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Casting and Casteing Indian Diplomacy

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Abstract

In this essay, I look at a curious intersection – the emergence of Indian diplomacy in the interwar era and the end of indentured labor. A genealogical reading suggests that Indian diplomacy takes "birth" primarily to articulate the political and civic rights of the new, seemingly upper caste Indian, in contrast to the lower caste "coolie" of the past. Diplomacy here becomes a practice through which this difference between the upper caste Indian migrant as a rights-bearing individual, and the lower caste Indian migrant as a non-rights bearing individual is enacted. This interrogation of Indian diplomatic practice is primarily an effort to reveal the ways in which caste, rarely explored as a factor in Indian diplomacy, is indeed central to its making.

Keywords

Indian diplomacy – British India – caste – interwar era

Introduction

To paraphrase (the much paraphrased) Charles Tilly, diplomacy makes states and states make diplomacy.[1] As a practice fundamentally geared towards pushing, practicing and enacting peace, modern diplomacy is the very antithesis of war. Consequently, it is diplomacy which creates and shapes the everyday interactions of states in the international system. Just like war-making then,

1 This is obviously a play on Tilly's famous "states make war, and war makes states." See, Tilly, C. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In *Bringing the State Back In*, eds. P. Evans et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–86.

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diplomacy is understood to be a function of the state. Traditionally, to be a diplomat is to act on behalf of the state.

A valid question to ask then is: Can a colony, i.e. a not-yet-sovereign state, claim to *do* diplomacy? Indeed, in what ways does "diplomacy" as a legitimacy-inducing site of contestation play a role in *enacting* statehood? A brief intervention such as this can hardly do justice to these issues, but what I propose to do here is discuss the case of an "anomalous actor," i.e. British India, and through this discussion, suggest lines of enquiry for the study of diplomacy in general, and the past and present of Indian diplomacy, in particular.

The Condition of Possibility

In purely technical terms, colonial India could be said to have a department dealing with foreign affairs as early as 1783.[2] However, for diplomacy as a practice to emerge, one can only look at the interwar era as the period of emergence, for it is in this period that India gains a "quasi-international" status.[3] British India was a member of several international organizations, including the League of Nations and later the United Nations. To emphasize the peculiarity, India was a non-self-governing country with treaty making powers, while others like Newfoundland and Southern Rhodesia which became fully self-governing lacked such treaty making powers.[4] As D.H. Miller was to note in response to India's participation at the League of Nations, India was an "anomaly among anomalies" as the only non-self-governing country.[5]

This exceptionality of India as a non-self-governing international actor can only be understood through the entanglement of four key developments which frame the emergence of Indian diplomacy in this period: political reforms in

2 Rao, S.N. *History and Organization, Procedure and Personnel of the Indian Foreign Service* (Mumbai and Bangalore: Strand Book Stall, 2002), 1–2.

3 Heimsath, C.H., and S. Mansingh. *A Diplomatic History of Modern India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1971); Keenleyside, T.A. "The Indian Nationalist Movement and the League of Nations: Prologue to the United Nations." *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 39 (3) (1983), 281–98; Poulose, T.T. "India as an Anomalous International Person (1919–1947)." *British Yearbook of International Law* 44 (1970); Nair, N.P. *The Administration of Foreign Affairs in India with Comparative Reference to Britain*. Unpublished PhD Thesis (New Delhi: School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1963); Das Gupta, A. *The Indian Civil Service and Indian Foreign Policy, 1923–1961* (London: Routledge, 2021).

4 Poulose, T.T. "India as an Anomalous International Person," 206.

5 Miller, D.H. *The Drafting of the Covenant* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 164; Legg, S. "An International Anomaly? Sovereignty, the League of Nations and India's Princely Geographies." *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (1) (2014), 96–110.

India, decentralization of the empire, the question of the status of Indians abroad and the end of the system of indenture.

During the First World War, the cry for political reforms within India had reached a crescendo, leading to the famous Montagu declaration of August 1917 which promised placing India on the path of "responsible government." This fell considerably short of the Indian demand for dominion status, but one of the outcomes was the granting of dominion-like status to India on matters of imperial concern by including it in the Imperial Conferences. In a resolution passed at the Imperial Conference of 1918, India was recognized in the same league as the dominions and, accordingly, given equal representation on all platforms of international diplomacy, including at the League of Nations and at the Washington Conference of 1921–22. In contrast, the pace of internal reforms for Indians was far more disappointing. The Montford Reforms of 1919 and the Simon Commission of 1927 were rejected by the Gandhi-led nationalist movement, which demanded full dominion status and eventually at the end of 1920s, full independence.[6]

As a result, the slowness of internal reforms was often pegged against the stunning quickness with which India had been seemingly given equality of status in the international realm. In the early 1920s, for instance, Indian Liberals such as V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and T.B Sapru were convinced that recognition of India's equality on international platforms was a proof of the inevitability of self-government within a few years. As India's plenipotentiary at the Washington Conference, where Sastri sat on the same High Table as the representatives from nine states including Britain, France, Japan, Italy, and the United States, he was convinced that India's diplomatic equality made full dominion status inevitable.[7]

The Indian National Congress, the predominant anti-colonial party, took exactly the opposite view. The assumed equality of external status was a sham, meant to dissipate the buildup of the nationalist movement for self-government. As the Congress pointed out, India had little influence on any important matters of defense and strategic interests. The Indian representatives, as Nehru was to later dismiss them, were merely "the camp-followers of the British."[8]

Both these sets of views are certainly exaggerations, and require more thinking through the entanglements of diplomacy and Indian agency in the making of diplomacy. But most important here is that India's external equality

6 For details, see Thakur, V. *India's First Diplomat: V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and the Making of Liberal Internationalism* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

7 Ibid., chp. 5.

8 Nehru, J. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, second series,* 1 (1), ed. M. Hasan (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund and Oxford University Press, 1984), 506.

of status also had another, less appreciated, function with regard to India's internal status. The political unity of India was only concretized in its external representation. Internally, there were two Indias – British India and the Princely States – with different political status. Indian representatives to the imperial and international conferences included representatives from both sets of political units. India as a singular state and indeed a nation (given that India's national movement had hitherto considered the question of princely states) was only concretized on the plane of diplomacy.

India's gaining of external equality however also came at a price; it was paralleled by the gaining of "autonomy" by the white dominions on the question of immigration. A resolution passed in 1918, which recognized the right to equal treatment of the Indian overseas, also recognized the principle of domestic autonomy with regard to maintaining the composition of internal populations. Over the next few years, white dominions passed a slew of legislations aimed at maintaining white supremacy with regard to migration control. This made racial exclusion explicit in immigration policies, unlike in the past when racial control was maintained through other means, such as education tests, property qualifications, and gentlemen agreements.[9]

So, even though, on most issues of external and defense matters, the dominions and India were to consult with Britain, at the imperial conferences the matter of immigration policies was turned from an imperial to a domestic issue. Furthermore, the immigration issue was also intricately tied to the questions of citizenship and subjecthood within the British Empire. The 1918 resolution, and similar resolutions passed at the 1921 and 1923 imperial conferences, simultaneously affirmed the principle of British subjecthood by claiming equality of status of all subjects within the British Empire. In other words, an Indian in Australia ought to have the same civic status as a South African in Australia.

This double-gesture of enshrining national sovereignty but at the same time affirming imperial subjecthood pointed to the fundamental issues related to the political form that the British Empire found itself to be in. It was no more an Empire in the nineteenth century sense (where imperial writ extended uniformly), but neither was it a "new League of Nations" – as the South Africa prime minister Jan Smuts imagined it to be, i.e. a loose co-federation, with autonomous states. Sovereignty resided fully neither with Britain, nor with the

9 See Lake, M., and H. Reynolds. *Drawing the Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

individual dominions.[10] The issue was further complicated by the multilayered nature of political units within the Empire.[11]

The matrix of relations among various units of the Empire required both a new imperial ideology as well as a malleable bureaucratic apparatus. "The Commonwealth of Nations" as an idea attempted to fill the first void, and the second – in India's case – was answered through calls for sending diplomatic "Agents" to countries which had issues related to Indians resident overseas.[12] The country where this concern was the most pressing was South Africa. As early as 1918, Satyendra Sinha, India's representative, requested that South Africa should host an Indian Agent to liaise between the two governments. The suggestion was not taken up but was repeated in subsequent imperial conferences, and eventually adopted in 1927 when India sent its first Agent to South Africa. This was the first ever diplomatic position of its kind within the empire/commonwealth – it was equivalent to a High Commissioner who until then had only been exchanged between Britain and other settler dominions (India also sent a high commissioner in the UK). What we see here are the bare bones of India's diplomacy developing, both as a practice and as a relatively autonomous institution.[13]

But the claims for India having a diplomatic status are almost wholly about the status of Indians overseas. And these follow very closely another development: the end of indenture in 1917. Started to fill the labor shortage after the end of slavery, the Indian indenture labor fed the sugar plantations across the British Empire from Guyana to Fiji, displacing almost 3.5 million Indians in an 80-year period from 1830s to 1910s. Indian Indenture was meant to replace African slavery, but as the commonwealth historian Hugh Tinker famously argued, it ended up becoming "a new system of slavery."[14] At the start of the twentieth century, strong protestations from Indian nationalists who highlighted the plight of the indenture as well as opposition by the white dominions were instrumental in bringing an end to this scheme.

10 See *The Imperial Conference 1923*. "The Position of the Indians in the British Empire," Appendices to the Summary of Proceedings (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1923), 139.

11 It constituted a fully sovereign Britain, internally sovereign white dominions, a colony and princely states under British paramountcy joined together as a quasi-dominion, Crown Colonies fully under colonial control, and indirectly ruled colonies.

12 See, Das Gupta, A. *The Indian Civil Service*.

13 Thakur, V. *India's First Diplomat*.

14 Tinker, H. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). For a critique of the new slavery argument, Kumar A. *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

However, a key reason for protests was the poor image of India that "coolies" represented. Several nationalists had argued that the indenture system paraded the poverty of India, and hit at India's *izzat* (pride).[15] Political leaders in the settler colonies also complained about the poor quality of Indians being sent, often a hint of their caste status in India.[16] Indenture labor came mostly from India's depressed castes, those who were at the lower end of the socio-economic hierarchy, but also given the demeaning peculiarity of the Indian caste system, hereditarily tasked with doing manual labor. Often in their case, the conditions of indenture were not fulfilled. The resulting discriminations on them in the colonies and the dominions were justified in the name of the vices of the poor, i.e. poor sanitation and living standards.[17]

The emerging Indian leadership, in the moderate as well as the extremist factions of the Indian National Congress, was of the middle class, almost wholly composed of the upper castes. For them, the ill-treatment of Indians in the dominions created an impression of India as a "coolie" or *shudra* nation.[18] The stopping of indenture altogether hence was also a step in the direction of shifting the focus away from the poor "coolie" to the new Indian immigrant who was economically and socially better-off, the trader and the soldier. The trader and the soldier, as the so-called good immigrant, were the rights-bearing subjects of the British Empire who fulfilled the conditions of equal British subjecthood via property qualifications.

This shift from the "coolie" – who in any case was not eligible for civic and political rights – to the trader/soldier – who claimed equality on account of either the property qualifications or the services offered to the empire – proved an important identity claim for the Indian abroad. While the upper caste Indian elite was ashamed of the "coolie," the trader/soldier was India's own contribution to the efforts at civilizing. So, in a famous book written in 1918, the Aga Khan argued that the trader in East Africa had shown India to be capable of spreading civilization abroad. A crucial marker of self-government, as evidenced by the white dominions, was a claim to civilize the natives.[19] Whites across the empire, from Australia to South Africa to East Africa, had used the

15 See *The Imperial Conference 1923*. "Statement by Tej Bahadur Sapru," 73.

16 See Thakur, V. "Travels in Diplomacy: V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and G.S. Bajpai in 1921–1922." *International History Review* 44 (4) (2022), 874–91.

17 See "Position of Indians in South Africa – Statement Submitted to His Excellency the Viceroy of the South African Deputation," Pro No. 80, In Proceedings Overseas – A., March 1926 (Nos. 1–88), India Office and Records, L/E/7/1411, British Library, London.

18 Under the Indian caste order, *shudras* are the lowest ranked of the four *varnas*, who perform artisanal and labor functions in society.

19 Khan, A. *The Memories of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 127–32.

civilizing nature of the white mission to claim statehood for themselves. The white colonies had become dominions by projecting to be good civilizers. In East Africa, Aga Khan argued, India through its trading class had fulfilled its own civilizing mission, and thus qualified for dominion status.

The change from the "coolie" to "trader/soldier" was also manifested in increased agitations among the Indian community abroad. The *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914 and the spread of revolutionary ideas among the Indian diaspora from America to Europe to Kenya through *Ghadr* and other anarchist movements, had significantly shifted the narrative of a pliant and servile Indian "coolie" to a more active, agitational and aspirational Indian petty bourgeoisie class.[20] Even in South Africa, where Gandhi led the Satyagraha movement, which ended in 1914, the demands and the demographic, as Maureen Swan's work has showed, reflected the interests of the traders and upper castes.[21]

Hence, the new Indian abroad, the primary subject whose advocacy births Indian diplomacy, is a rights-bearing subject – an outgoing, non-insulated, economically better off, and predominantly upper caste subject. This new Indian is also the future of the Indian inside India, one who embodies India's equality of status within the British Empire. Indeed, the Indian abroad is the condition of possibility for India's future. Importantly, this new Indian is not the old "coolie" Indian who represented India's emaciated *shudra* past of subjection.

This essay is suggesting that these two key issues, the opening of the possibility of equality for India's status within the Empire and the shift in the demographic of the Indian who would be a rights-bearing subject, together frame the emergence of India's practice of diplomacy.

Caste and Indian Diplomacy

It is no secret that scholarship on Indian international relations and diplomacy has not seriously engaged with caste, neither as an empirical reality nor as a conceptual and constitutive category. A sociology of the core members of Indian diplomacy, through its history to the present, has never really been attempted, yet the upper caste character of India's diplomatic service and IR academia is quite evident.[22] The discipline's language of state, nation, and

20 Sohi, S. *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

21 Swan, M. *Gandhi: The South Africa Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1988).

22 Kumar, P., and U. Sarkar. "Podcast Interview on 'Caste and Its Absence from Critiques of Indian Foreign Policy." SuniIndia.in (2021). https://www.sunoindia.in/beyond-nation-and-state/caste-and-its-absence-from-critiques-of-indian-foreign-policy.

international relations makes it convenient to place "caste" as a "domestic" category, when indeed the conceptual corpus of Indian IR and diplomatic thinking, from *arthashastra* to *advaita* to *ahimsa*, is deeply caste-inflected.

In addition to thinking through the conceptual and constitutive character of Indian IR, this also suggests other lines of enquiry that scholars working on caste and diplomacy could follow. As I have argued, the emergence of Indian diplomacy and the changing caste character of the Indian diaspora is not a coincidence. Indeed, it is the upper caste Indian who becomes the primary subject of Indian diplomacy. To borrow a line of thinking from the practice turn in IR, diplomacy here becomes a practice through which this difference between the upper caste Indian migrant as a rights-bearing individual and the lower caste Indian migrant as a non-rights bearing individual is enacted. In a way, then, caste becomes the condition of possibility of India's diplomacy, of who is worth representing and who is not. In the above case, the upper caste Indian is worthy of such representation, while the "coolie" Indian, even though part of the Indian nation, was seen as an embarrassment and thus, as Kalathmika Natarajan's excellent work shows even for post-independence Indian diplomacy, an "undesirable."[23]

This then links back, albeit in somewhat of a non-linear fashion, to the question this essay started with – how do we think about the diplomacy of the colonized? It is not enough to think of diplomacy as a legitimacy-enshrining tool or practice. Our conceptions must go further to think of the ways in which, diplomacy, even in anti-colonial contexts, serves to advance and enshrine non-egalitarian visions. Even further, diplomacy, as the advance guard of the nation-in-the-making, concretizes who is considered worthy of being part of the postcolonial nation, and who is not.

Indian scholarship, especially in diplomatic history, has importantly reflected on the role of race in Indian diplomatic relations. But at the same time, it has hived off the constitutive role of caste in the making of Indian diplomacy. Race and caste (and indeed, gender and class) intersect and entangle in several ways in the performance of diplomatic roles, but by focusing on just race (and sometimes class), the Indian diplomatic studies scholarship continues to silence and, in turn, perpetuate caste hierarchies.

23 Natarajan, K. "The Privilege of the Indian Passport (1947–1967): Caste, Class, and the Afterlives of Indenture in Indian Diplomacy." *Modern Asian Studies* (2022), 1–30.