

Research Notes on the Nehru Papers



China and India in the Age of Decolonization: An Introduction to the Nehru Papers Project, 1947–1964

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Some years ago, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) in New Delhi declassified the post-1947 materials within the Jawaharlal Nehru Papers collection. These newly available materials cover the years 1947 to 1964, when Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was prime minister of the Republic of India. This period witnessed India's transition into formal postcoloniality, a process that was paralleled by the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Our project seeks to analyze the interactions and exchanges between China and India in this age of decolonization through the pages of the Nehru Papers. Importantly, we bring to this archive a distinctly interdisciplinary lens, drawing from the humanities and social sciences. Our aim is to decenter the discourse of international relations that currently dominates

popular and scholarly understandings of the relationship between China and India during this crucial period of nascent nationhood. As we go on to discuss in this general introduction to our project, a shift in disciplinary attention and method holds the potential to reveal new vectors of connection and to reframe long-held assumptions and entrenched narratives about China–India relations in the mid-twentieth century.

The Nehru Papers Project

The recently declassified materials at the NMML include telegrams, meetings minutes, memoranda, reports, correspondence, press clippings, photographs, and much else. The contents cover a wide range of subjects, from formal state-to-state relations to the arts, sciences, cultural exchange, and trade and economic issues, to name but a few. The materials are contained in over eight hundred bound xeroxed volumes (although this number is likely to grow). Until volume 760 or so, the progression is chronological. Any given year, therefore, is covered by several volumes, many of which themselves have multiple book-length parts. For instance, over sixty volumes cover the year 1953, but since many of these volumes have multiple parts, the actual number of bound books with materials from 1953 is significantly higher. The final few dozen volumes contain materials that are classified as “miscellaneous and news clippings” and cover the entire seventeen-year period from 1947 to 1964. The entire collection thus runs into well over one thousand bound books and hundreds of thousands of pages. Given the absence of a finding aid that provides more granular detail, scholars have to peruse the individual bound books and their multiple parts to locate matters of interest. And since new materials are added occasionally, they need to keep track of this expanding collection regularly.

Between May 2017 and March 2020 we identified and copied from the post-1947 Nehru Papers archival materials pertaining to China. This sub-archive now consists of well over ten thousand pages. During the process of collection, it became evident to us that given the volume and richness of these materials, they can only be processed, and their importance properly recognized and highlighted, through a much larger collaborative effort. Accordingly, we formed a multidisciplinary and international group of scholars to read and workshop these documents together. Among us are historians, literary and film scholars, and political scientists based in Canada, China, India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Although the members of our group have all been engaged in the study of China and India, for many of us, the types of documents that comprise the Nehru Papers vary significantly from the kinds of materials we otherwise work

on. The literary scholars among us, for instance, found themselves cultivating a very different practice of reading when delving into the thousands of pages detailing the inner workings of the state. Those of us accustomed to working primarily with Chinese, Hindi, or Bengali materials had to now become well-versed with the particular register of English in which Indian bureaucratic affairs are conducted. We approach such challenges as opportunities: our project is founded on a commitment to take seeming dissonances between our disciplinary backgrounds and the archive at hand as an invitation to read differently, and to pursue lines of inquiry that can broaden and reframe narratives of China–India relations. What happens when we use a non-international relations lens to read and analyze documents that were primarily generated for the purposes of state-to-state relations? What conclusions could we reach about China–India interactions based on such analysis of these documents? In pursuit of such questions, our project aims not only to make the contents of the Nehru Papers more widely available, but to do so in a manner that registers the value of these documents beyond the disciplinary idiom of international relations and its reverberations in public discourse.

Our readings of the Nehru Papers highlight not only the richness of those documents that this archive affords us access to, but also the partial and scattered nature of the archive. Several threads of telegraphic correspondence remain unresolved, with questions whose answers likely lie in another state archive, somewhere else in the world, and with references to appendices and attachments that were likely filed away in some other volume. Beyond such contingencies of record keeping, we are also keenly aware that the Nehru Papers provide a one-sided view—from the perspective of the Indian government and Indian actors—of the state-building activities of China and India during this period. In some cases, we found ourselves drawing from other archives to fill gaps in the Nehru Papers, and in other instances, documents from the Nehru Papers helped furnish pieces of information missing from other collections of materials.

Two existing sets of documentary compilations are important to acknowledge here. The first is the longstanding project to produce the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*. Recently completed under the editorship of historian Madhavan K. Palat, the collection comprises 85 volumes that cover Nehru's entire life (1889–1964).¹ The second is a focused, five-volume collection on China–India relations, edited by the retired Indian diplomat Avtar Singh Bhasin.² While

¹ The volumes are available online at <https://nehruselectedworks.com/>.

² Avtar Singh Bhasin, ed., *India–China Relations, 1947–2000: A Documentary Study*, 5 vols. (New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2018).

tremendously valuable, its focus is almost exclusively on diplomatic affairs and international relations.

Distinct from such documentary collections, our work has involved placing the Nehru Papers within a fuller context, mining the papers for clues to pursue further in other materials, and at times, reading the incompleteness of the archive as telling in its own right. As a result, our project endeavors not to provide a comprehensive view of China–India relations between 1947 and 1964, but rather to focus on those select documents that provide meaningful insights into the intertwined histories of China and India from the perspective of our own varied disciplinary and research agendas.

Interventions

For a long time, historical scholarship on China and India has been dominated by two self-limiting approaches: intellectual history and foreign policy/geopolitics. This tendency is particularly acute for the 1950s, studies of which are dominated by a concern with border demarcations and a teleological focus on the causes, course, and legacies of the 1962 Sino-Indian War. The 1950s is also perceived as a period of “Hindi-Chini bhai bhai” (“Indians and Chinese are brothers”), without a proper examination of the exchanges and interactions that took place during the decade.³ The Nehru Papers provide a fascinating array of discourses and deliberations that took place within the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister’s Office, and other sites across Delhi, revealing the behind-the-scenes thought processes and contemplations among Indian and foreign diplomats and political leaders. Our goal with the Nehru Papers is to overcome the aforementioned narrowness and lacunae in studying China–India interactions by incorporating analyses of cultural, scientific, and economic dimensions. This does not mean that we neglect some of the key political events; nor do we restrict ourselves to the concerns of China

3 This has been highlighted in Arunabh Ghosh, “Before 1962: The Case for 1950s China–India History,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 3 (2017): 697–727; and Arunabh Ghosh, “Accepting Difference, Seeking Common Ground: Sino-Indian Statistical Exchanges, 1951–1959,” *BJHS Themes* 1 (2016): 61–82. Recent scholarship has offered new paradigms for studying China–India cultural interactions in the 1950s beyond the “bhai bhai” narrative. See Adhira Mangalagiri, “Ellipses of Cultural Diplomacy: The 1957 Chinese Literary Sphere in Hindi,” *Journal of World Literature* 4, no. 4 (2019): 508–529; and Adhira Mangalagiri, “A Poetics of the Writers’ Conference: Literary Relation in the Cold War World,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 58, no. 3 (2021): 509–531. See also Yan Jia, “Beyond the ‘Bhai-Bhai’ Rhetoric: China–India Literary Relations, 1950–1990” (PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2019).

and India when the role or contribution of a third country/region becomes evident in these documents. Thus our intervention not only relates to the reconceptualization of China–India interactions during the period under study, but also illustrates new methodological tools that could be used to analyze the relationship between the two largest countries of Asia.⁴

In an earlier project, some of us examined archival and library material on China–India interactions pertaining primarily to the pre-1950s period.⁵ That project helped us not only to recognize the value of archival research and collaborative analysis of such sources, but also to acknowledge their shortcomings. Much of the archival material in the national archives located in the UK, India, and China were compiled, collected, and used by the state. Especially for the colonial archives, Nicolas Dirks has pointed out that these documents “reflect state categories and operations such that the state literally produces, adjudicates, organizes, and maintains the discourses that become available as the primary tests of history.”⁶ As a result, they are frequently used to analyze political and diplomatic relations between China and India. In order to address similar shortcomings with the Nehru Papers, we have tried to assess them using sources from outside the collection, extract materials that elucidate the role of non-state actors and issues, and examine episodes and perspectives that are neglected by specialists of international relations.

Our readings of the Nehru Papers fall broadly within five themes, which together articulate our interest in and organize our approach to this archive: knowledge production and circulation, the agency of institutions and individuals, the materiality of connections and circulations, the languages of cross-cultural connections, and deliberations about key events in China–India relations. On the one hand, these themes avoid the usual border and geopolitical concerns that dominate research on China–India relations during the second half of the twentieth century; on the other hand, these themes relate to

4 Some of us have been involved in addressing the issue of methods in China–India interactions through various workshops and conferences. Forthcoming special issues of the *International Journal of Asian Studies* and *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Asian Interactions* in 2022 will carry essays that have emerged from these discussions and deliberations. Our Nehru Papers project is intended to add to this broader reflection on methodological issues in China–India studies. For an overview of the state of China–India studies and concerns about the lacunae in methodological analysis see Tansen Sen, “China–India Studies: Emergence, Development, and State of the Field,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 2 (2021): 363–387.

5 Tansen Sen and Brian Tsui, eds., *Beyond Pan-Asianism: Connecting China and India, 1840s–1960s* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021).

6 Nicolas B. Dirks, “Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History,” in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*, ed. Brian Axel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 58.

the larger issues of cross-cultural and transregional connections in Asia. These themes also allow us to examine the Nehru Papers from an interdisciplinary perspective and propose new ways to study relations between the two nation-states during the first decade of decolonization.

Beyond furthering scholarship in China–India studies, the Nehru Papers also bear considerable contemporary relevance. Following deadly skirmishes on the heavily militarized China–India border in the summer of 2020, militantly nationalistic rhetoric is once again on the rise in both countries. By bringing into view the constructive and vital roles China and India played in each other's entry onto the world stage as modern nation-states, more rigorous study of the 1950s can combat the violent and expansionist images of each currently circulating in the other's public sphere. In addition to offering alternative narratives of China–India relations, we also hope that the interdisciplinarity of our project can make a case for the urgent importance of humanistic sensibilities in reshaping how people relate with others across national borders.

We plan to publish findings from our readings of the Nehru Papers as brief research notes in a series of special collections in *China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies*. This issue marks the first installment of the series. Our research is ongoing, particularly on the later years of Nehru's prime minister-ship. We have decided to begin publishing research notes in the hopes that some of the documents we discuss may prove of use to others working in China–India studies, as well as to those working more broadly on the themes of interest to us. We welcome comments and contributions from readers, which will undoubtedly shape our experiments with these documents and the questions we ask of them in the years to come.