

## UK: Remembering 'Comrade Sak'

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**Shapurji Saklatvala, the first MP of colour elected on a Labour ticket, turned his parliamentary seat into a vehicle to fight both capitalism and imperialism.**

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On 17 June 1927 a heated debate was underway in the House of Commons on a controversial proposal to send to India a commission that would review the provisions of the India Act of 1919, with a view to possible further limited constitutional reforms. To be headed by the right-leaning Liberal Sir John Simon, a cautious proponent of gradual changes, the proposed consultative body would have no Indian representative. The Simon Commission's blatantly racist composition – especially egregious given that it was a body set up to discuss the issue of political representation for Indians – was manifestly inflammatory, and the protests that rocked India a few months later surprised many political observers by their 'sheer ferocity'. When the commissioners did arrive in India, they were greeted by a sea of black flags and placards reading 'Go back, Simon'. In Britain itself, however, it would be left to the member for North Battersea to voice outright criticism of the commission, in an indignant and characteristically direct parliamentary peroration:

It is absolutely impossible for one country to hold another in subjection and pretend to offer them measures of reform giving them a partnership in the commonwealth. That is all humbug. I see that a new Commission is going to be appointed, and I would like to ask what is going to be the scope of that Commission and its terms of reference.

Everybody knows, whether it is put in black and white or not, that the first thing that will be put in the terms of reference is how this country can keep a stranglehold over India.

A fellow MP had had quite enough. Launching into an ad hominem attack on his prolix colleague's personal history, George Pilcher, member for Penryn and Falmouth, noted that, while the honourable member for Battersea had 'made some very cruel and unjustifiable charges against the European population in Bombay' in relation to poverty, low wages and slums, he himself belonged to the wealthy community 'most responsible' for Mumbai's industrial development. It was 'high time', Pilcher sneered, for parliament to 'know who the hon. Member for North Battersea is and what is his relationship with that great industrial community in Bombay'. During another fractious debate on the Simon Commission that autumn, it was the turn of the Tory under-secretary of state for India to get personal about his Battersea colleague, who had once again attacked the mission. No one with 'the remotest knowledge of India', snarled Earl Winterton, 'could possibly accept the hon. Gentleman as an exponent of Indian opinion. As far as I know, he has absolutely no authority of any sort. He is repudiated by every responsible organisation in India.'

The focus of this sniping was Shapurji Dorabji Saklatvala, the lone Communist member of the House. Saklatvala was a Parsi from Bombay, who had first come to Britain in 1905 in his late twenties for medical treatment. After marrying an Englishwoman, Sally Marsh, he had settled down in London, where the couple would raise a large family. Saklatvala was indeed related to the great industrial

dynasty inaugurated by Jamsetji Tata, and had worked for several years in the family concern. He was not quite culpable of being an 'heir of the industrial system which he attacks', however, having been a paid employee and a poor cousin rather than a direct descendant of the main branch of the business dynasty. Responding to Pilcher's broadside, Saklatvala replied simply that he had no greater stake in defending his own natal community than he had in attacking Bombay's elite European milieu: 'The Parsee capitalist class is just as abominable and as much to be avoided as the class to which the hon. Member and his friends belong in this country'. Responding to Winterton's charge that he was not taken seriously by any Indian organizations, he pointed out that he, who had been officially welcomed in nine Indian cities during a recent tour, could speak of matters Indian with far greater legitimacy than the 'unrepresentative Indian Princes on the League of Nations' placed there by the earl in his capacity as colonial secretary. At this point, Saklatvala had been in the House for three years, elected first in 1922 as a Labour MP, and then again in 1923 as a Communist (after the Labour Party expelled Communist members). So he noted that while he spoke in this debate as 'one of the conquered and enslaved subject races', he was also 'representing the interests of the British electors who sent me'.

It is this sense of carrying a dual but intertwined representational responsibility – and his persistence in identifying common ground between the two sides – which makes Shapurji Saklatvala a figure of transnational significance in thinking about the relationship between colonial insurgencies and British anticolonialism in the interwar period. Deemed 'one of the most violent anti-British agitators in England' by state espionage agencies, Saklatvala sought actively to forge a language of opposition to empire that would at once undo the pretences and prevarications of gradualist reformism and make clear that resistance to empire was in the interests of both the Indian and British working classes. Where Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and others who visited India during the Swadeshi years came back to make the case for reforms that might defuse the 'unrest', Saklatvala was arguably the first MP to make a sustained case in parliament against reformism and 'liberal' approaches to colonial governance in themselves. His biographer, Marc Wadsworth, argues that Saklatvala was also responsible for putting empire and anti-imperialism firmly into the view of liberals and progressives at a time 'when the British left was by no means committed to anti-imperialism'; he invited campaigners from the colonies to speak at meetings and wrote on the topic in such organs as the *Labour Leader*. At meetings of the Independent Labour Party, which he joined in 1909, 'Saklatvala raised the issue of Indian independence and chided the ILP on the need to be more internationalist'. The subject of three biographies – one by his daughter, Sehri – Saklatvala, Britain's third Indian MP after fellow Parsis Naoroji and Mancherjee Bhownagree, is usually mentioned only in passing in studies of early twentieth-century relationships between English dissenters and Indians, which have tended to focus on more reformist figures such as Annie Besant, C. F. Andrews and Mirabeau (Madeleine Slade), who appear less Manichean in their approach to colonial questions. Yet Saklatvala – who described the likes of Besant as 'white men and women' who 'pass as India's friends and pretend to be almost Indianised' – himself emerges in some ways as the consummate hybrid, deeply rooted in British political and social life while equally committed to the Indian anticolonial struggle. To the later dismay of the British Communist Party, he was also committed to retaining something of his Parsi cultural and religious heritage. Described later by George Padmore as the 'most independent-minded Communist ever', during his parliamentary career Saklatvala produced the first truly uncompromising refutation of imperialism in the House, one which put in place an unbridgeable antagonism between empire and democracy, refused to accept that reforms or 'trusteeship' were possible in the context of political subjugation, identified the centrality of capitalism to the imperial project, and stressed the revolutionary agency of the oppressed out of which common ground would emerge.

In doing so, 'Comrade Sak' crafted a unique political voice for himself, at once Indian and British, speaking out candidly and passionately on many causes, but most especially against imperialism,

which, for him, was inextricable from capitalism. Known for 'a striking and original manner of speaking', he would tell his British audiences that 'he could not help it that his accent was a little foreign but his heart was not foreign'. One contemporary, the journalist Herbert Bryan, described Saklatvala as possessed not of 'the mock eloquence of the demagogic wind-bag, but the deep sincerity of the man finding expression in flaming words', also noting: 'His command of English is infinitely superior to that of the average Englishman.' The over 500 interventions he made in the House of Commons during a relatively short but packed parliamentary career certainly ranged over domestic issues such as housing conditions, unemployment, wages and trade unionism, but the majority were on India and imperial matters, earning him the sobriquet of 'Member for India'.

While it is true that he 'was only one of many personalities operating in the West from a variety of Indian political tendencies', few were able so deftly to negotiate – and make a polemical virtue of – colonial subjecthood as a form of dual citizenship. The fact that Saklatvala was at once influential and reviled had much to do with his ability to navigate artfully – though never without integrity – between the pronouns 'you' and 'we' when addressing British politicians and lawmakers; the 'you' was a source of irritation to his political opponents. Unsurprisingly, not a little racism came his way, with some on the 'pink' left allegedly wanting to get 'this bloody nigger off our backs'. Saklatvala's synchronic identification with both fellow Indian colonial subjects and ordinary British citizens appears to have been completely sincere; certainly there is nothing in either his private communications or his public pronouncements to suggest otherwise. Indeed, the insight that subjects of the British Empire and ordinary Britons had more in common with each other than with their respective ruling classes was one that he attempted to elaborate from his earliest years in British politics, and which he later parlayed into the language of communist internationalism. Intervening in Commons debates and playing an active role in organizations ranging from the British Socialist Party and the Independent Labour Party to the Workers' Welfare League of India and the League against Imperialism, Saklatvala made significant public contributions that tell us something about how British criticism of empire was shaped and reformulated, particularly after the October Revolution, by the growing presence and pedagogical impact of Asian and African campaigners and intellectuals in the imperial metropolis. Certainly, he was responsible for adamantly bringing resistance to the imperial project – particularly, though not only, in India – firmly into both parliamentary view and public hearing, which was no mean feat. Close readings of his speeches and writings indicate the extraordinary extent to which Saklatvala was preoccupied with the project of channelling a democratic 'voice', both for the subjects of colonialism and for ordinary Britons; he also wanted each of these constituencies to hear the other. Later in his political career, Saklatvala, with what fellow MP Philip Snowden described as 'volcanic eloquence', would also become a prominent spokesman in Britain for another juridical crisis of empire that became a cause célèbre in Britain – the infamous 'Meerut Conspiracy Case'. Both Saklatvala's political career and the Meerut campaign are significant moments in the history of metropolitan anti-imperialism in the interwar period.

The war years, from 1914 to 1918, had not been especially active campaigning years in relation to imperial matters in Britain. They witnessed an unfolding tussle – between the Congress in India, which would come under Gandhi's leadership after the war, and the British Committee of the Indian National Congress – over who would speak for India and control the direction of agitation on Indian matters in Britain. Wartime powers had enabled the colonial government in India to ban political demonstrations and repress the Home Rule agitation, Besant herself being imprisoned in 1917. In Britain, the British Auxiliary to the Home Rule Leagues undertook some activism, which included meetings, petitions and court cases that brought in supporters including 'many of the organisations dedicated to socialism, democratic control and the protection of civil liberties which the war had thrown up and which had responded vigorously to Besant's arrest'. Certainly, this form of engagement had worked to garner more British public support for a moderate and gradualist

programme, whereby India would be 'given' Home Rule and perhaps dominion status. Meanwhile, a bitter divide between Besant and Tilak also emerged, the former calling for the Congress to accept the extremely modest 'Montagu-Chelmsford reforms', while the latter adhered to the more advanced insistence on dominion status. The spectrum of options nonetheless remained relatively narrow, and on the whole reformist rather than radical. In the immediate post-war period, partly due to Gandhi's reluctance to encourage foreign propaganda, campaigners for Indian freedom in London were a muted voice.

Saklatvala would be something of an exception, and an important one, as he positioned himself assertively as an interpreter between India's resisting colonial subjects and Britain's governing classes.. A prolific campaigner for the causes he espoused, Saklatvala did not leave behind a collated body of work. His views, analyses and arguments have to be reconstructed from his frequently lengthy parliamentary speeches and interventions, addresses to rallies, and journalistic contributions to a range of political organs, including the Labour Leader, the Labour Monthly, the Daily Worker and the Anti-imperialist Review. Even before he took up democratic office, however, Saklatvala challenged paternalism both in the usual imperial quarters and on the left of the British political spectrum. In July 1919, when he submitted a statement to the India Office on behalf of the Workers' Welfare League of India, established in 1917, Saklatvala commented on the assumption that the franchise had to be withheld from Indian workers on account of their illiteracy. Noting that many illiterate Britons had in fact been enfranchised in the course of the Reform Acts, he observed:

The Indian village worker, though illiterate, is far from being uncultured. The latest revolution in Russia proves at least one thing, that an illiterate Asiatic when given a vote and voice in State affairs, is capable of appreciating and enjoying it to the extent of living up to it, fighting for it, and dying for it, as ardently as his literate European comrade.

The league's 'Statement of Principles' also notes that, where the Labour Party was concerned, 'instead of a voice from India we are confronted by a dumb people'. Saklatvala's influence is unmistakable in this document's observation that such a constructed 'dumbness' makes it possible for all manner of reformist declarations to be made in India's name, including assertions that 'this or that trifling change is not only necessary but sufficient to satisfy India's needs'. Repeatedly invoked in his writings, this emphasis on 'voice' was clearly derived from the exposition of the national 'self' as it emerged in Swadeshi and swaraj ideologies of self-determination – Saklatvala would refer to himself at one point as 'a Tilakite extremist' – but, over time, it took on a more specifically communist dimension. Indian resistance, much like Indian opinion, was not homogeneous, and resistance took varied forms. Similarly, Saklatvala repeatedly underlined the fact that all countries and cultures had traditions of resistance embedded in them: 'You have had your struggles, and we have ours, and shall still have them.'

In post-war India, some of these struggles took the form of labour rebellions. As the Royal Commission on Labour in India pithily put it, by the late 1920s there had grown a reasonably widespread 'realization of the potentialities of the strike'. From 1925 onwards, left-wing and communist activities in trade unions – and trade union membership itself – began to increase, as a wave of strikes once again paralysed the country. Where 'Gandhi preached a philosophy of class peace and collaboration and opposed any appeal to class interest', communists were able to address a lacuna, appealing to 'the self-consciousness and organization of the proletariat or the peasantry'. For all its power as a mobilizing force, then, the Congress in the 1920s was 'not without a certain vulnerability to political ideologies not its own', and the question of class and labour, which it generally evaded under Gandhi, was brought firmly into view by socialists and communists. Beyond that, of course, Lenin, in oppositional debate with M. N. Roy, had famously arrived at a formulation for colonial policy to be adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920:

'All Communist Parties must give active support to the revolutionary movements of liberation, the form of support to be determined by a study of existing conditions, carried on by the party wherever there is such.'

The background of British interwar communism is important here. Saklatvala left the Independent Labour Party in 1919 after joining the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which was constituted by the merging of various small left-wing groupings, the most consequential of which was the British Socialist Party. He became a member of the CPGB's Colonial Committee as well as a group calling itself the Indian Bureau, both set up to follow the Comintern's directive that there should be close collaboration between the CPGB and emergent communist movements in various parts of the British Empire, including India and Egypt. There has been considerable debate about the extent to which the CPGB did in fact engage with the question of colonialism. Certainly there is some merit to the argument that India was something of an exception to a wider CPGB indifference to, or at least ineffectiveness on, colonial questions. In a very critical but important article, the historian Marika Sherwood has claimed, for instance, that the CPGB ignored black workers and issues of racism despite instructions from the Comintern to engage with colonial matters. Claims that the party 'pioneered the analysis of and sponsored discussions of imperialism in colonial and semi-colonial lands', she argues, were exaggerated, as was the insistence that the 'party stressed the growth and importance of the anti-imperialist struggles of the working peoples of the countries of the British Empire'. Sherwood cites Saklatvala himself as expressing disappointment as late as 1934 with the CPGB's record on colonialism:

the fundamental sense of the Party members' duty towards colonial problems [does] not exist ... the Party as a whole has not been keenly live to it ... There has been a tendency to treat the colonial problem as a mere side issue and nobody's problem in particular ...the condition of indifference and suspicion between the Party and their colonial nationals is deplorable.

This is not the place to revisit the frequently bitter discussion about the role of the CPGB as a whole in relation to imperial questions, but it is worth noting that Saklatvala was certainly the most prolific and noteworthy of high-profile figures associated with the CPGB to speak on them. While not the only party member who wrote on empire per se – Rajani Palme Dutt's writings on India come to mind – he was certainly the most committed to attacking reformism and gradualism, while emphasizing the insurgent agency of the colonized masses. 'Does a communist have to witness oppression in order to take up the struggle?' Sherwood has asked in the context of her analysis of the CPGB's treatment of colonial issues and its inadequacies in engaging with anticolonial resistance movements in the Caribbean and Africa. Even as the answer must be in the negative, there seems little doubt that the power animating Saklatvala's speeches and writings on colonial matters drew significantly upon his experiences of life in the Raj, as well as his continued close engagement with real struggles there after he had moved to Britain. Even where India was concerned, Saklatvala was distinctive not only in the extent to which he engaged with colonial questions, but also in how he approached them. He was, for one thing, direct in identifying the pressing need for the British labour movement to engage with colonial issues: 'If by any chance continued unwisdom, apathy or arrogance on the part of British Labour drives the Indian Labour or mass movement into open hostility against them, British Labour will have to be prepared for evil days.' As Saklatvala would note on many occasions, the resistance to British imperialism in India both exceeded and challenged the limits of bourgeois nationalism. Genteel parliamentary discussions about 'reform' served to obscure far more fundamental questions about empire which were being posed by resistance on the streets and in the factories of India. Saklatvala would put them to parliament.

Admittedly, the task of a solitary Communist member in a hostile capitalist House of Commons is a difficult one. A refusal to register the voices – still less the resistance – of colonial subjects was built

into the very structure of colonialism, Saklatvala argued, as he made it his task to voice that resistance in the House of Commons. He would remind his colleagues repeatedly that their discussions on India evaded the fact that the Raj was being resisted fiercely, and was only able to perpetuate itself through intense repression:

We are debating here as if the Bengal ordinances were never promulgated, as if the shooting of Bombay operatives during the cotton strike had never taken place, as if a great strike of thousands of railway workers is not even now going on in the Punjab, with men starving ... as if all these things had not happened, as if a great controversy is not raging, not only with the people of India but with people all over the world, whether British Imperialism, whatever its past history, is at all permissible to exist now for the benefit of the citizens of Great Britain herself.

It is this refusal that enabled the myth of the liberal empire to persist, along with the notion that 'true' Indian opinion was 'moderate' – an adjective that simply denoted views in accordance with those of the Colonial Office. In an astonishing maiden speech as a Labour MP in the House of Commons on 23 November 1922, Saklatvala brought together a range of themes he would develop and finesse – often at stupendous length – in the seven years he spent there. Foremost among these was the right of ordinary citizens to be heard and represented, rather than have 'reforms' imposed from on high. Opening with an apology for not speaking in 'the traditional manner of the House of Commons', he insisted with courteous firmness that it betokened no lack of respect for his colleagues if 'we of the people shall now require that the people's matters shall be talked in the people's voice'. The speech was long and covered substantial domestic ground, but moved swiftly enough to Saklatvala's signature project – illuminating the workings of empire as inextricably tied to the workings of capitalism, thus tying together the fates of all those at the mercy of the 'spread of the cult of private enterprise'. It was a theme to which Saklatvala would return over and over again: imperialism was not simply about forcing nations under foreign subjugation and thus violating British values – though it was that too – but also about putting in place systemic inequalities and exploitation that rebounded as damagingly on British workers as on colonial subjects. From this perspective, anti-imperialism – a rejection of the economic workings of empire – was as essential to the health of British society as it was to colonized ones. Colonialism's 'seductive tale' full of 'glamour' became an altogether different narrative when it registered high unemployment figures in Britain: 'It is the growth of this private enterprise, of these large corporations and trusts, these huge industrial concerns in India, which is beginning to tell its tale upon the workers of this country.'

The constitutive futility and bad faith of colonial 'reforms' undertaken on the assumed wishes of colonial subjects, while they were simultaneously rendered 'dumb', would become one of Saklatvala's parliamentary and campaigning preoccupations. It would also underlie his unflagging insistence on the need for constant democratic contact between the working peoples of Britain and subjects of the Empire – necessary not just for the colonized, but in order that the former too might understand their own historical circumstances. In February 1923, with the House debating the Indian States (Protection against Disaffection) Act of 1922, which limited criticism of native rulers of states, Saklatvala offered a fierce critique of the 'mock Debate' and even his own Labour colleagues' attempts to have royal assent withheld from the Bill:

By our very effort to save the Government from rushing into a mad act, we are liable here on the Labour Benches to be surreptitiously drawn into an Imperial policy, as if we wanted Imperialism to be run more correctly than they desire, but though there is such a danger, there is no reality in it.

There can, Saklatvala repeats, be no mitigated, reformed or 'democratic' version of imperialism – a danger even Indian nationalists court when they parlay with the British government, 'tacitly

accepting the right of this country to send a Viceroy at all'. The war had made clear that there could be no halfway house, 'that no country and no nation can now live at peace and in prosperity by crushing other nations economically'. The only 'reforms' that would make sense would obviate any requirement for imperial rule, and 'start a scheme by which the workers and peasants of India enjoy the same standard of life as the workers and peasants of Europe and of America'. Saklatvala also repeatedly emphasized the paradox of petitioning for reforms in a colonial context: either a country had the right to rule another without being told how to do it, or it had no right to do so; anything else was just 'little details in the art of governing another nation by a sort of hypnotisation'.

Saklatvala's criticisms enshrined the insight that, for all their humanitarian pretensions, reformist approaches to empire were devoid of a genuine universalism which ought to be, by definition, indivisible. If 'the same principles of life are in every European or Asiatic nation', then it was constitutively impossible to 'bestow' such things as freedom and sovereignty in a 'gradual' manner. The routine elision of anticolonial resistance in favour of negotiation and petitioning obscured the simple fact, Saklatvala took pains to point out, that no British man or woman or any person in Europe would 'tolerate for one day a power so despotic and arbitrary as the Crown ... is insisting upon enjoying in India'. And so – and this was the point which bore repetition – it was far from a uniquely British habit to resist tyranny; theories emphasizing ineluctable difference in order to argue, for instance, that Asians venerated despotism were themselves, comrade Sak pronounced damningly, a consequence of 'Western ignorance' and self-regard: 'It is an untruthful statement to say that the people of the East are tolerating high privileges in monarchy and in their ruling castes and classes. It is a false notion. It is the Western conceit; it is the Westerner admiring himself, as though the Westerners have the highest consciousness of human life.' Pointing to examples of rebellion by the Chinese, Turks and Persians, the last having 'overthrown completely one monarch after another', Saklatvala tore apart fraudulent theories according to which 'Asiatic people always allow a good deal of latitude to their monarchs' as enacting a self-serving and willed 'Western ignorance' of histories of Asian resistance. In fact, he averred with a touch of malice, the opposite was true: 'No Eastern country would tolerate as the British people have tolerated the humbug and nonsense from the governing classes.' Equally, 'schoolboyish' British theories of India as a country always ruled by a foreign monarch appeared to overlook the fact that Britain had routinely sourced its own rulers from abroad: 'A few families supply monarchs to Europe just as a few biscuit factories supply biscuits all over Europe.' Saklatvala rejected reformism because it inscribed the right of an imperial 'higher consciousness' to extend its generosity and intelligence towards a consciousness figured as less advanced. As a result, it was fundamentally antithetical to the principle of human equality, and led inevitably to double standards even in progressive rhetoric: 'You call the Indians seditious when they protest against these things, but when you rise in revolt in this country against the ruling classes it is called the spirit of democracy.'

Saklatvala was unabashedly universalist even as he insisted on the need for historical specificity. Given that 'human feeling, the human heart and the human mind are just the same in India as here or elsewhere', he deemed appeals to absolute cultural difference and relativism an elaborate ploy, deployed selectively and self-servingly. It enabled the absence of consistent principle from imperial practice – 'Sometimes one thing is right and at another moment it is wrong'. Such selectivity invariably worked in favour of the ruling imperial class by allowing factories, mines or dockyards to be set up as universally beneficent, but suddenly generating culturally sensitive apologetics when it came to fair working conditions, equal labour rights or minimum wages: 'We cannot do it, because India is cut up by caste, or because of Hindu and Mohammedan hatreds, or because there are depressed classes.' Spreading the benefits of modernity was given as an excuse to colonize, 'to start cotton factories, jute factories, steel works, engineering works, post offices, railways and telegraphs'; but the same modernity was deemed far too much of an experiment when it becomes the basis of demands for social justice and decent working conditions. Saklatvala's own insights

about the need to radicalize both Indian nationalism and the British response to it were shaped by the growing industrial unrest in India. They prompted him to observe trenchantly in parliament that any progress on wages for Indian workers had not so much been 'granted' as 'extorted by the workers fighting inch by inch against you'. Such pieces of progressive legislation as existed in India, too, had only come to pass after some nominal powers were extended to Indians. The much-vaunted role of imperial trustee had generally only been exercised with machine guns and soldiers, 'with bayonets ready' on behalf of industrialists, in the face of protests like those demanding an end to brutal conditions in the Bengal mines. Why, he asked his colleagues pointedly, did those claiming to have gone to India 'because suttees were being burnt' have nothing to offer factory women facing an infant mortality rate of 600 to 700 per thousand?

In 1927, the beneficent delusions, as Saklatvala saw them, of the gradualist camp took the form of a 'great British blunder' - the all-white and all-British commission headed by Sir John Simon. As one historian notes: 'In one stroke the British had achieved the very thing that had eluded Gandhi since the end of non-cooperation - nationalist unity ... Boycotts and protests against the Simon Commission's stately progress across the subcontinent reawakened the excitement of direct action. It also coincided with an extremely alarming level of workers' strikes and communist and terrorist activity.' As Gandhi launched his famous Salt Satyagraha, and finally called for 'Purna Swaraj' or 'Complete Independence', seeking to regain greater control of a movement split between agitators and constitutionalists, Saklatvala once again bore the mantle of 'the member for India' in the House of Commons, and challenged not only its terms of reference but its most fundamental assumptions. The arguments he had made against imperialism and the philosophy of reform on the basis of the right to voice and self-determination now came together in the form of a powerful and sustained polemic:

Just as this country would not allow Chinamen or Germans to write a constitution for this country, it is equally absurd for this country to appoint a Committee to write a constitution for the people of India, on whatever basis. The only point of discussion in this Chamber should be whether this country is still to be a tyrant over India, or whether it will be courageous enough to say 'no' and cease to be a tyrant. There is no gradual process about this. The only kind of commission that would make any kind of sense would be one whose brief was to 'investigate as between Imperialism and anti-Imperialism', one which consisted not of dissembling reformers who traded in ambiguity, but rather of 'honest imperialists' and 'candid, open-minded, outspoken anti-Imperialists'.

On 17 June 1927, Saklatvala put to the House that the commission's purpose of looking into reforms while holding India down in subjection was 'humbug'. Once again, he distanced himself from the reformist position of his Labour colleagues, like the Labour MP George Lansbury, noting that none of this was 'a question of reform, or gradual or quick reform'; what was at stake was 'a question of the possible relationship between two nations on the basis of one nation deciding what is good for the other'. Saklatvala spelled out for his fellow parliamentarians the fundamental paradox of reformism: 'Between slavery and freedom there is no middle course, and a transition from slavery to freedom can never be attained by gradual measures.' Freedom was indivisible: 'When you make up your minds that there shall be no slavery, then the bond must break, and it must break completely ... There is no such thing as gradual freedom.' It was a point he would make again and again in the course of the Simon Commission debates, 'that there is no such thing as Committees and Commissions being appointed, granting stage by stage freedom to conquered nations from their conquerors'. The 'antiquated, savage system of rule of another country and another people' quite simply had to end.

It is all nonsense to say that for the benefit of the Indians the British nation has got to be



there, and is performing some benevolent action. For goodness sake be honest, and say you are a nation of enterprise, and, in seeking for enterprise to seek your own good, opportunity placed you in a strong position to throttle the country and the people of India ... It is no use pretending as though a deputation had come to you from the Indians, as though a section of the moderate opinion of India came to Great Britain and said, 'Come and protect us; come and give us military protection; come and teach us civil administration', and so on.

In nonetheless proposing an amendment later that year which would require Indian legislative consent to the Simon Commission, Saklatvala was making an important philosophical and political point about voice and the recognition of widespread resistance to British rule in India. His amendment would 'compel the Government to take notice of the existence of the second party to the contract, and not to move in the matter as if they alone count, and India does not exist at all'. In the absence of such minimal consent, an already compromised process simply elided the other party which, he noted pointedly, having 'heard of our one-sided activity ... is objecting as strongly as possible and in whatever manner it can against this proposal'. This modest amendment was rejected, as was an even more minimal one in which Saklatvala proposed simply that Pandit Motilal Nehru of the Indian National Congress be invited to speak to the House so that it might 'listen to the voice of India through another Indian and then judge for yourselves whether you are not doing a most criminal thing to-day in appointing this Commission'. Due in no small part to Saklatvala's campaigning leadership, and inspired by the fluttering black flags of the Indian protests, Britain too witnessed demonstrations: 'To hell with the Simon Commission' read placards in Hyde Park rallies at which Saklatvala and others spoke.

It was precisely such attempts to represent the forces of Indian anticolonial resistance in Britain that led to the spiteful personal attacks from parliamentary colleagues on Saklatvala's own position as a Parsi from a wealthy community who was in no position to speak for Indian interests. Saklatvala was unfazed by the criticism, noting trenchantly that the question of 'voice', when it came to colonized people, was in any case tendentiously invoked:

And we are told here that that Commission which will be appointed in India will express the voice of the people of India. A little while ago the Under-Secretary told us that it is impossible for any representative to express the voice of the people of India; but when it is the mill-owners, and the industrialists, and the magnates, and the landlords, and the zemindars, and the princes, then they represent, not only the voice of the people of India, but all that is perfect in democracy, all that can be imaginable in the world as expressing the sorrows and grievances and sufferings of the people.

It is of some importance that Saklatvala insistently extended the same arguments he made for democracy and self-determination for India to Britain and the British people. The hierarchical division between those who were considered properly representative and those whose voices did not count applied to Britain as well: 'Anybody who would try to speak of Great Britain as one homogeneous nation is wrong; anybody who is trying to speak of India as a homogeneous nation is wrong. Both the British nation and the Indian are sharply divided into two classes.' This is what enabled him to make perfectly clear that he was no more a votary of the Indian capitalist classes than he was of their British counterparts, and to keep on repeating, given his responsibility to his electorate in England, Scotland and Wales, that it was a curse for all, 'for the workers of Britain, for the workers of India and for the peasants of India, to have these Imperial ties'.

Most valuably, he made clear that a failure to understand the workings of empire in fact hurt the British working classes: 'The neglect of the British working-class to study British imperialism in its proper light is leading to the accomplishment of two processes, namely, a rapid Britainising of a

capitalist master-class in India and a rapid Indianising of the large working-class in Britain' – a race to the bottom for both working classes in the long run. These were points that had been heralded in different ways by Jones and Congreve in the wake of 1857. Even as he urged a coming together of campaigning interests, writing in the Labour Monthly, Saklatvala reminded the British labour movement that it was really in India that the ugliest face of contemporary capitalism could be seen – a face that would reveal itself at home in due course if not resisted:

Take your worst slums, your most congested lodging-houses and yet you cannot conceive of that broken-down mud hut, to enter which even a stature of 5 feet of humanity has got to nearly double up. There is no other ventilation or opening for light, and there is even nothing to see inside these huts, which are invariably completely unfurnished. I am not talking now of villages; I am talking of large industrial centres like Nagpur and Cawnpore where exist cotton mills more flourishing than most cotton mills in Lancashire, and where several thousand workers are still consigned to these death-traps.

Comrade Sak did not hold back in telling British labour they were wrong not to have seen that their 'immediate task lay in levelling up the conditions of ... fellow workers in India'. There was a tendency to act as though the Empire did not exist at all. 'An almost conceited view was taken that the low level of the Indian was well deserved and that the higher level of the British worker was something that was permanently secure by his own merit.' The British labour movement had failed signally to look at 'securing a world standard' for labour as an act of solidarity rather than 'an act of secondary charity from the stronger to the weaker group'. This, he said, would prove to be a mistake. For all the hostility with which he was met, Saklatvala was not without support from some parliamentary colleagues, one of whom observed that, as 'the only Indian-born native in the House', Saklatvala provided his fellow MPs invaluable perspective on the question of Indian opinion in India that could not be ignored any longer. Another pointed out that every effort had been made by the government to prevent Saklatvala from 'visiting his own country to get in touch with Indian opinion'. It was indeed after much trouble getting a nervous British government to endorse his passport for travel back to his country of birth (he had already been banned by the US government from travel to that country) that Saklatvala arrived in India on 14 January 1927, for what would be his last visit. He received a hero's welcome, with throngs gathered to see him disembark in Bombay, welcoming him with enthusiastic speeches and garlands – which he refused to wear, but deposited at the statue of Tilak on Chowpatty Beach. Whatever their reservations about his affiliation to the Communist Party might have been, Indian nationalists of various stripes clearly recognized that he 'was a member of the British parliament fighting for them'. Saklatvala himself viewed the trip, rather grandiosely, in terms of an attempt to 'pull the two working-class brotherhoods together'.

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**Priyamvada Gopal**

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**P.S.**

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