

REFLECTIONS

[THE BIG PICTURE]

An emerging India came alive in imperial London

The 90th anniversary of the Round Table Conference is an opportunity to revisit the landmark event that delivered provincial autonomy, a plan for legislative assemblies and a blueprint for the framework of the Constitution. Most of all, it gave us the first glimpse of the various strands that would come together to form India

India is amid its great age of anticolonial centenaries; 2014 to 2018 prompted reflections on its contribution to World War I and the demands for self-government that came out of it. 2019 marked the 100th anniversary of India signing the peace treaty at Versailles and becoming a member of the League of Nations, the only non-self-governing political body to join this international diplomatic family. The same year marked a centenary since the Rowlatt *satyagraha*, and reflections on the non-cooperation movement that followed have seen Mahatma Gandhi's achievements and reputation debated afresh. This year saw Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi call for a reappraisal of the "martyrs" of Chauri Chaura, referring to an incident that led to the suspension of the Congress's first mass movement. What, then, will now be commemorated? The 1923 founding of the Swaraj Party? Delhi's communal riots of 1924? The disastrous Simon Commission, appointed in 1928?

Civil disobedience, from 1930, will be commemorated for sure. But what of the conference which led to the suspension of the movement, so that Gandhi might be released from prison and travel to Europe aboard the *SS Rajputana*? December 24 marked 90 years since the Round Table Conference (RTC) concluded in London. This path-breaking gathering is so remembered that it is forgotten, it is so plainly in sight that it is overlooked. Most history students could reel off a sentence or two. The conference was called to resolve deadlocks between Hindus and Muslims, Princely and British India, imperialists and nationalists, the Congress and the liberals, and it failed. Many of us can hazily recollect the elongated round table, and photos of Gandhi in committee or staying in the east of London. But in my book *Round Table Conference Geographies*, I argue that this table, and the conference, deserves revisiting for several reasons.

First, India's Constitution is currently under stress from majoritarian tendencies and politics, in ways which have fuelled a renewed interest in the origins of the document. It is a peculiarity of standard tellings of the RTC that they can simultaneously insist that it failed, and yet produced the Government of India Act of 1935, building what is often called the backbone of the Constitution. After two-and-a-half years of intense consultation and Westminster scrutiny—via a joint committee and a bruising passage through both Houses of British Parliament—the act was finally passed, becoming the longest statute in British history to that date. It provided the blueprint for the Indian federation, and two-thirds of the articles of the Indian Constitution that came into effect in 1950

were lifted directly from the framework that the RTC devised.

Second, India's rocky road to geopolitical superpowerdom is prompting reflection on its international history. Diplomatic conferences were places where India both displayed and made its nationhood. "India" functioned as a coherent, singular State at the scale of the international, long before it did so at the scale of the national. Between its performances at the Paris Peace Conference (1919-20) and the Bandung Asian-African Conference (1955), the three sessions of the RTC (1930-32) were India's most spectacular international showcase. They were also training grounds for many of its most influential diplomats, politicians and constitutionalists. Dr BR Ambedkar honed the skill of Constitution-drafting and

Mahatma-challenging; Sarojini Naidu furthered her art of political campaigning and social networking; Muhammad Ali Jinnah tutored himself and others in the political geometry and geography of majority-minority communalism; while KM Panikkar advised delegates in London's tearooms, gentleman's clubs, and palace antechambers, practising the dark arts of diplomacy that he would later deploy as India's ambassador to China, Egypt and France.

Third, while the RTC allows us to see a familiar India emerging, it also reminds us of other potential Indias that did not come into being. Though coinciding with the invention of Pakistan as an acronym and an imaginary geography, no one at the conference was proposing a separate Muslim State. Rather, the debate was over whether the federal Centre should be strong (the Congress's desire) or weak (the Muslim League's demand).



Stephen Legg



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Likewise, no one was suggesting that the princely states would be disbanded in the federation. On the contrary, in 1932 it was seriously proposed that India should become a confederation that could nurture a separate federation of princely states within itself.

This is all to say that the RTC has not been well served by history (the passing of time) or history (the discipline). I propose that the conference is much more interesting if we attend to its geography (its places and spaces). This allows us to appreciate the vast array of locations in which the long months of the conference (two for the first session, nearly three for the second, one for the third) played out. Beyond the conference venue of St James's Palace, delegates continued their work in offices, apartments, tearooms, suites at the Ritz, Gandhi's mission house at The East End, theatres, cafes, museums, gentleman's clubs and the specially created Indian Social Centre at Mayfair where delegates found cheap lodging, food, and entertaining spaces. The burgeoning Indian restaurant scene at Soho was well used, where delegates rubbed shoulders with the Indian diaspora, from budding artists and students to lonely travellers in an, at times, openly racist impe-

rial capital.

Looking at the everyday lives of the Indian delegates reminds us how un-alien London was to many of them. Some knew it well, having trained there as lawyers, campaigned there as politicians, or having been hosted there by fellow hereditary rulers (the *Maharaja* of Bikaner was a friend of Emperor George V, much to the *Maharaja* of Patiala's displeasure). It was because of this that Gandhi condemned the false atmosphere of the conference and blasted it for being non-representative of India. The very act of being invited to London meant that you were not a radical. The ex-Khilafat firebrand Maulana Mohammad Ali had a claim, but he died at conference. Because of its composition, the ex-Member of Parliament and communist Shapurji Saklatvala branded the conference a huge success, not failure, for "the British imperialist thugs who created it, in order to outwit the lesser Indian capitalist thugs in the Moslem and Hindu camps."

I conclude my book not by trying to prove whether the conference succeeded or failed, which is surely a loser's game. Rather, it asks who benefited from branding this extraordinary event a failure. British Labour and Lib-

erals, ejected from or dejected by the conference, denounced it. Jawaharlal Nehru informed Gandhi via telegram from India, mid-conference, that the RTC was "dead as a doornail". Ambedkar was triumphant in London but later forced by the Congress into a humiliating U-turn at Poona. The more the princes understood what a federation would entail for their sovereignty, the less federal they felt. The failure of the princes to volunteer in sufficient numbers for the federation delayed it until after Independence.

But the conference delivered provincial autonomy, workable communal ratios for legislative assemblies, a pathway out of the political deadlocks of the early-1930s and, for Saklatvala, another triumph of British-dominated capitalism in India. Drawing our attention to how the RTC both succeeded and failed, exposes the spaces of a temporarily very Indian London in which a federation, a nation and its futures were being crafted.

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