Research in India (fall 1996)

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Research access in Indian archives

H-ASIA

September 25, 1996
Queries on research access in India and related issues
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From: raw94@aber.ac.uk (RICHARD ADAM WHITE)
Colleagues,

I will shortly be leaving for a research trip in India and am hoping that the combined experience of H-Asia may be able to lend me some guidance. My research is examining the perceptions and images the British official mind held of the development of Muslim nationalism during the period of the Khilafat movement and how this affected and effected British policy. Whilst I have been able to carry out the bulk of my research in London, I am hoping that research in India will be able to shed a little more light on the Government of India side of things as well as offer insight into the reverse side of the picture, that is to say how Indian Muslims viewed their relationship with their colonial rulers. I welcome any assistance from the most basic (ie where are the NAI exactly and do I need any special letters of introduction etc to be able to use them) to more substantive comments on possible other collections of primary and secondary sources (in English) that may be of interest. In anticipation, many thanks. If I pick up any useful tips whilst I am out there I shall be sure to pass them on to H-Asia.

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H-ASIA

September 26, 1996
Response to query about research in India, esp. the National Archives
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From: "Prof. James Lochtefeld"
Dear Dr. White (and other readers),
The National Archives of India is on the Janpath in New Delhi, just north of the intersection with Rajpath (on the right side of the street as one travels south).

That's the easy part. In 1990, the document that the archivists really wanted to see (and have a copy) was my "permission slip" from the Ministry of Education, which gave official approval to my research project (this was the letter that allowed me to get a research visa on the USA end, for which I had to apply and wait 6 months, although longer waits are not unusual). Since I had the letter and could give them a copy on the spot, everything went quite smoothly, but my impression then was that without such clearance access is very restricted, although things may have changed since then (and I was, after all, only an insignificant graduate student, etc. etc.). I also found the people working there to be quite helpful, friendly, and knowledgeable.

On another note, I found that the records (at least for the Home Ministry) were open and extensive for the period up to the end of World War I, but that much of the material after that is (or at least, was) still classified as restricted under the Official Secrets Act. Thus, the Khilafat-era materials may not even be open to viewing.

Good luck!
James Lochtefeld
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From: K.Brittlebank@unsw.EDU.AU (Kate Brittlebank)
I support James Lochtefeld's comments about access to the National Archives. I was there at the end of 1993 and I too felt that I would not have been allowed access without my official research approval. It was the only document they were interested in seeing.

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Ed. note: The issue of research access is a sensitive one which first became a significant problem for some American scholars in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war. British scholars continued to enjoy relatively easy access until almost ten years later, as I recall. In 1984, real visa restrictions were put upon British nationals going to India, but I seem to recall that British scholars were already having...
access problems; and while the American Institute of Indian Studies and the Fulbright folks could be of real assistance, there was no great concern on the part of anyone at the High Commission in Delhi about some history student wanting in the archives. Perhaps things are less restrictive now. I hope so.

F.F. Conlon

From: Gail Minault

This is for Dr. White. I have done research in the National Archives of India on the Khilafat Movement. I did so in 1968-70 and found extensive materials. Another very important source of material will be the Nehru Memorial Library next to Teen Murti House. You'll need to turn up with a letter of introduction from your university, your letter of permission from the Indian government (necessary to get a visa), and -possibly-a letter from your embassy (or high commission) in New Delhi. It is always a good idea to take along spare xeroxed copies of these documents. It is also a good idea to take along spare passport photos.

Now, since your work concerns British views toward the Khilafat movement, such papers as the Meston papers and the Butler papers in the IOL are invaluable, as you doubtless already know. My own book on the movement may also be of help, particularly the "pan-Islamic" bogey, British worries about it, as vs. those who saw the movement for what it was: an Indian protest movement. Muslim attempts to play upon British fears of a pan-Islamic menace were useful to them at that time. Newspapers may also be very helpful and the Nehru Library has a large collection of Indian (English-language) newspapers. The UP State Archives in Lucknow is also useful for that topic. Have fun.

Yours sincerely
Gail Minault
University of Texas

2.) From: Peter Robb PR4@soas.ac.uk

With reference to Dr White's query and Prof. Lochtefeld's response, my advice to any researcher who is new to this field and who has the choice, would be to start in London at the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, especially using Government of India and local government (A series) records, before about 1921, plus certain private papers. This allows a quick scrutiny of likely sources, and provides the bedrock for some topics. Then in the National Archives there the same proceedings plus more extensive materials. The researcher should insist on receiving 'file' and not 'proceedings' volumes for the period before 1921, as these contain valuable 'keep-withs'. From the 1920s, volumes are generally arranged by files. The Nehru Memorial Library and Museum also has very valuable papers for the topic proposed.
Access to the National Archives may possibly be different for American citizens, and it certainly has differed from time to time, particularly with regard to the question of research visas - though not much, I think, in accordance with the seniority of the scholar. Recently (1994/5), Commonwealth citizens, arriving mostly on tourist visas, have needed only a letter from their High Commission (i.e. Embassy) to gain full admission to the National Archives and all its materials. They have secured that letter merely by establishing their bona fides to the embassy staff. Moreover using a daily pass to the archives is no problem (one now goes to the little gatehouse to get this) and is preferable to trying to obtain a pass for a period. This is in effect a reversion to the more relaxed system of the early 1970s, and was certainly in operation a couple of years ago - by helpful and friendly staff, some of whom (in the main reading room) had in fact been there in the 1970s!

If the decision is to seek a research visa (necessary for longer visits and non-archival research), it is well known that applicants should describe their topics carefully. The more government departments might be supposed to have a legitimate interest in the subject, and the more sensitive it is, even for the relatively distant past, the more likely it is that an application may be delayed or even refused. On the other hand some state archives may interpret topics and permissions extremely literally, and deny access to materials deemed irrelevant to the project; some also require research notes to be deposited for scrutiny. (I have never heard of any such question or procedure at the National Archives.)

Anyone with more up-to-date information - for example, since the change of government - should please send a post to H-Asia.

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From: HUJOHNSO@root.indstate.edu

I have had similar experiences as other correspondents with research difficulties in India. Mine have taken place at the Nehru Memorial Library in New Delhi.

Introduction letters from sponsors and/or university officials in America were requested by Library officials. But I was not allowed to look at any documents (at the time I was interested in Jayaprakash Narayan correspondence) that were post-independence.

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From: aburger@uwcmail.uwc.edu

My experiences with gaining access to the National Archives on Janpath are a bit different, and more pleasant. I went to India in 1992 on my sabbatical, and on a tourist visa, wishing to study the licit opium industry. This was obviously not a topic for which government position was likely to be given, even if confined to the 1930's. And in fact such a request was turned down.

However, I went to the Archives to inquire about access, and was told to come back with a letter of identification from my university, and a letter from the American Embassy attesting to my scholarly background. I phoned to get the Dean to fax such a letter, and went to the Embassy (vita in hand). They gave a nice letter. I went back to Janpath, handed in the two letters and asked how long I might have to wait for permission. The official said she would give it to me right then, on the spot. So I was able to explore the archives on narcotics, with great support from the staff (who said I was the first person to ever request most of those documents).

The document collection is impressive until independence. Officials said they were still in the process of cataloging more recent documents, but offered to search these for a fairly reasonable fee. I may ask for such a search for 1950's data before my next trip. BTW, the Archives do not allow laptops or typewriters on the premises; cost of xeroxing is high; notes must be taken (for the most part) by hand.

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From: Philippa Levine philippa@mizar.usc.edu

There seems to be no hard and fast rule at the National Archives in Delhi. I presented my "research visa" and was admitted, but some days later an additional request for another letter from the consulate held me up. On the other hand, someone alongside whom I was working in there had turned up without the requisite ministerial approval but with a letter from his consulate and gained access without too much effort. Arriving without the ministerial stamp of approval is risky, but be prepared to spend a further day doing business with your consulate after you arrive.

Philippa Levine  
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