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An Indian Liberal in the Empire

The dilemmas of Srinivasa Sastri

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A biography of Srinivasa Sastri, long considered an irrelevant figure in colonial India, highlights his contribution to the making of the modern liberal international order and to putting Indian diplomacy on the world stage.

Srinivasa Sastri was a man subject to occasional bouts of depression and melancholy. But in late 1938, he expressed soul-crushing despair. Asked by the Bombay jurist Chimanlal Setalvad to preside over a session of the National Liberal Federation, the preeminent body of the country's dwindling band of liberals, Sastri responded by pronouncing the death of Indian liberal politics. "Sir Sivaswami [Iyer, the Madras lawyer] asks whether I want the Liberal Party to be interred," he wrote to Setalvad. 'I don't. It is a formal ceremony. Even that is unnecessary. Just do nothing. You dissolve naturally, quietly and without fuss." Indian liberals, he continued, operated "in a world where it is clear we are not wanted." And so, Sastri turned down Setalvad's offer, begging to be left alone. "I am a clod of miserable earth, which nothing can galvanise. Let me be."

While considering Indian liberals of the colonial period, many historians have echoed Sastri's sentiments: proclaiming their irrelevance and leaving them be. Vineet Thakur's biographical study of Sastri, *India's First Diplomat*, is therefore a refreshing correction to such historiography. While acknowledging the shrinking domestic political space in which liberals operated in the interwar period, Thakur highlights the very real contributions they made in the diplomatic sphere.

Against white exceptionalism

Sastri emerges as a preeminent architect of liberal internationalism, someone who represented India in multinational conferences, bilateral negotiations, and before the League of Nations. Most significantly, he hammered away at racialised notions of a British Commonwealth, taking the fight against white exceptionalism to the United Kingdom, Kenya, and South Africa. As a colonial subject representing a non-sovereign entity, however, there was only so much he could do. His personality -educated, Anglophile, elite Brahmin - also "ended up sabotaging his mission and agenda." Sastri's profound melancholy might have been misplaced, but there certainly were some causes for despair.

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Valangaiman Sankaranarayana Srinivasa Sastri (1869-1946) was the prototypical Indian liberal. Like his mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, his demeanour and politics were forged in the classroom: he began his career as a schoolteacher. He maintained a steadfast faith in the supposed ideals of the British Empire - equality, freedom, and progress - while savaging the day-to-day practice of imperialism. Sastri was committed to constitutional politics, taking part in imperial institutions ranging from the Madras Legislative Council to the Privy Council. Finally, he expressed a capaciously global outlook on political affairs, desiring India's active engagement in an emerging Commonwealth and with the world at large. Sastri's greatest legacy was the championship of Indian rights in the diaspora, where Indian colonial subjecthood was pitted against entrenched, institutionalised racism.

It was Sastri's grave misfortune to see much of this liberal universe collapse with astonishing speed at the end of the First World War. Aside from taking up Gokhale's task of forging constitutional reforms for India (by playing a role in the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms), Sastri took refuge in the world of diplomacy. Almost immediately, he displayed inordinate talent in this new vocation.

Representing India at the 1921 Imperial Conference, alongside heads of government of the dominions and the United Kingdom, Sastri adroitly pushed through a resolution against white exceptionalism and in favour of the rights of Indian residents in the dominions. The resolution, Thakur believes, was "a landmark in the history of the British Empire," holding up the idea of an imperial citizenship which was not defined by whiteness. In the imperial capital, Sastri crossed swords with Jan Smuts, the prime minister of South Africa, and Winston Churchill, then the British secretary for the colonies, and won the admiration of David Lloyd George, the British prime minister. After this stunning diplomatic debut, Sastri gained international recognition at the newly established League of Nations - where he refused to toe the line of his British overlords by critiquing racial discrimination in South Africa - and at the 1921

Washington Naval Conference on disarmament and East Asian affairs.

An entrepreneurial diplomacy

But whom did Sastri represent? Many Indian nationalists assailed Sastri's diplomacy, caricaturing him as a mere imperial puppet. They lampooned his advocacy of the political rights of Indians abroad, arguing that India first needed political independence at home. In Sastri's mind, though, waiting for full sovereignty did not make sense. The rights of Indians abroad were, Thakur notes, "also a question of India's self respect" and thus components in the broader national struggle.

Sastri's critics missed out on some other achievements of his diplomatic work. Through an active diplomatic presence, India won international recognition, pushing it closer towards some form of autonomy (Sastri had faith in India's steady advancement to dominion status).

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This was a critical point, entirely in keeping with long-standing liberal political tactics. Indian liberals had a knack for creating productive political spaces in the most unlikely places, where real power seemed simply unattainable. An earlier generation of liberals had done so via the British Parliament or in rubber-stamp Indian legislative bodies. Sastri did this on the diplomatic circuit, employing rhetoric and his own persona to compensate for very little actual power. As an Indian and a colonial subject in a white man's world, he had "no option but to be entrepreneurial."

Herein lay Sastri's contributions to liberal internationalism, something which is skillfully detailed by Thakur. Sastri was smart enough to realise the very real limits of the Wilsonian Moment for India - that self-determination was a dead letter for a non-European people firmly within imperial clutches. Instead, he excelled at making vivid comparisons between lofty rhetoric of universal rights and actual practice, "manoeuvring the several contradictions of liberal internationalism" through tireless negotiation of the space in between. If British or dominion leaders extolled the supposed liberal values of the Commonwealth, Sastri would not simply call their bluff. He would hold them accountable.

Smuts was the first leader to be outwitted by this very entrepreneurial diplomat. At the 1921 Imperial Conference, Sastri lavished praise on the British Commonwealth as an engine of human progress. While moving his resolution on Indian rights, he convinced Commonwealth leaders to accept the principle of racial equality while acknowledging that it had not, as yet, been achieved in practice. What was Smuts, the leader of a profoundly racist polity, to do? He could either oppose the resolution - and tarnish his reputation before the world - or sheepishly go along with it. Quite naturally, he chose not to stand in the way of a declaration in favour of equality, although he listed South Africa's reservations in a rejoinder. This gave Sastri enough political space to narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality in the future.

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It was still an arduously uphill task. After touring the dominions to campaign for the rights of Indian residents, the Indian government in 1923 deputed him to Kenya, where a particularly rabid band of white settlers had earlier plotted a coup and the forced exile of Indians. Through exploration of the Kenyan affair, Thakur identifies a curious and often overlooked historic dynamic: that white exceptionalism strengthened across the British empire after the First World War, in spite of that conflict having utterly crushed the myth of white superiority in the eyes of the colonised.

In Kenya, Sastri entered a world of head-spinning racial politics where white settlers justified anti-Indian policies on the grounds that Indians were a menace to indigenous Africans. London politicians let such claptrap go relatively unchallenged. The endorsement of pro-white policies in Kenya was "a personal blow" to Sastri, a "betrayal of his faith in empire." For a moment, his liberal moorings seemed to give way to something more radical as he called for India to take retaliatory measures against the Commonwealth. In Thakur's prose, one can hear the ties of imperial loyalty groaning under pressure, almost snapping.

The limits of liberalism

Ironically, South Africa proved to be a much more productive venue for Indian diplomacy. Through the late 1920s, Sastri tried to narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality which he had articulated at the Imperial Conference. In early 1927, Sastri engineered the Cape Town Agreement, which stopped an anti-Indian bill and bound the South African government to certain responsibilities for Indian residents, particularly education. It was a remarkable coup for both India and its preeminent diplomat: the first-ever bilateral agreement in the Commonwealth without London's involvement, perhaps another sign that India was well on its way to dominion status. As India's first agent to South Africa, Sastri spent nearly two years engaged in furious public diplomacy with English settlers and Boers, urging them to adopt kinder attitudes towards their Indian neighbours.

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Sastri's time representing India in South Africa, however, exposed the very real limits of his diplomacy and of Indian liberalism in general. As agent, Sastri made the case for Indian rights through something Thakur calls "performative Brahminness," relying upon his own cultured persona to demonstrate that Indians were not all just mere coolies. This sidestepped the reality that the most vulnerable Indians in South Africa were relatively poor and uneducated - people who needed real help rather than a public demonstration of Indian refinement. Sastri's diplomacy, Thakur concludes, "thus came at the cost of weakening movements for political rights."

Moreover, Sastri demonstrated the racism and casteism inherent in the Indian liberal politics of the time. He made remarkably little outreach towards black South Africans and actively encouraged Indians to desist from any efforts at non-European solidarity. Like many other liberals, he clung to the argument that Indians deserved rights because they were civilisationally more evolved than Africans. "To treat Indians in the same manner as Africans was not merely an affront to Indians but also to British colonialism," Thakur summarises Sastri's line of thinking.

All of this meant that Sastri's diplomacy "only managed to postpone the inevitable." In March 1946, while Sastri was on his deathbed, Smuts wrecked the Cape Town Agreement through the "Ghetto Act," which formalised the segregationist policies which Sastri had combatted. There certainly was an element of Shakespearean tragedy in Sastri's life: an Othello confronting the limitations imposed by his own skin colour, a Hamlet reflecting about a time very much out of joint.

The legacy of Sastri

India's First Diplomat is a welcome examination of a figure who has lurked in the shadows of Indian and international history for far too long. Thakur navigates complex diplomatic territory in crisp, lucid prose and he has clearly been able to delve into his subject's nimble mind, giving the reader a flavour of Sastri's gift for negotiation.

> As Thakur notes, the values and ideals for which Sastri fought are "disturbingly opposed to the India of the present."

There is one missed opportunity: Thakur's narrative largely ends in 1929, when Sastri still had 17 years to live. True, his most productive years as a diplomat were behind him, but Sastri continued to be a towering figure in Indian politics, particularly for negotiations between nationalists and the colonial government. It is here that Thakur could have explored how Sastri deployed his talent for negotiation and compromise in the domestic sphere. By continuing the narrative, Thakur also could have drawn links between India's first diplomat and India's incipient diplomacy in the late 1930s and 1940s, formulated by some of his mentees like Girija Shankar Bajpai, the first secretary general of independent India's ministry of external affairs.

Additionally, Thakur could have further fleshed out Sastri's fascinating relationship with Mahatma Gandhi. Gokhale's two disciples retained profound respect for one another in spite of not being able to see eye-to-eye on matters of nationalist politics. Thakur notes that, towards the end of his life, Sastri encouraged Gandhi to turn his attention towards world peace, even suggesting that he attend the San Francisco Conference in 1945. This would have been a wonderful opportunity to explore how Sastri, the quintessential global-minded liberal, pushed nationalists to think about the world at large, making them stakeholders in liberal internationalism.

As Thakur notes, the values and ideals for which Sastri fought are "disturbingly opposed to the India of the present." Today, instead of protesting political disenfranchisement, assaulting prejudiced norms, and outwitting arch-racists, India's diplomats in South Block and abroad are furiously justifying the actions of a profoundly illiberal government at home. Perhaps they would benefit from examining the life and career of India's first diplomat. One hopes that Sastri's melancholy was not in vain.