

The Future of India's Strategic History: Archival Research and Policy Impact

Event Summary

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the twelfth edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series on **The Future of India's Strategic History: Archival Research and Policy Impact**. This was held in a hybrid mode with opening remarks from **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, and India's former National Security Advisor and Foreign Secretary.
- The first half of the discussion focused on how the study of history using different sources has benefitted the understanding of India's foreign and security policies. It included interventions by **Anit Mukherjee**, Non-Resident Fellow, CSEP and Associate Professor in the South Asia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University; **Avinash Paliwal**, Associate Professor of International Relations, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; **Nicolas Blarel**, Associate Professor of International Relations, Leiden University; **Pallavi Raghavan**, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Ashoka University; **Narayani Basu**, Author and Historian; and **Khushi Singh Rathore**, Ph.D. Candidate, Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- The second half of the discussion focused on the state of archives and the declassification processes at various ministries, possible solutions to improve preservation and accessibility, and the impact of archival research on current and future policy-making. This included interventions by **Raghvendra Singh**, former Director General, National Archives of India and Director, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library; **Rahul Sagar**, Associate Professor of Political Science, New York University Abu Dhabi; **Swapna Kona Nayudu**, Lecturer of Global Affairs, Yale-NUS College; and **Nitin Gokhale**, Author and Editor-in-Chief, StratNewsGlobal.com.
- The discussion was moderated by **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security, CSEP. Participants included serving and retired officials from the government and the military, scholars from leading think tanks and universities from India and abroad. The Tiffin Talk Series features scholars presenting their recent, evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India's foreign and security affairs.

Participants shared how the study of history has changed their understanding of India's foreign and security policies in terms of organizational continuities and other structural patterns beyond just ideological, individual or emotional factors. Studying official records has also helped dismiss the idea that India "lacks a strategic culture." Much of the discussion focused on the tragic state of most public archives, absent processes of declassification and the importance of India investing in the study of history to learn from the past, improve future policies and also be able to "tell its story" to the world. Participants also exchanged ideas on possible ways to accelerate declassification, improve preservation and democratize accessibility to

official records, including through digitization and public investments in world-class infrastructure.

The utility of archival research

Commenting on why it should be an Indian strategic interest to ensure declassification of records, one participant gave an example of the 2000s, when China's smart and selective declassification of files on the 1962 war biased the views of several Western scholars. By keeping the archives closed for decades, successive Indian governments contributed to the perpetuation of various myths, including that India 'lacks a strategic culture', that Indian policy-makers 'do not

understand the use of force, that 'China did not matter' to decision-makers allegedly preoccupied with Pakistan, or that India 'does not undertake non-UN sanctions', among other narratives. Recently, the growing availability and access to new archival materials has led to debunking such myths as it has allowed for the dissemination of new evidence. As one participant noted, "if Indian papers aren't made available to write India's history, they will be written based on others' views of India".

The study of official records can also help bridge the scholar-practitioner divide by uncovering the specific capacity constraints and other limitations under which decision-makers operate. This ringside view often allows scholars to replace criticism with humility. Their work also helps communicate the complexity of policy-making to broader, non-expert audiences. Another participant noted that archival research is important because "historical reasoning is the dominant mental methodology of policy makers". If there are no proper accounts of history, preserved and accessible, there is a tendency to use an imagined past or repeat mistakes.

Finally, as another participant emphasized, there is no final truth in the archives: one must engage in collaborative work, focus also on other evidence and methodologies, including the translation of foreign archives to cross-check information, oral histories, and non-governmental papers. The study of past policies can also be put to normative use by bringing in voices from the margins, for example women diplomats, who may have previously been omitted or erased.

The state of Indian archives and declassification

The lack of preservation and limited accessibility to Indian archives generated a passionate exchange among participants on the reasons for such neglect: why is it easier to access India's history through archival collections in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe than within India itself? One participant reasoned that the civil services are technically unprepared and also under-resourced to deal with the archives, often seen as a "parking ground" posting. Both central and state archives are understaffed and untrained, with an older generation of officers either demoralized by lack of resources or actively

opposed to modernization and accessibility to "hold their turf." The dearth of attention given to preservation was discussed with reference to specific documents that have been neglected and destroyed, with valuable evidence of Indian history being lost forever.

Participants also discussed the limitations of the Official Secrets Act of 1923 and how it is used as a shield for particular individual or organizational interests to block release of certain historical records to the public. This is especially a hurdle when dealing with military documents due to the "sensitivity" of their contents but there are several instances, participants noted, where there is no operational value or concern. The issue of declassification is thus often dependent on "arbitrary will" or occasional interest of one or the other official interested in the study of history.

Ways ahead

Participants stressed the importance of digitisation to improve transparency and accessibility to the archives. While the Indian government has made some recent moves towards this, such as the Abhilekh Patal Portal for Access to Archives and Learning, there is still much scope to improve. One participant noted that even in some recent cases of mass digitization, there is no metadata available as the coding has not been done properly.

The example of the Qatar Digital Library was brought up as the gold standard for archival documentation. Within India, the Asiatic Society of Mumbai and the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune highlight India's capability to digitise and preserve records responsibly. This could be replicated across the country. The emergence of private archives, such as Ashoka University's Archives of Contemporary India, is another way of preserving and improving the quality of archives without relying on public institutions. Nonetheless, the role of the state to ensure this public good remains essential: this will require sustained, top-down "political will" to overcome various vested interests and massive public-private partnerships to invest in infrastructure, training and capacity building of expert staff. India has the tools to build and maintain sustainable archives, as one participant mentioned, and given best practices globally, "there is no need to reinvent the wheel."

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

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