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What are Private Papers of public figures like PM Nehru, and what rules govern their declassification?

Sonia Gandhi had barred public access to Nehru's papers that she had donated to PMML, and also taken away several boxes of these documents. Can donors impose conditions on the sharing of the papers they give away?

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The correspondence of a Prime Minister with other eminent personalities of the time can be part of that person's Private Collection. Pictured here, one of the last letters written by Mahatma Gandhi that was handed over to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. (Express archives)

The Prime Ministers' Museum & Library (PMML) has decided that it will not permit future donors of Private Papers of eminent personalities to impose indefinite conditions on the declassification of such material.

In 2008, Congress leader [Sonia Gandhi reclaimed boxes of papers from Jawaharlal Nehru's Private Collection](#) that the family had donated to the museum earlier, and also barred access to several sets of these papers.

How private are the 'Private Collections' of eminent public personalities? What rules govern the declassification of correspondence involving occupants of high government offices? Who is responsible for declassifying access to such papers?

First, what are Nehru's papers at the PMML, and how did they get there?

The Jawaharlal Nehru Papers were the first set of Private Papers obtained by PMML, which was set up originally as the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library

(NMML) in the memory of India's first Prime Minister.

The Private Papers of Nehru, spanning both the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods, were transferred to PMML in several batches starting in 1971. The transfer was facilitated by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund (JNMF) on behalf of Nehru's legal heir, Indira Gandhi, who apparently remained the custodian of these documents until her assassination in October 1984.

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Subsequently, a substantial collection of Nehru's Papers from the post-1946 period were handed over to PMML by Sonia Gandhi.

Does the PMML have Private Papers of other leaders as well?

The PMML has the largest collection of Private Papers in the country, which originally belonged to some 1,000 personalities of modern India, encompassing the entire spectrum of its leadership. In this collection are the papers of Mahatma Gandhi, B R Ambedkar, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Bhikaji Cama, Chaudhary Charan Singh, and many others.

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Among its recent acquisitions are papers of former Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Shanta Kumar, which include letters written by him to Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) on One Nation, One Election, the abrogation of Article 370, and Indo-Pak relations, according to the PMML.

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There are also the papers of the legendary environmental activist Sundarlal Bahuguna, which were donated to PMML by his wife, Vimla Bahuguna, and papers pertaining to Hindi writer and author Yashpal, comprising correspondence pertaining to his revolutionary activities during the freedom struggle.

Are Private Papers the same as personal papers?

The individual collections have come from families, institutions, universities, and other private donors. The papers are invaluable for an accurate appraisal of the lives and times of these personalities, and essential for an understanding of India's modern history and its landmark moments. This is what lies at the heart of repeated efforts to make them available to scholars and researchers.

The custodians of the archives say there are essential differences between papers and correspondence that can be deemed personal, as opposed to Private Collections, even if they pertain to the same person. For instance, the correspondence of a President or a Prime Minister with other eminent personalities of the time, or with institutions, can be part of that person's Private Collection by virtue of these papers being owned by the person's family or other private individuals.

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However, correspondence and documents held in personal capacity are excluded from this set.

Official Records constitute another set of papers — these are held by various government departments and ministries, and could comprise letters, records, or file notings, etc. pertaining to the working of various central and state governments.

What kinds of conditions do donors of Private Papers impose?

When donors hand over Private Collections in their ownership to archives and museums, they sometimes reach an understanding with the recipient institution, imposing conditions for their declassification and public access.

Many of those who donated Private Collections to PMML set unspecified embargo conditions on public access to these papers — consequently, the institution holds these papers and conserves them, but it cannot make them public, and researchers cannot access them.

It is in this context that the museum — which functions under the Ministry of Culture — has decided that it will, under normal circumstances, permit only a five-year embargo from the date of receipt of any new papers. In rare cases, this window can remain shut for up to 10 years at most.

PMML has also decided to go ahead and open up on its own several sets of private papers that have been lying in its custody for decades, pertaining to the first Speaker of Lok Sabha G D Mavalankar, Nehru's niece Nayantara Sahgal, and many as 2.80 lakh pages pertaining to Nehru that were not claimed by Sonia Gandhi in 2008.

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Which organisation other than the PMML acquires Private Papers?

The other organisation that acquires Private Collections in the country, the National Archives of India — which too, operates under the Culture Ministry — says it acquires only those papers which the donors agree to declassify.

It is the norm to put all records in the public domain, unless in very rare cases, where the concerns may be pressing and pertain to security or sensitivity.

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The National Archives' Private Archives Section has in its custody a rich collection of private papers of eminent persons who have contributed in various fields of public life. These papers have been acquired mainly through donations and gifts from individuals and institutions around the world.

The National Archives has papers pertaining to Mahatma Gandhi, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Dadabhai Naoroji, Purushottam Das Tandon, Maulana Azad, Minoo Masani, Sardar Patel and Keshav Dev Malviya among others.

How does declassification work in other countries?

In the United States, the Library of Congress Manuscript Division holds Personal Papers and organizational records that are significant in American history. The National Archives and Records Administration is the official depository for US government records, like the National Archives of India here.

The Public Records Rules, 1997, covers declassification of all kinds of records and correspondence in India. For official records, the Rules say that the responsibility for declassification rests with the respective organisations, and that records should ordinarily be declassified in 25 years.

The definition of Public Records encompasses any records in relation to the central government, and any ministry, department or office of the government — including the PMO and the President’s Office. However, the 1997 Rules don’t lay down sweeping powers for papers owned by private individuals and families, which is voluntary in nature — either by means of donation or sale of these documents in some cases.

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Divya A reports on travel, tourism, culture and social issues - not necessarily in that order - for The Indian Express. She's been a journalist for over a decade now, worki [... Read More](#)

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