

Jan Smuts, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Legacies of Liberalism

Written by Vineet Thakur

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/05/18/jan-smuts-jawaharlal-nehru-and-the-legacies-of-liberalism/>

VINEET THAKUR, MAY 18 2018

Recently, while writing a book on Jan Smuts, I was terribly worried about unintentionally rescuing him from history, where he has by now been judiciously dumped as a racist. He has long been forgotten outside South Africa, and is increasingly losing any relevance inside it, although Richard Steyn's recent biography has attempted to resuscitate him. 'Slim Jannie', as Afrikaners called him, has long presented this arresting image of the great liberal on the international stage, who was also conveniently racist – the author of segregation, in fact – in South Africa. He, as one Indian diplomat, R.M. Deshmukh, noted in an internal memo, 'reconcile[d] the irreconcilable'.^[1] Exactly a hundred years ago, Smuts wrote a pamphlet that led to the formation of the League of Nations. At San Francisco in 1945, he was hailed as the 'counsellor' of the world. A *New York Times* editorial in 1921 prophesized that in 20 years Smuts would become the premier of the 'United States of Great Britain'.^[2] Reality almost caught up with prophecy as in early 1940s there were plans for Smuts to succeed Churchill in case the latter died. While he was lauded as the 'prophet' and frontier philosopher of the liberal world, the African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois called him 'the greatest protagonist of the white race' who could 'express bluntly, but 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.' On Smuts' 1930 visit to the US, Du Bois had in fact challenged him to a public debate on his racial views after Smuts had called Africans 'the most patient of Animals, next to the ass.'

His encounters with Indian diplomats, which is what I was writing about in the book, were thus the only instances when he was exposed at international platforms for being racist. But, the sweet irony in all this was that Indian diplomats also saw in Smuts a figure to emulate, one who could punch above his country's weight at international platforms. At the 1921 Imperial Conference, G.S. Bajpai, then a young ICS accompanying the Indian delegation but later the first Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs in independent India, marveled at Smuts's stature.^[3] Although Smuts represented a small country, Bajpai noted how he made it a point to speak on imperial matters. Because of Smuts' 'imperial outlook' he had become this 'great figure of the Empire'. In contrast, Indian representatives spoke nothing except when asked to comment on Indian matters. He noted wryly: 'Silence, no doubt is a great virtue but I think that there are occasions when speech is golden.' Bajpai wanted Indian representatives to follow Smuts' example.^[4]

They did, at least on matters of Indian concern. Not only did Indian diplomats learn international diplomacy by observing him, but they were also to upstage him at his own game in Imperial Conferences in 1921 and 1923. His final *dénouement*, indeed, came in 1946 when a Vijayalakshmi Pandit-led delegation brought him an 'avalanche of condemnation' at the UN. Nehru's India had brought a UN resolution against South Africa on the racial treatment of Indians, and in a spectacular diplomatic performance outwitted the South African delegation led by Smuts. Exasperated by Indians, he was to say: 'I am suspected of being a hypocrite, because I can be quoted on both sides'.^[5] As a brilliant diplomatic strategy, Indian diplomats would often quote at great length Smuts' own speeches to him.

The more I thought about Smuts and his role in history, especially given his ambivalent relationship with the inter-war liberal order that he had helped create, the more I saw similarities with a post-Second World War figure who in terms of international footprint was both Smuts' successor and ideological other: Jawaharlal Nehru.

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Smuts, Nehru and the International Order

The diplomatic lives of these two leaders are somewhat neatly separated by the Second World War and the accompanying international order. They never met personally, although a series of letters – which Smuts called ‘paper bombs’ – passed between them after the UN Resolution of 1946. When Jan Smuts died and the Cambridge University chancellorship fell vacant, Nehru was the leading choice. However, Nehru did not contest and withdrew because he thought it would be looked upon unfavourably in India.

Their personal biographies have much in common: both were Cambridge-educated lawyers who returned home to immerse themselves in their respective struggles for freedom from British rule, and both were central to the negotiated transitions that followed. These two nation-builders, both scorned by critics at home for being more concerned about international affairs than domestic politics, made defining contributions to world affairs and emerged as world statesmen cut from the finest cloth. Drawn towards the Fabian ideas of English politics, both were often criticised at home for being ‘too English’. Yet, they were Fabians of their respective times.

Smuts was a pre-Second World War politician whose views on race were quite consistent with the mainstream liberal thinking within the Empire. The interwar period of international politics may be remembered for its lofty but misplaced ideals, such as World Government, but there is – even now – little scrutiny of the racism that passed as common sense among white intellectual, supposedly progressive elites. The idea of World Government – the liberal utopia of the times – was as much a racist idea, for ‘uncivilised’ non-Europeans were to be governed through mandates and colonial trusteeship. In contrast, Nehru embodied the post-Second World War moral order of political and racial egalitarianism thrust upon the white world by the decolonised nations. Judged according to the world they lived in and made, Smuts was the most important liberal statesman from the non-Western white world in the post-First World War era, while Nehru emerged as the distinctive liberal statesman of the coloured peoples of the world in the post-Second World War era. Just as Smuts was a champion of the decolonising white world, Nehru spoke as the voice of the decolonising coloured world. Smuts was the brain behind the Wilsonian moment in world politics; Nehru was at the heart of the Bandung moment.^[6] Smuts’ ‘romance of the veld’ and Nehru’s ‘revolt against the west’ were both crucial in decentering the international, albeit with different moral, racial and geopolitical consequences.

One can even find strong resonances between Smutsian pan- Africanism and Nehru’s pan-Asianism. From his first public speech in 1895, pan-Africanism appeared in Smuts’ speeches time and again. While more often than not his schemes for Africa were imperialist, towards the latter part of his life he denounced any notions of a ‘United States of Africa’ and a ‘Monroe Doctrine for this continent’ as utopia. Relatively secure of the white rule in the continent by now, in a speech in April 1940 he had suitably modified his pan-Africanism to being an idea about a socially and economically integrated continent.^[7] Likewise, Nehru, although sufficiently circumspect about any ideas of a pan-Asian federation that Indian nationalists had started advancing from the early 1920s, organised the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, the first ever conference of Asian leaders. Nehru’s pan-Asianism was imagined more in terms of an alternative world order. Asia, for him, could emerge as an ‘area of peace’, comprising countries outside bloc politics.^[8] Finally, if Smuts imagined the British Commonwealth of Nations as the most apt representation of his holism, Nehru went a step further and imagined ‘One World’. Both, in some ways, cautioned against arriving too early at a conception of evil within the liberal paradigm. Smuts sympathised with a defeated Germany after the First World War and Nehru pushed for a more sympathetic consideration of communist countries such as the USSR and China. In their own ways, they engineered ideas that were subversive in one context but terribly imperialist in another. For every South-West Africa that Smuts was not willing to sacrifice for his idealism, Nehru had his Kashmirs.

An instructive example of this is their approach to the Commonwealth and how each engineered subversive shifts in the understanding of this institution. When Smuts first articulated his idea of the British Commonwealth in the mid-1910s, it was proposed against the idea of a unitary colonial state – Imperial Federation – in circulation at the time. Smuts’ idea of a British Commonwealth was more of a spiritual unity under the British Crown within which the dominions and India would enjoy relative autonomy (even in foreign policy). The autonomy of the dominions and India was important for Smuts, and the Commonwealth developed along these lines after the First World War. However, for Smuts, two institutions were central to the idea of the Commonwealth: the British monarchy and the imperial conferences.^[9]

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This understanding of the Commonwealth was first challenged by Nehru and India's independence.^[10] In the decolonising Commonwealth, both the monarchy and the control of Britain were seen as signifiers of a colonial past. For Nehru, the Commonwealth was not a spiritual Empire, as Smuts had argued, but an organisation for the people, united by a common history and liberal values. He redefined the Commonwealth by doing away with the physical hegemony of Britain, while retaining its intellectual and moral hegemony. In his last days, Smuts regretted this change and was deeply critical of India remaining in the Commonwealth despite being a republic.

Towards the end of their lives both looked like misfits in the world they helped make. Smuts' liberalism was past its sell-by date, as he increasingly faced jibes of being a hypocrite at the UN in 1946. He never visited the UN again. Likewise, Nehru's proclamations of a human rights-based world order were contrasted against his government's violent actions in Kashmir, Hyderabad, Goa and Nagaland. Two years before his death, Nehru received a rude shock that his visions of a new world order, based on what the Australian scholar Priya Chacko calls Nehru's theory of friendship, were hopelessly unrealistic. He never recovered from military defeat at the hands of China in 1962 and died a dejected man.

The worlds and worldviews of Jan Smuts and Jawaharlal Nehru were separated by what Du Bois called a 'colour line'.^[11] The global visions of Smuts and Nehru were informed by two opposite racial imaginings of liberalism. But within the liberal framework, Nehru also plays the role of Smuts' successor as one who makes liberalism racially and politically inclusive but is also constantly troubled by the sometimes hypocritical nature of his own actions.

Smuts and Histories of Anti-racism

Histories of cosmopolitanism are laced with ambivalent figures, and Smuts is certainly one. Placing Smuts and Nehru side by side and within the broader liberal paradigm, we come to a picture that is both global and local, contextual and textual, historical and contemporary. Both Smuts and Nehru are exceptional figures of 20th century. But in each other's company, they also become starkly provincial figures. Their visions of liberalism complement as well compete with each other.

The story of Smuts is thus not only of his racism. Histories of anti-racism also cannot be told without him. The complexity of his liberal internationalism provided Indian diplomats with tools and arguments that they eventually used to fight him. Perhaps, the following tale would be enough to bring this point across.

At the 1921 Imperial Conference, Indian diplomats led by Srinivasa Sastri had convinced the majority opinion in favour of their resolution for granting equal civil rights to overseas Indians. Only South Africa was against this resolution. However, since all resolutions at the Imperial Conferences were always unanimous, other white dominions refused to formally endorse India's resolution. They also very reluctant to go against Smuts. Indians were considerably dejected, when Smuts himself came to India's rescue. Smuts argued that he agreed with the principle of racial equality in the Empire but given South Africa's 'exceptional circumstances' he could not agree with the specific resolution. So, he would not oppose the passing of the resolution, so long as South Africa could append a note of dissent. As soon as he dropped his objection, the resolution was passed with majority.^[12] It made history as the first ever resolution passed on racial equality within the Empire. Even from the opposing side, Smuts had a role in passing it.

He thus provided his opponents the tools of his own demise and in so doing, unwittingly, bolstered the fight against his own brand of liberal racism. Racism has been, for much of the modern history, liberalism's 'lie in the soul' – a falsehood it has perennially refused to acknowledge. Smuts was perhaps the most ardent champion of that liberalism. Through sustained engagements with liberalism, anti-colonial interventions pushed it to become more inclusive and global. Although, as Nehru's example shows, it brought in its own problems.

Notes

[1] Note prepared by Mr. R.M. Deshmukh, High Commissioner for India in the Union of South Africa for the South African Indian case to the United Nations Organisation, dated 4 September 1946, R.M. Deshmukh Papers, F.No. 54,

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p. 31.

[2] Stephen Bonsal, 'Boer Prop of the British Empire: Boer Prop of the British Empire', *New York Times*, Jul 24, 1921, p.4.

[3] Letter from G.S. Bajpai to Tej Bahadur Sapru, 14 Jan 1921, Tej Bahadur Sapru Correspondence, 1st Series, Reel 1 (A-G): IOG Neg 4986, Indian Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, London.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Keith W. Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force, 1919–1950*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 450.

[6] Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

[7] Jan Smuts, *Plans For A Better World: Speeches of Field-Marshal the Right Honourable J.C. Smuts, P.C., C.H., K.C., D.T.D.*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1942, p. 254. Also see, Ronald Hyam, *The Failure of South African Expansion 1908–1948*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1972.

[8] Vineet Thakur, 'An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947', *The International History Review*, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2018.1434809

[9] Jan Smuts, 'The White Man's Task', in *Plans for a Better World*, pp. 15-30.

[10] Bimal Prasad, 'Nehru and the New Commonwealth', *India Quarterly*, 39 (4), 1983, 432 – 446.

[11] W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Worlds of Colour', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 (3), 1925, 423-444.

[12] For this, see Vineet Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost: India's first diplomats and the narrative of foreign policy', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45 (2), 2017, 232–58

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