

## Research at the Indian National Archives

In 2000, after a twenty-five-year foreign service, academic and business career largely associated with the Middle East and Asia, I entered a doctoral program at the University of Texas at Austin. Reentering graduate school, I knew in general terms what I wanted to pursue as a dissertation topic. What had emerged from my experience in foreign service and business was a heightened interest in the relationship between the Middle Eastern and South Asian political dynamic and Anglo-American foreign policies in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, I focused on research resources at the Kennedy, Eisenhower and Johnson libraries and the National Archives in College Park and supplemented these materials with Arabic language and other sources from various university libraries and collections. I even had a brief opportunity to investigate French holdings at the Colonial Archives in Aix-en-Provence. While largely limited to Algeria and only marginally useful to my topic, the Colonial Archives provided me experience in archival arbitrariness as only the French can practice it. By early 2003, I was ready for the next phase of research. Arriving in London just after an early January snowstorm, I took up residence at a bed and breakfast only two hundred meters from the Public Records Office (PRO).

Because so many Americans have done research at the PRO, I will focus on a relatively new aspect of research there: the use of digital cameras. I applied for permission to use mine, and after briefing me and issuing me a handout, the PRO approved it with the proviso that no flash be used. The PRO has an area for digital camera use located next to the copy desk on the second floor. Several tables are pushed against the windows on the west side of the building. While the windows provide additional light, to accommodate the “no flash” rule users of digital cameras must be prepared to contend with short dreary winter days or, for that matter, cloudy days in the summer. This means that the camera lenses must have good light-gathering characteristics. I used the medium-cost SONY DSC-S75 with a Zeiss lens and a 128-megabyte memory card. This \$500 camera functioned well in low-light conditions and had enough memory, depending on settings, to store over two hundred high-definition pictures of documents. At a focal distance of two to three feet I could frame the document and get an exact picture. This process requires a steady hand to prevent blurring. Using a USB link, I then downloaded the pictures from the camera to the hard-drive and/or CDRW in my laptop computer. The camera, computer and photo software are relatively simple to operate.

At night in the “cave” of my bed and breakfast room I reviewed, labeled and organized the document pictures taken that day and made certain that all files were backed up. Where computers are concerned, I operate on the third corollary to Murphy’s Law -- namely, “The worst possible combination of events that can occur will occur.” Accordingly, I backed up all files in multiple places. I used not only the hard drive but also multiple duplicate CD-ROMs. I never allowed any of the files to reside in only one place. To shoot more pictures, I had to erase old files from the camera, but I did so only after I had created separate copies on CD-ROM and the hard drive. I then periodically mailed discs and e-mailed batches of research home for safe storage.

With regard to the PRO, the most significant advantage to “digital research” is cost savings. I have a suspicion that the PRO staff are generally so friendly and helpful because they have a secret profit-sharing plan with the copy desk. At around 80 to 90 cents per page, copying

gets expensive in a hurry. This cost has several drawbacks. Research is slowed because to avoid expense researchers use various cost avoidance schemes, scribbling, typing, and carving notes in stone, if necessary. Even at peak efficiency the copy desk is in itself a relatively slow process. The line for copying, combined with the limits on folders, creates a bottleneck that means longer stays to cover a research topic effectively, which in turn means more costs in terms of food, lodging and transportation. Using a digital camera also saves time by simplifying the administrative process of sorting out which things to copy, which things to take notes from and which things to ignore. In effect, research becomes a “shoot first and ask questions later” process.

There are also savings in “sanity costs.” These costs comprise all of those things that go wrong while researching and writing that make you contemplate other careers. How many times do researchers forget to take notes on something or misquote someone? How often do they wish they had the document six months or perhaps even a year later for reference and review? With a stored digital picture a researcher can retrieve, manipulate and print out any portion of a document. Having a copy is also very useful for a researcher trying to decipher those cryptic, often illegible, minutes scribbled on the jackets of telegrams, on document covers and in the margins of reports.

When I returned home, I converted all of the pictures, which I had arranged by PRO file number, into slide shows and printed them out in hard copy. My research files now include approximately three thousand pages of documents from the PRO at a copy cost of around \$.08 per page. This includes toner and paper costs for printing out all the picture files. In short, the use of the digital camera on just this one trip not only shortened the length of time required to obtain my research materials, a significant savings in itself, but also saved me approximately \$2,000 in copying costs. This alone paid for the camera, the computer and half the cost of the laser printer used to capture, manipulate and produce hard copies. I now have copies of all my source materials in paper and digital form to review and re-review at my own discretion. In addition, I have a good digital camera to use just for fun during my travels.

After experiencing the new digital vistas at the PRO, technophobes need only to board British Air to Delhi to feel more at home. The Indians permit only paper, pencil and laptop. I had planned my trip to Delhi as an extended reconnaissance of the Indian National Archives and the Nehru Library, to be followed up by additional expeditions if necessary. I arranged for my visa through the Indian High Commission in London, which added another \$20 to the approximate \$65 dollars charged. London had to cable Washington to make certain that I was not a threat. For U.S. citizens, it is simpler to go through the Washington embassy, but I just failed to get around to it. Over the period of a week, I trudged down to the Indian embassy three times to hear “not today.” Finally, my passport miraculously reappeared, visa in place, and I bought a round-trip ticket on British Air 143 and 142. These flights in and out of Delhi are extremely crowded, and I decided to pay \$500 extra for the larger “premium coach” seat. The round trip from London totaled about \$2,000. I might have gotten a straight coach seat for \$1,000 by booking earlier or through STA, the travel service for students.

The flight leaves London daily at 11:00 A.M. local time and arrives in Delhi at 1:45 the next morning. Given the time of night and the numerous warnings about taxis from the airport, I chose to stay at a nicer hotel, the Intercontinental Grand, and they arranged to meet me at the

airport. This is not as outrageously expensive as one might expect. Through the hotel website, I found a room for about \$120 per night including breakfast. Apparently January through March is the high season; during the summer prices are as low as \$75 per night. My plan was to stay there a few nights and then find something less expensive if necessary. By the time I cleared passport and customs control, retrieved my bag and arrived at the hotel it was about four in the morning. I found it interesting that Indian security x-rayed carry-on bags coming off the airplane.

The Intercontinental was convenient for other reasons as well. They had “preferred” taxi drivers who, for a slightly higher price, could take you to all the stops required in setting yourself up to work at the Nehru Library and the National Archives. Armed with letters of introduction from professors at UT Austin, I went to both the library and the archives to see what was required to gain admission. Both wanted an additional letter from the Cultural Affairs Officer (CAO) at the American Center on Kasturba Gandhi Marg near Connaught Place. A quick trip to the American Center netted a set of original letters (the archives and library in Delhi insist that they not be copies) to go with the university introduction. By my second day in Delhi, I was registered and able to work at both the archives and the Nehru Library. I also investigated some cheaper places to stay. A visit to the YMCA and YWCA confirmed that they were not up to the Hong Kong YMCA Salisbury standards. While a younger set might consider them passable, I took one look at the mattresses and my back hurt. They were only about \$50-60 per night cheaper than the Intercontinental and literally a world apart in amenities. In addition, the Intercontinental was within walking distance of the archives, the American Center and the bookstores in Connaught Place, so I decided to absorb the extra cost and stay put.

At this point, I began to alternate days between the archives and the library. Indian archives and libraries are very different from their American and British counterparts. At times they require an almost intuitive search strategy. Research in my particular area of interest (Indian foreign relations, 1955-1963) also creates certain issues. Where American foreign policy is concerned, almost all research has contemporary political overtones. No one in Delhi, and probably all of India for that matter, wants researchers to see documents related to territorial disputes unless they feel fairly certain that any writings about those documents will follow the acceptable political line. This is particularly true at the archives, where “border” is a four-letter word. The staff quickly informed me that all the materials associated with the northwest frontier after 1913 are closed. I inquired about the efficacy of closing records prior to 1947 in light of the fact that the India Office files at the British Library were open and received the expected response: it is a “rule” set in bureaucratic concrete. All other boundary materials from the 1920s were closed for the same reason.

Initially I concluded that the archives would be completely useless for post-independence research, but I persisted in the Ministry of External Affairs file, the only accessible file that I found of any value. In comparison to the files at the National Archives at College Park or the PRO, this entire file is small, but I was pleasantly surprised to find oblique references to problems with Pakistan and also some interesting correspondence between Morarji Desai and Jawaharlal Nehru, in which they discuss American personalities and Desai gives an armchair analysis of the American ambassador to India, John Kenneth Galbraith, and relates Galbraith’s complaints about policy emanating from Washington. While many documents are of dubious

quality, others were useful and led to further research at the library on the struggle between foreign policy leftists and centrists in the Indian government. The differences in personnel and reporting styles between the Indian foreign service and those of the United States and Britain are also interesting. Often the commentary found in Indian diplomatic traffic and correspondence represents a genre of political reporting completely alien to that of the British and Americans. There is an interesting tendency to point out that particular leaders were schizophrenic or mentally unbalanced. For example, reports from Baghdad spelling out some Iraqi opposition views also deliberate upon the “megalomania” of Abd-al-Karim al-Qasim. The reports are frequently unintentionally entertaining.

The reading room at the Indian Archives is a relatively poorly lit interior room. Small lockers for bags are provided at the entrance. Only a few desks, located against the outside walls, have access to power plugs. Given the power fluctuations and frequent outages, I thought it safer to run on battery power as much as possible. Having two batteries came in handy. A flashlight was also useful for those occasions when the archives went from poorly lit to pitch black due to outages. The staff was reasonably helpful, but no matter what the posted schedule, requested files were never produced exactly on time. Sometimes requests made early in the morning appeared around noon. Noon requests randomly appeared at closing time or the following day. Requests made late in the afternoon often did not appear until the following afternoon. I am sure that someone understood the system and made it work, but improvisation seemed always to be my lot. Here again, my hotel-arranged taxi came in handy. Never quite knowing the status of my files, I would have the taxi take me to the archives and wait outside while I went in to check. Entrance involved a cursory check of my crumpled papers at a tumbledown guard hut using an old blanket for a door. If the files were there, I would signal the taxi from the front steps, and he would return at closing time. If not, I would have him take me to the Nehru Library, and I would work there instead. Having the flexibility to work in either location was extremely useful. It might be possible to walk to the Nehru Library from the Intercontinental Grand hotel or the archives, but it would be a real hike.

The system at the Nehru Library is more efficient. The library has a more or less open stacks arrangement. Manuscripts and files must be ordered, but much of the material available for my particular research resided in memoirs and collected writings. In fact, the holdings at the library identified several useful sources that I have subsequently purchased. As at the archives, the library has desks located against the walls with power outlets for computers. At the Nehru, the lights tended to stay on, but I used a power stabilizer to protect the computer. The library is much more heavily used than the archives, so researchers should arrive early to get a power outlet. Those desks located in middle of the rooms lack power, so once again the spare computer battery came in handy. The library has no provision for securing bags. Researchers must leave them in a pile behind the reception desk.

The library is a more convenient place to work, and the staff’s friendly attitudes probably reflect the nicer environment. The filing system for holdings is somewhat unusual and requires some getting used to, however, and the shelving staff has a very relaxed attitude toward replacing books. As a result, the reference system tends to vector the researcher to the general vicinity of a work as opposed to its precise location. At times, when no one in the library was able to find a book I wanted, the staff seemed to be confident that it would “turn up someday,” and a shrug

usually heralded the end of the search for it. The more open arrangement at the library makes it an excellent option for those days when the bureaucracy has paralyzed the archives. I strongly suggest that researchers register at both and alternate between the two instead of trying to finish research at one before using the other.

In general, if the sole purpose of the trip is the study of American diplomatic history or even an U.S.-centered view of Indian relations, then it will be a very long and expensive trip for some interesting but modest gains. However, if a researcher is taking more of an international historical approach, then the combined holdings at the archives and Nehru Library provide a substantively broadened perspective and real insights into the nature of the Indian bureaucratic milieu. The researcher can get a feel for the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian foreign and civil service and for their “third party” views of American and British diplomacy, particularly in the Middle East and Asia. Comparisons between holdings at the library and documents that were accessible at the archives shed new light on the personal relationships within the Indian government, between U.S. and Indian officials, and even to a limited degree between officials within the U.S. government. The results certainly added new substance to my research and an enhanced understanding of archival materials already collected in the United States and Britain.

Outside the archives and library, there was always something interesting to see and do in Delhi. The location of my hotel made it easy for me to walk to Connaught Place and browse the bookstores for titles that were a fraction of the cost anywhere else. A half dozen good bookstores reside in Connaught’s “C” and “D” block alone. I also found a rare bookstore located in Block II, a south Delhi commercial district. It had a remarkable collection of works and prints from the Raj era. Some were seriously overpriced, but a quick online check identified one bargain. I purchased a presentation copy of the record of King George V’s 1911 Durbar printed in London in 1914 for fifty percent of market value. Just wandering around the collection was worth the taxi fare. From my hotel, I could walk to the government-owned Central Cottage Industries Emporium where everything from a one-ton jade Ganesh to all manner of Indian textiles was for sale. I also had lunch at the Imperial Hotel. Built in the 1930s, this art deco structure is a throwback to the Raj and boasts one of the largest collections of Raj and 1911 Durbar paraphernalia in Delhi. It was great fun to wander through the lobby and bar area taking in the amazing collection of pictures, artifacts and, for lack of a better word, “props” from the colonial period. The hotel’s best rate, a special, was \$275 per night, a bit over the top, but lunch on the veranda was great. The Emporium, Imperial and Archives are all located on Janpath Marg, one of the radials that intersect at Connaught Place, and all were within walking distance of the Intercontinental Grand. A myriad of museums are also located in this general area.

I left my weekends for sightseeing expeditions. I spent one Saturday in Old Delhi visiting the Jami Masjid (the largest mosque in India), Chandni Chowd market area and the Red Fort. At the Red Fort, my guide, Mr. Rohni, provided expert commentary and a wrenching personal tale of woe, printed in the foreword to his one-dollar guide to Mughal Delhi. I created my own “Mughal Day” and spent a bright, cool Sunday visiting Humayun’s Tomb, the sites of the Old Mughal capitals and Mehrauli Archeological Park, including the Qutb Minar complex. In response to repeated warnings from any and all in Delhi, including random passersby, about being kidnapped by a “tuk-tuk” driver, I arranged for a taxi at the hotel and negotiated an all-day price of \$20 to \$30 for each of these outings. There are cheaper ways to get around, but with

dedicated transportation, I could cover more ground. I took a weekend trip to Agra to visit the Sikander (Akbar's Tomb), Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort, with a side trip to Fatapur Sikr. The latter, Akbar's capital from 1571 to 1585, ranks as one of my three favorite archeological sites, the others being Petra in Jordan and Douga in Tunisia. Because of its non-urban location, Fatapur Sikr is truly a snapshot in time and by far the most interesting site of my entire trip. Agra and Fatapur are about thirty miles apart and approximately 150 miles from Delhi. The arrangement of archival and library work all week followed by sightseeing on the weekends worked well.

I departed Delhi on British Airways at 3:25 A.M. The hotel even provided me with an expeditor at the airport. I arrived semi-conscious in London, where I stayed overnight before hopping another flight back home. In a trip lasting a little over two months, I netted thousands of documents for research, dozens of new acquaintances and new experiences to add to an already lengthy list. Of course, there are many different ways to plan a multi-country research trip. For me, the strategies of combining digital equipment at the PRO and a focused, coordinated approach to the Indian Archives and the Nehru Library in Delhi resulted in significant research gains for a reasonable investment.