Indian Officials in the ILO, 1919-c 1947

This study sheds light on the services of a distinguished line of Indian officials in the International Labour Organisation, particularly before Independence. Their brilliant academic backgrounds, their roles in the organisation and their contributions are analysed. The issues of India’s disproportionately large financial contributions to the ILO and meagre Indian representation in the secretariat are also briefly examined. In all, the ILO and India were well served by these outstanding Indian officials though they operated in difficult times with the shadow of a colonial government always looming over them.

This paper focuses on the contributions of Indian International Labour Organisation (ILO) officials, particularly before Independence. We look at their backgrounds, their roles in the organisation and their contributions. This analysis is based on an examination of selected documents and papers in the ILO Archives in Geneva, supplemented by other information from printed sources.

We often tend to ignore the contributions of Indians who worked for international organisations before Independence. This is not surprising, for their number was always very small. However, it is not necessarily true that they had no impact on the organisations that they worked for or on the country that they represented. Again, they were the first of several generations of Indians who distinguished themselves while serving in the United Nations (UN) system.

The issues of Indian financial contributions to the ILO and Indian representation in the secretariat are briefly examined as well. The two issues are not unrelated – in the late 1920s and the 1930s, India made very significant financial contributions to the ILO while very few Indians were employed in the organisation. This is a fact that has not passed unnoticed.

India’s Financial Contributions

Indian legislators in the late 1920s and early 1930s felt that India was contributing more than its fair share in financial resources to international organisations. The benefit that India obtained was to be judged in terms of the number of posts it held in these organisations. The evidence was clear – contributions exceeded representation, whether looked at in absolute terms or in relation to the position of other countries.

A table prepared by the ILO in 1929 in response to questions raised in the Indian Legislative Assembly provided strong support to this view. According to it, India contributed Swiss Francs (CHF) 4,89,156 in 1929, while the expenditure on salaries of Indian officials in Geneva and the office in India together amounted to CHF 1,04,900. In sharp contrast, the UK contributed CHF 9,17,168, while the expenditure on its officials in Geneva and its correspondent office in London amounted to CHF 9,67,860. In the case of France, the corresponding figures were CHF 6,90,059 and CHF 11,67,860. So, while the gross amount paid by India was less than that paid by either the UK or France, the net amount (net of expenditure on officials and correspondent offices in the country) was higher.

Immediately after second world war, the situation remained iniquitous. According to a report on contributions for the 27th financial period, in 1945, the US paid 14,24,632.92 in gold francs, while the UK paid 14,24,632.76 gold francs. India was the third largest contributor in that year, paying 6,33,170.04 gold francs or 7.8% of the total...
payable sum. This was a reflection of India’s dependent status and the immediate post-war economic situation in many parts of the world. It may be noted that the large sterling balances accumulated by India during the war may have made the burden easier to bear.

The situation improved only a little in 1947. According to a report dated 31 December 1946, the scale of contributions to the ILO for 1947 required (undivided) India to pay 6.97% of the total budget, while the UK and the US paid 15.66% each. Against this, India’s relative contribution to the budget of the UN was 3.95%. These figures cannot be strictly compared because the UN membership differed from that of the ILO and the US made an extra emergency contribution to the UN that year. However, the damage imposed by second world war on West Europe was factored into both ILO and UN calculations.

In the pre-Independence period, there is little doubt that India paid more than what it received in terms of expenditures on officials. India’s annual contribution to the ILO in 1929 was a little over half that of the UK, which had a highly developed economy. In 1945, India was assessed higher than 50 of the 53 member countries. One must also note that there was no technical cooperation programme of the scale that emerged after 1950, which would have benefited a less-developed country such as India and compensated for the high contribution it made.

The system of levying contributions from members was substantially altered after 1945. The ILO Governing Body set up an Allocations Committee in 1946 to examine all questions of contributions on a continuing basis. The basic principle was to establish an equitable system of contributions. The need to take into account UN scales was repeatedly stressed, but it was realised that the UN scales in 1946 were themselves not yet on a permanent basis. Nevertheless a fundamental revision was proposed and the principle of harmonisation of the ILO scale with the UN scale over time was generally accepted. This goal was reached in 1977. It is important to stress here that the UN scale was developed after detailed research by a panel of experts, who examined the capacity of different countries to pay, per capita national incomes, war damage and changes in economic strength over time. In more recent times, the contribution of India to the ILO budget, according to Indian government figures, has substantially decreased – from 4.44% in 1950 to 0.42% in 2006.

**Indian Representation**

As in most international organisations, the ILO secretariat played an important role in carrying out the work of the organisation in line with its programme and budget, which it helped to shape. The present system of recruitment and staffing of UN organisations can be traced back to those of the League of Nations and the ILO before 1945. However, the earlier systems were different in many ways and changed over time. The Indian Civil Service was regarded as the most representative permanent expatriate service of its time and provided a model that was used in determining the salaries and other benefits of the League and ILO officials.

The full story of how these evolved has yet to be written.

Indian public opinion, as manifested in the Indian Legislative Assembly in 1928, strongly felt that Indian representation in the ILO, in terms of officials, needed to be enhanced. Sarabhai Nemchand Haji asked if the number of Indians working for the League of Nations, the ILO and the Committee for International Cooperation was proportionate to India’s annual contributions to these bodies. In the course of the discussion, the government did not clarify whether any effort had been made to press for the appointment of Indians when the first appointments to these organisations had been made. It was however stated that the last representation on the appointment of Indians was probably made by the government in 1926. Finance Member Basil Blackett intervened in the debate to state that he had a conversation “last November” in London with Eric Drummond, Secretary General of the League of Nations Secretariat, regarding the appointment of one or two Indians to certain posts in the League of Nations. He had also discussed “the possibility of finding men who would be suitable”. It may be noted that the League already employed some Indian professionals at different levels. Among the small number of early employees at the League of Nations Secretariat was P P Pillai, probably the first Indian to be so employed.

Another contentious issue related to the ILO was the exclusion of Indians from the list of British subjects who could compete in competitions open to British subjects. Following representations by Indians resident in the UK, the ILO administration made it clear to the director of its London office (letter dated 12 January 1931) that “in future all competitions open to British subjects will include India”.

The ILO stated that it had 205 international posts (excluding clerical staff) and that three Indians (presumably P P Pillai, Rajani Kanta Das and K Kuriyan) were employed in a letter dated 8 May 1928 to an official in the India Office, London. This was a very low proportion of the total (less than 1.5%) and the situation did not improve by 1935, when according to a minute dated 15 January 1935, there were three Indians employed as officials – Das, Kuriyan and Raghunath Rao. It should be mentioned here that Pillai, who headed the ILO’s Delhi office, was not included in this list. By 1938, there was one more Indian official, Sarukkai Krishnamachary Raja. The staff list of July 1947 carried the names of six Indians – Rao, Kuriyan, Sadhu Singh Dhami, C Kumar, Amir Hussain Ali (Aamir Ali) and S Jain (S K Jain).

In 1946, the ILO took the somewhat unusual step of asking the Indian Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC), to advertise for two temporary posts of Member of Section for appointment in Montreal. Following an advertisement, a selection committee was formed comprising Frederick Robertson, Chairman FPSC, Lt Col Rehman, Member, and Pillai. The commission called 24 of 62 applicants for an interview and selected Amir Hussain Ali and S K Jain. Both were to achieve high office in the ILO – the former became chef de cabinet and the latter, deputy director general.

**Indian Officials: Backgrounds and Careers**

We now turn to the backgrounds and careers of some of the early Indian officials of the ILO. They include Kuriyan, Pillai, Das, Rao, Raja and Dhami.

**K Kuriyan**

Kuriyan was the first Indian ILO official. He was born on 1 October 1895 and obtained his BA and BL degrees from the University of Madras in 1918 and 1920 respectively. He then went to London.
and did a BSc in economics at the London School of Economics (LSE) from 1920 to 1923. He also spent three years at Lincoln's Inn. On the basis of written and oral examinations, he was appointed by the ILO on 15 February 1924 as member, section B, intelligence and liaison division. He was later transferred to the diplomatic division and acted as secretary of conference committees and as private secretary to Atul Chatterjee when he was president of the conference. In 1933 Kuriyan joined the labour legislation section and was later chief, application of conventions section.

In 1940, as a contribution to the war effort, he volunteered for service with either the Government of India or the state of Travancore. The ILO forwarded his request to the government, which replied that neither it nor Travancore had anything to offer. He then obtained a suspension of his contract in 1940 to go and work for the British Air Ministry in Tetbury. He worked in the British civil service as administrative principal (temporary) at the Air Ministry on the manpower committee and labour coordination committee. He also administered the Workmen's Compensation Act for the Air Ministry and treasury injury warrants at overseas commands of the Royal Air Force.

Kuriyan rejoined the ILO in 1944 and was appointed to his old post, but in Montreal, where, due to the war, the ILO had moved many of its staff. He actively participated in the preparations for the Asiatic Regional Conference in New Delhi in 1947. He died in Geneva on 1 January 1948 while he was chief of the application of conference decisions section.

PP Pillai

Pillai was born on 15 April 1894 and after obtaining his BA and LLB from the University of Madras, was awarded a PhD by the LSE in 1923. He returned to India and helped to organise the League of Nations Union in India and extend its branches and activities. His PhD thesis was published in 1925 as a book, Industrial Conditions in India. He was awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) by the British government for his work. He was chosen in 1924 as a member of the Imperial Education Service and approved as a professor of economics and political science, but this was cancelled when the service itself was abolished soon after.

Pillai was the first Indian to join the League of Nations secretariat. He was selected on the basis of a competitive examination held in London and joined on 25 February 1924 in the economic section. He secured a renewable seven-year appointment as member of section class B on 1 January 1925. While working in the League, he was asked by Secretary General Drummond to go to India to help set up an office there. Pillai went to India and held discussions with national leaders, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru, and reported to Drummond that there was not much interest there in having a national League office. However, there was concern about industrial strife and conditions of work. He reported that an ILO office would be welcome in India. Thus Pillai had an important role in creating an ILO presence in India and he was later to become the first director of the ILO's branch office in India.

As a result of this mission and discussions between ILO Director Albert Thomas and Drummond, Pillai was encouraged to join the ILO. He formally applied through the Government of India, for a position in the ILO secretariat in Geneva as a member of section, class A. He was selected by the ILO in 1927 and appointed member of section, class A in the diplomatic section (native labour section) at a salary of CHF 19,000 a year.

N M Joshi, General Secretary, Indian Trades Union Congress (ITUC), had written to ILO Deputy Director Harold Butler on 17 March 1927 pointing out Pillai’s eligibility for an ILO post. He described him as intelligent, hard-working and an up to date student of economics. He mentioned that Pillai had already written a book on Indian economics. Joshi wrote another letter on 1 June 1927 to Thomas, supporting Pillai and noting that he had already suggested to the government that it recommend Pillai for appointment by the ILO. As we shall see later, Joshi provided letters of recommendation to two other Indian appointees, Das and Rao. As a leader of the ITUC and as deputy member and later member of the Governing Body of the ILO, Joshi was a person with considerable influence.

In August 1928, Pillai was appointed director of the ILO office in Delhi, which began to function from November 1928. His annual salary was set at CHF 24,000 (about Rs 12,000 at that time) and his rank was to be immediately above chief of section, but below chief of division in the ILO at Geneva. He was given diplomatic privileges and immunities under Covenant 7 of the League of Nations. Pillai’s correspondence with Geneva in his P file reveals many exchanges on the question of his salary and parity with the salaries of Indian bureaucrats. These are important to help us understand the process whereby the salaries of international civil servants would later be determined.

To begin with, his monthly salary appears to have been equivalent to that of a deputy secretary in India on the scale Rs 1,250-1,350. This was a little absurd as he had diplomatic status, headed the ILO branch office, and was representing the ILO in meetings with high officials and national leaders. Questions of salary and parity with Indian pay scales continued to arise. In 1933, G Fleury, chief of the administrative section, stated that Pillai was placed in what he described as “a grade of the 1cs somewhere between a fairly senior under secretary and junior deputy secretary”. However, his day to day working relationships were at the deputy secretary level; and one must remember that a deputy secretary was a much more important functionary before Independence than today.

Pillai’s positioning in the Indian hierarchy reveals startling similarities with the repeated attempts of British officials in India to unravel the intricacies of the Indian caste system. A person’s real or perceived position in the hierarchy was important in determining his standing among both Europeans and Indians in India and perhaps even in Geneva. It is interesting, in this context, to read a comment made by ILO Director Butler in 1938. In an extract from a note, dated 24 January 1938, addressed to Edward Phelan and the administrative section, he states,

I satisfied myself by my experiences in Delhi and other places in India that the caste system based on salaries operates among Europeans and Indians alike. If Dr Pillai’s salary amounted to Rs 2,000 his standing with government departments in Delhi would be immediately enhanced, strange as it may seem in Europe.

Pillai played an active role in the ILO. He liaised effectively with the government and employers’ and workers’ representatives
in India. He stayed in touch with key nationalist leaders and with senior British and Indian administrators, including secretaries to the government and the secretary of the legislative assembly. He even had an audience with the Viceroy. He attended conferences, wrote papers and generally promoted the ILO in India. His reputation as an eminent economist certainly helped him in his work. He was the author of a widely cited book, *Economic Conditions in India*, and the first Indian economist to publish a paper in an international economic journal, *Economica*, in 1923.26 He was invited to deliver the Banerji Readership Lectures at Patna University in 1929-30 and his lectures on India and the ILO were published as a book.27 In 1929, he published a paper on “International Labour Organisation and Forced Labour” in the *Indian Journal of Economics* and, in 1937, he published another paper in the same journal entitled, “The ILO and Agricultural Workers”.28 Also important were his close working relations with Joshi, whom he described as “ILO’s truest friend in India, but also my mainstay in the country”.29

A major event during Pillai’s tenure was the visit of the ILO Director Butler to India in 1937. While Butler was a former British civil servant, a product of Eton and Balliol, and known to several important British officials in India, the entire trip was carefully planned by Pillai, making use of his extensive contacts. Before this, Pillai had planned a mission undertaken by another senior ILO official, C W H Weaver, who visited India, Iraq, Persia and Turkey during January-April 1933. Throughout his 28-day tour of India, he was accompanied by Pillai.29

While Butler provided official reports on his mission to India, he, perhaps more interestingly, submitted a confidential report to Viceroy Linlithgow on his findings. In his assessment, the agricultural population “was impoverished, indebted and discontented”. He drew attention to industrial overcrowding and low wages and felt that high educated unemployment made the situation inflammable. The government, he argued, had to intervene in the area of industrial relations and improve statistical data. Also housing conditions were very unsatisfactory. It is doubtful if this report influenced government policy, which continued to neglect these issues at least until second world war.

Pillai was present in Philadelphia in 1944 at a defining moment for the ILO, and played a role in the drafting the Declaration that defined the aims and purposes of the ILO. It appears that he was being considered in 1946, at Nehru’s request, for appointment to a senior director’s post at the UN. In 1947, Pillai was appointed India’s first ambassador and permanent representative to the UN at Lake Success, New York. In March 1947, the Government of India requested ILO Director Phelan to grant Pillai leave of absence for three years,21 but Phelan consented to only one year. Pillai left for New York in July 1947 and after another year’s extension, returned to his ILO assignment in New Delhi on 1 January 1950. He retired from the ILO on 15 April 1954.

During his career in India, Pillai had to keep negotiating his salary and status in relation to the Indian bureaucracy. Significantly, he received no promotion from the ILO. When he went to Delhi in 1928, he was placed by the ILO at a rank between chief of section and chief of division and this remained his rank until his retirement. He appears to have been interested in becoming an assistant director of the ILO (this post was renamed assistant director general in 1948) and he was certainly qualified for it. We discuss in a later section the process by which the first Indian assistant director general was selected and why Pillai did not secure this position.

Pillai was remarkably successful at maintaining good relations with the government both before and after Independence; at the same time, his relations with employers’ and workers’ representatives also appear to have been very good. At the time of Independence, the government was eager to utilise his skills and contacts in cementing India’s place in the UN.

Pillai directed his considerable skills at promoting the ILO at all levels in India. He combined a very detailed and thorough understanding of the labour scene with a very wide range of contacts among trade unionists and employers, as well as the government. His correspondence with Butler22 shows how careful he was in following ILO rules and procedures while maintaining excellent relations in India and promoting the causes that the ILO represented. Even today, he serves as a guide to the kind of role a national official representing an international agency should play.

A good example of Pillai’s diplomatic approach was the cautious manner in which he handled working with the Royal Commission on Labour in India.23 He had been approached by labour members to accompany the commission on its field visits, but, in view of the lack of enthusiasm shown by its chairman, J H Whitley, he followed Butler’s advice and declined as it could have been embarrassing if threats to boycott the commission materialised. Whitley appeared to be worried that Pillai might report his own findings to the ILO and the secretariat of the commission was “rather secretive”. Pillai was persuaded to accompany the commission from Bombay to Calcutta to see establishments in Nagpur and in the coal and iron mines near Calcutta. Pillai, however, continued to advise individual members who sought his advice, including Beryl Power, the only woman member, whom he knew from his days at the LSE.

Pillai’s major contribution was the institution of a system of sending monthly reports from the Delhi office, covering different aspects of the labour scene. Beginning in 1928, it went on until 1945 and beyond. In 1966, G A Johnson, a retired senior official of the ILO, was asked to examine the collection of monthly reports from all branch offices and correspondents and report on whether they should be preserved. He concluded that they constituted “an extremely valuable, and indeed, unique assemblage of documentation”. Johnson felt that the reports from New Delhi by Pillai were “of a very high standard”. In the first available report by Pillai, according to Johnson, he “gave valuable background surveys of importance for the understanding of the detailed particulars on specific industrial and labour issues contained in subsequent reports”. Pillai’s reports covered the 1928 session of the Indian National Congress, the policies and positions of various political and communal groups, and relations between the central and provincial governments in labour legislation.24 Such reports were sent by Pillai and the New Delhi office until Independence and after it. I believe that these would be very useful to Indian labour historians.
On his death in 1977, ILO Director General F Blanchard wrote on 9 June to Pillai’s wife,
As the first director of the ILO Branch office in New Delhi, he played an important role in orienting the work of the ILO towards developing countries and continued to carry out these responsibilities with distinction until his retirement in 1954. At the time of India’s independence it was not surprising that the Government called on his high talents, and the ILO was happy to cooperate and enable him to serve as his country’s ambassador to the UN (ILO Archives, File P-2135).

Rajani Kanta Das
From 1925 to 1940, Das was an official at the ILO office in Geneva. Das was a pioneering Indian labour economist, but he is little known in India today. He was born near Dhaka in 1881. After studying at Calcutta University for four years, he went to the US and studied at Ohio State University, University of Missouri and University of Chicago to obtain a BSc and MSc in agriculture and an MA in biology. He did his PhD in economics at the University of Wisconsin and was awarded the degree in 1917. He was probably the first Indian to obtain a doctoral degree in economics from a US university. His supervisor, John Commons, was well known for his work on labour economics and institutional economics.

Das taught at De Paul University and Northwestern University in Chicago during 1919–20. From 1920 to 1922, he was lecturer in economics at the College of the City of New York and New York University. He worked as special agent for the bureau of labour statistics of the US government, producing a report on Indian migrants on the Pacific Coast. He then returned to India and was associated with Visva-Bharati University during 1924–25. After leaving the ILO, he worked for the US government in China and South Korea. Das lived the rest of his life in the US and I do not have information on his activities after about 1960.

Das’ first major published work was Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast (1923), based on a study he did for the US Department of Labour. It was a pioneering work which objectively analysed the problems of Indian migrants on the west coast of the US. His other books on factory legislation, industrial efficiency and other such topics made him the foremost authority on Indian labour economics.

Das, with his substantial contributions to Indian labour economics, was an ideal candidate for the ILO. In 1923, he applied unsuccessfully for a post of labour statistician.28 In September 1925, Joshi took up his case with then ILO Deputy Director Butler and Arul Chatterjee (the Indian government representative). Commons also strongly recommended him for an appointment. He was appointed for a year from 2 November 1925 to 1 November 1926 and was to be engaged in “enquiries” and “research”.

When his appointment was extended, it was recommended that he be considered for a Section A post which was to be filled by a “Hindou”. According to an extract from a report dated 24 February 1928, there were two posts marked for “Hindous”, one was for Pillai in Delhi and the other was open to other Indians. Das was selected to the second post. On 1 March 1928, he accepted a regular post at the ILO on a seven-year renewable contract, as was the practice at the time. He was placed in the Member Section A category and thus became the senior-most Indian official through the 1930s.29

Das began work in the intelligence and liaison division, and worked on the Indian part of the Asiatic Enquiry. This was placed at the disposal of the Royal Commission on Indian Labour in 1929. As we shall attempt to show later, the Commission made use of Das’ work. He summarised and utilised the reports provided by the branch office in New Delhi. He combined these with his own studies of Indian materials and prepared information notes and short articles. He also provided the ILO with a summary of the Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India.

In 1938, he was transferred to the section for studies extra-European, service agriculture. This was not to his liking as he had in 1935 indicated his desire to join the economic group, rather than the agricultural group. Apparently questions of seniority were involved. He also wanted the title of adviser, but sought neither promotion nor more salary.30

In 1940, as part of the wartime arrangements to move sections of the ILO from Geneva to Montreal, it was decided to retire Das on 30 June 1940, though in the normal course his contract would have run until 1 July 1941. Even a letter from Joshi of 13 February 1939 asking ILO Director John Winant to reconsider was of no avail. After the war, Das tried hard to return to the ILO. His efforts and those of his wife Sonya Ruth Das, who had from the early 1920s been a persistent promoter of his career, were not successful. On 7 August 1951, Director General David Morse wrote to Das, expressing his regret that there were no openings available.

Das was an excellent labour economist who was afforded the opportunity to carry on his technical work on labour problems when he was in the ILO’s Asian labour programme. This gave him access to materials and resources to undertake a thorough study of Indian labour problems and bring them to the attention of a large audience. According to reports on his work, he maintained good relations with the Indian delegations to the International Labour Conferences and Governing Body meetings.

Unlike Pillai, Das was not diplomatic in his actions. We review two related instances where Das made positive contributions but incurred the wrath of British officials in India. As a staff member of the ILO, Das contributed reports and other material which were used by the Royal Commission on Labour in India in its 1929 Report. In a letter dated 22 April 1954 to Director General Morse, Das noted that following a resolution by Joshi at the Seventh Session of the International Labour Conference, he had been specially appointed to undertake a study by the ILO of labour conditions in Asiatic countries. In his words,

I was specially appointed by the ILO to undertake the task and completed, among other things, a report on the historical background of industrial labour, when the appointment of a Royal Commission on Labour in India was announced. I decided to postpone further study on my report until the publication of the Commission’s report and the lapse of a reasonable period of time. But my published volumes, e.g., Factory Labor and Plantation Labor, as well as my MS report on Industrial Labor to the ILO were fully utilised by the Commission in outlining the programme of investigation and writing the historical background of its report (ILO Archives File P-1838).31

The annual report on Das dated 31 March 1930 noted that the preliminary manuscript of the Indian part of the Asiatic Enquiry (which he had prepared) was placed at the disposal of the Royal Commission on Labour in India. Again, according to Pillai,
director of the ILO Delhi office, “The vast store of material collected by the office on conditions of labour in India was placed at the disposal of the Whitley Commission, to which the office also sent a comprehensive memorandum on social insurance”.

In 1931, Pillai drew Butler’s attention to the “unpleasant impression” left by the visit of Das and his wife. Das, according to Pillai, had spoken to the Joint Secretary of the Commission, arguing that his name should prominently figure in the report as he was the author of the memorandum on social insurance sent by the ILO. One point certainly appears to be incorrect – his work related to labour conditions, not social insurance. This was made clear in an internal minute of 31 March 1933 addressed to Butler, “It seems plausible that Dr Pillai misunderstood the object of the demarche, which may have been based on the fact that we sent Mr Das’ draft report in the Asiatic Enquiry series to the Commission.” In his letter to Pillai, enclosing this minute, Butler accepted that Das’ report on labour was sent to the Royal Commission. Still he tried to play down its importance by adding that it “was entirely his own work, but in a rather incomplete state. I do not know how much use it was to them.”

An examination of the several books and articles written by Das, including some that were prepared before, but appeared after the Report of the Royal Commission, generally support the view that his work contributed significantly to its findings. The material provided through the ILO was probably very useful to the Commission. However, the report itself made no mention of Das’ contribution in its acknowledgements, but thanked “the Director of the International Labour Office, who placed the resources of that office at our disposal and readily responded to our requests for information”.

In 1932, A G Clow, joint secretary, department of industries and labour, and a former member of the Royal Commission, complained to Pillai about the contents of a book published by Das, Plantation Labour in India. Das had entered into a debate on his findings in the pages of The Statesman, a daily newspaper from Calcutta, known to be supportive of British enterprise in India. According to Clow, this book used material supplied by the government to the ILO for use in the Asiatic Enquiry. In the arrogant manner typical of a colonial official, without indicating any specific error in the book, he dismissed the work as “a bit of unfair propaganda”. However, since this propaganda was “futile and ineffective” the government had decided not to take serious note of it. Pillai attempted to explain that this was not an official publication but Clow retorted that it brought no credit to the office. He also noted that the government had strict rules about clearance for such non-official publications.

The episode reveals some of the problems created by the extraordinary sensitivity of the colonial government, especially on adverse publicity on labour conditions in British-owned plantations in India. Researchers like Das highlighted the exploitative practices of British planters and the way in which the basic rights of labourers on the plantations were being systematically abused. The resulting publicity through the press must have been very embarrassing to the government, and its strong reaction was therefore not surprising.

This attempt of the government to impose its own standards of censorship on the ILO did not go far, but the problem of presenting unfavourable findings in a “palatable” form still remains a headache for many ILO officials. Das, as analyst, expressed his views; the government expressed its strong displeasure; and Pillai, as local office director, had to gently fight the flames.

Apart from his contributions to the work of the Royal Commission, Das summarised and utilised the reports provided by the branch office in New Delhi and combined these with his own studies of Indian materials to prepare information notes and short articles. Several major pieces by Das appeared under his own name in the International Labour Review, the ILO’s journal. These articles provided analyses of major Indian labour problems related to factory labour and legislation, child labour and women. They were, in many respects, far ahead of their time. For example, his work on child labour in India was probably one of the earliest in the field and is remarkable for its emphasis on the need for an integrated policy for the well-being of children in India. He identified three main elements: (i) the encouragement of voluntary but responsible parenthood; (ii) the development of compulsory primary education; and (iii) the adoption of progressive social legislation.

In a paper on women labour in India, Das argued, “In spite of biological distinctions between the sexes, indicating functional differences in certain life processes, and in spite of the existing inferior position of women in most communities, which is more or less historical and accidental, men and women are equal partners in society, and social progress depends largely upon the fullest expression of both in all social, political and industrial spheres of life”.

In his view, if women enjoyed the rights and privileges as well as the duties and responsibilities of society, women and their communities would gain. So he believed that India should adopt policies to equalise social, political and economic opportunities for men and women alike. To this end, he proposed free and compulsory general and technical education for girls, the creation of new industrial opportunities by regulating working conditions to meet their requirements, the abolition of child marriage, the purdah system and the caste system, and the political disfranchisement of women.

Raghu Nath Rao
Rao was born on 2 February 1899 at Kumbakonam. His mother tongue was Marathi, but he also knew Tamil, Malayalam, English and French. He studied at the University of Madras and then did an MA in political economy at Edinburgh University in 1924-25. He worked as a journalist, acting as the European correspondent of several Indian newspapers.

According to one of his teachers at Edinburgh, economist J S Nicholson, Rao stood third in the examination. Another former teacher, Mack Eastman, a Canadian historian who later joined the ILO, recommended him highly. Rao was also supported by recommendations from Joshi and R K Shanmukham Chetty, workers’ and employers’ representatives, who addressed a joint letter to Thomas on 17 June 1929. In 1930, G S Bajpai, joint secretary to the Government of India, wrote on 9 May to Butler supporting Rao’s candidature. No doubt as a result of this barrage of recommendations, he was asked to do a written test and appointed in the editorial section for two months in 1930. After
more letters from Joshi and Bajpai, Rao obtained a series of short-term appointments and was finally absorbed in the ILO's service in 1932. Rao rose rapidly, working on technical areas like unemployment and migration, and labour conditions and with the Asiatic section. In March 1945, he was given the position of grade I, member of section and in 1946 the rank of councillor.

In 1945, as chief of the Asiatic service, he went to New Delhi to discuss a proposed health insurance scheme for industrial workers and to get material for a report on wartime developments in the labour sector and plans for post-war reconstruction in India. Rao had earlier accompanied Butler on a mission to India and Ceylon in 1938. He was also actively involved in the preparations for the Asiatic Regional Conference of the ILO in New Delhi in 1947.

Rao was the first Indian to be appointed assistant director general (ADG) of the ILO. He achieved this distinction on 1 March 1948. He retired from the ILO in 1964 and died a couple of years later, in 1966.

**Sarukkai Krishnamachary Raja**

Raja was born on 1 November 1911 at Kumbakonam in the Madras Presidency. He obtained a BA (Honours) degree from Madras University and a BSc degree from London. His uncle and guardian, Diwan Bahadur S K Sundaracharu, Madras Civil Service (retired), apparently knew Butler well enough to write to him in 1934 asking for a job for his nephew at the ILO. He followed this up by asking Frank Noyce, member of council, department of industry and labour, Government of India, to recommend the young man to Butler. Finally, Sundaracharu travelled all the way to Geneva and followed Butler to London and Paris to personally plead the case.

Coatman, a well-known economist, had been Raja's teacher in London, but he was lukewarm in his recommendation. Coatman recommended another Indian who, in his opinion, was far better. Despite this, Raja was appointed on 2 March 1936 to a category B post and renewed as a category A post for seven years in February 1937. He initially worked in the cooperation and handicrafts, special problems section. He published a paper in the _International Labour Review_ on the subject of Indian handicrafts. In 1938, he was in the application of conventions section with Kuriyan. However, he returned to India to be with his ailing wife and his contract was suspended on 2 November 1939. On 1 January 1940, he wrote to the ILO to say that he would not be returning to his post as he expected to obtain a job with the office of the economic adviser, Government of India.

Raja appears to have been appointed, not for his academic credentials, but as a result of his uncle's persistence and ability to prevail upon Butler. I am afraid it does not show the ILO in a good light. As he did not serve long, it is difficult to assess his achievements.

**Sadhu Singh Dharni**

The last Indian official we consider is Dharni, who was appointed on 24 August 1942 and retired on 20 March 1966. Born on 20 March 1906 in Punjab, he migrated to Canada at the age of 15, worked in lumber mills and studied at the University of British Columbia, Alberta and the University of California, Berkeley. He did his PhD in 1937 from the University of Toronto on “The Philosophy of John Dewey: Its bearing on India”. Late in life, he wrote the semi-autobiographical _Maluka: A Novel_, which describes the hard life of Indian immigrants in Canada.

Dhami had considerable experience in Canada in workers' education and union organisation. His work in the ILO was mainly on labour legislation, migration, and vocational education and training. Working for the ILO, he produced a report on labour legislation in India, several articles in the _International Labour Review_, and prepared a monograph on vocational and technical training in India.40

**First Indian Assistant Director General**

A major event during the 1940s was the selection of an Indian assistant director general.41 While the appointment was made by Director General Phelan in March 1948, the process began much earlier. The first reference to such an appointment appears in a letter dated 4 November 1944 from D B Meek at the Office of the High Commissioner for India in London addressed to Phelan. Noting that the schedule of the ILO budget for 1945 provided for a post in the grade of assistant director, Meek stated that “they [Government of India] feel that the time may now be appropriate to advance the claims for the appointment of an Indian national to one of such posts”.

Fairly soon after, on 13 December 1944, Joshi wrote to Phelan strongly recommending Pillai, who had “both seniority and experience”. The Government of India vigorously supported Pillai's candidacy, but it became clear that Phelan was not prepared to consider Pillai for the post. In July 1945, Ahuja, the Indian government’s representative to the Governing Body, informed Phelan that the government suggested that Pillai be appointed. Phelan had apparently indicated his opposition to the appointment, but not in writing. The government, through its High Commissioner in London, Samuel Runganadhan, wrote to Phelan formally recommending Pillai whose “academic qualifications and past experience” made him a suitable choice. Runganadhan also asked Phelan to give his reasons for not accepting Pillai.

In his reply, Phelan expressed “high regard” for Pillai, but argued that his service in India did not equip him for the job. He wanted a candidate “with somewhat wider administrative experience which would enable them to exercise higher supervision over an international staff with considerable authority”. In effect, Phelan made it clear that he was not prepared to consider Pillai, though his reasons did not appear convincing, especially given the candidates he later was to consider. As S D Lall, a senior Labour Ministry official wrote in a letter dated 25 November 1946, addressed to Phelan, “He [Pillai] was looking to promotion as Assistant Director and although you were able to speak highly of his work in India, you could not offer him this appointment.”

An examination of the correspondence suggests that the government was very unhappy with Phelan’s view. They had sent only one name, Pillai, and Phelan made it clear that he would not accept it. The Ministry of Labour, in a telegram to the high commissioner's office in London, stated quite unequivocally, “We remain unconvinced by Phelan's arguments. If Pillai has run the Delhi Branch efficiently we consider him the best available choice.” Probably out of pique and aware of the importance of continuity in Delhi for the success of the upcoming
Asian Regional Conference, the government suggested that Pillai be withdrawn from India if the ILO did not have confidence in him. Phelan responded by praising Pillai’s work in Delhi, and argued that it would be a disservice to withdraw him from his present post just at the moment when his wide contacts can be positively helpful.

Although they continued to express their support for Pillai, the government did not want to lose the post of assistant director, and they knew that the final choice lay in Phelan’s hands. The government submitted three names – Humayun Kabir, M Hasan (vice-chancellor, Dacca University) and J C Chatterjee (Vice-Chancellor, Agra University). While all three were either good academics or academic administrators, none had ILO experience or much international exposure.

Phelan, meanwhile, had another candidate in mind. He had been very impressed by M K Vellodi, an ICS officer he met at a meeting in Seattle. “I think he would be an ideal assistant director for the ILO”. Vellodi initially rejected the offer from Phelan, but later showed a willingness to accept. However, Prime Minister Nehru was not willing to release Vellodi.

Having failed to get Vellodi, Phelan offered the post to another ICS officer, Shamal Dharee Lall, Secretary, Ministry of Labour, in December 1947. Lall had been actively involved in the work of the ILO as a government representative on the Governing Body and became Chairman of the Governing Body in 1948-49. Lall did not accept, citing personal and other reasons.

Finally, Phelan wrote to Rao, offering him the position. He did not conceal that his preference had been for Lall, but stressed his confidence in Rao, based partly on the success of the recent Asian Regional Conference that he had managed. The government also endorsed Rao and he was appointed assistant director general in March 1948.

Concluding Remarks

India’s financial contribution to the ILO before Independence was larger than one would have expected a poor country’s to be and it was not matched by the number of Indians employed by the ILO or in terms of other benefits and resources provided to the country. In addition to the financial contribution, the high quality of the early Indian ILO officials and their contributions deserve to be recognised today.

The role and position of an Indian official in the ILO raised several important issues, particularly in the pre-Independence period. For instance, how did ILO officials from the UK and other colonial powers treat them? How did the (colonial) Indian government treat them? Again, how were they viewed among Indian constituents, and how did representatives of British enterprises in India see them? Full answers to these questions lie far beyond the scope of this short paper. In this section, we examine some evidence on the problems encountered by Indians seeking employment in the ILO as well as ILO officials working in the India before independence.

As many serving ILO officials would readily admit, working at a country level, it is difficult to promote social and economic causes, conduct impartial scientific inquiries, and, at the same time, keep the government happy. India was a colony; the government was not democratic or representative of Indian interests, and expatriate (mainly British) groups were actively involved in running plantations and factories. The conflict between Indian interests, interests of the home country and interests of British enterprise in India made the task of the ILO and its officials especially difficult.

Quite obviously, no Indian could be appointed to the ILO without the consent of the colonial government, and the latter would only accept “loyal” subjects. Recommendations from members of the Governing Body definitely improved one’s chances. The ILO procedure required a written test and interview and this appears to have been followed in every case. But as the cases of the Indian officials we have examined make clear, the actual mode of identifying candidates and selecting them was a little more ad hoc.

Even though the ILO did not follow explicit policies to search for candidates before recruiting them, its choice of Indian officials was generally excellent. Four Indians had long careers in the ILO in the pre-Independence period. Of these, Kuriyan, Pillai and Rao were from south India (two from Travancore) and were graduates of the University of Madras. Kuriyan and Pillai had gone on to the LSE, while Rao had been in Edinburgh.

Generally, the individuals selected had either lived and worked abroad before joining the ILO and/or had foreign degrees and qualifications. Also strong recommendations from Joshi and Indian government officials were important. This changed a little only in 1946, when, for the first and last time, the Indian Federal Public Service Commission played a role in recruitment for the ILO.

Both Pillai and Das were eminent Indian economists. Pillai obtained his PhD from the LSE while Das obtained his PhD from Wisconsin. Pillai’s Economic Conditions in India remains an important publication. He played a major role in building links between India and the ILO and was greatly respected by all. Das was the first Indian to obtain a PhD in economics from the US. Das was also in many ways the father of Indian labour economics and a visionary on labour policy.

Rao was the first Indian to achieve the distinction of being an assistant director general of the ILO. Rao, like Pillai, had a unique combination of technical knowledge and skills in relations and international diplomacy.

Both Dhami and Das had experienced considerable personal hardship in the labour market, having struggled in their early days to find work, often taking up manual jobs. Both made lasting contributions to our understanding of the problems of overseas Indian migration to North America – Das through his pioneering study of Hindustani workers on the Pacific coast and Dhami through his semi-autobiographical novel Maluka.

The ILO and India were well served by Indian ILO officials. The selected officials were generally persons of extraordinary ability who contributed greatly to the work of the ILO and promoted a better understanding of Indian labour problems and policies. Given the interest of Indians in the work of the ILO in its early days and the close contact of the ILO with India before Independence, Indian officials played the important role of acting as a bridge between the two. Of course, the existence of a colonial Government in India made the task more complicated and there were some misunderstandings and potential flashpoints.
This section draws on Butler Cabinet file XC 21 ILO Archives, File P1/26: Confidential letter from Pillai from its lists of serving officials once he was promoted, and retirement/resignation are placed. This is an early example of the distinction made between headquarters personnel and field staff, in terms of tenure and certain other conditions.

An examination of the periodic staff lists reveals some ups and downs in numbers and some rather short-lived appointments. One important name missing from the list is probably that of the first Indian woman to work for the ILO. This was missing from the list is probably that of the first Indian woman to work for the ILO. This was missing from the list is probably that of the first Indian woman to work for the ILO. This was

In reply to a letter from the Labour Minister, Pillai wrote, “When in 1928 Dr Pillai, as a result of sub-

Another contributor was Rao, who prepared re-

The ILO took no action against Das. There is no reference to this letter in his Personal File.

Another contributor was Rao, who prepared re-

Meek to Phelan, 14 November 1944.

Joshi to Phelan, 13 December 1944.

Runganadhan to Phelan, London, 8 April 1946 (Confidential).

Phelan to Runganadhan, 24 April 1946 (Private and confidential).

ILO Archives, File P-2315. The posts of Director, Deputy Director and Assistant Director were re-designated Director General, Deputy Director General and Assistant Director General in 1948.

Telegram of 27 July 1946 from the Ministry of Labour, New Delhi, to the High Commission for India, London.

Sehgal to Phelan.

The Chinese delegation had pressed their claim for consideration should an Indian not be selected. See letter from Li Ping Heng, Chinese Representative on the Governing Body to Phelan, 27 March 1947.

Phelan to Runganadhan, 11 July 1946. Phelan had unsuccessfully competed for the ICS: perhaps he retained a snaking admiration for its members. See ILO (2009), page 11.

Phelan to Velldo, 30 April 1947.

Bajpai (Secretary-General, Ministry of External Affairs) to Pillai, 18 November 1947.

Phelan to Lall, 30 December 1947 (personal and confidential).

Lall to Phelan, 10 January 1948.

V K R Menon may have been a competitor. He hints that “a very senior post in the ILO” was within his reach early in 1948 (Rao was appointed Assistant Director General in March 1948) but that he had pre-

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