



It's all about sponsorship

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The new book, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World*, by Vasili Mitrokhin and Professor Christopher Andrew, has triggered a flurry of comments in the Indian media. Although the ways in which the KGB (and the CIA) influenced the so-called 'non-aligned' nations such as India was known to everybody, the contents of the book seem to have surprised certain quarters. The level of reactions from the political parties in the country shows the extent of calculated ignorance of the Indian leaders. Someone has even termed the book as a 'spy thriller'. This comment can only make one smile; Prof Andrew's research is the topic of a very serious seminar organised by the Cold War International History Project at the Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington, DC. The centre has been the main institution in the West collecting, translating and publishing declassified documents from former Communist bloc. Their publications (partly available on their website) are a testimony of their scholarly work.

Delhi was certainly fertile soil for Soviet 'sponsorship', but Moscow's assistance was not limited to India and powerful ministers or apparatchiks. I recently came across the biography of Phüntso Wangye, the first Tibetan Communist. (*A Tibetan Revolutionary*, by Melwyn Goldstein, University of California Press). As a young man, Phüntso studied in a Guomintang military school, but got attracted towards Communism very early. He was only 19 (in 1941) when he and a friend came into contact with Fei Delin, the First Secretary of the

Soviet Embassy in Chongqing. Phüntso recalls: "We told him we had started our own Tibetan Communist Party organisation. We said that ultimately we wanted to go back to Kham (Eastern Tibet) to start a socialist revolution and hoped that the Soviet Union would be willing to support our efforts."

Fei listened politely and told him that he had to refer their discussion to Moscow. After a few weeks, Phüntso went back to the embassy. No news had yet come, but Fei asked the young boy how he was managing financially. When Phüntso replied that he depended on some relatives, Fei "smiled and said that the embassy would be glad to help me and then he gave me one hundred yuan, and said he would do the same each month". The innocent Phüntso said he "was startled by his generosity, since at that time one could eat for a month for only fourteen or fifteen yuan."

A few months later, Phüntso and his friend met Ye Jianying, one of Zhou Enlai's officers, and told him they wanted to go to Yan'an, Mao's headquarters. Ye explained that it was difficult, but promised to help. He gave each of them a sum of 450 yuans. The young Tibetans never reached Yan'an but eventually returned to Chongqing where they met Fei Delin again and discussed with him their projects.

A few weeks later, Phüntso was told that Moscow had agreed to his plans to study in the Soviet Union. He was given a secret code to cross the border (via Gilgit and Xinjiang) and a sum of 1000 yuans plus a similar amount in English pounds.

This was a huge amount in 1941, especially for a 19-year-old. One understands better that a few lakhs of rupees here and there given to some Indian ministers or for winning an Indian election was nothing for the Soviet Union. It was part of their 'sponsorship' programme.

To finish the story of Phüntso, in 1951 he was the main liaison

between the Communists who had invaded Tibet and the Dalai Lama's government. During the following years, he became very close to the central leadership in Beijing, particularly Mao, but he soon discovered that some Chinese officials suffered from the same disease as the Nationalists: The Great Han Chauvinism.

When the Dalai Lama left for a six-month visit to China in 1954, Mao ordered Phüntso to accompany the Lama everywhere. During his talks with the young Tibetan leader, Phüntso tried to convince the Dalai Lama that Communism was a good thing for Tibet. He remembers: "I explained to him about the Communist Party and the reforms that were taking shape in inland China.

He was extremely interested, asked many questions and readily agreed that the Tibetan nation was backward and had to be reformed." Phüntso's dream to see a modern and socialist Tibet in his lifetime did not come true. In April 1958, he was unexpectedly arrested to 'cleanse his thinking'. During the following 18 years, he was interrogated, tortured and jailed in the most atrocious conditions. His mistake was that he had thought that he could be a sincere Tibetan and a Communist at the same time. He did not know that sponsorship has a price.

The example of Phüntso Wangye and The Mitrokhin Archives raises several questions. First, what would have happened to the archives if the KGB librarian had defected to India? The answer is clear: Nothing. My experience is that Indian politicians do value archives. It is logical: It could make them accountable. Ask for any files related to Kashmir, Russia or China in the National Archives of India, and your request will be marked 'NT', meaning 'not transferred'. In fact, the new Right to Information Act of 2005, which comes into force next month, will protect those who do not want India's history to be known.

Article 8 (1) (a) says: That "there shall be no obligation to give any citizen, - (a) information, disclosure of which would prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the State, relation with foreign State or lead to incitement of an offence." This is enough to cover for 100 years all blunders and mischief by those who have made India's modern history. Further, Article 23 says: "No court shall entertain any suit, application or other proceeding in respect of any order made under this Act and no such order shall be called in question otherwise than by way of an appeal under this Act."

This automatically bars any scholar or organisation from doing what is regularly done in the US: Asking a court to verify if a specific classification is still justified after 30 years. Incidentally, the US Freedom of Information Act "establishes a presumption that records in the possession of agencies and departments of the executive branch of the US Government are accessible to the people". This is not the case in India.

Further, files pertaining to security agencies such as the IB, RAW, etc., do not come under the purview of the new Act. Therefore, 'sponsored' politicians will continue to be well protected. In the present circumstances, they can sleep soundly. No skeleton will ever be found in their cupboards except if it comes from abroad, which can be easily dismissed as the work of 'foreign hands'. Then, another consequence of the recent revelations: It blows apart Indian foreign policy's best-nurtured myth - that India was a non-aligned nation during the Cold War.

A last point should not be forgotten. To find significant documents in any archive is not a day's work like many seem to believe in India. It requires painstaking and protracted efforts by devoted history lovers

who are well aware of the historical background of the period they are researching. Unfortunately, instead of sponsoring honest historians, the rulers in Delhi prefer sycophants who will protect their interests. The saga of the infamous Towards the Freedom project bears witness that only tainted (red) 'scholars' can have access to original documents. The 'sponsorship' business goes on.

And what about the Indian press? Mitrokhin says that the KGB could plant at will articles in at least 10 newspapers. Is the situation different today? Not so much, the difference is that 'sponsors' have no ideology (except money) anymore.