Liberal, Liminal and Lost: India’s First Diplomats and the Narrative of Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Indian historiography has largely overlooked the contribution of Indian Liberals in the pre-independence era. It is worse in Indian diplomatic history where studies on pre-independence are few and far between. Responding to this double excision, this article traces the emergence of a new Indian narrative of foreign policy around the issues of equality and justice in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Anchoring their argumentativeness in diplomatic finesse, Indian Liberals such as Satyendra Sinha, VS Srinivasa Sastri and Tej Bahadur Sapru relentlessly campaigned for racial equality and predominance of the rights of people over the rights of states at the Imperial Conferences. In articulation of these views, South Africa, a country where ideas about the status of Indians and Indian civilisation were most contested, emerged as the singular foreign policy ‘other’ around which India’s foreign policy narrative was constructed.

Introduction

Indian history, the historian Ramachandra Guha complains in his magisterial India after Gandhi\(^1\), stops at independence. For students of diplomatic history in India, this is a problem in reverse. With Jawaharlal Nehru being both the author and the authority, diplomatic history in India begins with independence.\(^2\) This notion of the absence of diplomatic history in pre-independence India, to implant our concerns on Guha’s, not only excises the sterling role of

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\(^2\) Rarely have attempts being made to look at pre-independence foreign policy. And those that do – such as Bimla Prasad’s and Iqbal Singh’s works, end up reinforcing the idea that although the Indian National Congress had a tradition of foreign policy, its content and form from 1927 onwards was mostly shaped by Nehru. See, Bimla Prasad, The Origins of Indian foreign policy: the Indian National Congress and world affairs, 1885-1947, Second edition, Bookland Private Limited, Calcutta, 1962; Iqbal Singh, Between Two Fires: Towards an Understanding of Jawaharlal Nehru’s Foreign Policy, Volume I, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) and Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1992. For the foreign policy resolutions of the Congress before Independence, see N.V. Rajkumar (ed.), The Background of India’s Foreign Policy, Navin Press, Delhi, 1952.

some diplomats but also misplaces the origins and influences of Indian diplomacy. In calling some of the protagonists of this tale that we will soon meet ‘India’s First Diplomats’, I attempt to open up the field of history in Indian diplomatic studies. This claim of being ‘the First’ is not necessarily a claim for the origins to arrogantly seal the debate. On the contrary, it is an attempt to reset the understandings of the periods and protagonists of Indian diplomatic history and by setting it up in a provocative fashion invite interpretations that wrestle for alternative beginnings.

The premise of the article is the following: The diplomatic history of modern India could be described as beginning not with independence (nor for that matter Nehru’s 1946 speech) but with India’s entry into the international world, via the British Commonwealth, after the First World War. While Britain still dominated Indian foreign policy thinking, the demands for indigenizing foreign policy from India (and the British anxiety to make the Indian representations look ‘authentic’) helped insert some Indian faces into Indian diplomatic representations. These representatives, who formed the leadership of the Indian Liberals, occupied the liminal space between the government and the nationalists. Structurally constrained by their position within the British Empire and unable to agree with the extreme agentic demands of the Indian nationalists, the Liberals exercised their agency in ingenious ways from this position of liminality. In doing so, they not only redefined the foreign policy of British India but also set its agenda on important matters, such as the question of overseas Indians. As the prime articulators of India’s national viewpoint at the international level, these Liberals engineered a new narrative of Indian foreign policy which emphasized racial equality, justice and predominance of the rights of people over the rights of states. A long view of Indian foreign policy would reveal that post-independence foreign policy based itself on this legacy.

In the pages that follow, I will narrate how Satyendra Nath Sinha (1863-1928), VSS Srinivasa Sastri (1869-1946) and Tej Bahadur Sapru (1875-1949) constructed a new moral discourse of Indian foreign policy. Significantly, they did this by exposing the ambivalent moralism of General Jan Smuts, arguably one of the most eminent figures in the history of the Empire.

But before we go on to tell this story, let us briefly discuss the alliteration in my title - Liberal, Liminal and Lost.
Why have the liminal voices of the liberals been lost?

The excision of the narratives of the colonial era from Indian diplomatic history is unjustifiable. Yet, an exercise in shadow boxing would perhaps question the ‘Indian’ element in the colonial narrative of foreign policy. Further, it would seem disingenuous to trace the colonial antecedents of Nehruvian foreign policy, when Nehru did indeed give a decidedly anti-colonial thrust to his foreign policy. However, the binaries that the former arguments seeks to reinforce (Indian – British; colonial – anti-colonial) may not serve as helpful organizing categories, as much of what happened between the two world wars in Indian foreign policy lay between and betwixt these categories. Likewise, by depriving Nehru’s foreign policy of its context and its legacy, we may actually be doing a disservice to him. By singularly identifying him as the fount of Indian foreign policy, he oftentimes is blamed for all the problems besetting it, just as he receives accolades from other quarters.3

The reluctance of scholars to engage with pre-independence foreign policy narratives has meant that our sources for British India’s foreign policy are the historians of the Empire, who expectedly come with Eurocentric lenses.4 In surveying this period, scholars such as Robert Blyth and Thomas Metcalf have focused on pre-First World War period.5 For them, post-war India became inward looking with little agency in foreign policy decision making. Up until the War, India acted as a sub-imperial node within the Empire from where much of the eastern part of the Empire was controlled. Among other things, the Great War brought home the realisation


Sneh Mahajan’s recent work is also important in this regard. However, she takes India as an element in British foreign policy rather than India as an agent in making its own foreign policy. See, Sneh Mahajan, British Foreign Policy, 1874-1914: The Role of India, New Delhi, Routledge, 2002.

5 The only exception is Hugh Tinker’s (op. cit.) extremely well researched study, Separate and Unequal. However, he has also chosen to speak from the vantage point of British bureaucrats rather than Indians.
in England that conflicts could no more be localised. Consequently, they argue, decision-making on foreign policy was centralised to Whitehall. The rise of a strong nationalist movement in India from 1919 onwards also contributed to India’s inward turn.

The British-centric views of these histories have precluded them from noticing another significant trend which developed in the post-war period. Alongside strong demands for some form of Home Rule, Indians also demanded a strong imprint in defining foreign policy of the colonial state. The most important foreign policy issue from the Indian perspective was the treatment of Indians overseas, especially within the Empire. Intertwined with questions about national identity and national pride, this became the most crucial foreign policy issue on which Indians not only demanded a voice but also defined India’s response. As India gained a ‘quasi-international’ status post-WWI,\(^6\) Indians used this opportunity to raise issues about racial equality and advanced strong arguments about the rights of individuals against the rights of states in international politics. In significant ways, they created a foundation on which Nehru’s foreign policy was able to build upon. Independent India’s first and most spectacular post-independence foreign policy success – isolation of South Africa at the UN, which as Manu Bhagwan\(^7\) has argued contributed immensely towards the adoption of the Declaration of Human Rights – drew on years of long and acrimonious debates Indians had already had with South Africans on international platforms. In fact, General Smuts – cornered as he was by Indian diplomacy in the late 1940s, exposing his Janus-faced internationalism – may only have felt a sense of déjà vu. He had faced a similar onslaught in the Imperial Conferences just after the First World War from the Indian Liberals. As India’s first diplomats, the Indian Liberals in subtle yet profound ways engineered a new foreign policy discourse helping pre-figure, what later became, the basic principles of Indian foreign policy. Placed in a liminal space between the colonial and the anti-colonial, the Liberals, often derided as advertizing agents of the British by the nationalists\(^8\), had to maneuver and open up a space for dialogue and minimizing confrontation between the nationalists and the British. With regard to the question of Indians overseas, they provided the

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\(^8\) This comment was made on VS Srinivasa Sastri by the Eastern African Indian National Congress. See, “RT Hon. Mr. Sastri: England’s Advertisting Agent”, Democrat, 2 March 1929, FD 8, AICC Papers: I Installment, NMML.
common ground from which both the colonial and the anti-colonial responses could be harmonised. Unfortunately, their contributions have not been recognised.

Indian historiography has generally been unkind to the Liberals. Being somewhat antithetical of both the leftist and the nationalist traditions of historic writing in India, the Liberals post-Gokhale have found relatively little mention in the Indian colonial struggle. After the arrival of Gandhi on the national scene, the Liberals were considered “a body of sycophants and self-seekers”.  Preferring graduated constitutional reforms over what were deemed more revolutionary Gandhian methods for India’s emancipation, they have been associated with the appeasement of colonialism in post-independence history writing.  Ironically, until about 1919 Gandhi was an ardent supporter to the Empire, something that he valued even more than non-violence. As late as 1918, he had chosen to depart from his life-long insistence on non-violence in favour of Indians arming themselves in the cause of the Empire. Addressing a public manifesto with regard to war recruiting in 1918, he admonished the British for keeping India without arms and making Indians effeminate. Nevertheless, as a citizen of the Empire, he said, “I have faith in the virtues of the English nation, and that is why I advise you to join the Army. I know the English have done great harm to India, but I believe it to be beneficial to live with that nation. Comparing vices and virtues, I find that the virtues are great”. Keeping Gandhi’s own views in mind, it is quite disconcerting that national historiography has chosen to write very little about the Indian Liberals. As bourgeoisie intellectuals who perpetuated both class and colonial rule, leftist historians have expectedly little to offer on the Liberals.

Reaching the Civilisational Pedestal

In Partha Chatterjee’s famous thesis, the anti-colonial discourse of national identity in 19th century India was premised on the Indian acknowledgement of material inferiority and spiritual superiority vis-à-vis the West. Yet, for the 19th century Bengali intellectuals such as Bankim

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10 Bayly, 2012, Ibid., p. 3.


Chandra Chatterjee and Bhudev Mukherjee, this material inferiority was not necessarily deemed as inferiority but as a parallel way of living. The primary difference, these intellectuals had argued, between the West and India was the approach to the question of violence.\textsuperscript{13} The West was a war loving society and Indian thinking spiritualised peace to an extent that there was a serious aversion to the use of violence. Western thinkers, they argued, misrepresented this peace-lovingness as cowardice and effeminacy. This had been the primary reason for India’s colonisation with virtually little resistance. Thus, in order to be considered civilisationally equal by the West, India had to disprove its effeminacy. World War I became India’s moment of reclamation.\textsuperscript{14}

In November 1914, Sir 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 civilisation and thought of the valour of her fighting races and of the patriotism of her sons”. Continuing further, he said, “She now claims to be not a mere dependent of, but partner in, the Empire”.\textsuperscript{15} This realisation of the worth of this ‘ancient civilisation’ had been forced upon by the massive Indian contribution to the British war effort, which was second only to the United Kingdom. In the four years between 1914 and 1918, India went on to contribute 552,000 combatants, 391,000 non-combatants and incurred 106,594 causalities. Apart from this, India also contributed about 1,750,000 animals. The total expenditure incurred by the Indian government on account of war was £24,700,000 and total cash contributions from India (rulers, princes, private bodies, and people) were £2,524,500.\textsuperscript{16}

Buoyed by this support from England, Mohammad Shafi, who later became a member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council, introduced and got passed a resolution in the Imperial


\textsuperscript{14} Even someone like Gandhi, whose faith in non-violence was fundamental, also argued that the Indians had to disprove their effeminacy. This was evident from his pleas to Indians to take up arms in support of the British, as stated in the previous paragraph. On the colonial construction of Indian femininity vis-à-vis western masculinity, see Ashis Nandy (1983) \textit{The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism}, Delhi: OUP.

\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in, “Resolution on the Representation of India in the Imperial Conference”, in SAB, PM, Vol. 1/1/136, Ref. PM32/1/1936, National Archives, Pretoria, p. 3.

Legislative Council in September 1925. This resolution called for the representation of India in the Imperial Conferences.\(^{17}\) In the debate on the resolution, Shafi argued that India was so central to the existence of the Empire that no important problem within the Empire can be addressed without taking account of India’s opinion. With about 75 percent of the population of the Empire, another member Asad Ali argued, India contributed a mammoth share to the Empire. Compared with other Dominions, 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.\(^{18}\) By all parameters, India, various members argued, deserved an equal representation at the Imperial table. Surendranath Banerjea, later the founder of National Liberal Federation of India, argued that at stake was not only a representation for India, but a representation for Indians, and that the Empire could no more disregard all of this because India had proved its worth during the War.\(^{19}\)

During the war, Indians had fought with and against European soldiers and done remarkably well, so much so that no less than General Smuts had lauded the courage of the Indian troops under him.\(^{20}\) This was significant because, during the Boer War more than decade earlier, Indians forces had been forced to see the war from the sidelines as non-combatants. A war in which “the Union with the Colonies (in the Empire) was sealed with blood”, Indian blood had been deemed too polluted by the white races. Deprived of the opportunity to disprove their effeminacy to the Whites during the Boer War, the Indian forces during the First World War, the Liberals in the Legislative Assembly argued, had stepped up to the civilisational pedestal with some vengeance. In light of this, the question, another member MB Dadbhoy asked was, “Will the Imperial Government, will the Colonial Government be reluctant to remove once and for all

\(^{17}\) The Imperial Conference until then was a gathering of the Prime Ministers of all the self-governing Dominions of the Empire. Based on an idea of ‘Imperial Federation’ first proposed by New Zealand in 1852, the first Colonial Conference was organised in 1887 in the year of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The Secretary of State for India attended this meeting, but India was absent in the subsequent meetings of 1897 and 1902. In 1907, India was represented by James Mackay, in the absence of Lord Morley, Secretary of State for India. In 1911, when the conference was re-christened ‘Imperial Conference’, India’s presence was marked by the Secretary of State. However, in all these conferences, India was only present but was not a member of the conference.

\(^{18}\) “Resolution on the Representation of India in the Imperial Conference”, op. cit., p. 16.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 11.

\(^{20}\) General Smuts said, “I wish here publicly … to repeat that I have had no more loyal, devoted and brave troops under me than those troops from the Indian Empire, and I think the young South Africans who went with me, who fought side by side with these heroes from Asia, today have more kindly feelings than they had before towards the Indian population of South Africa.” Quoted in, P.S. Joshi, *The Tyranny of Colour: Verdict on South Africa*, Thacker & Co. Ltd., Bombay, 1945, p. 96.
our badge of inferiority and to raise us in the scale of nations?”

The argument was unmistakably strong and heeded to by London.

The next gathering of the members of the Empire took place two years later with India as an equal member. Moreover, this Imperial War Conference of 1917 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”, it also recognised India as “an important part of the same”. The latter added at the insistence of the Indian representative Sir Satyendra Sinha. 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.” With India’s participation in the Imperial Conferences and later the Paris Peace Conference and the League of Nations, India’s civilisational credentials had been acknowledged. Despite this acknowledgement, there remained the question of racial equality which was being somewhat redefined during this period.

For most part of the nineteenth century, questions of race and civilisation were intertwined. Biological theories of race were predominant up until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Hegelian ideas of civilisational difference were reduced to racial differentiation as race was the primary justification for civilisational inferiority. However, with the rise of Japan in the late nineteenth century and its impressive victory over Russia in 1905, animated debates about whether what were deemed racially inferior people could be civilisationally advanced

22 This was technically not an ‘Imperial Conference’ and was called Imperial War conference, partly because India could not have been a part of the Imperial Conference without a resolution to that effect having been passed by the Conference.
23 See “Resolution VII: Representation of India at Future Imperial Conferences”, in Imperial War Conference 1917: Extracts from Minutes of Proceedings and Papers laid before the Conference, Presented to both Houses of the parliament by the Government of His Majesty, London: His Majesty Stationary Office, May 1917, p. 4
25 Ibid.
26 The membership of the League for instance was conditioned upon, among other things, the member being a civilised state. However, another condition according to Article 7 of the draft Covenant had stated that “admission to the League shall be limited to fully self-governing countries including Dominions and colonies”. When India did not fulfill the latter condition, one of India’s plenipotentiaries to the Paris Peace Conference, Maharaja of Bikaner stressed on India’s civilisational status and argued: “…if the people of India with their ancient civilisation were considered fit to fight in Europe and in other theatres of the war side by side with other nations of the world in this tragic drama, then on the grounds of our common humanity there can be no just or cogent excuse to deny India her admission into the League” . Quoted in Hugh Purcell, The Maharaja of Bikaner, Rupa, New Delhi, 2013, p. 92.
arose. The first Universal Races Congress in 1911 had asked its participants to define the conceptions of race and civilisation and asked their attitude towards the suggestion that “so far at least as intellectual and moral aptitudes are concerned, we ought to speak of civilisations where we now speak of races?”

The Japanese victory, WEB Du Bois rejoiced, had broken “the foolish magic of the word ‘white’”. For him and many others, it sparked a movement of coloured solidarity. However, it was debatable if the Japanese saw themselves in this way. Likewise, the Indian national leaders – including Gandhi – while dismissing the race-centred argument being employed against them by Europeans were more than eager to differentiate between blacks and Indians. This differentiation, however, could only be made if racist understandings were divorced from understandings of civilisational ‘progress’. Asian countries like Japan and India – which were ancient civilisations – were different from countries in Africa, not because of the difference in colour but because of the difference in the advance of their civilisation. The victory of Japan and subsequent contribution of India to the war effort allowed a space for making this distinction. The white nations, it seemed, were agreeable to this distinction at least in the sphere of the more ethical international politics as against domestic politics. Race was reduced to being a matter of domestic politics while civilisation was used as a category of international exclusion. Consequently, as civilisational equals, countries like Japan, India and China were admitted as partners in international diplomacy. Yet, the same diplomats who would be given equal status on the international table could be subject to racial discrimination and deprived of their basic civil rights if they visited white countries. This perverse arrangement was officially acknowledged at

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29 The coloured solidarity was more imagined than real when the Japanese themselves were asking for immigration restrictions being waved off in Australia on account of Japan’s advanced civilisation and difference from other coloured nationals.

30 The debates across the white western nations about ‘civilisation tests’ to sort out the ‘colour question’ was representative to the slowly and surely opening distinction between race and civilisation.
the Paris Peace Conference where Japan’s resolution for racial equality was turned down despite being voted in favour by a majority of 11 to 19.\textsuperscript{31}

In the years that followed, Indian diplomats, mostly Indian liberals ably helped by sympathetic British administrators like Montagu, Chelmsford and Reading, relentlessly pursued this awkward binary in order to demolish the racial argument. In doing this, they admitted to a civilisational scale on which Indians were deemed as equals to the Europeans, but others such as Africans could still be considered inferiors. The racial scale, however, they argued was without any basis and outright discrimination.

\textit{The 1918 Resolution: Reciprocity and the betrayed Rights}

The treatment of overseas Indians was one of the central foreign policy issues in the early twentieth century. As the role of India as a sub-imperial node declined after the First World War, the issue of the treatment of Indians abroad became the major issue. The Indian National Congress had, since its inception in 1885, always taken up the issues of Indians abroad. Mahatma Gandhi’s introduction into national politics, following his struggle in South Africa for the rights of Indians, made this an even more important issue. For some nationalists, especially people like CF Andrews and later Jawaharlal Nehru, the treatment of Indians within the Empire signified the need to seek models of independence outside of the British Empire, as there was no hope of justice within it. The loyalists to the Empire, predominantly the Indian Liberals, were faced with the task of asserting that justice could be attained within the Empire.\textsuperscript{32} For some time, Liberals such as Gokhale even flirted with the idea of seeking a colony for Indians in German East Africa.\textsuperscript{33} However, Indian Liberals, such as Satyendra Sinha, VS Srinivasasastri and Tej

\textsuperscript{31} Even though he was part of the British delegation, the Indian representative Satyendra Sinha had chosen to disagree with his other counterparts in the delegation and stated that “he would be obliged to come forward … in support of the Japanese position”. See, Purcell, 2013, p. 101.


\textsuperscript{33} An idea that was assiduously championed by Aga Khan and a British official Theodore Morrison. For more on this, see Blyth, 2003, op. cit.
Bahadur Sapru, limited their demands to seeking justice for Indians in the dominions and colonies.\textsuperscript{34}

Within the British Empire, and even otherwise, the most repressive racial laws against Indians were in South Africa. Indians were discriminated against even in other Dominions in various degrees, but the number of Indians in those countries was small. Besides, in South Africa, Indians under Gandhi had mounted a successful movement which had received a massive support from India. The Gandhi-Smuts agreement, signed just as the Great War was about to start in 1914, had generated a compromise which seemed acceptable to both sides for some time. Hence, at the Imperial War Conference in 1917, General Smuts declared that the Indian problem in South Africa was not a question of race but a matter of fear of the white population.\textsuperscript{35} Being a “white population on a black continent”, he asserted, the whites were always fearful of any foreign non-white influx and hence “adopted an attitude which sometimes … has assumed an outward form…of intolerance”.\textsuperscript{36} The racism of whites, thus, was merely an outward expression of fear. Emphatically welcoming the Indian representatives, he assured them that with the settlements that had been reached with the Indians in the past, this fear would evaporate as soon as they are assured of no more immigration inflow.\textsuperscript{37}

Sinha returned as India’s representative to the conference next year. An ardent admirer of the British empire with “unbroken faith in British character fair play and justice”,\textsuperscript{38} Sinha had been the first Indian to become a member of the Viceroy’s Executive, a former President of the Indian National Congress, and in 1917, India’s representative at the Imperial War Conference and War Cabinet. A year later in 1919, he was made the Under-Secretary of State for India and was admitted to the House of Lords (the first ever Indian in both the cases). At the 1917 conference, with considerable skill, Sinha had moved a resolution calling for reciprocity of treatment between India and the Dominions with regard to immigration. In a memorandum in 1918, he listed India’s principal grievances, mostly against South Africa. In listing these, he

\textsuperscript{34}The National Liberal Federation was formed in 1918, after the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were spurned by Congress. The moderates, including SN Benerjea, Satyendra Sinha, RP Paranjape, Tej Bahadur Sapru and VS Srinivasa Sastri, who supported these reforms formed the National Liberal Federation.

\textsuperscript{35}“Reciprocity of Treatment between India and the Self-Governing Dominions”, op. cit., pp. 117-120

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38}Speeches and Writings of Lord Sinha: A portrait and a Sketch, GA Natesan and Co., Madras, p. xx.
reminded the South African government that the Indian labour was invited by South Africa and the prosperity of the Natal province is considerably owed to Indians. Alluding to Smuts’s speech of the previous year, he argued that given the “sympathetic attitude” of the members, he had not taken up the racial aspect of these laws against Indians at the conference. He proposed that an Indian agent should be installed at Pretoria that could act as a conveyer belt of grievances from the Indian population to the Union government. He called upon the members that “these important questions should be settled not in any petty huckstering spirit of reciprocity only, far less of militant animosity and retaliation, but on those broad principles of justice and equality which are now more than ever the guiding principles of the British Empire”. However, he was soon to be disappointed.

The resolution which was eventually adopted in 1918, while promising early consideration to the removal of the disabilities against Indians living in the Dominions, had also acknowledged the right of the domestic governments “to completely control the composition of its own population by means of restriction on immigration from any of the other communities”. Thus, the resolution while promising a consideration for the ethic of equality had simultaneously proclaimed the right of domestic jurisdiction. In fact, it exposed a central conflict in the idea of the Empire itself. A miniature international system rooted in its times, it was an association where the Dominions were pushing for increased sovereignty while still trying to create a common ethic. Consequently, despite assurances for “the most sympathetic consideration” to Sinha’s memorandum by the South African representative, H. Burton, that country passed the restrictive Asiatics (Land and Trading Amendments) (Transvaal) Act in early 1919. This act reinforced trading and land owning restrictions on Indians in South Africa. A disappointed Sinha wrote, “To me it is clear that there is no room for Indians in the British Empire itself. If we were able to retaliate, I would prohibit by legislation all forms of intercourse with South Africa…”.40

40 Quoted in Tinker,1976, op. cit., p. 31.

After the end of the War, the anti-Asiatic movement in South Africa picked up steam. The Union Parliament appointed a select committee in March 1919 to enquire into some recent legal judgments on the property and license rights of Indians in South Africa. The Select Committee, while respecting the rights of the those Indians who owned businesses and trading licenses before the Gandhi-Smuts Agreement in June 1914, ruled that the obtaining of trading licenses by Indians in future should be stopped and the land-owning disabilities of Indians as stated in the Transvaal Law 3 of 1885 should be extended so as to bar Asians owning companies.
South Africa’s anti-Indian law received considerable attention in India; there not surprisingly were calls for a Royal Veto. A deputation of Indian Liberals, then in England for discussions on constitutional reforms, waited upon the Secretary of State, Edwin Montagu, and submitted a Memorandum opposing it. Tej Bahadur Sapru advocated retaliatory measures but feared no practical effects could be achieved with them. The Indian Government joined Indians in South Africa in protest, and threatened to consider serious action against South Africa. No mining concessions, as a first move, were to be granted to a South African company in Burma. A number of cables were exchanged between London, Shimla and Pretoria. The South African government promised to appoint a Commission to look into the whole Indian question in the Union. Lord Buxton, the South African Governor General, was convinced that this was merely a time wasting measure by his own government. Sardonically, he wrote to London that this proposed commission had postponed the “evil day” but it was unlikely to remove the prospect of further legislation which would be “restrictive rather than remedial in effect”.

Montagu wrote to London that that this was a question of imperial policy, not local South African issue. Hence, the representatives of the Government of India should be able to communicate their views to the Commission. South Africa, while dismissing the argument that it was an imperial question, nevertheless welcomed the suggestion for Indian representations. The Indian side insisted that Indian delegation should comprise of an official and a non-official. Making a strong pitch for one of the members being an Indian, the Indian government argued that the opinion in India against the South African legislation was so strong that a deputation without an Indian member would have no domestic legitimacy. George Barnes, the member for commerce in Viceroy’s Executive Council, who was related to Lord Buxton, then opened a private channel of communication with Buxton on the issue. Barnes seems to have initially suggested Gandhi’s name, but after a strong opposition from Pretoria indicated the Viceroy’s strong preference for Srinivasa Sastri.

42 Tinker, 1971, op. cit., p. 32.
43 Lord Buxton quoted in “Confidential and Immediate, Asiatic Department, Letter No. 4442/19, dated 26 July 1919”, GG, Vol. 907, Reference No 15/967, SAB, National Archives, Pretoria.
44 For these conversations, see GG, Vol 907, SAB, National Archives, Pretoria.
VS Srinivasa Sastri, an ardent follower of Gokhale, was the president of the Servants Society of India and a member of Imperial Legislative Council. Widely regarded as one of the most eloquent speakers and scholars of his generation, he commanded the respect of his friends and enemies alike. Despite strong political differences with Gandhi, he was one of the people Gandhi respected. When initially sounded about Sastri’s name, the South African government flatly refused that there was any need for an Indian but later argued that he could not be given the same treatment as his European counterpart. On learning about this, Sastri refused to be part of the delegation and instead another European member was sent. The Indian delegation presented the Indian case to the Commission. Eventually, the Commission suggested the continuation of trading and licensing restrictions against Indians and advised voluntary segregation and voluntary repatriation. Less than a year earlier, on 26 August 1919, General Smuts had said to the Indian population in Durban “We have to live side by side in conciliation, and we must endeavor to understand each other’s standpoint, so that we may live together and grow together. We are members of the one family and belong to the same Empire”. The Commission’s recommendations gave the lie to Smuts’s pronouncements.

The next Imperial Conference was scheduled for July 1921. Lord Chelmsford, who had earlier nominated Sastri for representation to South Africa, this time nominated him as India’s representative, fully cognizant that he will have to make India’s case against the man who had refused to entertain Sastri in South Africa on racial grounds. While nominating Sastri, Chelmsford allegedly said: “Mr. Sastry (sic) is the most competent person. If he opens his

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The lives of Gandhi and Sastri offer a resounding parallel. They were born in the same year and both were Gokhale’s protégées. After Gokhale’s death, both were being considered for the presidency of Servants Society of India. Although Gandhi eventually declined and Sastri became the president. For his work as India’s first agent in South Africa, Sastri is most definitely, along with Gandhi, the most well-known Indian figure amongst South African Indians. It is ironical however that while Sastri’s work is well known in South Africa, he has been forgotten along with a host of other Liberals in India.

mouth, and speaks two sentences in the conference, everybody would have the surprise of their lives and listen to him with wonder.” Sastri was not to disappoint this faith in him.

**1921: Claiming Equal Rights**

The 1921 Imperial Conference opened on 20 June 1921 in London. On the list of issues to be discussed were the Anglo-Japanese alliance, naval, military and air defence, matters relating to convening a Constitutional Conference, inter-imperial communications by land, sea and air, overseas settlement, civil aviation, reparations, statistical bureau, shipping and patents. The Indian resolution, drafted by Sastri, on the position of Indians in other parts of the Empire was on the agenda. From the outset, Sastri mounted a remarkable verbal assault on General Smuts.

A Cambridge trainer lawyer and successful Boer General, General Jan Christian Smuts as one of the most respected international figures of his times. He fought both with and against the British and drew accolades for both his military leadership and diplomacy. Straddling between the two worlds – colonial and anti-colonial, war and peace, racism and universalism, he drew on these contradictions to present a very cosmopolitan bearing. Presenting an anti-colonial front, he could call the Irish question “a stain upon the Empire”; while at the same time he could comfortably mask his racism as cultural relativism thereby justifying South Africa’s internal colonialism. For WEB Du Bois, he was “the world’s greatest protagonist of the white race”, who could express “bluntly, and yet not without finesse, what a powerful host of white folk believe but do not plainly say in Melbourne, New Orleans, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Berlin and London.” This ambivalent cosmopolitanism of Smuts was to receive a shake-up at the conference.

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47 Quoted in VS Srinivasa Sastri, “English Translation of Srinivasa Sastri’s autobiography”, (originally in Tamil), VSS Papers, Writings and Speeches, S. No. 82, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi, p. 20. This was written as a series of articles on some aspects of his life to a Tamil weekly, *Swadesamitran*.

48 He was the original author of the Woodrow Wilson peace plan (and later the Preamble to the UN) and brokered the peace agreement between the British and the Irish nationals. He so impressed Woodrow Wilson’s delegation at the Paris Peace Conference that they wanted him to be Britain’s ambassador to the United States. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 308.

Speaking on the second day of the Conference, Smuts referred to the glowing ideals of the League of Nations which embodied “the most deeply-felt longings of the human race for a better life”.\textsuperscript{50} He exhorted the Empire to back these ideals for “it may make the foundation of the new international system” for lasting peace.\textsuperscript{51} Taking this as a point of entry into the debate, Sastri, in his opening speech, reminded Smuts that peace was dependent upon “a stable and unalterable relationship between communities – based on honourable equality and recognition of equality of justice”.\textsuperscript{52} In realisation of these very ideals, Sastri stated, the Indian delegation had presented a Resolution to the Conference on the basis of which “the whole position must be judged (sic)”.\textsuperscript{53} Sat’s Resolution asked for an acknowledgement that there was “incongruity between position of India as an equal member of the British Empire and the existence of disabilities upon British Indians lawfully domiciled in some parts of the Empire”.\textsuperscript{54} Consequently, the resolution recommended “the adoption of a policy of removing any disabilities under which such Indians are placed, and … merging them into the general body of citizens in whatever part of the Empire they may be lawfully domiciled”.\textsuperscript{55}

Sastri next spoke in the conference two weeks later on 8 July. Until then, he had been visibly silent during the Conference making few interventions, except for asking for his resolution to be taken up soon. When Sastri finally succeeded in arranging for a discussion for 8 July, Smuts suggested referring the question to a special committee. During the conference, Smuts had tried his utmost to postpone the matter and this time he received support from his life-long admirer, Winston Churchill. This was, as it would appear in the coming days, not the only time when Churchill’s sympathies were required in the defence of Smuts.\textsuperscript{56} Consequently, while Sastri was asked to give a statement on 8 July, the discussion was transferred to a special committee under Churchill’s chairpersonship.

\textsuperscript{50} “E – Second meeting; Stenographic Notes of a meeting of the representatives of the United Kingdom, the Dominions and India, at 10 Downing Street, S.W. on Tuesday, June 21, 1921, at 11 a.m.”, A1, A1/35, SAB, National Archives, Pretoria, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{54} “E – Nineteenth Meeting; Stenographic Notes of a meeting of the representatives of the United Kingdom, the Dominions and India, at 10 Downing Street, S.W. on Friday, June 8, 1921, at 11 a.m.” A1, A1/35, SAB, National Archives, Pretoria, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Tinker, 1971, op. cit., p. 47.
Formally presenting his resolution on 8 July, Sastri delivered an eloquent speech which not only established him as the “Empire’s Silver Tongue Orator” (as his colleague Sir Thomas Smart called him) but also presented a new moral perspective on the question of rights of people versus rights of states. The Reciprocity Resolution of 1918, he argued was based on two principles – the rights of Dominions to manage their population and the right of the Indians to be treated equally within the Empire. The former, a principle of self-preservation, was an inferior principle to the latter, which was rooted in justice and equality. In India, he argued, the Empire was facing the rising agitation of Indians led by Gandhi. CF Andrews, Gandhi’s follower, had begun to argue that so long as India was part of the white man’s Empire Indians will not be able to find justice and racial equality. Very discreetly but with certainty, he proceeded to make racial equality a principle on which the future of India within the Empire was dependent. By doing this, he made the question of Indians in South Africa a question of the very survival of the Empire itself. Having established the absolute necessity of racial equality as a cornerstone, he drew a distinction between principle and practice. Given the anti-Indian sentiment in white-ruled South Africa, he recognised General Smuts’s limitations in granting political and civil liberties to Indians in South Africa, but argued that the acceptance of the principle of equality did not make it a necessity for the governments to grant civil liberties immediately, or in a limited time frame. All that must be agreed upon was that this was the correct thing to do and that it must be done when the opportunity arises. “[I]n such complicated affairs”, he said, “it is often necessary to proclaim an ideal”. For India, “If we accept this principle and lay it down, although it may be a very elementary principle, we tell the Dominions which violate it today, that they must set their house in order, that they must at the earliest opportunity begin the process of

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59 Ibid., p. 5.
60 There was another point that Sastri did not make at the conference but believed strongly in. In a letter he wrote to his Secretary later, he argued that General Smuts’s fears about granting political rights to Indians were merely theoretical. Indians abroad were “politically passive” people and even where they had political rights such as Mauritius and British Guyana, they have not exercised them for any political domination. While political rights will help Indians seek remedy against oppression, they will never challenge white hegemony. See, “Sastri to Rao, letter dated 27 October 1926”, Correspondence with VSS Sastri, PK Kondana Rao Papers, NMML, New Delhi.
conforming to this principle. This is the value that India attached to this declaration.”

To Sastri, it was a workable compromise between principle and practice. He concluded in a hyperbolic tone,

Today when I came here, my role is not that of an impatient critic of the Administration. My role is still that of a patient man, who says “I have borne so long, let me know that you are thinking of the remedy, that you are not making the situation worse for me, but that you have resolutely made up your minds that these grievances shall be no more. Establish your *bona fides*.” I am sorry to say that even that elementary, that first fact in the situation, the *bona fides* of one Dominion, have still to be established. It is late; I fear it is very late; but I hope it is not too late. …Let me be enabled therefore by your good offices, to go and tell my countrymen that there are still hopes for us within this British Empire, in this Empire where we wish to live in confraternity with other peoples, that there is room, and honourable room for us.

The speech was very well received, including by the British Prime Minister who was sympathetic to the Indian resolution. General Smuts prevaricated and, initially, tried to postpone the discussion. Finally giving his response on 15 July, he admitted: “The whole basis of our political system in South Africa rests on inequality and on recognizing fundamental differences which exist in the structure of our population”. Stripped of his high idealism, Smuts sounded a pale shadow of his puritan self. Although previously Smuts had alluded to economic fears of the white minority as a cause of segregation, he was forced to admit to the reality of racial inequality by saying that the “colour question [is]…the bedrock of our constitution”. No South African government, he argued, could go against this prevailing view to grant political equality to Indians. If the resolution was passed, he argued, it would make it even more difficult for Indians in South Africa, who otherwise enjoyed relatively better economic status. Economic prosperity without political rights, to him, was the best compromise to the Indian question. Smuts’s response infuriated Montagu who argued that both the Indians and the Europeans were settlers in South Africa over Africans. Hence, if at all the question of Indians was to be dealt with

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p. 7.
64 “E (S.C.) – Fourth Meeting; Stenographic Notes of a meeting of the representatives of the United Kingdom, the Dominions and India, at 10 Downing Street, S.W. on Friday, June 15, 1921, at 11 a.m.” A1, A1/35, SAB, National Archives, Pretoria, p. 3.
65 Ibid.
separately, it had to be dealt with the questions of Europeans and not Africans.\textsuperscript{66} Sastri linked Smuts’s arguments to the message that the Empire was sending to Indians worldwide. He stated:

I must state, Mr. Chairman, that the statement brings before us the position of enormous danger to the Empire, and to the principles on which the Empire is built. India, cannot be told either directly or indirectly, that she is never to be the equal of any white community. You cannot tell her that hope for peace another week (sic).\textsuperscript{67}

Smuts retorted by stating that “[n]o one had done more for India in this Conference for her position in the Dominion than I have done”.\textsuperscript{68} This prompted another Indian representative, the Maharaj of Cutch to ask Smuts, if, keeping South Africa aside, Smuts had to speak as an individual for the sake of the Empire, would he accept the principle. Smuts gave a very evasive response saying that “there is no point exploring a road which I am sure will take us nowhere”.\textsuperscript{69}

This showdown between Shastri and Smuts also provided an opportunity for others to expose the latter’s discordant idealism. In a letter to his son, written two days after he introduced his Resolution, Shastri narrated a dinner conversation at the Prime Minister’s house:

Then the P.M. [Lloyd George] said my speech gladdened the hearts of the British Cabinet Ministers, for I arraigned General Smuts, who used on every occasion to preach the Sermon on the Mount with a sanctimonious air. They were very sore about it and told each other. ‘Serves him right. Where is his justice now and equality and tenderness to oppressed nationalities?’\textsuperscript{70}

More than any other, it gladdened the heart of Australian Prime Minister William Hughes. During the Paris Peace Conference, when the Japanese proposal for racial equality was turned down, Hughes had been made to look the “fall guy” allowing Smuts “to play the suave international statesman”.\textsuperscript{71} Hughes found his opportunity now. Supporting the Indian resolution, albeit with a few changes, he stated: “The position of South Africa cannot be supported from the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[66] Ibid., p. 6.
\item[67] Ibid., p. 8.
\item[68] Ibid.
\item[69] Ibid., p. 9.
\item[70] Jagadisan, 1963, op. cit., p. 77.
\item[71] Marilyn and Reynolds, 2008, p. 302.
\end{footnotes}
standpoint of justice. …I cannot for the life of me see how it is compatible with our frequent declaration of the principle which govern this Empire”.72 He recalled Smuts’s idealism with regard to the Irish question and exhorted “may it not fairly be said that the policy of the Union of South Africa towards the Indian population falls within the same category?”73 William Massey, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, argued that South Africa was making a “mistake”.74 Were it not for Churchill’s sympathetic interventions because of his high regard for Smuts,75 Smuts seemed to have been isolated with almost everyone against him.76

Eventually, the resolution was finally adopted in a toned down form to say that it was “desirable that the rights of such Indians in the dominions to citizenship should be recognised” omitting reference to the adoption of a policy in this regard.77 Nevertheless, this was a remarkable diplomatic victory for India. In India’s diplomatic history, this was the first time when India’s concerns had been recognized over the concerns of a white Dominion. Significantly, in the process, a non-official from India had isolated one of the finest diplomats of the times. Moreover, this was the first time ever that a resolution at the Imperial Conferences was passed without unanimity.78 79

From London, Sastri went to Geneva to attend the Second Session of the Assembly of the League of Nations as India’s delegate. William Meyer was the head of the Indian delegation, but he asked Sastri to speak on India’s behalf. Sastri, speaking in “slow sentences with their faultless

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73 Ibid., p. 11.
74 Ibid., p. 13.
75 Tinker argues that Churchill had a life-long admiration for the Smuts whom he considered “a superhuman leader and thinker”. Tinker, 1971, op. cit., p. 47.
77 The text of the resolution can be found in CF Andrews, 1926, op. cit., p. 20.
78 The Prime Ministers of the Dominions, except Smuts, invited Sastri to visit their countries to address their populations and create a favourable impression in order to pass legislations in favour of Indian civil rights. Sastri went on a dominion tour as an ambassador for India and between June and October visited Australia, New Zealand and Canada.
79 Sastri later acknowledged that Smuts could have scuttled the agreement by insisting on the unanimity of the Empire. Yet, he only registered South Africa’s dissent not as a general principle but “in view of the exceptional circumstances of the greater part of the Union”. VS Srinivasa Sastri, “Africa or India”, In Speeches and Writings of the Right Honourable V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, Volume 1, Madras: South Indian National Association and Srinivasa Sastri Endowment Fund, 1969, p. 64.
phrasing”, delivered yet another sterling speech. He claimed the Assembly was “bound to act in the interests of all of the others; that we are cosmopolitan reality, that we are the citizens of the world, and not merely the limited countries which we happen to represent”. Having outlined the high moral ideals of the League, he called upon the League to review its mandate policy with regard to the claims on German West Africa by South Africa. The latter’s racist policies, he argued, would mean that Indians living in German West Africa “would be worse off under the trustees of the League [South Africa] than … under the Germans”. Hailing Sastri as the best speaker in the Assembly, H. Wilson Harris, the President of the International Association of Journalists, commented: “It will be hard for the League to find a higher watchword”. By raising the issue of South Africa’s racism, Sastri had internationalised an issue that, until then, had been considered an issue internal to the Empire. The British delegation was miffed at this outcome but Sastri held that the Indian delegation was not subordinate to the British delegation.

When Smuts returned to South Africa, his views on the issue hardened. Based on his experience at the Imperial Conference, he held that the problem of Indians in Natal “might even shake the foundations of the Empire”. The only workable solution, he thought, was their return to India, or to some other colony like British Guyana or the Malay states. His government planned to introduce the Class Areas Bill, a far more restrictive legislation on compulsory segregation of Indians in urban areas. In 1921 he seemed somewhat sympathetic to the principle of equality within the Empire even if highlighting South Africa’s special case. At the next Imperial Conference in 1923 he challenged the 1921 Resolution and asked for it to be withdrawn. This hardening of his position had partly been prompted by Sastri’s continued criticism of South Africa’s racism during his dominion tour as well as on the question of Kenya. He must have felt somewhat relieved at the thought that his opponent this time was not

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82 Ibid., 345.
84 In that session, Sastri claimed the Indian delegation even voted against the British delegation once. See, Sastri, “Autobiography”, op. cit., pp. 43-44.
85 Tinker, 1971, op. cit., p. 53.
86 Sastri had been arguing that there were two ideas of Empire in strong contestation. The British ideal of fairness and justice and the Boer ideal of inequality and racism, and the latter was now being exported to Kenya by Smuts. See, Sastri, 1969, op. cit., p. 63.
Srinivasa Sastri. However, the new adversary, according to Smuts’s biographer, proved “far more formidable than Sastri”. This was Tej Bahadur Sapru.

1923: Give us a “place in the House …not stable”

At the Imperial Conference of 1923, India was represented by the Secretary of State, Lord Peel, the Maharaja of Alwar and Tej Bahadur Sapru. The latter was a distinguished lawyer, member of the Liberal party, and had served in the Viceroy’s Executive Council. The Indian delegates decided that Sapru would be the main speaker on the Indian question during the conference. In the spirit of a lawyer preparing for his case, Sapru landed in London four months in advance to work on the issues at hand. In these four months from July to October, he met the opinion-makers and -shapers – officials, politicians, journalists and eventually all the Dominion Prime Ministers. His strategy was clear. In the words of Smuts’s biographer, Sapru “annexed the territory which hitherto had been Smuts’s territory”.

Two days after the conference opened Sapru called on Smuts in a cordial meeting. On 18 October, Smuts submitted a Memorandum on the Indian Question which revealed a new position. In 1921, he had argued that inequality was the foundation of South Africa. This time he elevated this into a moral position by arguing that there was “no equality of British citizenship throughout the Empire”. Throughout the Empire, the reasoning ran, different people enjoyed different political rights while some had no rights at all. Consequently, the demands for equal rights within the Empire were founded on no logical basis. Furthermore, the nature of the Empire had significantly changed in the past few years. It was now “a smaller League Nations … not a

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87 Hancock, 1968, op. cit., p. 147.

88 Hancock, 1968, op. cit., p. 148.

89 Ibid.

unitary state but a partnership of equal states”. As a result, the 1921 resolution, because it drew its mandate from a unitary conception of Empire, was a “profound mistake”.92

Having laid out this position, Smuts met Sapru again two days later on 20 October but refused to make any concessions on his position. Somewhat incredibly, Sapru retorted that it would lead to a war between the two countries and Sapru repeated his warning three days later. Sapru may have been speaking in metaphors, for both Sapru and Smuts knew that as long as India was in British hands this was not possible. But the projection of war as fait accompli reflected Sapru’s insistence on how grave the issue was for India.

The battle was taken up on 24 October. After Lord Peel introduced India’s stand, Sapru delivered a long, well-prepared speech which ran for 107 minutes. Speaking with a lawyer’s eye for well-crafted arguments, Sapru began with a note of allegiance to the Empire and then proceeded to list India’s grievances as a “loyal member”. Fair treatment of Indians abroad was a matter of ‘izzat’ (honour) for Indians, and it echoed with demands for equality within the country. India, he argued, was undergoing a profound transformation where the masses and classes were beginning to speak in a single voice of nationalism; moreover, the question of equality within the Empire was an issue on which “320 million Indians” of all hues and opinions spoke with a single voice. “Any inequality of Indian nationals enters like Iron into our soul” and in his plea to the Conference, he stated that “as a subject of King George”, he was “fighting for a place in the household”, and would no longer “be content with a place in his stables”. Assuring the Dominions that there will be further immigration from India, he stated that he was the strongest opponent of any further immigration from India. He pointed out that in passing the 1921 resolution all the Dominions except South Africa had accepted a just position in addressing the question of Indian disabilities. In this regard, he suggested that each Dominion and colony under the Empire, where Indians were resident, constitute a committee that will

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Hancock, 1968, op. cit., p. 148
94 “Statement bt Tej Bahadur Sapru”, in Imperial Conference 1923, op. cit., p. 73.
95 Ibid., p. 74.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., p. 72
98 Ibid., p. 81.
confer with a committee from India to find explore avenues for how the equality resolution of 1921 could be implemented.99

Turning to General Smuts, Sapru began by pointing out that he had stood up for “peace to all the world” and “stood as a protector of minorities”100 Yet, this imperial statesman, he said, did not realise that his colour policy was putting the whites and coloured people against each other not just in South Africa but across the world. “I tell him frankly”, Sapru said, “if the Indian problem in South Africa is allowed to fester much longer, it will pass … beyond the bounds of a domestic issue and become a foreign policy issue of such gravity that upon it the unity of the Empire may founder irretrievably”.101 On the issue of Smuts’s Memorandum, Sapru dismissed Smuts’s view on the Empire as a “new League of Nations”. The League, he pointed out, did not have a common sovereign; the Empire did. Given these different positions, the question of constitutional rights will naturally also be tackled differently in the Empire from the League. In any case, he suggested, if one agreed to General Smuts’s interpretation, even the League was bound by its own resolutions. General Smuts was asking the Conference to consider its own resolution as a “scrap of paper”.102 Finally, he said, he did not want to take a “legal position” as the Conference was a gathering of statesmen, not legal minds. Legal matters, he said, were subservient to prudence and statesmanship.103

Five days later, Smuts responded by once again suggesting that with regard to Indians it was not a question of colour. The Indian, he said, was not “inferior to us because of his colour or any other ground – he may be superior; it is the case of a small civilisation, a small community finding itself in danger of being overwhelmed by a much older and more powerful civilisation”.104 The moot point here, for him, was economic. If Indians were to be given the franchise, it would also have to be extended to the Africans and the white community which was in minority would be swamped.

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99 Ibid., p. 82.
100 Ibid., p. 83. Perhaps, Sapru alluding to the 1922 resolution at the League of Nations for the protection of minorities that Smuts-led South Africa had proposed.
101 Ibid., p. 84.
102 Ibid., p. 85
103 Ibid., p. 85.
This was a curious position that Smuts maintained for much of his life. However, if the question was economic and Smuts was only worried about being swamped by the Africans, on what basis had he placed Indians and Africans in the same category? Clearly, as a community, Indians were also, like the whites, a minority. Why not, as Montagu had suggested in the 1921 conference, put Indians and Whites in the same category as they both were settlers? The previous year at the League of Nations, the South African representative, Professor Gilbert Murray, while discussing South Africa’s resolution on the protection of minorities had made a distinction between the question of minorities and the question of being at different stages of civilization.105 South African policies towards Indians in Africa, he stated, stemmed from the latter concerns. For Indians, however, the question of civilisational parity was different from racial parity. The Indian complaint was not that Africans and Indians were being discriminated against and that there should be no basis of inequality. The Indian delegation had only argued that Indians – who were civilisationally at par with the West – need to be treated the same as Whites. Africans, who were not considered to be civilisationally advanced, could remain deprived of their rights.106

In his rebuttal, Sapru asked Smuts: what if Irish nationals, before the 1921 freedom, had been settled in South Africa, would they receive political rights?107 Here, Sapru was addressing one of Smuts’s assertions that Indians cannot claim equal rights when they did not have the same rights within their own country. He was pointing that if a white person from a colonised country came to South Africa, would s/he not be granted the same privileges as other whites? Hence, was this differentiation not based on racial ideology?

105 In supporting the South African resolution on the minorities, the Indian representative, the Maharajah of Nawanagar, had reminded South Africa, “the declared champions of the rights of the minorities”, that “charity may well begin at home”. See, “Extracts from the debates in the League of Nations, Third Assembly 1922 on the Resolution regarding protection of minorities”, in RM Deshmukh Papers, F. 49, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

106 For instance, in a speech for moving the resolution in the Council of State on 5 March 1923, on the rights and the status of Indians in Kenya, he stated: “With regard to the natives of Africa, Sir, as I have said in the Council already, I will not try to raise feelings. The natives of Africa are, as everybody knows, not quite civilised. They are advancing by leaps and bounds. Great efforts are necessary to pull them up along the line of evolution” (In VSS Sastri papers, Writings and Speeches, S. No. 23). Gandhi’s views on the natives are also too well known.

107 “Statement by Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru”, Imperial Conference 1923, p. 122.
By now, Smuts had already been cornered once again and Sapru had brilliantly isolated Smuts and South Africa. The Resolution of 1921 stood and none of the Prime Ministers accepted Smuts’s proposal. Soon, Smuts went out of power and a new more conservative government was formed in South Africa. The issue, however, had already been internationalized in the limited sense of the Empire and it remained no more possible for South Africa to project it as merely a domestic issue.

Conclusion

Three years after these events, in December 1926, an Indian delegation landed in South Africa. In the next few days, they engaged in discussions with the South African government and in early 1927, an agreement was achieved on the Indian question in South Africa. Called the Cape Town Agreement, it was widely applauded in India as well as South Africa. Gandhi called it an “honorable compromise”. Sarojini Naidu called it a “memorable performance”. Although led by Mohammad Habibullah, the star performer in the Indian delegation, was Srinivasa Sastri. Twice blocked by Smuts to come to South Africa, he was enthusiastically accepted by the South African government as India’s first Agent to South Africa in 1927. The Agreement was the first ever bilateral agreement within the Empire in which Britain was not involved. For both India and South Africa the Agreement was a spectacular foreign policy success. Interestingly, just about the time this Agreement was signed, Jawaharlal Nehru was undergoing his own initiation into foreign policy at the Congress of the Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels. Soon thereafter, the Indian National Congress became active about issues of foreign policy, opening its own Foreign Policy Department in 1936. This marked the handing over the baton from the Liberals to the Nationalists as the former were no more the only prominent voices speaking for India abroad.

The Agreement also was a culmination of remarkable efforts that the Indian Liberals, particularly Sinha, Sastri and Sapru, had made to internationalise the issue of ill-treatment of...
South African Indians. In significant ways, their interventions created an atmosphere where South Africa could no more look at it as a domestic issue. On a broader level, this had significant value for India and the Indian foreign policy. The issues of racial equality (with an acknowledgment of the civilizational scale) and rights of people were the central narrative points around which the Indian Liberals sought to build the new discourse of Indian foreign policy. This was the inaugural moment of modern Indian diplomacy, a moment when Indians – given the opportunity to articulate and shape Indian foreign policy – contributed to creating a legacy on which independent India picked on.

112 For a history of the Agreement, see, Mesthrie, 1987; Joshi, 1945.