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World War 1 and the Emergence of Indian Diplomacy

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An often-repeated claim about India in the interwar period is that India was an ‘anomalous actor’, or an ‘actor with a quasi-international status’.¹ India – British India, to be specific – was the only non-self-governing country with treaty making powers.⁴ India was, D.H. Miller noted, an ‘anomaly among anomalies’ as the only non-self-governing country to be a member of the League of Nations.² India was also a member of the affiliated organizations of the League, such as the International Labour Organization and the Permanent Court of International Justice at the Hague. In addition to the League, Indian participated in the Imperial Conferences (1918, 1921, 1923, 1926, 1932, 1937 and 1944 – now called Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference), the Washington Naval and Disarmament Conference (1921-22), The Geneva Economic Conference (1927), the London naval Conference (1930), and the Hague Reparations Conferences (1929-30). India was also a founding member of the United Nations and indeed, when Indian became an independent state, it was already a signatory to 627 treaties and a member of 51 international organizations.³ By the time Jawaharlal Nehru-led interim government was sworn in in September 1946, India already had 13 missions abroad. So, the country had quite a substantial international presence that was somewhat extraordinary for a colony.

The task I have identified for myself in this short intervention is to sketch the motivations for the emergence of Indian diplomacy in the aftermath of the First World War. However, if readers are interested in India’s interwar diplomacy, I would readily recommend three recent books.

The first is Sneha Mahajan’s 2018 book titled *Foreign Policy of Colonial India, 1900-1947* which looks at the strategic motivations and mechanisms of British India’s foreign policy.⁴ Mahajan’s book looks at the foreign policy of a colony and focuses largely on the British interests in the making of Indian foreign policy. An excellent companion to Mahajan’s book is Amit Das Gupta’s *The Indian Civil Service and Indian Foreign Policy, 1923-61*.⁵ This book looks at the making and evolution of Indian foreign policy from an Indian and institutional perspective.

¹ T Poulse, “India as an Anomalous International Person (1919–1947),” *British Yearbook of International Law* 44 (1970), 206.; R. P. Anand, “The Formation of International Organizations and India: A Historical Study,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* 23, no. 1 (February 2010), pp. 5–21, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0922156509990318>.

² D.H Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant*, vol. 1 (London: G.P. Putnam’s and Sons, 1928), pp. 164.

³ Partition Proceedings Vol 3 (1949), Government of India, New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, pp. 217-79; Poulse 1970, 206. Also see, Vineet Thakur, “Colonial Origins of Indian Foreign Policymaking,” *EPW*, 49:32 (2014), 58-64.

⁴ Sneha Mahajan, *Foreign Policy of Colonial India, 1900-1947* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ Amit Das Gupta, *The Indian Civil Service and Indian Foreign Policy, 1923-1961* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2021).

Essentially, Das Gupta charts the evolution of the clumsily titled Department of Education, Health and Lands – which was the department that dealt with, most prominently, the questions related to overseas Indians. So while it is understood that Indians had little say in the strategic questions of Indian foreign policymaking, it is equally true that as far as the issue of the rights of overseas Indians was concerned, which concerned shaping India's position on racial discrimination, Indian members from politicians to diplomats had considerable degree of agency in determining Indian positions. In fact, the principles of Nehruvian Indian foreign policy, especially anti-racialism, drew on the years of work that Indian politicians and diplomats had done at international platforms by then. For a reader interested in going into these details through a biographical telling, I must do the immoderate task of recommending my own book, *India's First Diplomat: V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and the Making of Liberal Interventionism*. This book looks at the diplomatic life of an individual who combined the politician and the diplomat in the 1920s and became, after Gandhi, the most recognized Indian figure abroad.⁶

The question I want to address here is why and how is it that Indian diplomacy emerges at the end of the First World War. What role does the War play in the emergence of India as an international actor? And I will argue that the exceptionality of India as a non-self-governing international actor can be understood through the entanglement of three key developments. They are: a) India's military participation in the First World War; b) the change of the balance of power in the Empire with the increased autonomy to the white settler dominions; c) and the emergence of the trader/soldier rather than the indenture worker as the subject of rights within the empire.

War, Masculinity and Nationhood⁷

During the First World War, a term later coined by the British soldier-turned-journalist Charles Repington, Ireland saw a full-scale mutiny against Britain, South Africa came perilously close to it, and the Bolshevik Revolution fanned the fires of self-determination across the empire. Britain's former prime minister Arthur Balfour worried that the War had taught that an 'organised forces of men' asserting their numerical superiority through united action could enforce their views. If the East was to learn this lesson and act upon, Balfour warned, the British rule in India would come to a sudden end.⁸

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

⁷ I discuss this in more detail in Vineet Thakur, *Jan Smuts and the Indian Question* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2017).

⁸ Quoted in, Joanne Stafford Mortimer, "Annie Besant and India 1913-1917," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18 (1983), 61-78, at p. 76.

Yet remarkably, India which had seen a growing unrest against colonial rule just before the War remained by and large peaceful. This was despite the depleted strength of British and Indian troops in the country. The Indian viceroy, Lord Hardinge, no stranger to the mutinous potential in India considering that he had survived a bomb attack, was proud of India's loyalty as he told the *New York Times* that at one time during the war, there were only 10,000–13,000 British troops in India, a country of 315 million.⁹

Where Hardinge saw reassurance, the *Ghadar Party*, a revolutionary party of Indians based in North America, saw opportunity, enough for planning a wide-scale mutiny in India. The mutiny was crushed before it could start, and the revolutionary activity within India was largely contained. However, the German financial support to this planned mutiny tainted Ghadar for other Indian leaders, who by and large supported the empire in the war. In fact, the two Indias – British as well as Princely – had enthusiastically marched their men, money, mortar and mammal on the side of the empire. Even the likes of Annie Besant, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas Gandhi, otherwise radically opposed to the government, had appealed for war time recruitments into the army. The fiery poetess-politician Sarojini Naidu, appealed to 'give the very flower of our manhood' so that 'England's need may be served incidentally, and India's need ultimately'.¹⁰

The British were, thus, as thankful for the general lack of revolutionary activity in India as they were for the material support that Indians had provided. Consequently in Britain, India's participation in the war generated considerable sympathy for India's claims for political reform and representation. A great outpouring of messages during the war commended the service of Indian soldiers in the time of war and the loyalty to the empire by Indians in general. As early as November 1914, Charles Roberts, speaking on behalf of the Secretary of State for India, asserted in the House of Commons that India should 'occupy a place in our free Empire worthy alike of her ancient civilization and thought, of the valour of her fighting races and the patriotism of her sons.' India now, he continued, 'claims to be not a mere dependent of, but partner in, the Empire.'¹¹ India had matched up to the 'standards of civilization', to use Gerrit Gong's phrase, and hence was now a nation worthy of equal status.¹²

The nation, as it was understood in Europe, was the highest manifestation of colonially constructed notions of masculinity. As the sociologist Charles Tilly's aphorism goes, 'War made the state and the state made war.' However, unlike Tilly's imagining of it, war is more than a functional necessity for the idea of a nation. In the lore of nationhood, great nations become so only after going through metaphorical rites of circumcision in war, and coming out

⁹ A.C Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad, 1905–1927* (Patna: Bharati Bhawan, 1971).

¹⁰ *The Servant of India*, 1 (13), 16 May 1918, p. 146.

¹¹ See, Thakur, 2017, p. 20.

¹² Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of Civilization in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

bloodied but manly on the other side. Each nation has tales of war, valour and bravery at the centre of its own imagination.

For India, this was of particular importance because India had been constructed as feminine by British colonialism. As post-colonial scholars such as Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee have argued, femininity was deemed a character of Indian civilisation that purportedly made it inferior to the more masculine Western civilisation. The writings of James Mill, Thomas Macaulay and even Karl Marx are filled with expositions of the feminine, cowardly and treacherous character of Indians. Nineteenth-century Indian writers such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee deeply resented this construction of India and blamed it on the lack of the sense of nationhood among Indians – to be more specific, Bankim is writing about Hindus rather than Indians. They exhorted Hindus to bring ‘India’ into existence by fighting against either Muslims or the British. This would for them prove India’s civilisational parity with the British and the West, in general.

The First World War was thus India’s moment of reclamation of its masculinity, nationhood and civilisation. The vitality of this moment could be gauged from the fact that even Mahatma Gandhi chose to depart from his lifelong insistence on non-violence in favour of Indians arming themselves in the imperial cause. Addressing a public manifesto with regard to war recruitment in 1918, he admonished the British for keeping India without arms and for making Indians effeminate. The war was, he believed, India’s moment of national assertion, which could only happen through the abolition of India’s femininity.¹³

To make this point clearer, it is perhaps useful to contrast this moment with another: slightly over a decade before the First World War, Indian soldiers had been sent to South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (also Gandhi’s first war, by the way). In this war, Indian forces had been forced to see the conflict from the sidelines as non-combatants; they were not allowed to fight in the ‘white man’s war’. The Anglo-Boer War, the first War of the British Empire in which armed forces from across the white ‘Empire’ fought on one side, and as an observer said, and forged a commonwealth in the ties in blood. While Indian forces were otherwise used for imperial wars across the Empire’s non-European frontiers, such as in Sudan and Egypt, in this particular conflict, which had white combatants on the opposing side, Indian blood had been deemed too polluted. Indians had now fought in the First World War with and against European soldiers and done remarkably well, so much so that the former Boer War General Jan Smuts himself had lauded the courage of the Indian troops under him who fought against the Germans.

Now that Indians had shown their masculine equality with whites, Indians demanded an equality of status at the level with white dominions. In September 1915, Mohammad Shafi,

¹³ “Mr. Gandhi on War Recruiting: Why Home Rulers Should Fight”, *Indian Opinion*, No. 37, Vol. XVI, 13 September 1918, p. 148.

who later became a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, introduced a resolution for separate representation of India in the Imperial Conferences. Comparing the salience of India with other Dominions, Asad Ali argued that India generated more than three and a half times the revenue of Canada, four times that of Australia, four and a half times that of South Africa and more than seven times the revenue generated by New Zealand. Another member M.B. Dadbhoy asked: 'Will the Imperial Government... be reluctant to remove once and for all our badge of inferiority and to raise us in the scale of nations?' The resolution received enthusiastic support. The argument was unmistakably strong and heeded to by London.¹⁴

Consequently, in the next gathering of the members of the Empire in 1917, India was invited to participate as equal member. The three member delegation constituted, for the first time, two Indians: Sir Satyendra Sinha and the Maharaja of Bikaner. Furthermore, this Imperial War Conference passed a resolution necessitating steps to secure the assent of various governments so that India should be fully represented at all Imperial Conferences. While acknowledging the British Dominions as 'autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth' the Conference also recognised India, at the strong insistence of Sinha, as 'an important part of the same.' Sinha was also able to insert India's name in the line which read '...recognise the right of the Dominions and India to an adequate view in foreign policy and foreign relations.'¹⁵ With these additions, India's status as a quasi-international actor were established and it was from there on able to participate as a full member in the Imperial Conferences, Paris Peace Conference, League of nations and all other international organisations.

Decentralization and the Defence of Empire

The equality of India was mounted on the argument for the autonomy of the white dominions. And this is the second point I make below.

The broader question of the constitution of the British Empire had haunted imperial enthusiasts on the eve of the War. The surge of Japan, Germany and the United States from the late-nineteenth century onwards increasingly chipped at the British hegemony of the seas. By the first decade of the twentieth century, they were no more distant challengers but serious contenders. Britain could no more foot the military bill alone and needed the empire's constituents to pull their military weight to defend its vast territorial and naval expanse. In the War, the dominions and India had come to the Empire's aid, temporarily deferring the crisis. But the question remained: could the instrumentality of purpose ever be a guarantee of a longer-term commitment? The War was an exceptional event of an unimaginable scale; would this support also be forthcoming when the Empire is forced to retreat by nudges and pokes? Furthermore, with every ounce of imperial defence required for guarding the empire's borders, Britain could ill-afford the luxury of continuous coercion against assertive

¹⁴ See, Thakur, *Jan Smuts and the Indian Question*, 21-22

¹⁵ Thakur, *Jan Smuts and the Indian Question*, 24.

nationalisms in the colonial empire, especially in Ireland, India and Egypt. The empire needed a new empire-ideal, an Empire 2.0.

The ideological basis for this was provided by a group of imperial minded men, known as The Round Table, who proposed the federation of empire into a 'commonwealth'. The federation scheme envisioned a form of shared governance of the empire by Britain and white settler colonies. But, the idea that the notoriously racist dominions would co-govern Britain's colonies including India was alarming to several Indian nationalists. The Indian liberal leader V.S. Srinivasa Sastri asserted that it would be ludicrous to think that dominions – some of which were hardly more advanced in their political institutions than Indians – would not only be ranked higher in the new imperial hierarchy but also govern India. This would reduce India to 'a household drudge in the imperial family, compelled to put on the livery not only of Great Britain but of New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Canada and petty Newfoundland'. India was now called upon to serve 'more masters and worse masters.'¹⁶ Unless Indians fleshed out ideas of their own, initiated schemes which reflected the demands and desires of Indians, the dangers of being outthought by imperial enthusiasts were horrifyingly real.

This is the context of two key proposals put forward by Indians during the War. The 'Memorandum of the Nineteen', a proposal from 19 members of the Imperial Legisture, and the Congress-League Scheme, jointly agreed upon by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. The cry for political reforms within India reached a crescendo – partly out of the fear of being co-governed by the dominions, which eventually lead to the famous Montagu declaration of August 1917 which promised placing India on the path of 'responsible government'.

'Responsible government' 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. Accordingly, as I have noted above, India was recognized in the same league as the dominions and given equal representation on all platforms of international diplomacy. And this was mostly because of the extreme concern Indians had shown about not being treated inferior to the dominions.

Over time the pace of domestic reforms remained disappointing. But the slowness of internal reforms was pegged against the stunning quickness with which India had been seemingly given equality of status in the international realm. In early 1920s, for instance, Indian Liberals such as V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and T.B Saprú 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 America, Britain, France, Japan,

¹⁶ V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, *Self-Government for India: Under the British Flag* (Allahabad: Servants of India Society, 1916), pp.8.

and Italy, he was convinced that India's diplomatic equality made full dominion status inevitable.¹⁷

Hence India's seeming international equality served three purposes: first, it gave India a status equal to the other dominions, hence mitigating concerns about being under any scheme of shared governance. Second, it allowed to signal to, at least one section of Indian leadership, the inevitability of dominion status even when institutional reforms were slow.

And third, crucially, India's external equality of status also had another, less appreciated, function about India's internal status. The political unity of India was only concretized in its external representation. Internally, there were two Indias – British India and Princely States – with different political status. But, 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.

The Trader/Soldier as the New Subject of Rights

This discussion then allows us to move to the third key facet of the emergence of Indian diplomacy and another event, that goes often unnoticed when we look at the histories of the First World War: the end of indenture in 1917. Started to fill the labour shortage after the end of slavery, the Indian indenture labour fed the sugar plantations across the British Empire from Guyana to Fiji, displacing almost 3.5 million Indians in an 80-year period. 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.¹⁸

The settler colonies or white dominions were notoriously racist. In fact, they had gained national identities primarily in the context of their racial policies. The demands for decentralisation of the empire had also come largely from them. A key reason being that they wanted to create racialised regimes through immigration control. Britain, which had to worry about the insalubrious effects of legally racialised regimes in other colonies, attempted to forestall explicit racial measures through advocating other means, such as education tests, property qualifications, and 'gentlemen' agreements. These were, to put in another way, 'non-racist racist measures' because they were meant to achieve the objective of stopping immigration from non-white countries without explicitly mentioning race. But by the end of the First World War, the balance of power between Britain and its white dominions had changed. With decentralization, if on the one hand India gained external equality, it was paralleled by the gaining of 'autonomy' by the white dominions on the question of immigration. Indeed, a

¹⁷ Thakur, *India's First Diplomat*, ch. 5.

¹⁸ Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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.¹⁹ The question of immigration was now turned from an imperial issue to a domestic issue, meaning that the British had even lesser say on the racial ill-treatment of Indians in these white settler dominions, most prominently in South Africa.

Most Indian leaders were keen to see indenture go. 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*²⁰ nation. 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 'good' immigrant, were the 'rights-bearing' subjects of the British Empire who fulfilled the conditions of equal British subjecthood via property qualifications.

But since indenture had now ended, Indian leaders argued that the settler dominions had no further reasons to complain, and certainly no justification to continue to racially discriminate against resident Indians. And since, as I have said, the issue of immigration was made from an imperial to domestic issue, Indians could no more complain to Britain when a racist legislation was passed. Britain washed off its hands of any responsibility but at the same time did not want to completely alienate Indians, given how important the issue was for Indian leaders. After all, as Tej Bahadur Sapru said in the Imperial Conference of 1923, the treatment of Indians abroad was a question of India's *izzat*. Since Britain could no more intervene on behalf of Indians, a status of equality to India was an invitation to vicariously enjoy the benefit of sovereignty, i.e. to parley bilaterally with the dominions on the question of the rights of Indians. In other words, India was encouraged to bilaterally engage with the dominions, hence establishing a status of diplomatic equality.

So, as early as 1918, Satyendra Sinha, India's representative to the Imperial Conference, 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 the High Commissioner which until then had only exchanged between

¹⁹ See, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Under the Indian caste order, shudras are at lowest ranked of the four varnas, who perform artisanal and labour functions in society.

Britain and other settler dominions (India also sent a high commissioner in the UK). Here what we see is the barebones of India's diplomacy developing, both as a practice and as a relatively autonomous institution.²¹

Importantly, this shift from the pejoratively named '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 seen as 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.²² Whites across the empire, from Australia to South Africa to East Africa, had used the 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 shift from the 'coolie' to 'trader/soldier' was also manifested in increased agitations among the Indian abroad community. The *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914, the spread of revolutionary ideas among the Indian diaspora from America to Europe to Kenya through *Ghadar* 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.²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵

What I am suggesting here is that these two key issues, the opening of the possibility of equality of India's status within the Empire and the shift in the demographic of the Indian who would be subject of rights, merge to frame India's response through the practice of

²¹ Thakur, "India's First Diplomat".

²² Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), pp. 127-132.

²³ Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁴ Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1988).

²⁵ More elaboration, see Vineet Thakur, "Travels in Diplomacy: V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and G.S. Bajpai in 1921–1922," *The International History Review* 44, no. 4 (April 2022): 874–891, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2021.1907438>.

diplomacy. It is here that India's labour history, caste politics, diplomatic history and military history converge.

Conclusion

In the end then, let me only restate the points I have made above. The 'origins' of Indian diplomacy are entwined in the set of developments which shape its foundation, form, and function. India's military participation in war was an assertive disavowal of a colonially constructed femineity and reclamation of masculinity on which basis Indians now claimed equal representation at the imperial and international table. The War also pushed the dominions to assert their own autonomy from Britain and in turn Britain's efforts to entice the dominions through promises of 'shared governance' of the empire.

Equal imperial representation was a way to assuage a section of Indian leadership of the inevitability of domestic equality. Finally, more powers to the dominions also further entrenched the colour line within the Empire. Imperial equality was a way through which Britain in some ways transferred its own responsibility of ensuring the equal treatment of Indians abroad onto Indians themselves. However, for Indians, another event, the end of indenture, meant that the new Indian subject in the empire was mostly the petty bourgeoisie trader/soldier rather than the proletarian indenture worker. Caste and class intermingle here to assert the rights of a new kind of imperial subject.