

Towards the Invention of a Common Language of Science: The League of Nations' Committee for Intellectual Cooperation and the Colonial Question in British India

Arnab Dutta, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Dutta Arnab. 2022. "Towards the Invention of a Common Language of Science: The League of Nations' Committee for Intellectual Cooperation and the Colonial Question in British India". *Centenary of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations*. Geneva, 46-48. <https://intellectualcooperation.org/dutta-2022>

This presentation explores how the League of Nations' International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation viewed the role of India and its particularities in a broader framework of universal science / knowledge. Drawing from the writings, correspondences and biographical details of the first two Indian members of the committee – two Bengalis namely Devendra Nath Bannerjea and Jagadis Chandra Bose – I show how they used the notion of academic sovereignty of intellectual cooperation in the face of the lack of political sovereignty of a colonised nation. Especially taking into account the discussions around the formation of 'national committees' and what those 'national committees' meant to the larger project of 'international cooperation,' I contextualise the oscillation between certain fundamental categories at play – Indian anti-colonial nationalism and its specific position vis-à-vis imperial / metropolitan / global circulation of knowledge.

As a general background, the League of Nations' International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation, instituted in 1922, is considered a prototype of intellectual and scientific internationalism, which in later decades paved way to the creation of UNESCO (Sluga 2010, 393-418; Sluga 2013, 45-78). The existing historiography around this form of interwar intellectual internationalism took notice of how the turbulent political situations in Europe conditioned the trajectory of scientific cooperation (Laqua 2011, 223-47). Extending from that, Reijnen and Rensen's research has located these efforts within many European intellectuals' rethinking of Europe's political destiny in the 1920s and 30s (Reijnen, and Rensen 2014, 01-30).

In short, throughout the 1920s and 30s the League's committee contested, debated, reframed and, in turn, expanded the semantic reverberations of its constituent categories and concepts: the role of intellectualism and the direction of international cooperation. With humanists and classicists like Henri Bergson and Gilbert Murray at its helm, and eminent natural scientists like Albert Einstein and Marie Curie representing their national scientific realms in an international institution, the committee strived to create a 'new order' of a common language and a universal scientific temperament conducive to what they thought as the role of knowledge in an internationalist world order. Murray's 1929 essay "From Chaos to Cosmos" best exemplified their universalist strategies, where alongside the call for the "standardization of scientific terms" and "co-ordination of bibliography" of different scientific disciplines, he also explicitly charted the "soul-satisfying" moral role of "the Western races of men" in this academic project (Murray 1929, *The Ordeal of This Generation*, 185-86, and 193-94). Precisely at the same time, while corresponding with the British bureaucracy for the upkeep of the imperial interests in India, Murray reiterated the non-political nature of universalist knowledge that could overcome the "interests [of] ... nationalist politics" in India (India Office Records and Private Papers IOR/L/E/7/1432/75vii).

In that context, the committee's universalist ambition of having an integrationist scientific language for both humanistic and natural sciences was therefore interspersed with the political conditions of racialized (thus non-universal) and colonial hierarchies. In the first decade (1922–1931) of the committee's activities the only members from a colonized country were two Bengali men from British India: Devendra Nath Bannerjea and Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose (Grandjean 2018, 542). Along with the Japanese member Tanakadate Aikitsu, they were also among the only non-white members of the committee. Though there have been recent attempts to integrate non-European actors (such as the Ibero-American knowledge

networks) within the dominant historical narrative about the committee, the colonial (and by extension, the racial) dimensions of it remained mostly unattended (Grandjean 2020, 65-89). By examining Bose and Bannerjea's roles and contributions in the committee, this paper addresses this gap; and asks the research question: how and why did the committee maneuvered to oscillate between their model of universal scientific cooperation and their discursive understanding of the colonial (and racialized) hierarchies of knowledge.

Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937) was a Bengali physicist and botanist, and from 1920 onwards a Fellow of the Royal Society in London. Educated in Cambridge, Bose championed in Bengal a unique blend of modern natural sciences and an anti-colonial quest for an idealized ancient Indian spiritual Sanskritic past – comparable to the efforts of his closest friend Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali poet, educationist and the first non-European to receive a Nobel prize. Simultaneous to a plethora of English writings concerning the new inventions in physics and botany, Bose parallelly wrote extensively in Bangla to chronicle his European sojourns, to popularize western / European science, and to situate that within his ideational framework of Sanskritic Indian past (Lahiri 2009, 21-41; Nandy 1980, 58; Dasgupta 1999, 255-58). Consequently, it is worth noting in this context as to how his continuous writings in Bangla journals published from Calcutta incorporated his European experiences during the League committee's meetings; and in turn, juxtaposed a highly technical realm of discussions taking place in post-WWI European Order and the horizon of expectations of Bengali reading-public in British India.

The second Bengali member in the committee, Devendra Nath Bannerjea (1899–1954) was a professor of political economy at the University of Calcutta, who helped drafting the League committee's proposal for the role of university-teaching in the grand scheme of universal science. Unlike Bose, Bannerjea's anti-colonialism included an active participation in the conservative internationalism of Nazi-Fascist political dispensation. After his association with the League's committee, during his long-term academic stay in Germany in the 1930s, Bannerjea eagerly fused the realms of Indological scholarship and the National Socialist regime (Framke 2014, 102-7). In sum, by taking into account the case studies of Bose and Bannerjea's interactions at and beyond the League's Committee for Intellectual Cooperation and at the same time moving beyond their mere biographical specificities, this paper contributes to the global intellectual history of scientific practices in the twentieth century; and address the negotiation and relocation of racial colour line and colonial difference in practice (Raj 2007; Baber 1996).

Following the intellectual genealogies of the conceptual categories (universal scientific language, cooperation, colonialism and anti-colonialism), this research uses global intellectual history methods, thereby discursively weaving in a varied range of archival sources (Chakrabarti 2004, 75). The simultaneous use of the committee's papers in three major West European languages and the reception of the committee within the receptive framework of a vast range of Bangla language sources from British India will broaden the historiographical outreach of the committee's history from a non-Eurocentric vantage point. To that end, this paper extensively draws from Bose and Bannerjea's papers at the League of Nations Archives in Geneva; their correspondence with other European members of the committee; and Bose and Bannerjea's travelogues and related writings in Bangla (in four Calcutta-based journals – *Prabasi*, *Basumati*, *Bharatbarsha* and *The Modern Review*, accessed and researched by the current author at Hiteshranjan Sanyal Memorial Archive of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta, India).

References

- Baber, Zaheer. 1996. *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India*. SUNY Series in Science, Technology, and Society. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chakrabarti, Pratik. 2004. *Western Science in Modern India: Metropolitan Methods, Colonial Practices*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Dasgupta, Subrata. 1999. *Jagadis Chandra Bose, and the Indian Response to Western Science*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Framke, Maria. 2014. "Die Rolle der Berliner Indologie und Indienkunde im Dritten Reich." In *Indologie und Südasiastudien in Berlin: Geschichte und Positionsbestimmung*. Edited by Hannelore Lötze, Ingo Strauch and Maria Framke. Berlin: Trafo-Verlag.

- Grandjean, Martin. 2018. "Les Réseaux De La Coopération Intellectuelle: La Société Des Nations Comme Actrice Des Échanges Scientifiques Et Culturels Dans L'entre-Deux-Guerres." Dissertation, UNIL Université de Lausanne.
- Grandjean, Martin. 2020. *A Representative Organization?: Ibero-American Networks in the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations (1922-1939)*. In *Cultural Organizations, Networks and Mediators in Contemporary Ibero-America*. Routledge Studies in Cultural History, 82. New York: Routledge.
- India Office Records and Private Papers. 1929. IOR/L/E/7/1432/75vii. League of Nations Intellectual Co-operation: Institute of Intellectual Co-operation and the establishment of national committees. 21 Feb 1929 – 9 Jan 1932.
- Lahiri, Ashish. 2009. *Bigyan O Motadorsbo: Hindutvavad, Creationism O Bikolpo Bigyan*. Kolkata: Ababhash.
- Laqua, Daniel. 2011. "Transnational Intellectual Cooperation, the League of Nations, and the Problem of Order ." *Journal of Global History* 6 (2): 223–47.
- Murray, Gilbert. 1929. *The Ordeal of This Generation: The War, the League & the Future*. Halley Stewart Lectures, 1928. London: G. Allen & Unwin.
- Nandy, Ashis. 1980. *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists*. New Delhi: Allied.
- Raj, Kapil. 2007. *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650-1900*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reijnen, Carlos, and Marleen Rensen, eds. 2014. *European Encounters: Intellectual Exchange and the Rethinking of Europe 1914-1945*. European Studies, 32. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Sluga, Glenda. 2010. "Unesco and the (One) World of Julian Huxley." *Journal of World History* 21 (3): 393–418.
- Sluga, Glenda. 2013. *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*. Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.