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1919 Paris Peace Conference Centennial: Recollecting India's Representation and Participation

Dr. Monika Chansoria

The Paris Peace Conference opened on January 18, 1919, paving way for an ensuing legacy of peacemaking. It aimed at fortifying the conceptual foundations in reference to the very essential premise on which peacemaking rests – i.e., bringing a conflict/war to a halt, and thereafter initiating a diplomatic process that seeks to provide a platform for initiating the process of reconciliation. Held at the Palace of Versailles, the Peace Conference saw delegates from 27 parties, with rigorous deliberations and recommendations that eventually got included into the Treaty of Versailles with Germany, held at the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, on June 28, 1919.

India and the Paris Peace Conference

India's representation and participation in the 1919 peace conference holds special mention especially since India, at that time, was under the colonial rule of the British Empire. According to the Interpretation Act of 1889 (Sec. 18 {5}) India came to be defined as "British India, together with any territories of any native prince or chief under the suzerainty of His Majesty…" Thus, international law did not recognize any cleavage between British India and 'Indian' India, even though the territories of the Indian Princes and Chiefs were called States, and most of these enjoyed sovereign rights.[1] As far as the Paris Peace Conference is concerned, the role of Ganga Singh, the 21st Maharaja of the Indian princely desert state of Bikaner (located in northwestern India) remains particularly etched in the pages of history since he was the only non-white member of the British Imperial War Cabinet, as well as an Indian signatory to the Treaty of Versailles – that arguably was to shape the remainder of the 20th Century.[2]

Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Tokyo-based Senior Visiting Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs. Previously, she has held appointments at the Sandia National Laboratories (U.S.), Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan), and Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris). Dr. Chansoria has authored five books including her latest work, *China, Japan, and Senkaku Islands: Conflict in the East China Sea Amid an American Shadow* (Routledge © 2018).

1 For more details see, Lanka Sundaram, "The International Status of India," *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 4, July 1930, p. 452.
2 Hugh Purcell, "The Rajput at Versailles: The Maharajah of Bikaner, Consummate Soldier and Peace Treaty Signatory," *Outlook*, March 31, 2014.

When the British Empire declared war on Germany in August 1914, the young Maharaja emulated his ancestors, the Bika Rathores, of whom, 17 out of 21 had led their own troops in warfare. Maharaja Ganga Singh instantly sent a cable to the King-Emperor, George V, stating "I have the great honor and privilege of having served Your Imperial Majesty as Aide-de-Camp longer than any other Indian Chief. If the Empire is involved, for that personal military service of a Rathore Rajput Chief … I am ready to go anywhere in any capacity for the privilege of serving my Emperor..."[3] Accordingly, the 34-year-old Indian Rajput clan ruler arrived in northern France in October with an appointment on the HQ staff of the 7th Indian Division stationed near Bethune, from where he was assigned to the headquarters staff of Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force.[4] Four days after the First World War ended, then Viceroy of India, Lord Chelmsford telegraphically summoned the Maharaja of Bikaner on November 15, 1918 asking him to proceed to London and be the representative of India in the Imperial War Cabinet and join discussions about a peace settlement consequent of the armistice signed with Germany on November 11, 1918.[5] British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, wrote in his *War Memoirs* acknowledging dependence on 'Bikaner' as the Maharaja was fondly called. George referred to him as a "wise man coming from the East… we came to rely on his advice, especially on all matters that affected India".[6]

Two considerations that perhaps drove the decision of inviting the Maharaja of Bikaner were, firstly; that the 600 Indian Princes among them ruled nearly one-third of the entire landmass of India; and second, and more importantly; the contribution of India to the Allied cause in World War I saw over one million Indian soldiers serving overseas mostly on the Western Front and in Mesopotamia, sacrificing 75,000 lives for the cause of the Empire – therefore making it imperative for India to have its place and say in the peace settlement at the Paris Conference.[7] Interestingly, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (*The Mahatma*) described the Indian subcontinent to be surprisingly united in "sharing the responsibilities of Empire" and hoped that by willingly entering the War, India would be able to portray itself worthy of self-government.[8]

The War had a profound effect upon the attitude of His Majesty's Government towards India. The huge sacrifice made by India in terms of men and material, coupled with the zeal with which it espoused the cause of the Empire forced it as a matter of right to find representation at the Imperial War Conferences of 1917 and 1918, and at the meetings of the Imperial War Cabinet held during that phase.[9] The Imperial War Conference of 1917 recognized the defects of the obsolete machinery that existed for regulating inter-imperial relations, and thus passed a resolution which defined the self-governing Dominions "as autonomous

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 For more details see, Hugh Purcell, *Maharajah of Bikaner: India – Makers of the Modern World*, (Haus Publishing, 2010).

6 *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George* Vol. 1, (Odhams Press Ltd., New Edition, 1938).

7 Purcell, n. 2.

8 As cited in *The Times of India*, August 1914; also see Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj: Indian Home Rule*, (Navjivan Publication House, revised edition, 1939); for related notes on the First World War see, M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth: An Autobiography,* (Boston, 1957).

9 Sundaram, n. 1.

nations of an Imperial Commonwealth" and India "as an important portion of the same". It also claimed for the Dominions, and India, an adequate voice in the regulation of the foreign policy and foreign relations of the Empire.[10]

For the peace conference in Paris, it was agreed in 1919 that the major White Dominions and India should each have two 'plenipotentiaries' to represent them. The Maharaja of Bikaner was initially named an "Adviser" but soon after was appointed as one of His Majesty's plenipotentiaries, the other being Satyendra Prasanno Sinha, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for India from 1919. They were bestowed with full-accredited powers to represent India (even though Lord Edwin Montagu, who served as Secretary of State for India, 1917-22, was officially their leader).[11] They both went on to sign the eventual Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919. For the plenipotentiaries, representing the British Empire offered a huge prize to be won, not as much for the Empire, but for their own individual countries. This thought was not lost on Maharaja Ganga Singh when he dispatched a cable before setting back on voyage for home, "Peace signed today with Germany. Starting for Marseilles and sailing tomorrow... It is thus the first time in Indian history that the signature of an Indian Prince appeared on a document, the most fateful in the history of the world."[12]

India in the League of Nations

The original draft of Article X of the Covenant of the League of Nations dated February 14, 1919, contained the phrase "States Members of the League". David Hunter Miller's book, *The Drafting of the Covenant*[13] stated with authority at the meetings of the 1919 League of Nations Committee, "… it had been agreed that India should be a member of the League." Having an independent membership with the right to vote against Great Britain in the League of Nations would eventually become the strongest proof and argument in favor of self-government for India's case.[14] India was granted unconditional original membership of the League of Nations despite its colonial position as part of the British Empire and lack of political autonomy at that time.[15] The roots of this decision lay perhaps in India's involvement in World War I, and its independent representation at the Paris Peace Conference. The Indian plenipotentiaries signed the peace treaties alongside representatives of other sovereign states on the basis of legal equality of status. Being an original signatory to the Treaty of Versailles, India was granted entry into the League of Nations. The members of the League of Nations were originally to be restricted to those countries, which were 'self-governing', but a clear exception was made in case of India on account of its immense contribution to the Allied Forces during WWI. The Covenant of the League of Nations, drawn up at Paris and signed by India, guaranteed its entry, thereby making it only one of the original 31 members of the League that was not self-governing.[16]

The decision to admit India as an original member of the League of Nations automatically meant admission to the International Labor Organization, the Permanent Court of International Justice, the International

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 452; also cited in a publication by the Maharaja Ganga Singh Trust Foundation.

12 Purcell, *Maharajah of Bikaner: India*, n. 5.

13 David Hunter Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant,* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928).

14 Lanka Sundaram, *India in World Politics: A Historical Analysis and Appraisal,* (Sultan Chand & Company, 1944).

15 D. N. Verma, *India and the League of Nations,* (Patna: Bharati Bhawan Press, 1968).

16 "Making Britain: Discover How South Asians Shaped the Nation, 1870-1950" The Open University, January 10, 1920; and see, Government of India Files, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

Committee of Intellectual Cooperation at Paris, the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome and several other League and non-League organizations.[17] Moreover, the manner in which India sought to stabilize its position in the International Labor Organization, ultimately led to its recognition as one of the eight chief states of industrial importance in the world. India soon secured representation at almost every international conference, such as the Washington Conference on Naval Armaments, the Geneva Economic Conference, the London Reparations Conference, the London Naval Conference, the Hague Reparations Conference, the World Disarmament Conference, among others.[18]

India's role and contribution in WWI and the Paris Peace Conference logically pointed to the next steps in India's international status. It needs to be underscored that it was India, and not British India, which became a Member of the League, and that, India was defined to include the Indian States as per the Interpretation Act.[19] Being accorded special representation on an equal footing with self-governing Dominions and alongside sovereign States, the Paris Peace Conference and signing of the Treaty of Versailles were remarkable for the creation of a special international status for India. As David Miller succinctly noted, never before in the history of India had such a novel procedure been adopted to lay the foundations of its future juridical international status.[20]

17 Sundaram, n. 14.

18 Ibid.

19 The Indian Statutory Commission lays particular stress upon this point that can be verified from the British White Paper CMD Report, Vol. II, pp. 9-10, 1930.

20 Miller, n. 13, pp. 157-58.