
“The Woman Who Swayed America”: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 1945

by

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Abstract: This essay demonstrates the ways in which Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit’s gendered performance on the periphery of the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO) in San Francisco (1945) established her diplomatic celebrity and lay the foundations of India’s Congress nationalist aspirations for postwar global moral leadership. Her calls to end colonial rule and discrimination were not new additions to the discourse of international diplomacy, but her self-conscious performance of a modern, ideal Indian womanhood with intimate ties to both her brother, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Gandhi was new, and it captured the imagination of contemporary observers near and far. Pandit’s elite, cultured, and charismatic self-representation provided the perfect future tense for the nearly-postcolonial India.

The skilful timing and unremitting energy of Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit and her supporters in the United States have ensured a floodlight of publicity for India’s claims at a time when the peoples of the world are looking anxiously to the conference for formulation of principles and policies which are intended to shape their destinies.

Times of India, 7 May 1945

With such puppets representing India at San Francisco people were naturally disappointed and did not expect much from the Conference, so far as India’s interest was concerned. *The only ray of hope was the presence of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit in America.*

R. L. Khipple, *The Woman Who Swayed America: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit*, Lion Press, Lahore 1946, p. 79.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900-1990) was one of the highest ranking and most visible female diplomats of her generation. A member of perhaps the most prominent political family in India – her father was the wealthy Kashmiri politician and Gandhian nationalist Motilal Pandit, her brother was Jawaharlal Nehru – Pandit had become active in the nationalist movement as a young woman. Sarojini Naidu was a mentor to Pandit through her work in the All-India Women’s Congress in the 1920s.

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Pandit also looked to Mahatma Gandhi as a mentor and father figure, particularly after the death of her own father in 1931. Her elder brother, Jawaharlal, remained a close confidant throughout his life. During the mass movements of the 1930s, Pandit served three prison sentences for political action against British imperialism, the final time alongside her twenty-year-old daughter at Naini prison in Allahabad. Pandit led the first Indian delegation to the United Nations in 1945, and during her brother's terms as Prime Minister of India (1947-1964), she continued to head India's UN delegation. She served as the first woman and first Asian president of the UN General Assembly in 1953. In addition, she was India's first ambassador to the Soviet Union (1947-48), and was ambassador to the U.S. and Mexico (1949-52) and England (1954-61).

Introduction

This essay demonstrates the ways in which Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's gendered performance on the periphery of the 1945 UN Conference on International Organization in San Francisco established her diplomatic celebrity and at the same time lay the foundations of India's aspirations for postwar global moral leadership in the post-war world. Politically experienced within a national context but a novice on the international stage, Pandit took advantage of the opportunities presented to her to gain increased media attention for her cause. Her calls to end colonial rule and discrimination were not new additions to the discourse of international diplomacy, but her self-conscious performance of a modern, ideal Indian womanhood with intimate ties to both her brother and Gandhi was new, and it captured the imagination of contemporary observers near and far. Pandit's elite, cultured, and charismatic self-representation provided the perfect future tense for the almost-postcolonial India. Her physical presence and embodied difference attracted an orientalist gaze directed toward her by western observers fascinated with this "diminutive, silvery-haired woman", dressed always in a sari, who could speak with such force as she "Twist[ed] the Tail of the British Lion"¹. Pandit's ability to garner support from both well-heeled America supporters and the India lobby in the U.S. meant she was well positioned to represent the Indian cause at the UNCIO that spring. This essay shows how Pandit's propaganda in San Francisco bolstered the notion that the All-India National Congress was the only legitimate inheritor of the postcolonial Indian state. Despite some challenges to this predominant position, the voices of other Indian nationalist interests were effectively drowned out: figuratively by the overwhelming press coverage of Pandit that reiterated her legitimacy, and literally when a heckler at a press conference (an Indian Muslim attached to the official UNCIO delegation) was forced out of the room by other attendees. In these ways, Pandit's iteration of Indian aspirational postcoloniality abroad pushed aside the very real contests for power at home and reinforced the legitimacy of the Gandhi-Nehru dyad prominently on the global stage.

¹ William Moore, "Indian Woman Twists the Tail of British Lion", April 27, 1945, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, p. 6.

“A star-making turn”

The most important thing to emerge out of the 1945 UN Conference on International Organization (UNCIO) for the Indian nationalist cause was the geopolitical and international diplomatic experience gained by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. As a founding member of the United Nations, India had an official delegation at the conference, but the three knighted Indian men selected by the British to represent the colony were considered “stooges” by the large number of anticolonial and antiracist individuals and organizations gathered in San Francisco. The irony of a dependent state joining an organization ostensibly made up of sovereign nations only helped boost attention for Pandit’s anti-imperial public speech. Pandit was no novice to politics. As the eldest daughter in India’s most famous Indian National Congress (INC, or Congress) family, she had been steeped in the language and action of nationalist politics since childhood. But her debut on the international stage in 1945 provided her with a formative education in diplomacy on a larger scale and foreshadowed the contradictory nature of UN postcolonialism, which would develop in the coming years. In the making of international diplomatic celebrity, her performance on behalf of Indian independence and anticolonialism writ large in the months surrounding the conference was at the time and continues to be considered “a star-making turn.”² She was a highly effective and affective avatar for the Indian nationalist cause and she would use the lessons learned in San Francisco to great success when she returned as India’s official head of delegation to the UN in 1946 and beyond. The combination of anticipation surrounding the formation of the UN in San Francisco, a savvy political propaganda machine supported by the India lobby in the United States, and characteristics specific to Pandit as an individual, helped launch a political and cultural force.

Pandit’s presence in the United States in the spring of 1945 was both personal and political. The majority of the Congress leadership remained imprisoned for their participation in the 1942 Quit India Movement, but Pandit had been released due to health concerns in early 1944 shortly before her husband succumbed to illness worsened by his own imprisonment. Because Indian law prohibited women from inheriting, Pandit was left without significant income. She worked for some months organizing famine relief in Bengal, but was personally adrift and in need of financial stability. When lawyer and politician Tej Bahadru Sapru, with the support of Mahatmas Gandhi, invited her to join the Indian delegation to the Pacific Relations Conference to be held in Virginia, USA in February 1945, she combined this opportunity with visits to see her two eldest daughters who were attending Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

When she arrived in New York City in December 1944, Pandit was the first prominent Indian National Congress figure to visit the United States since the start of the war. In response to her arrival, individuals and organizations sympathetic to the Indian cause welcomed her with open arms. Pearl S. Buck offered her practical help finding accommodation and clothing appropriate to the New York winter. The Chinese Consul General held a reception in her honor where Pandit met the British

² Manu Bhagavan, *India and the Quest for One World: The Peacemakers*, MacMillan, New York 2013, p. 31.

author W. Somerset Maugham among others. Power couple Henry and Clare Luce Booth gave a dinner-reception at the Waldorf-Astoria that drew “the elite of New York”³. Eleanor Roosevelt hosted a luncheon in Pandit’s honor. New York’s Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia received her at City Hall. And over 1000 people heard her speak publicly for the first time at the Indian Independence Day celebration on January 26, an event hosted by the India League of America⁴. It became apparent quickly that Pandit was naturally adept at representing the Indian cause in gatherings both large and small.

The social and political culture that undergirded postcolonial Indian politics at the United Nations in 1945 was a “glittering” world made up of international and internationally-minded elite diplomats, activists, and artists. While Pandit’s political and familial lineage gave her entrée to this elite setting, her intelligence and personal charisma assured her staying power. To observers, Pandit moved through this milieu effortlessly, but throughout her first stay in the United States, Pandit was learning how to utilize her political history and distinctive personal characteristics to move her agenda forward. Over these months, Pandit self-consciously created a self-representation that would allow her the most access to and success on the international stage. Her savvy complicity in the appropriation of herself as a symbol of modern India helped produce an especially effective diplomatic celebrity.

From childhood Pandit and her sister, Krishna Hutheesing, were groomed to become exemplary models of the “educated, ‘modern,’ new woman” early twentieth-century Indian nationalism desired⁵. For Pandit, her Anglophile education and elite upbringing (made visible and audible through her comportment and speech), mixed with the bravery, strength, and domesticated femininity required of the ideal Gandhian *satyagrahi* was eminently transportable/translatable into the elite social and political culture she encountered in the United States. She occupied a liminal space, a gendered persona at once Eastern and Western that appealed to her influential supporters as well as a broader audience. As an Indian admirer wrote after the 1945 lecture tour:

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, in her self, combines all that is best in the two ways of life – the Eastern and the Western...Her exterior beams with the manners and etiquette of...her European governess – but her heart throbs with the Kashmiri Brahmin blood of her ancestor[s]⁶.

³ Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir*, Crown Publishers, New York 1979, pp. 190-191; “Mrs. Pandit”, *India Today*, 5, 11, February 1945, p. 3.

⁴ “Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit”, *India Today*, 5, 10, January 1945, p. 4; “Events Today”, *New York Times*, 26 January 1945, p. 19; “India is Visualized Seizing Independence”, *New York Times*, 27 January 1945, 4; “Display Ad 4-No Title”, *Washington Post*, 29 January 1945, p. 5.

⁵ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question*, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Kali for Women, New Delhi 1989, pp. 233-253. For more on women and gender in the Gandhian movement, see Suresht R. Bald, *The Politics of Gandhi’s ‘Feminism’: Constructing ‘Sitas’ for Swaraj*, in Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tétreault (eds.), *Women, States, and Nationalism: At Home in the Nation?*, Routledge, New York 2000, pp. 81-97; Ketu H. Katrak, *Indian Nationalism, Gandhian ‘Satyagraha,’ and Representations of Female Sexuality*, in Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Nationalisms & Sexualities*, Routledge, New York 1992, pp. 395-406.

⁶ R.L. Khipple, *The Woman Who Swayed America*, cit., p. 149.

Perceived more as an approachable “British subject” than the less comprehensible category of “Indian”, her performance could be consumed comfortably by American audiences. Through her embrace of this self-representation, Pandit gave India its foothold into UN culture even before Indian independence was achieved. And her political legitimacy as the primary spokesperson for Indian interests was greatly enhanced due to her close association with her brother, Jawharlal Nehru, and her family’s decades long relationship with Gandhi. But when one US newspaper declared her the “First Lady of India”⁷, it signaled the arrival of much more than a familial representative; it telegraphed the arrival on the world stage of an Indian woman who was to lay the very foundations of India’s ambitions for global moral leadership in the post-war geopolitical order.

Setting the Stage

Pandit arrived in the United States in late 1944 via a circuitous route. With the end of the war approaching, the Indian National Congress leadership felt it was time to send a spokesperson to the United States to garner public support on behalf of their cause. Widowed since January 1944, Pandit found herself alone and without financial support for the first time in her life. Left with no sons and no will guaranteeing her a portion of her husband’s inheritance, according to Indian communal law their money and property reverted to her husband’s family. Pandit was initially offered only the minimum Rs. 150 widow maintenance and Rs. 50 for her daughters until they married. Nehru offered what support he could from his prison cell at Ahmadnagar Fort: Rs. 2000 and his encouragement to keep working, try not to worry, and to remember that he considered her and their younger sister, Krishna, “joint-owners” of the family estate⁸. Pandit could have pursued a legal case against her in-laws, but Gandhi, an important paternal figure since her own father Motilal’s death in 1931, urged her to let the conflict with her in-laws go as “we had more important things to do”⁹. Against her lawyer’s advice but with the intent of ending the painful episode, Pandit agreed to accept a small settlement from her brother-in-law. She “signed a document giving up [her] personal claims and that of any unborn grandsons [she] might have, and the chapter was brought to a close”¹⁰. The question of on-going financial resources remained pressing, and a lecture tour in the United States held the potential for addressing that problem.

In spite of its financial constraints, Pandit’s status as a widow did open up new possibilities for her activism and allowed her increased mobility. In a conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt for *McCall’s* magazine during Pandit’s tenure as Indian Ambassador to the United States in 1950, the two women mused about the particular

⁷ S.A. Haynes, “India Stands For Equality, Leader Tells Baltimoreans”, *Afro-American*, 7 April 1945, p. 1.

⁸ Jawahar to Nan, 13 March 1944, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom: Nehru’s Letters to His Sister*, HarperCollins Publishers India, New Delhi 2000, p. 391 and 395. Letters in the volume date from 1909-1947, with just one letter from 1956.

⁹ Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, cit., p. 181.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

pressures placed on female diplomats. Responsibilities were two-fold for a woman who was expected to play the roles of both Ambassador and Ambassador's wife, demands that Pandit said caused physical and emotional strain. She acknowledged that despite its added pressures, widowhood had made her international diplomacy possible. While Minister of Health of the United Provinces from 1937-1939 (the first Indian woman to hold such a position), Pandit traveled to see her husband every weekend, even when they worked in different cities. But if he had been alive, she surmised, she would not have been able to be a diplomat as it would be too awkward for her husband. The timing of her husband's death contributed to the serendipitous timing of her emergence at the United Nations the following year. Married, she would have been less inclined to perform a role that required independent travel abroad; widowed, she was able to become one of the very few women active at the highest levels of international diplomacy in the 1940s and 1950s.

Given these circumstances, when Gandhi, out of prison since June 1944, and Sapru, President of the Indian Council for World Affairs, approached Pandit to speak on behalf of India in the United States, she was free to go. The only hurdle remaining was governmental permission to travel. As part of continued imperial control and surveillance of Congress leaders, the British had confiscated her passport and seemed unlikely to reissue it in the foreseeable future. Ultimately, she found a way around British restrictions on her mobility and entered the United States without a passport. In her memoirs Pandit describes Edith Pao, the American wife of the Chinese Consul General in Calcutta, inviting her to attend a consulate dinner for the American Air Force. There, Pandit was introduced to the chief of the Allied Air Command in the Eastern region. With approval from US Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, she boarded a US army plane in December 1944, US visa in hand. The British, highly concerned about the impact of Indian propagandists in America, nevertheless were unable to prevent Pandit's entry into the United States. If the American government provided permission to enter the country, the best the British could do was track her movements and send their own counter-propagandists to lessen her impact¹¹.

After Christmas holidays spent with her daughters, Pandit left for the Pacific Relations Conference (PCR) in Virginia, one of five Indian delegates attending as non-voting observers. She attended lectures and meetings and had the opportunity to mingle with other delegates from all over the world. As she would do throughout her travels, Pandit wrote to her brother about her experiences. In February, Nehru responded to her letter about the conference and shared his insights about these types of international meetings. Pandit having apparently expressed frustration with the lack of definitive action at the conference, he conceded, "You are perfectly right in saying that these conferences do not decide anything important or solve any of the

¹¹ Pandit was also monitored throughout her trip. For example, someone who attended one of Pandit's debates forwarded a letter to the Foreign Office describing how the debate "quickly developed into a discussion on whether England should give up India" (Marika Sherwood, *India at the Founding of the United Nations*, in "International Studies", 33, 4, 1996, p. 412. And in one letter Nehru mentions Amarnath Jha being sent by the Indian Government to the United States "to put their side as unofficially and gently...as possible" in a letter to Pandit (Jawahar to Nan darling, 20 March 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 465).

world's problems"¹². Yet the conference was by no means a waste of Pandit's energies. It was during the PCR that she began to attract the media attention that would become ubiquitous in the coming months and years. According to one biographer, her few opportunities to talk in Virginia gained "favorable news releases, which created interest in the woman from India"¹³. And a *Washington Post* columnist predicted that the "brilliant, colorful Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit" was certain to be "spotlighted"¹⁴. Even before the main event started in San Francisco, she had begun to make an impression on observers, one that would propel her into international diplomatic celebrity in service to the Indian nationalist cause.

Word of Pandit's successes reached Nehru in prison half a world away via news reports, friends' updates, and the much-delayed letters she wrote to him throughout her journeys. The letters Nehru wrote to her in this period provide a glimpse into how he viewed her experiences as a training ground for future endeavors. Writing from Ahmadnagar Fort (Maharashtra) and later Bareilly Jail (Uttar Pradesh), government censors constrained Nehru's ability to be explicit about political issues. International mail delivery was also highly unpredictable; letters often were months in transit. As a result, Pandit would not have received her brother's letters in time to act immediately on his advice. Nevertheless, the letters demonstrate Nehru's recognition of Pandit's growing effectiveness on the global stage. In a letter dated late January 1945, he wrote he had been following her travels in press accounts and had "no doubt" she would improve the "minds and outlooks" of the American people on the Indian issue. On a more personal note, he also hoped the experience would help Pandit grow in confidence and develop new "ideas and energy" for the work ahead¹⁵. In a letter from February, he mentioned that cables containing brief extracts of her statements had "rather upset the composure of people in New Delhi and Whitehall," a testament to the wide circulation of her anticolonial critiques¹⁶. An early April letter conveyed Nehru's pleasure at that Pandit was "making good and impressing people" and that she seemed to be "finding" herself:

You are growing in mind, in outlook, in self-assurance, and in a friendly and favourable atmosphere your capacities are developing. One must of course have ability and capacity but almost equally important is the chance and opportunity to develop them... Keep growing and learning, flexible in mind and body, and yet always with that hard steel-like something which tempers us and keeps us straight and anchored, and gives us a sense of real values¹⁷.

Even before Pandit made her most lasting impression at the UNCIO in San Francisco, her talent at speaking effectively on behalf of the Indian cause to audiences outside the subcontinent had become apparent.

¹² Jawahar to Nan, 27 February 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 454.

¹³ Anne Guthrie, *Madame Ambassador: The Life of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit*, Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., New York 1962, p. 120.

¹⁴ Genevieve Reynolds, "Berge Denounces Cartels", *Washington Post*, 19 January 1945, p. 12.

¹⁵ Jawahar to Darling Nan, 31 January 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 445.

¹⁶ Jawahar to Darling Nan, 27 February 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 456.

¹⁷ Jawahar to Darling Nan, 10 April 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., pp. 469-470.

Global 1945

Physically distant yet inextricably linked to the bloody battlefields of the Second World War, San Francisco became an unlikely location of diplomatic import when delegates from fifty countries met to debate the structure of the proposed United Nations in late April 1945. Newspapers in the previous months had been filled with momentous stories drawing readers' attention to happenings in locations across the globe embroiled in the war. The Allies had won the Battle of the Bulge, firebombed Dresden and Tokyo, and freed Manila from Japanese occupation. Franklin Delano Roosevelt died just weeks after being sworn in for an unprecedented third term, leaving the untested Harry S. Truman to lead the emerging superpower. As battles continued on numerous fronts in Asia, Europe, and the Pacific that spring, concentration camps including Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, and Flossenbürg were liberated, revealing the horror of genocide perpetrated by Germany. The war had been long and grueling, and it had affected a large portion of the world's population.

At the same time, governments and leaders were developing a forward-looking vision for the postwar world. In February 1945, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain had walked away from the Yalta Conference with a signed agreement on the reorganization of postwar Europe. The Arab League formed in Cairo in March, creating an important regional political power. Now, San Francisco had been selected as the location for the United Nations Conference on International Organization and invitations were sent to founding member states to convene at the end of April¹⁸. With the reality of gruesome warfare and massive civilian casualties in the sixth year of this global war as its backdrop, diplomats converged on the City by the Bay. A second world war in a generation was ending and an international organization was being built, in the words of President Truman at the opening session, to "provide the machinery which will make future peace not only possible but certain"¹⁹.

At the center of power in San Francisco were those delegations representing the Big Four – China, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States – with the reality of a bipolar power struggle emerging between the latter two increasingly obvious. The document presented to member states for their consideration had been hashed out amongst these powers during the Dumbarton Oaks talks (August 21-

¹⁸ It was a given the United States would host the conference for several reasons: Roosevelt's passion for the organization, the lack of active warfare in the country, and the fact that the US government offered to pay all costs save the delegates' personal expenses. San Francisco was chosen because of a dream US Secretary of State Edward Stettinius had during the Yalta Conference. See: Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation. The Founding of the United Nations*, Westview Press, Boulder, 2003, pp. 111-112 and 61.

¹⁹ "Address by President Harry S. Truman", 25 April 1945, *The United States and the Peace*, Part II: *Verbatim Record of the Plenary Sessions of the United Nations Organization on International Organization, San Francisco, April-June 1945*, The United States News, Washington, D.C., n.d., p. 29-A.

October 7, 1944)²⁰. Invited delegations from the other founding nations were allowed to put forward, debate, and vote on amendments to the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. Unsurprisingly, the draft Charter reflected the contradictions of an organization guided by powerful governments seeking to protect their own sovereignty while simultaneously extending new powers to an international organization. A prime example of this tension was the belief expressed by many smaller member states that the power of the veto at the Security Council was a “defect” written into the draft Charter²¹. With deference to the greater responsibility for the war and the enormous power held by the Big Four, the other member states nonetheless resented the veto and hoped for a larger, more inclusive Security Council with regional representation²². Time would prove their fears well-founded: the insistence on the part of the Big Four as well as France to maintain the veto in the Charter contributed directly to frequent deadlock at the Council throughout the Cold War years²³.

Though the fight over the veto was among the most heated of the conference, the delegates faced many more disputes over the organization of the UN Charter. The smaller countries submitted thousands of revisions to the Dumbarton Oaks proposal, and the Big Four put forward more than 20 joint amendments of their own. In order to address these questions, the conference was divided into four major commissions, each with several sub-commissions tasked to discuss sections of the draft plan and any relevant amendments. The commissions met for six weeks, working longer and longer hours as the end of the conference neared. The official Indian delegation submitted no substantive amendments, but it was honored with the selection of Sir Arcot Ramaswamy Mudaliar (1887-1976), a lawyer and politician from southern India, to serve as the first chair of the Economic and Social Council committee. Debate over major issues was vigorous, including over the status of regional organizations, the establishment of permanent members on the Security Council, and the scope of the Economic and Social Council. But the deck was stacked against smaller countries in more ways than one. Primarily, the Big Four had veto power over any amendment. While they were willing to negotiate behind the scenes and make some compromises, they would not allow their power to be undermined considerably. Also, in Stephen C. Schlesinger’s assessment, most of the smaller

²⁰ “The United Nations Dumbarton Oaks Proposals for a General International Organization (For the Use of the Delegates)”, Doc. I, G/1, May 17, 1945, *United Nations Conference on International Organization, San Francisco 1945*, Documents 1-2, Part 1 (1945). See also Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: The Origins of the United Nations and the Search for Postwar Security*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1990.

²¹ “Address by Alberto Lleras Camargo, Chairman, the Colombian Delegation”, *The United States and the Peace*, Part II: *Verbatim Record of the Plenary Sessions of the United Nations Organization on International Organization, San Francisco, April-June 1945*, The United States News, Washington, D.C n.d., p. 42. Delegates from other South American countries, Australia, Egypt, and others also raised concerns about the veto in their plenary remarks.

²² On the battle over the veto, see Stephen Schlesinger, *Act of Creation* cit., pp. 193-225.

²³ Since 1989, the Security Council has made on average one decision per week, a drastic improvement over roughly one decision per month in the first four decades of its existence (Peter Wallensteen and Patrik Johansson, *Security Council Decisions in Perspective*, in David M. Malone (ed.), *The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the 21st Century*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder 2004, p. 18.

nations were “resigned to whittling down the dominance of the big nations, but not driving them out of the organization”. A compromised system outweighed the spectre of no organization at all²⁴.

Many observers representing a wide variety of interest groups roamed the meeting halls at the UNCIO. Their hope: to impact decisions on specific issues. These individuals and organizations without official representation in the conference halls hoped to wield some influence on the direction of the postwar world order even in the face of great power dominance. British journalist Alistair Cooke described the various groups as “unpopular crusaders for small nations and lost causes, drilling away underneath the official whirl in the hope of deepening the foundations of the peace”. These included the Serbian Orthodox church in Yugoslavia, spokesmen for the Armenian question, the American League for a Free Palestine, and Friends of Republican Spain²⁵. Near the end of the conference the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that those such as the Venezuelans calling for the repudiation of Spain’s Franco, whether “ill-timed or right-timed...have made it clear that multitudes are seeking a peace based on moral considerations”²⁶. Emerging from within the political landscape of the United States, the NAACP also asked for a seat at the table during the San Francisco conference. The US government ultimately granted access to the NAACP along with 41 other interest groups, inevitably diminishing the influence of any one organization when so many were allowed to attend. As private citizens these representatives could observe and lobby from inside the meeting halls, but in reality they had little to no influence on negotiations²⁷.

These events in San Francisco echoed a similar phenomenon at the formation of the League of Nations in 1919 when activists from across the globe had gathered in Paris to speak out against racial and colonial oppression and create a “new order” as the world emerged from the First World War²⁸. The question of racial equality became a highly contested issue as a result. Those “seeking to combat racial discrimination in the world needed a powerful and officially recognized voice at the peace conference itself”, and so they looked to the Japanese delegation²⁹. These men had received instructions from the Japanese government to make clear that cooperation with the League would be predicated on the inclusion of a racial equality

²⁴ Stephen Schlesinger, *Act of Creation* cit., p. 172.

²⁵ Alistair Cooke, “Big News and Little News: Contrasts at San Francisco,” *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1945, p. 4.

²⁶ “Peace and Justice Sought for Minorities”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 June 1945, 9.

²⁷ See Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2003, pp. 50-51.

²⁸ Both the US and the British attempted to restrict the mobility of activists suspected to stir the waters in Paris. See Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination*, Westview Press, Boulder 1988, p. 77; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, pp. 59-60; and David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 1993, p. 567.

²⁹ Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice*, cit., p. 79.

clause in the covenant³⁰. When the League of Nations Commission, designated to produce the organization's Covenant, sidestepped the first attempt to include such language, the issue went global, drawing emotional reactions from both inside and outside the meetings³¹. Japan's initially nationalist proposal was transformed into a "universal crusade"³² as millions around the world hoped for change, including delegates to the Pan-African Congress organized by W.E.B. Du Bois to run parallel to the Paris talks³³.

For defenders of white supremacy from North America and the white British settler colonies, even vague language on the subject of equality had been cause for alarm in 1919. The Australian Prime Minister William Hughes put up the most vocal opposition to the Japanese proposal, allowing US President Woodrow Wilson and South Africa's Jan Christiaan Smuts to lay the blame for the language's omission on Hughes' shoulders³⁴. Despite intense rounds of diplomatic talks and an "eloquent and moving" final appeal by Japan's Baron Makino, proposed language on racial equality was left out of the final Covenant³⁵. In the end, the dominance of white, western male diplomacy in Paris won when the limited structure of the new organization successfully excluded competing interests. The real decisions were not made at the more democratic plenary meetings but "by the leaders of the great powers, who met in an increasingly smaller group as the conference stretched on"³⁶. Small states could not override the intentions of the League's framers, and in regards to racial equality the great power statesmen were unwilling "to recognize that this issue might be of intense concern to millions of people throughout the world"³⁷. Nevertheless, the debates did succeed in producing a "heightened emotional awareness of race" and critiques of imperial power around the globe³⁸.

While governments selected their delegations and gave permission to various groups to have insider access in San Francisco in 1945, and news outlets assigned reporters to cover the creation of the UN Charter, activists with a diverse array of

³⁰ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 287; and Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race, and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919*, Routledge, New York 1998, pp. 16-17.

³¹ Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice*, cit., p. 95.

³² Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line* cit., p. 287.

³³ *Memorandum to M. Diagne and Others on a Pan-African Congress to be Held in Paris in February, 1919*, in "Crisis", 17, 3, 1919, pp. 224-225. For an extended discussion of Japan's complicated motivations for bringing the issue of racial equality to the Commission, see Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race, and Equality*, cit., pp. 89-116. On Du Bois and the Pan-African Congress, see David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, cit., pp. 561-580.

³⁴ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line* cit., p. 302; and Goolam Vahed, *Race, Empire, and Citizenship: Sarojini Naidu's 1924 Visit to South Africa*, in "South African Historical Journal", 64, 2, 2012, p. 330. See also Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race, and Equality*, cit., pp. 125-136, and 154-157.

³⁵ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line* cit., p. 301.

³⁶ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, cit., p. 57.

³⁷ Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice*, cit., p. 96.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 102.

political interests also mobilized on the fringes of this new conference. Among these many interest groups were the India League of America and the National Committee for India's Freedom who were lobbying for Indian independence. Together, they selected Pandit to represent their cause. The context for the discussion of race and empire was quite different at the end of the Second World War than it had been in 1919. These issues no longer could be shunted aside so easily by European leaders. Though in the words of Mark Mazower "the UN was designed by, and largely operative as an instrument of, great power politics," the make-up of the new international organization and its rhetoric nevertheless was more inclusive than had been the League of Nations and its Covenant³⁹. The colonial nations had made many promises to their dependencies to gain their participation in the war effort; the Allies could not have triumphed without the financial support and enormous influx of soldiers from the colonized world. Furthermore, the principles that emerged from the Atlantic Charter, which formed the basis of the 1942 "Declaration of the United Nations" and then were carried over into the Preamble of the UN Charter, stated a commitment to a postwar world in which nation-states would work together effectively not only to avoid war but also to promote human rights and justice.

The Preamble to the UN Charter was particularly idealistic, committing the new organization to work to preserve international peace and affirming the dignity of all through a commitment to human rights and the promotion of social and economic progress. Born out of the hope for postwar peace as envisioned by geopolitically dominant states, the ideals contained in the Preamble and the Charter formed a space into which millions of colonized and oppressed peoples around the world could place their hopes for a reconfiguration of power in the post war world. These millions sought relief from the imperial power and racial subjugation that the League of Nations had reinscribed. The UN Charter gestured toward these goals, but its effectiveness would have to be put to the test. Questions of racial equality and imperial power were addressed differently in 1945 than they had been in 1919, though without satisfactory outcomes for those looking to the UN as an instigator of real change. The question of colonies and trusteeships had not been on the Dumbarton Oaks agenda. As for human rights, the Big Four "concurred that the most innocuous place to insert language on the subject was in the section on the responsibilities of the Economic and Social Council. The Council would 'promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,' but have no power to enforce them"⁴⁰. In San Francisco, Du Bois and the NAACP were successful in getting the United States' delegation to submit proposals on human rights and colonialism, but that delegation did little to get those proposals passed. A human rights commission was established, but was years away from effective intervention. As for the question of imperial power, though the rhetoric espoused the ideal of self-governance and equality of nations, the UN Charter in the end did not include the goal of independence for all. The new Trusteeship Council took over from the League's mandate system as a supervisory system, leaving power once again in the hands of

³⁹ Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empires and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, cit., p. 36.

the imperial states. As Mazower points out, “European powers were reasserting their control over their colonial possessions in Southeast Asia even as the San Francisco conference met, and American anticolonial rhetoric dwindled as the war came to a close and the importance of good transatlantic relations with major West European powers,” especially Great Britain and France, “became obvious in Washington”⁴¹.

Anticolonial activists inside and outside the meeting halls were dissatisfied with the continued dominance of imperial powers, garnering Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and her arguments on behalf of the Indian question even broader interest and support. The stage at San Francisco could not have been better set for Pandit’s introduction to world diplomacy. April 1945 was a liminal moment in both world history and in the history of South Asia. Much remained unsettled on both fronts, and yet the basic outlines of the future were becoming increasingly clear: Germany’s defeat was imminent and important gains were being made on the Asian-Pacific front. In India, much of the Congress leadership remained imprisoned, but the devolution of imperial control was clearly on the horizon. Nehru was released from prison in June, and he immediately set about negotiating the terms of British withdrawal. The same combination of uncertainty and hope contained in Indian nationalist’s desires also infused the UN Charter conference. By making parallels between the UN’s goals and India’s desire for freedom, Pandit would draw on the emotional center of this threshold moment to gain support and attention from a wide array of observers.

The “Acid Test” of the UN Charter

Underpinning Pandit’s message at San Francisco was the assertion that India represented “the pivot of the whole system of imperialism and colonialism.” How India’s fate was addressed at this moment, she argued, was to be “an acid test” of the principles of the United Nations, “and the continued denial of India’s freedom by Britain [would be] a negation of those principles and of the sacrifices that have been made” to win the war⁴². Pandit’s words echoed a statement Gandhi made to the press in the days leading up to the conference: “The freedom of India will demonstrate to all the exploited races of the earth that their freedom is very near and that in no case will they henceforth be exploited”⁴³. This theme linking India’s freedom to the ideals of the United Nations would become a common one throughout Pandit’s tenure at the UN in the coming years. But in 1945, it clashed with the goals of the official British Indian delegation, the members of which also hoped to gain Indian independence eventually, but were willing to cooperate in San Francisco on the creation of the Charter without reference to specific colonies at that time.

Pandit’s highly visible presence outside the meeting halls of at the San Francisco conference disrupted the script envisioned by the British and the official Indian

⁴¹ Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, cit., p. 150.

⁴² William Moore, “Challenger: Indian Woman Twists the Tail of British Lion”, *Chicago Tribune*, 27 April 1945, p. 6; “Leaders Speak for Colored Peoples: Colonial Hopes Soaring Upward as the Result”, *Atlanta Daily World*, 3 May 1945, p.1; P.L. Pratts, “Mme. Pandit Makes Stirring Plea for Freedom of India at San Francisco”, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 May 1945, p. 5.

⁴³ “Gandhi Disowns Parley Delegates”, *New York Times*, 18 April 1945, p. 15.

delegation. As had happened at the League of Nations, India's official representatives to the UN Charter conference were not affiliated with either the All-Indian National Congress or the Muslim League, the two most prominent Indian nationalist organizations. The British instead selected delegates who were sympathetic to continued colonial involvement in the subcontinent: three knighted Indian men with long histories of cooperation with the metropolitan and colonial governments. Sir V. T. Krishnamachari (1881-1964) was almost twenty years senior to Pandit. He had been the Diwan (finance minister) of the Indian princely state of Baroda throughout the inter-war period and had served as an Indian delegate to a number of bodies including the League of Nations and several Round Table Conferences. Sir Arcot Ramaswamy Mudaliar had been a prominent leader of the nationalist Justice Party (est. 1916), which had its roots in the organized efforts to curtail the dominance of the Hindu Brahmin caste in social, religious, and political spheres beginning in the nineteenth century⁴⁴. Mudaliar most recently had served as one of two Indians appointed to Winston Churchill's War Cabinet and would go on to represent India at the UN after independence alongside Pandit. Sir Malik Firoz Khan Noon (1893-1970), the youngest of the three representatives, was born in Lahore and educated at Oxford⁴⁵. Noon was the High Commissioner to the United Kingdom from 1936 to 1941, and then became first Indian to hold the defense portfolio on the British Viceroy's Council (1942-45)⁴⁶.

These three men, accomplished though they were, represented a stark contrast to Pandit's youthful appearance and more radical speech. Had it been up to the British government, no Indian nationalists or Indian journalists would have been allowed to attend the Charter conference to challenge the official delegation⁴⁷. The British and Indian governments had collaborated to prevent opponents from reaching San Francisco, a policy that was only partially successful. Pandit was already in the United States when the conference was announced, of course, and she had already proven her effectiveness as a spokesperson for the Indian cause. As a result, the conflict between the official delegation and independence activists could not be prevented, and news of the conference and Pandit's performance did circulate to India.

Congress connections in the United States made Pandit's work more effective. With the support of the India League of America and the Committee for India's Freedom, she was invited to help make the San Francisco conference "India conscious"⁴⁸. Due to the inability of other Indian independence activists to leave the subcontinent and the fact that the two main Indian lobby groups in the United States

⁴⁴ Kasinath K. Kavlekar, *Non-Brahmin Movement in Southern India, 1873-1949*, Shivaji University Press, Vidyanagar, Kolhapur 1979, pp. 121-133.

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Behn, *Concise Biographical Companion to Index Islamicus: An International Who's Who in Islamic Studies from its Beginnings down to the Twentieth Century, Bio-Bibliographical Supplement to Index Islamicus, 1665-1980*, Volume Three, N-Z, Brill, Boston 2004, p. 33.

⁴⁶ *Who Was Who in America with World Notables*, Volume V, 1969-1973, With Index to All Who Was Who Volumes, Marquis Who's Who, Chicago 1973, p. 535.

⁴⁷ "India Press Gag Implied; Plans for Sending Newsmen to San Francisco Canceled", 16 April 1945, *New York Times*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Marika Sherwood, *India at the Founding of the United Nations*, cit. p. 423.

had political affiliations with the Gandhian tradition, the All-India National Congress version of Indian nationalism dominated in San Francisco. Pandit's political speech and the printed propaganda released on her behalf claimed Congress was the only legitimate representation of the Indian peoples' desires, and presented Pandit herself as a recognized spokesperson for the party. This nationalist narrative denied the fact that the Congress faced stiff opposition at home from the Muslim League in areas with large Muslim populations and in ongoing negotiations with the British government. Also silenced were the many other organized political organizations (both more radical and more conservative) that did not support the Congress platform, including the right-wing Hindu Mahasabha and the Scheduled Castes Federation representing the Dalit community. Therefore, the coherence of Indian Congress nationalist dominance projected through Pandit's unofficial diplomacy at the San Francisco conference belied a much more tenuous reality on the ground in India.

Three letters to the editor from the *Times of India* in May and June of 1945 outline some of the expressed frustration at the idea of Pandit's representation of the Indian people as a whole given that she had not been elected by any Indian constituency. Ramprakash Roy's letter pointed out that Pandit did not represent the diverse spectrum of political interests organized throughout India such as the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Radical Democratic Party, or the Scheduled Castes' Federation.⁴⁹ Other letter writers focused more specifically on the Congress-League power struggle. Mahmud A. Wazifadar argued, "that unless the major question of Congress-League unity is solved once and for all India cannot be represented by any major party or individual"⁵⁰. Another writer quoted "a distinguished Indian publicist" as saying, "If the world Press seeks truth and not mere sensation they will resist the propaganda wiles of this Indian 'nationalist' siren and examine more closely the Muslim charge that the freedom for which the Indian Hindu Congress so loudly clamours is freedom to oppress"⁵¹. This critique turned the American press's fascination with Pandit as a womanly warrior on its head, depicting her instead as a *femme fatale* who was luring men to a dangerous conclusion with her beauty and charm.

A heckler at Pandit's biggest press conference at the end of April highlights Pandit's inability to remain insulated from the realpolitik of competing Indian nationalisms. Just after she delivered a short statement to an estimated 200 journalists and prepared to answer their questions, "a persistent Muslim" began asking questions, insinuating that Congress had been responsible for "violence and sabotage" during the Quit India movement in 1942. Rather than address the accusation, Pandit asked if the questioner was a journalist. Admitting he was not, he was forced to leave the room⁵². Speculation abounded about how he gained access

⁴⁹ Ramprakash Roy, "Reader's Views: Mrs. Pandit", *Times of India*, 5 June 1945, p. 4.

⁵⁰ "Letter to the Editor 1", *Times of India*, 22 May 1945, p. 4.

⁵¹ J.D.J., "Freedom From Fear: To the Editor", *Times of India*, 29 May 1945, p. 4.

⁵² "British Policy in India; Mrs. V. Pandit's Criticism", *Times of India*, 28 April 1945, p. 9; William Moore, "Challenger: Indian Woman Twists the Tail of British Lion", *Chicago Tribune*, 27 April 1945, p. 6.

to the press conference in the first place. Malik Firoz Khan Noon remembers in his autobiography that this press conference held very high stakes for the Muslim man who asked Pandit the “awkward question”. He was in fact a “brave stenographer” for the Indian delegation, and when “he walked out all cameras clicked. No one ever got such publicity as he did”. Noon claims that this man’s actions were so well-known and so widely criticized by the Congress Party that the stenographer could not find a job in government after independence and instead attempted to change his identity, opening a store in Connaught Place in Delhi. “When Partition came”, Noon writes, he became a victim of communal violence, and “was left for dead from sword wounds. He still carries the mark of a sword wound on his face”⁵³. R. L. Khipple later wrote that the stenographer’s efforts “boomeranged, and Mrs. Pandit received much wider publicity than she would have otherwise received”⁵⁴.

Noon was the only of the three Indian representatives reported to directly address Pandit and others’ criticism of the delegation’s independence, though he chose to engage more directly with Gandhi’s leadership in India than with Pandit’s representation in San Francisco. When asked about her by reporters, Noon was dismissive, referring to her as a “charming lady” without any direct comment on her political positions⁵⁵. He later refused to comment on the memo she submitted to the UN steering committee saying “he did not want to criticise a lady”⁵⁶. In early May, at a press conference described “as one of the most animated at San Francisco”, Noon presented his views on Indian independence. The journalists present, a majority of whom seem to have been more sympathetic to the Congress position, challenged his statements, and it was reported that the event sometimes felt like “a political debate rather than a press conference”⁵⁷. First, Noon accused Gandhi of being too influenced by “reactionary and orthodox Hindus”, who made him “bigoted and narrow-minded” with a political stance “half a century out of date”⁵⁸. Noon blamed Gandhi for rejecting the Cripps proposal, undermining the Allied war effort, and inciting communal violence through the Quit India movement in 1942⁵⁹. He further suggested the elder statesman should step aside and allow Nehru to take control of the Congress since Nehru was “the one man in the Congress who is likely to have the breadth of vision to see the Moslem point of view and come to an understanding

⁵³ Firoz Khan Noon, *From Memory*, Ferozsons Ltd., Lahore 1966, p. 179.

⁵⁴ R. L. Khipple, *The Woman Who Swayed America*, cit., p. 81.

⁵⁵ “British Policy in India; Mrs. V. Pandit’s Criticism”, *Times of India*, 28 April 1945, p. 9.

⁵⁶ “Sir F.K. Noon”, *Times of India*, 11 May 1945, p. 9.

⁵⁷ “Pandit Nehru Should Supersede Mr. Gandhi: Sir F. Khan Noon’s Views”, *Times of India*, 4 May 1945, p. 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*. See also: William Moore, “Report India Settlement is Growing Near”, *Chicago Tribune*, 3 May 1945, p. 10.

⁵⁹ This accusation should be considered at minimum disingenuous given that as a member of the Executive Council Noon expressed his own criticisms of the Cripps plan in 1942 (Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge South Asian Studies, Cambridge 1994, pp. 78-79). The Muslim League was as skeptical of the Cripps Plan as Congress, though for different reasons, and both major parties officially rejected the plan (Ivi, pp. 72-81).

with the Moslems”⁶⁰. When asked why Nehru was still in prison if his leadership would be so effective, Noon replied that Congress’s civil disobedience had been “a misnomer for rebellion”, and that he “sincerely” hoped Nehru would be released soon. “[T]he final question shot challengingly at Sir Firoz as the conference broke up was, ‘Is not the Government of India controlled by the British?’ Reply (in an equally challenging tone): ‘That is absolutely wrong’”⁶¹.

Noon’s comments circulated back to India and reportedly caused “great concern among Indian nationalist circles”⁶². In response to the press conference, Gandhi said he would fulfill Noon’s wish to step aside if the Congress prisoners were released⁶³. Further, he said there was no need for Nehru “to come to the front. He is in the front. The Government of India would not let him work as he would. He and I are friends. But we are no rivals. We are both servants of the people and the platform of service is as big as the world”⁶⁴. One “former member of the Congress Working Committee said in an interview: ‘It is very amusing to see Sir Firoz Khan Noon deposing Mahatma Gandhi. The people’s leaders are not appointed by some high authority, as [he] has been appointed to represent India at San Francisco against the declared wishes of the country’”⁶⁵. Shortly after the San Francisco conference, Noon joined the Muslim League, and after independence he became special envoy to the first prime minister of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah⁶⁶. Noon himself served briefly as Pakistan’s Prime Minister from December 1957 to October 1958, before being ousted by the first declaration of martial law in Pakistan’s history⁶⁷. Though he gained some publicity in San Francisco in 1945, Noon remained less visible than Pandit, who garnered much more positive coverage from the mainstream media in the United States and India, her Congress-leaning calls for independence overriding the statements of a vocal critic from outside the Congress’s circle of power.

“The Woman Who Swayed America”

From prison, Nehru tracked Pandit’s actions through North American newspaper clippings as best he could. Simultaneously with US audiences, Nehru was a consumer of what James W. Carey describes as an invented cultural form –

⁶⁰ P.L. Prattis, “Charge and Counter...Delegate Labels Gandhi A Traitor to Allied Cause”, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 May 1945, p. 12.

⁶¹ “Pandit Nehru Should Supersede Mr. Gandhi’: Sir F. Khan Noon’s Views” *Times of India*, 4 May 1945, p. 5.

⁶² “India Honoured At San Francisco”, *Times of India*, 3 May 1945, p. 5.

⁶³ “Fulfil Your Wish By Releasing Leaders’: Mr. Gandhi’s Offer to Sir F. Noon”, *Times of India*, p. 5 May 1945, p. 5; “Gandhi Agrees on Retirement with Proviso”, *Chicago Tribune*, 5 May 1945, p. 6.

⁶⁴ “Fulfil Your Wish By Releasing Leaders’: Mr. Gandhi’s Offer to Sir F. Noon”, *Times of India*, 7 May 1945, p. 8. The title used for this article was identical to one used two days earlier.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ *Chronology of International Events and Documents* 1:5 (August 27-September 9, 1947), p. 112. For extended explanation of the ramifications of Noon’s action, see: Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, cit., pp. 144-145.

⁶⁷ “Pakistan Horizon”, 19, 4, 1966, p. 339.

American print culture – which conveys “dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play”⁶⁸. Pandit’s savvy complicity in the appropriation of herself as a symbol combined with the gaze of American print culture to produce an especially effective diplomatic celebrity. Upon his release in June, he began forming an interim government, and he wrote to her a personal assessment of her successes: “You know that your work in the States has been very greatly appreciated here by all kinds of people. You have done a splendid job, as perhaps no one else could have done in the circumstances. The immediate consequences of what you have done may not be obvious but I am sure that the remoter consequences will be considerable”⁶⁹. With this, he made a decidedly accurate prediction. Pandit’s success at drawing both elite supporters and large crowds to the Indian cause in the United States led her, Nehru, and others to recognize the potential of her effectiveness on the world stage. San Francisco served as a rehearsal for Pandit’s future diplomatic career, and she worked to negotiate a persona fit for the task at hand.

One challenge Pandit faced was how to tread a course between representing the whole of India through her speech and highlighting her own position in Indian cultural and religious hierarchies. Nehru for one encouraged her to use Hindi when speaking to Indian audiences in the United States, presumably to signal a level of authenticity to the diasporic South Asian community there⁷⁰. One US paper printed a picture of her in a moment of “Calm Before the Storm” before one press conference, an image that served to ground Pandit’s actions within a Hindu-inflected spirituality strongly identified with the political symbolism of the Congress. In the photo, Pandit and an unnamed man face one another across a narrow table. On the right side of the image, the “sister of India’s great nationalist leader” smiles serenely over clasped hands held close to her chin. With hands clasped at his chest, the man bows to Pandit from the left of the image, eyes cast down⁷¹. He wears one of the most ubiquitous symbols of individual Congress affiliation: the Gandhi *topi*. This close-fitting cap made of white *khadi* (homespun cloth) and pointed in the front and back, first became popular during the 1920-1922 Non-Cooperation movement as one aspect of what Lisa Trivedi calls Gandhi’s contribution to the “visual vocabulary of national community”⁷². By 1945, the *topi* was “an established visual symbol of dissent” used widely by Indian nationalists⁷³.

Pandit also negotiated her physical representation of modern Indian womanhood and, by extension, the modern Indian nation. The relationship between Pandit and her clothing offers one clear example of the co-production of a persona designed for public consumption. While arranging her lecture tour with the New York-based

⁶⁸ James W. Carey, *A Cultural Approach to Communication*, in James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, revised edition, Routledge, New York 2009, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Jawahar to Darling Nan, July 24, 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 490.

⁷⁰ Jawahar to Darling Nan, 31 May 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 481.

⁷¹ “Calm Before the Storm”, *Chicago Defender*, 26 May 1945, p. 4.

⁷² Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi’s Nation: Homespun and Modern India*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2007, p. 40.

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 147. See extended description of the history of the *topi*, pp. 123-133.

Clark Getts Lecture Bureau, Mr. Getts wanted to discuss her attire since the “American public...would expect someone from India to look exotic and to wear bright clothes and fine jewels”⁷⁴. Though she refused to alter her rather subdued style, her usual selection of gray or pastel saris, her wedding ring, and a watch, were “exotic” enough in the US context to merit significant press attention.

Early in her lecture tour, Pandit articulated a level of frustration with the constant comments on her attire and its links to gender differences between the United States and India. Discussing the many women who hold high posts in India, she argued, “They got the jobs...not because they were women but because they were better than the men. And these...are not women whose clothes are described every time they enter the legislative assembly”⁷⁵. By refusing to alter her simple style to please her lecture sponsor, Pandit established some distance between herself and the orientalist gaze. However, in a 1949 interview Pandit was more reflexive about the sari as a cultural symbol. “Everybody admits that the sari is the most graceful dress for women”, she said. “But I find that in traveling, climbing in and out of airplanes, the sari is a confounded nuisance, and I’d like to wear skirts or slacks. But society demands that I wear a sari”. The male reporter refused to allow her the last word on the issue. Despite her “silver hair” and nationalist politics, he assured his readers, the “attractive younger sister of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru” remained beautiful. “She looks as good in the sari as the sari looks on her”⁷⁶. American, Indian, or otherwise—it is apparent that the sari played an integral part in the performance of an acceptable Indian womanhood in all of these contexts.

The more prominent Pandit became on the world stage, the more pronounced the attention to her attire, culminating in a frenzy of attempts to describe her clothing during her early days at the United Nations. William Moore’s coverage during the Charter conference was the first by a US reporter to rely heavily on visual description in order to emphasize Pandit’s visceral impact on contemporary observers. His first article, combining political reporting with not so subtle sexually-charged language was headlined, “Indian Woman Twists the Tail of British Lion”:

Folding her dazzling white robe [no buttons, no zippers] (sic) around some alluring curves, Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit of India moved into Anthony Eden’s hotel today and began twisting the British lion’s tail... Thus was the Indian question which many say will be the test of the basic principles of international organization brought out into the open as the conference was beginning its work⁷⁷.

Another article by Moore two days later featured an interview with Pandit who warned that America should help India in the fight for independence in order to avoid a war against imperialism. Invoking another prominent Eastern woman, Moore described his interviewee as:

⁷⁴ Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, cit., p.192.

⁷⁵ Leonard Lyons, “Broadway Bulletins”, March 10, 1945, *Washington Post*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Robert Trumball, “Mrs. Pandit Urges U.S.-Indian Links”, April 24, 1949, *New York Times*.

⁷⁷ William Moore, “Indian Woman Twists the Tail of British Lion”, April 27, 1945, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, p. 6.

a diminutive, silvery haired woman who speaks with force that recalls the chill fury with which Madame Chiang Kai-shek once brought the American congress to tears, was wearing a sheer black robe, so folded that its silver edging fell about her wrists and spiraled downward⁷⁸.

For Moore, Pandit's political message was inextricably linked with her appearance, made more exotic, and thus more intriguing, because of her "native" costume. Wrapped in yards of silk or cotton cloth, Pandit embodied a certain type of "Eastern" womanhood that made compelling "dramatic action" for consumers of her as news⁷⁹. The same would remain true throughout Pandit's diplomatic career, with her sari and her gender dominating initial coverage of her election as President of the General Assembly in 1953.

Pandit's voice was as significant as her appearance in translating Indian womanhood to a Western audience. Nehru initially expressed some concern about her speaking voice. He wondered in one letter, "how does your accent, intonation etc go down there? You tell me that your voice has been liked. That I can understand easily enough for you have a good speaking voice. But what of the special dislikes of Americans regarding the English way of speaking"⁸⁰. Her speaking voice did merit attention, though not negatively. In one 1945 article she was described as having an "Oxonian accent". insinuating a connection to the upper-class education her father, her brother, and other nationalist leaders obtained in England though Pandit herself was not educated in England. A reporter at her first press conference as Ambassador to the United States in 1949 expressed surprise that Pandit "spoke flawless English...in a low, well-modulated voice 'without a trace of accent'"⁸¹. Anyone familiar with Pandit's personal history would have been wholly *unsurprised* by her command of English. She spoke "with the cultured English" the "wealthy, aristocratic Brahmin", common to the Nehru family⁸². Pandit became literate in English before learning to read and write Hindi, and her father, Motilal, insisted his children speak with "a pure English accent"⁸³. One of the most successful Oxford-educated lawyers in India before converting to Gandhian nationalism after the First World War, the family patriarch "was of the view that unless we all turned ourselves into English people, there was no chance for us in the world"⁸⁴. During her childhood the entire family lived according to British standards Monday through Friday: they ate European food with utensils while sitting at a dining room table, dressed only in European clothing, and spoke English exclusively. Only on the weekend could the

⁷⁸ Ibid., "Two Spokesmen of Freedom Denounce Reds and British", April 29, 1945, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, p. 10.

⁷⁹ James W. Carey, *A Cultural Approach to Communication*, cit., p. 17.

⁸⁰ Jawahar to Darling Nan, 10 April 1945, in Nayantara Sahgal (ed.), *Before Freedom*, cit., p. 465.

⁸¹ William Moore, "Indian Woman Twists the Tail of British Lion", April 27, 1945, *Chicago Daily Tribune*; Anne Guthrie, *Madame Ambassador*, cit., p. 140.

⁸² Poppy Cannon, in Chandralekha Mehta, Nayantara Sahgal, and Rita Dar (eds.), *Sunlight Surround You, A Birthday Bouquet*, Orient Longmans, New Delhi 1970, p. 154. The three editors of this volume were Pandit's daughters.

⁸³ Pearl S. Buck, *Woman of the World*, in "United Nations World", 1, 2, 1947, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Sri Prakasa, in Chandralekha Mehta, Nayantara Sahgal, and Rita Dar (eds.), *Sunlight Surround You* cit., p. 24.

children experience the Kashmiri Brahmin food, language, and culture that their mother continued to maintain in a separate portion of the family estate.

In addition to establishing an effective persona for herself, Pandit also worked to cement her legitimacy as the main spokesman for Indian interests beyond her close association with Nehru and Gandhi. One paper even declared her the “First Lady of India”, as if Nehru were already prime minister⁸⁵. In San Francisco, Pandit consistently claimed to speak on behalf of all of India, taking for granted that her political party already spoke as the representatives of the Indian people as a whole. In one statement she declared she was “chosen by her compatriots in [the United States] and Canada as the sole spokesman for their cause”. She also spoke, she said, for the Indian National Congress, “which represents an overwhelming majority of all the peoples of India”⁸⁶. As the most visible of those aligned against the official Indian delegation at San Francisco, she was described in the American press as a more legitimate spokesman for India than Krishnamachari, Mudaliar, and Noon. She contrasted her own status against that of the official Indian delegates who were not representative of Indian interests at all, but were simply nominated by the British. W.E.B. Du Bois agreed with this assessment of the three “Indian Stooges”. In an article in the *Chicago Defender*, Du Bois described himself and the NAACP’s Walter White running away from a photo-op with the official Indian delegates. Since they “in no way” represented the Indian people, Du Bois wrote, “[i]t would have been a calamity for us to be photographed with them”. Instead, the two activists lunched with Pandit, who he described as “a charming woman in every way; physically beautiful, simple and cordial, [who] represents as few people could, nearly 400 million people, and represents them by right of their desire and her personality, and not by the will of Great Britain”⁸⁷. Walter White heaped on even greater praise in his assessment of Pandit at the end of the San Francisco conference, an extraordinary passage worth quoting at length:

Imagine, if you will, an exquisitely featured face of lovely reddish brown surmounted by a semi-circle of silver hair brushed backward and upward to that it looks like a halo when the sun shines through it. Imagine laughter as spontaneous and gay as that of a healthy child filled only with the joy of living and darkened by none of life’s heartaches and tragedies. Imagine beautifully kept hands which dart and flash with the color and skill of a bird in flight, lending just the need emphasis to words spoken with a throaty richness in flawless English. Imagine the transition with unbelievable speed from gayety to somber, moody fury against the suave exploiters of her people—a change of mood so startling that Helen Hayes, the great actress, was moved to describe its possessor as ‘a bright shining flame’.

The relationships Pandit forged with Black American leaders such as Du Bois and White in San Francisco because of her ability to present herself as the only legitimate representative of the Indian cause translated into powerful solidarities

⁸⁵ S.A. Haynes, “India Stands For Equality, Leader Tells Baltimoreans”, *Afro-American*, 7 April 1945, p. 1.

⁸⁶ P.L. Prattis, “Mme. Pandit Makes Stirring Plea for Freedom of India at San Francisco”, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 May 1945, 5.

⁸⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, “DuBois, White Run From Photo with India Stooges”, *Chicago Defender*, 12 May 1945, 5.

around questions of racial equality and anticolonialism when Pandit returned to the UN in 1946 as head of India's delegation.

The Future

Pandit capitalized on her family history, natural charisma, and gripping oratory in order to present a compelling personification of modern India at the birth of the United Nations. To Western audiences this fair-skinned, sari-wearing Indian woman with perfectly coiffed hair, the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, and a non-violent protestor who had been thrice imprisoned for civil disobedience embodied both the intriguing otherness of India and the possibility of India's future. Her future press attaché referred to "her mass appeal in the Western world" as a "phenomenon"⁸⁸. These observers, perhaps most familiar with Katherine Mayo's negative depiction of Indian women in *Mother India* (1927) were struck by the particular combination of Pandit's charismatic femininity and powerful political speech⁸⁹. For the Congress's nationalist project she embodied the ideal "modern Indian womanhood, lovely, graceful, intelligent, poised and thoroughly feminine," and thus reflected the position the Congress leaders believed postcolonial India should assume in world politics⁹⁰. According to British diplomat Philip Noel-Baker, "if India could produce such women, India could herself most assuredly control her national affairs"⁹¹. Pandit embodied this space in a moment in which the contingencies of history combined with the power of print culture allowed her to appropriate her own representation and project herself, and India, as legitimate actors on the world stage. The San Francisco conference was a major diplomatic event garnering attention from around the world. But it was the drama taking place outside the meeting halls via Pandit that predicted the nature of UN postcolonialism that would take root in the power of the General Assembly in 1946 through the Indian delegation's fight against racism in South Africa. In other words, the Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit of 1945 was the perfect future tense for both the aspiring Indian postcolonial state and the ideals of the United Nations itself.

⁸⁸ Shiv Shastri, in Chandralekha Mehta, Nayantara Sahgal, and Rita Dar (eds.), *Sunlight Surround You*, cit., p. 84.

⁸⁹ This was an argument made by Lyra Robero, a South African Indian observer at the UN in 1946 during Pandit's debates with Smuts over racist policies in South Africa (Robero, "When All American Went to Hear Mrs. Pandit", *The Passive Resister*, 31 July 1947). On the transnational circulation of Mayo's book see Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*, Duke University Press, Durham 2006.

⁹⁰ J. R. D. Tata, in Chandralekha Mehta, Nayantara Sahgal, and Rita Dar (eds.), *Sunlight Surround You*, cit., p. 71.

⁹¹ Philip Noel-Baker, in Chandralekha Mehta, Nayantara Sahgal, and Rita Dar (eds.), *Sunlight Surround You*, cit., pp. 54-55.