



# Declassification? What is declassification? Enabling the Study of India's Military History

Event Summary

Thursday, 6 July, 2023

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the 17<sup>th</sup> edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series on **Declassification? What is Declassification? Enabling the Study of India's Military History** with **Dr. Anit Mukherjee**, Non-Resident Fellow, CSEP.
- The discussion focused on the importance of studying India's military history and the instrumental utility behind it to derive lessons and inform policy-making. The first half of the discussion focused on the utility of studying India's military history and the importance of learning from outcomes of previous military campaigns. The second half of the discussion addressed the challenges surrounding declassification of military records in India and the pressing need to have a streamlined declassification procedure. The discussion ended with participants assessing solutions to preserve India's military history and identifying methods through which India's military history can inform and improve policy making.
- The discussants at the seminar included **Dr. Arvind Gupta**, Director of the Vivekananda Foundation and former Deputy National Security Advisor and **Squadron Leader Rana Chhina**, Director of the Centre for Military History and Conflict Research, United Service Institution of India.
- The discussion was moderated by **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, CSEP. Participants of the discussion included serving and retired officials from the military, scholars from India's leading think tanks and universities, and former diplomats.
- 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.

## The utility of studying India's military history

Participants discussed the significance of studying India's military history as past military operations enable didactic learning through which the armed forces can strategize and learn from the past. In context of the Russia-Ukraine war, participants identified how armies all over the world use conflicts as learning opportunities to inform future military strategies. Furthermore, one participant pointed out how the study of India's military history promotes indigenous knowledge amongst the populace about India's past military operations and it also enables "better projection of national and institutional interests".

Additionally, one participant highlighted how the study of military history forms the "operational core" for national

strategic and security studies. Participants discussed how military history goes hand in hand with strategic studies to draw insights from past military logistics, training, and operations to facilitate more strategic defence planning in the future.

## Challenges to studying India's military history

The discussion focused on how the study of military history has been impinged due to the absence of a comprehensive policy that declassifies military records. By commenting on India's rich and largely positive historical legacy, one participant highlighted how India does not let its history be told "honestly" due to the lack of a systematic and logical declassification policy.

Another major limitation that the absence of declassification poses is that it creates a learning vacuum between scholars and policy-makers that prevents the use of military history as a learning opportunity. One participant pointed out that the lack of archival research in India has been a serious obstacle in developing civilian expertise about India's military affairs. This has led to scholars creating narratives on India's military history by accessing archives abroad. In order to critically analyse India's military history, scholars and historians require more liberal access to primary source data to strengthen indigenous knowledge about India's military affairs.

Additionally, discussants highlighted how the cumbersome declassification process along with the scarcity of resources has led to slow progress on the declassification front. The lack of a training programme and paucity of trained record officers has also contributed to piecemeal advancement in declassifying military records. A systematic and logical declassification policy requires a streamlined declassification process that empowers scholars from universities and think tanks in India to steadily engage with declassifying military records.

The lack of political intent and will to support the declassification process is also another serious obstacle. By highlighting the declassification of the Subhas Chandra Bose files under PM Modi, one participant pointed out how the process of declassification can be expedited under the presence of political intent and will. To strengthen the declassification procedure in India, there is a pressing need to sensitize the political leadership towards the significance of military history and its practical relevance to contemporary military strategies.

After discussing the challenges to declassification in India, participants assessed steps that have been taken to improve access to military records. In light of this is the policy on declassification and archiving that was approved by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in 2021. The policy states that each organisation under the Ministry of Defence will transfer their records to the History Division of Ministry of Defence for handling and archiving. The policy also declares that records should be declassified in 25 years and any exceptionally sensitive records should be appraised by special committees consisting of archival

experts. Commenting on the progress made under the new declassification policy, one participant pointed out how almost 30,000 records up to 1960 are already with the National Archives of India while the remaining records are under the review process of archiving.

## The way forward

Participants highlighted the need of a learning ecosystem, which includes universities and think tanks, to create enabling conditions to bolster the study of military history in India. There needs to be a stronger interface between the academic community and ministries that can empower the contribution of scholars in shaping the narratives on India's military history. One participant suggested that a more balanced approach is needed which broadens the ambit of declassification by bridging the divide between scholars and policy-makers. A holistic perspective of India's military history should not only rely on the narratives shaped by former officials, but it should also involve contributions from historians, academicians, and scholars.

The discussion also laid emphasis on the vitality of an integrated record management policy that revisits the current policy on destruction of documents and widens access to documents in Professional Military Education (PME) institutions to allow scholars to learn from previous military campaigns. For instance, the declassification of dissertations in the PME institutions can improve contemporary military studies and research in India. Participants also emphasised the importance of digitisation of military records to improve accessibility to the archives.

Additionally, one participant emphasised that India should learn from the methods and experiences of declassification of other countries that have successfully created physical infrastructure to preserve their archives. The discussion highlighted how India should learn from best practices on declassification that have been adopted by other countries instead of reinventing the wheel. In order to improve the accessibility of India's military archives, participants also suggested using different methods such as redaction, automatic declassification of files after a fixed period, and downgrading the status of files that no longer bear any serious political implications.

*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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