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### The 'silver-tongued orator' advocates for Australian Indians: Srinivasa Sastri's tour of Australia in 1922

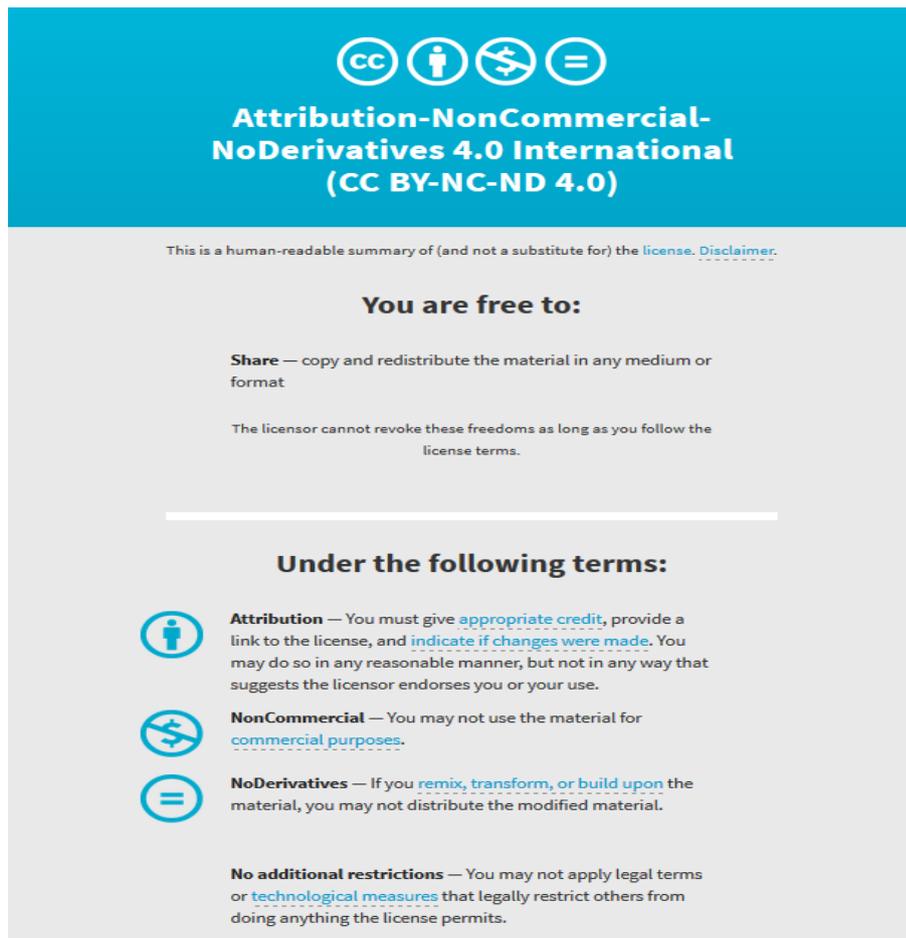
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# 4

## **The ‘Silver-Tongued Orator’ Advocates for Australian Indians: Srinivasa Sastri’s Tour of Australia in 1922**

Margaret Allen

### **Introduction**

On 1 June 1922, Srinivasa Sastri PC landed in Perth, Western Australia, to begin his tour of Australia. His brief was to persuade the Australian people and governments (federal and state) to accord ‘full citizenship’ to Indian residents. This meant enfranchisement for both state and federal elections, and the freedom to enter any occupation and to own property. During his tour he did not address the contentious issue of the White Australia policy. Sastri, an official guest of the Commonwealth, was greeted in Fremantle by the acting premier of Western Australia and by a representative of the Department of the Prime Minister who was to accompany him on his tour. This official recognition was rather ironic given the ferocity with which both federal and state governments sought to defend the White Australia project as a central plank of Australian policy and identity.

Sastri’s ensuing tour, which was to encompass most states and last until 11 July, offered Australians and their elected representatives the opportunity to become more open towards the aspirations of Indians for social and civic equality within Australia. This brief arose from the 1921 Imperial Conference in London, a gathering of premiers of the British Empire with

the British Government, where Sastri was a participant with the Indian delegation. It was agreed that his visit to Australia would be followed by similar visits to New Zealand and Canada; South Africa was the only white dominion to refuse to accept the mission.

As Sastri left India, his mission to the white dominions was endorsed by the viceroy, making him one of the first Indian diplomats and certainly the first to visit Australia.<sup>1</sup> During his six weeks journey he encountered Australians from all levels of society, addressed numerous meetings and met with state premiers and Cabinet ministers. He addressed the Australian Parliament in Melbourne, conferred with Prime Minister Billy Hughes and his Cabinet and spoke at a parliamentary dinner on 27 June. The tour and Sastri's speeches were reported extensively and, in general, in a positive manner in the press; yet, until very recently, his visit has received little scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines Sastri's tour and its significance and the level of its success in the light of contemporary struggles around race, colonialism and the campaign of Indians around the empire for imperial citizenship. While this story is very much an Australian one, it must also be told in the wider framework of transnational colonial and imperial histories. The chapter argues that, in many ways, this tour was an almost futile gesture and it only slowly led to some changes to the circumstances of Indians resident in Australia. The changes Sastri sought were relatively minor and related to the small and decreasing Indian community in Australia. The fact that any changes were slow and grudgingly granted exemplifies the power of the White Australia policy during this period. Prime Minister Hughes's apparent commitment to 'full citizenship' for Indians resident in Australia was rather illusory. Many of the changes needed were in the domain of state governments, which, like the federal government and general public, had a firm and stubborn commitment to the White Australia policy. Hughes believed that 'no Govt. (sic) could live for a day in Australia, if it tampered

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1 Kama Maclean, *British India, White Australia: Overseas Indians, Intercolonial Relations and the Empire* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2020), 145–6; Vineet Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost: India's First Diplomats and the Narrative of Foreign Policy', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45, no. 2 (2017): 1–47, doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2017.1294283; A. T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 137–40.

2 Maclean, *British India, White Australia*, 148ff; Vineet Thakur, *India's First Diplomat: V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and the Making of Liberal Internationalism* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), 105–21, doi.org/10.46692/9781529217698; Vineet Thakur, 'Colonial Subjects as Hegemonic Actors: V.S. Srinivasa Sastri's 1922 Public Diplomacy Tour of British Dominion Territories', in *The Frontiers of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Colin Alexander (London: Routledge, 2021), 78–95, doi.org/10.4324/9780429325120-5.

with a White Australia'.<sup>3</sup> Hughes's authority in the federal sphere was waning: he would lose office in February 1923 and, in any case, had no power over state governments' policies. While Sastri could raise issues relating to the small number of Indian residents, it was not possible for him to broach the larger issue of the restriction of Indian immigration to Australia.

Sastri was an excellent public speaker, logical and formidable in his delivery and able to appeal to the best instincts of his audiences. He attracted considerable attention in the press and large numbers attended the meetings he addressed. While some may have begun to question received notions about India and perhaps to widen their understanding of India's place in the world, an important element of his appeal was that he was different – an exotic curiosity. His Australian audiences were not accustomed to paying respect 'to a brown skin and a turban'.<sup>4</sup> He was an Indian who came from a different world and could speak in the King's English with great understanding of the British Empire and British culture. Some of the reports on him were, frankly, orientalist and his appeals for fair play could be sloughed off as part of the entertainment he provided.

There was a section of the press, largely representing the labour movement, that was deeply suspicious of Sastri's agenda and, despite protestations to the contrary, were convinced that he aimed to overturn the White Australia policy and thus undermine the Australian way of life. That any improvement to the conditions of Indians resident in Australia came after his visit must largely be laid at the feet of the resident Indians who agitated for it; the continued representations of other delegates visiting from India and the Government of India; and those few, more imperially minded, Australians who valued imperial connections over the narrow concerns of the White Australia policy and white solidarity within the empire.

## The Circumstances Leading to Sastri's Tour of Australia

When Sastri arrived, he was the first Indian to come to Australia as a representative of the Government of India. Other Asian governments had previously sent representatives. Indeed, in 1887, the Chinese imperial

3 Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001), 319.

4 A.G. Stephens, 'Indians in Australia', *Northern Champion* (Taree), 29 July 1922, 2.

commissioners visited,<sup>5</sup> in 1896 the Japanese Government established a consulate in Townsville and, in 1906, the Chinese commissioner, His Excellency the Prefect Hwang Hon Cheng, came to Australia as a representative of the Chinese Government to again investigate the position of the Chinese in Australia. Sastri came as representative of the British colonial government in India. His visit was, in a sense, symbolic of the changed position of India within the British Empire as the result of World War I. Indeed, 'India entered the emerging international system at the end of the First World War as a "quasi-international" actor, via the British Commonwealth'.<sup>6</sup>

That war had seen Britain heavily reliant on the manpower provided by India. India gave 552,000 combatants, 392,000 non-combatants and incurred 106,594 human casualties (and lost 1,750,000 animals). Indian Government war expenditure was £24,700,000 and other cash from India, including from the wealthy and generous rulers of the princely states, amounted to £2,524,000.<sup>7</sup> Given this, Indian political leaders had urged the British Government to share power with the Indian people and grant India a seat at Imperial Conferences. Edwin Montagu, secretary of state for India (1917–22), was one of the British leaders who understood the vital importance of making a generous gesture to India.<sup>8</sup> In August 1917, the British Government set India upon a new path, announcing 'the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'.<sup>9</sup> India was not given dominion status equivalent to the white dominions like Canada and Australia, but was given representation at the Imperial War Cabinet and the Imperial War Conferences of 1917 and 1918. Typically this representation included a British official, a representative of the Indian princely states and a moderate Indian politician.

The particular aspect of foreign policy these Indian representatives, in particular the moderate Indian politicians, directed their energies towards was improving the position of Indians living around the empire. The viceroy and Indian Government were quite supportive of this direction. Indian nationalists were concerned to advocate the rights of Indians to

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5 Marilyn Lake, 'The Chinese Empire Encounters the British Empire and Its "Colonial Dependencies": Melbourne, 1887', in *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, ed. Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 98, doi.org/10.1163/9789004288553\_005.

6 Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost', 2.

7 Ibid., 4.

8 Hugh Tinker, *Separate and Unequal India and the Indians in the British Commonwealth 1920–1950* (London: Hurst, 1976), 31.

9 Ibid.

participate in political life within India and, ultimately, to some form of self-government. But they were also committed to pursuing the rights of Indians domiciled around the empire and to seeing the promise of equality under British law fully realised. The restrictive policies of South Africa were the chief focus of the nationalists' ire. However, the other white dominions also failed to accord the legal rights of British subjects to Indian subjects of the Crown. Thus, Australia, with the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, had instituted the White Australia policy, which prevented new immigrants from the subcontinent travelling to Australia. In Canada in 1914, hundreds of Indians on the *Komagata Maru* were refused entry and the vessel was forced to return to Kolkata.

Indian representatives at the Imperial War Cabinet wanted both recognition of their right to free movement around the empire as well as social and political equality for Indians domiciled in various locations across the empire. The white dominions, however, were determined to control immigration to their shores. In 1917–18, the Liberal Lord Sinha represented India at these conferences along with the Maharaja of Bikaner and a British official. At the 1917 conference, Lord Sinha moved a motion 'calling for reciprocity between India and the dominions with regard to the question of immigration'.<sup>10</sup> This meant that the white dominions and India could regulate their immigration policies. The motion was passed unanimously. This saw India 'waiving her claim to free entry into the Dominions ... [while she] hoped to secure a fair treatment for Indians who were already domiciled there'.<sup>11</sup> Sinha appended a list of grievances of the Indian diaspora, but it had little force. By the time of the 1918 conference, Sinha sought to be more forceful and specific, given that the white dominions had done little to address the grievances listed and, indeed, South Africa had added to them. However, the conference resolved 'that each dominion had the right to determine the composition of its population through immigration restrictions'.<sup>12</sup> This meant that Australia, for example, could continue to deny entry to Indians who were British subjects.<sup>13</sup> Having been forced to leave immigration restrictions off the table, Indian representatives now pursued equal civil and political rights for those Indians resident in the dominions.

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10 Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost', 8.

11 Indian Government report, quoted in Maclean, *British India, White Australia*, 144.

12 Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost', 9.

13 Peter Prince, 'Aliens in Their Own Land. "Alien" and the Rule of Law in Colonial and Post-Federation Australia' (PhD thesis, The Australian National University, 2015), 121, [openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/101778](https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/101778).

By the time of the next Imperial Conference in 1921, there had been little advance of this resolution. Australia, in line with the 1918 resolution, had developed a scheme to allow resident Indians to apply to bring a wife and minor children to reside with them in Australia, and had agreed to legislate to allow Indian residents access to old age and invalid pensions.<sup>14</sup> However, this had not been legislated, and, in any case, any advances were usually delayed by 'administrative obfuscation'.<sup>15</sup> Sastri was one of the Indian representatives at the conference, along with the Maharao of Cutch and Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India. Sastri pointed out that while Indian representatives had conceded in 1918 'that each Dominion should be free to regulate the composition of its population by suitable immigration laws',<sup>16</sup> the 'full rights of citizenship'<sup>17</sup> should be accorded to Indians legally settled in the dominions. Sastri moved a resolution along these lines (a 'Resolution on Equality of Citizenship in the British Dominions') 'to remove the disabilities of Indians properly domiciled in these dominions as soon as possible'. There was a great deal of canvassing by Sastri and Montagu on one side, and on the other by Smuts, the prime minister of South Africa, who sought 'white solidarity'<sup>18</sup> from the other white dominions. As Rao puts it: 'The crux of the question was Empire solidarity versus white solidarity in the Empire.'<sup>19</sup> The putting of the resolution was delayed a number of times until Sastri threatened to resign from the conference if it were not put to the vote. It was passed, with Smuts adding the reservation that South Africa could not accept it 'in view of the exceptional circumstances of the greater part of the Union'.<sup>20</sup> However, while reserving South Africa, Smuts had agreed to the general principle of equality in the empire. Sastri had isolated him in the conference, adding his own reservation to the resolution regretting the South African position and hoping 'that by negotiation between the Governments of India and South Africa, some way can be found, as soon as may, to reach a more satisfactory position'.

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14 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): 918 INDI 16, Part 1 'India - Equal Rights to Indians in Australia and Territories' 1917-1923; A. T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia: The Background to Exclusion 1896-1923* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 133.

15 Maclean, *British India, White Australia*, 136.

16 Pandurang Kodanda Rao, *The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri: A Political Biography* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1963), 99.

17 *Ibid.*, 100. See also Tinker, 46-51.

18 Rao, *The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, 100.

19 *Ibid.*, 101.

20 *Ibid.*, 102.

The Sastri resolution on equal citizenship was 'the first time that the rule of unanimity of Imperial Conference resolutions was broken in favour of a majority vote'.<sup>21</sup> It was India, 'a subordinate branch of the British Government', that had isolated Smuts, breaching the white racial bonhomie within the empire.<sup>22</sup> Further, Sastri got on the record his suggestion that India and South Africa should negotiate directly, a tacit recognition of India as an independent actor, rather than merely a colonial subsidiary.

With the passing of the Sastri resolution at the 1921 Imperial Conference, the leaders of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada – at Sastri's suggestion – invited him to make a tour of their countries 'to plead the cause of the Indian therein and to create public opinion favourable to the resolution'.<sup>23</sup> It was a curious invitation, given that the premiers should themselves have taken on this task. Sastri was charged with persuading the general public of the dominions to recognise Indians' rights to 'full citizenship' and implicitly to their full humanity.

## Who Was V. S. Srinivasa Sastri PC?

Sastri's life and career were remarkable.<sup>24</sup> The son of a poor Brahman priest, he was born in 1869 and attended the Native High School in his hometown in the Madras Presidency where he excelled, qualifying for a free university education. Although he grew up in an orthodox household, he was nevertheless drawn to reform Hinduism and the Brahmo Samaj. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, gaining high honours in both Sanskrit and English. Financial restraints prevented him from continuing his education and studying law.<sup>25</sup> Instead, he taught at high schools before becoming principal of Hindu High School in Triplicane, Madras. There his interest in social questions grew and he took a leading role in the cooperative movement and was a sponsor of the liberal nationalist publication, *Indian Review*.<sup>26</sup>

21 Ibid., 103.

22 Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost', 15.

23 Rao, *The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, 121.

24 See Thakur, *India's First Diplomat*.

25 N. Raghunathan, 'Introduction', in *Speeches and Writings of The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri* (Madras: Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri Birth Centenary Committee, 1969), vol. 1, iv.

26 Rao, *The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, 5.

Attracted to working for the betterment of Indian society, Sastri gave up his high school position and joined the Servants of India Society in 1907. This select society, founded by the moderate nationalist reformer Gopal Gokhale in 1905, aimed to train 'national missionaries for the service of India in the secular field'.<sup>27</sup> Impelled by patriotism and notions of self-sacrifice for a greater good, Sastri took the membership vows, which involved the renunciation of personal fame and financial career goals. He gained wide experience in Indian politics, first attending the Indian National Congress in 1906 and assisting Gokhale in his roles as secretary of the Congress and as a member of the Indian Legislative Council. Upon Gokhale's death in 1915, Sastri was elected to succeed him as leader of the society. Committed to the gradual inclusion of Indians in the Government of India, in 1913 Sastri accepted the governor's nomination to a position in the Madras Legislative Council. Non-official members like Sastri were very much in a minority and their powers tightly circumscribed but he took the opportunity to 'ask questions, move recommendations to Government and speak on the budget' – or, as Raghunathan writes, 'ventilating grievances, securing minor remedies and educating public opinion'.<sup>28</sup> Sastri advocated the Indianisation of the public service and universal, compulsory and free education. He also promoted the scheme, advanced in 1916 by both the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, to pressure the British Government to accord more political power to India, so 'she should no longer occupy a position of subordination but one of comradeship'.<sup>29</sup> His publication *Self-Government for India under the British Flag* made the case for self-government 'on a par with the Dominions'.<sup>30</sup>

Sastri was a great enthusiast for the ideal of the British Empire but could also be a severe critic of British administration. He exposed the Indian Government's 'dis-ingenuous attempt to justify reservation of certain services for Europeans and Eurasians on the ground of their superior intelligence'.<sup>31</sup> And he made an 'excoriating denunciation of irresponsible and arbitrary government ... [in] his great speech on the Rowlatt Bill',<sup>32</sup> which ultimately passed as the *Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act 1919*, extending war time emergency policies of imprisonment without trial and preventative indefinite detention.

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27 Ibid., 6.

28 Ibid., 19; Raghunathan, 'Introduction', vol. 1, xi.

29 Rao, *The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, 24.

30 Ibid., 25.

31 Raghunathan, 'Introduction', vol. 1, xiii.

32 Ibid., vol. 1, xii.

Sastri's long political career and the extensive diplomatic experience he had recently gained well fitted him for the task of touring the dominions in 1922. At the Imperial Conference in 1921, Sastri was mixing in the highest level of British politics. He had worked closely with Montagu, the secretary of state for India, and with other leading figures, including Prime Minister Lloyd George. The Sastri resolution on equal citizenship had driven a wedge into the white majority at the conference. While in London, he was made a Privy Councillor and honoured with the Freedom of the City of London. In accepting the latter honour, he reiterated his ideal of racial equality, relating it, cleverly, as always, to the ideals of the British Empire and equating it with an Indian example:

On the highest authority the British Empire has been declared to be without distinction of any kind. Neither race, nor colour nor religion is to divide man from man as long as they are subjects of this Empire. As in the great temple of Jagannath in my country, where the Brahmin and outcaste, the priest and pariah, alike join in a common devotion and worship.<sup>33</sup>

He urged the British to share their 'great heritage of freedom, representative institutions, Parliamentary government and every form of human equality' and, in due time, to admit Indians 'to be full and equal partners in the glory of Empire and service of humanity'.<sup>34</sup>

Although not an independent nation, India was an original member of the League of Nations and Sastri was part of its delegation in Geneva in September 1921. He then proceeded as leader of the Indian delegation to the Limitation of Armaments Conference in Washington in November 1921. For the Government of India, Sastri appeared a safe choice as a 'native diplomat': with his moderate politics and perfect spoken English, he was 'a living tribute to the success of the civilizing mission'.<sup>35</sup> However, as Thakur argues, Sastri exercised some agency, navigating the arena open to him, namely India's anomalous status as a 'dominion-like colony' with 'dexterity, nuance and purpose'.<sup>36</sup>

It was reported in the Australian press that Sastri came as a result of an invitation by Prime Minister Hughes; however, as has been seen, this invitation arose out of the circumstances of the Imperial Conference. Sastri

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33 Rao, *The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, 106.

34 *Ibid.*, 107.

35 Thakur, 'Colonial Subjects', 79.

36 Thakur, *India's First Diplomat*, 12.

could not count upon Billy Hughes as an ally in his endeavours. Some accounts credit Hughes as being a supporter of the Indians at the 1921 Conference. Thus Cotton writes:

As a known and vocal champion of White Australia, Hughes nevertheless showed some sympathy with the position of the Indian spokesmen at the conference, even proposing in a draft resolution subsequently accepted by the conference that the Empire had a clear duty to recognise the rights of Indians to citizenship.<sup>37</sup>

However, correspondence between Sastri and his secretary Bajpai,<sup>38</sup> who accompanied him on the tour and at the Imperial Conference, shows Hughes's vacillation during the conference. Indeed, Hughes was caught between the notion of imperial solidarity and the need to maintain the White Australia policy, especially given the impending federal election.<sup>39</sup> It was reported that Hughes was eager for the resolution to be put so that Australia could support it. However, when it became clear that all save South Africa would support it, as Sastri reported, Hughes 'ruttet', and it was only with some revisions and the impassioned plea of Lloyd George that Hughes gave Australia's support.<sup>40</sup> Bajpai described the situation:

At the last moment Hughes defected. He said he could not isolate South Africa particularly as it might involve him in difficulties in Australia. He pleaded that he was afraid of the Chinese and Japanese. The Prime Minister [Lloyd George] however brought him round again. His was a most touching appeal – couched in language of seriousness, simplicity and true pathos. Idealism, even political idealism gains by moving expression. He raised the whole debate to a higher plane.<sup>41</sup>

Sastri and Bajpai soon formed a shrewd assessment of Hughes's ability to deliver any changes to the status of Indians he might promise. Bajpai noted:

He [Hughes] has only a majority of one in the House of Representatives. He has incurred the everlasting hostility of his former party, Labour. He has made many personal enemies, both

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37 James Cotton, 'William Morris Hughes, Empire and Nationalism: The Legacy of the First World War', *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 11 (2015): 109, doi.org/10.1080/1031461x.2014.995114.

38 G. S. Bajpai was, after independence, appointed as first secretary general of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.

39 Maclean, *British India, White Australia*, 142.

40 V. S. S. Sastri to Vamana Rao, 4 August 1921, letter no. 360, V. S. Srinivasa Sastri Papers, Correspondence Group IA, Indian National Archives (henceforth INA).

41 G. S. Bajpai to Dr Sapru [undated], enclosed in letter no. 360, V. S. S. Sastri to Vamana Rao, 4 August 1921, V. S. Srinivasa Sastri Papers, Correspondence Group IA, INA.

inside his party and outside. His autocratic ways have rendered him unpopular with a large section of the public ... Of course Mr Hughes has promised that if he comes back to power ... he would do what we want without consulting anybody.<sup>42</sup>

## Indians Resident in Australia

By the 1920s, there were only a relatively small number of Indians living in Australia: Yarwood estimates 3,150 in 1921.<sup>43</sup> These men had come as free immigrants to Australia during the late nineteenth century, generally to work as hawkers, labourers and canecutters. Many had adopted a sojourning practice, alternating long years spent in Australia with visits to homeland and family. These men valued their right as British subjects to free movement within the British Empire and protested strongly as Australian colonial governments introduced immigration restrictions during the 1890s and as the national government passed the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901.<sup>44</sup> Although their numbers declined with the restriction of ongoing immigration, they continued to protest against other restrictions upon their lives in Australia. Along with petitions to state governments, to the British Government and to the viceroy, Indians resident in Australia took action against the new range of discriminations in employment introduced by state governments. Thus, in 1904, Indians in South Australia joined with Chinese and Syrians in the United Asiatic League in protesting the Licensed Hawkers' Bill 1904, which aimed to deny hawkers' licences to those of Indian, Syrian, Chinese and Afghan backgrounds. Bhagat Singh, a merchant and spokesperson for the Indians, argued that it was discriminatory to make 'two laws for the subjects of one Power, applying especially to Indians, who are British subjects just the same as Australians'.<sup>45</sup>

In 1905, Indians in Western Australia joined in petition with local Chinese, Afghans and Japanese protesting against the recently passed *Factory Act*, which imposed harsh and discriminatory conditions upon workplaces where even a single 'Asiatic' was employed. The effect would be to diminish the hours such a business could operate and thus reduce its competitiveness.

42 Quoted by L. F. Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1915–1952* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1979), 507.

43 Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia*, 163.

44 Margaret Allen, "I Am a British Subject": Indians in Australia Claiming Their Rights, 1880–1940', *History Australia* 15, no. 3 (2018): 505ff, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2018.1485505.

45 'The Licensed Hawkers' Bill', *Advertiser*, 7 November 1904, 8.

As British subjects, these Indians argued that they were 'entitled to the privileges accorded their forefathers by the treaties under which the empire was founded' and contested the competence of the colonial legislature to 'interfere with those treaty rights'.<sup>46</sup>

In Queensland, between 1912 and 1919, Indians waged a campaign against the *Sugar Cultivation Act 1913*. This act involved a dictation test, similar to that required under the Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act. Indians legally domiciled in Australia could be denied work in the sugar industry. It was one of 18 acts passed by the Queensland Parliament between 1910 and 1938 restricting employment in a number of industries unless a person had a certificate showing that they could 'read and write from dictation not less than fifty words in any language determined by the relevant Minister or head of the particular organisation'.<sup>47</sup> The test was aimed at 'Asiatics'. Although exemptions were allowed for Indians and for Japanese already working in the industry, as the numbers of exemptions grew, white workers became more restive, exerting pressure on the state Labor government. When the government limited these exemptions, Indians in Queensland protested to the state government and state governor – and across the empire to the colonial secretary and India Office in London.<sup>48</sup> Pooran Dabee Singh, an Australian-born businessman, emphasised the injustice of Indians as comrades in the Allies' wartime struggles being so treated. In 1915, he noted that many Indians were currently 'serving the Empire' in the war, and that India was giving 'of her wealth and her people'.<sup>49</sup> While Germans, despite their homeland being Great Britain's bitter enemy, could work on the cane fields without restriction, Indians who were British subjects and due 'all the rights and privileges of citizenship' were debarred from such work, 'on account of their colour'.<sup>50</sup> When, in 1919, the government stopped issuing exemptions, the Indians took a test case, that of Addar Khan, who had been found working on a cane field without an exemption certificate, to the local Police Magistrate Court, then the Queensland Supreme Court and finally appealed (unsuccessfully) to the Privy Council.<sup>51</sup>

46 Petition from Western Australian traders, enclosure in no. 172, Correspondence 1897–1908 relating to the treatment of Asiatics in the Dominions, Colonial Office (hereafter CO) 886/1/3, National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK).

47 Prince, 'Aliens in Their Own Land', 218.

48 'Indians in Queensland', L/E/7/1246, File 2754/1921, India Office Records (hereafter IOR), British Library (hereafter BL).

49 'Indians Barred', *Brisbane Courier*, 30 August 1915, 4.

50 Ibid.

51 Treatment of Asiatics, CO 886/9/74, NAUK. Also 'Hindoos in the Canefields', *Queenslander*, 13 December 1919, 38.

Upon Sastri's arrival in Perth, members of the Indian community presented a list of grievances that had clearly come from some national consultation. They asked why Indians could not hold government positions; why they were not eligible for the old age pension when they paid rates and taxes; why they, as British subjects, could not hold a miner's right; and why they were not eligible to vote. Referring to the situation in Queensland, they asked why Indians could not work in the cane fields 'whilst Japanese, Chinese, Greeks, Germans and other aliens are allowed to do so?'<sup>52</sup>

In fact, the discriminations suffered by Indian residents varied across the country.<sup>53</sup> Although Indians in Perth raised the issue of the franchise in their appeal to Sastri, some Indians already enjoyed both the state and federal franchise. Indeed, Potts suggests that some 336 Indians were on the federal electoral roll in 1922.<sup>54</sup> Generally, these would be people who had the vote in their state at Federation and, thus, were eligible to be put on the federal roll. Indians were denied all voting rights in Western Australia and Queensland, and others who might have come onto a state roll in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania after Federation could not get onto the federal roll due to the particular interpretation of section 41 of Australia's Constitution.<sup>55</sup>

## Where Sastri Went

During his tour, Sastri met representatives of the Indian communities, state government premiers and Cabinet ministers, and was accorded civic receptions by lord mayors in Sydney, Adelaide and other state capitals. He consulted with leaders of the labour movement and political parties, and addressed numerous public meetings convened by groups such as the YMCA, Women's Non-Party Political Association, Royal Colonial Institute, Rotary Club, Student Representative Council of the University of Melbourne, Australian League of Nations Union, British Empire Union,

52 'Grievances', *West Australian*, 2 June 1922, 7.

53 See the list the Australian Government compiled of the 'Disabilities of Aliens and Coloured Persons within the Commonwealth and its Territories', NAA: A981 INDI 16, Part 1.

54 Annette Potts, "'I Am a British Subject, and I Can Go Wherever the British Flag Flies": Indians on the Northern Rivers of New South Wales during the Federation Years', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 83 (1997): 109. Being enfranchised in Australia was important to resident Indians and some kept their elector's right among important identity documents when they travelled back to India. See 'Gulab Singh application for permission to return to the Commonwealth', NAA: A1 1911/17264.

55 Pat Stretton and Christine Finimore, 'Black Fellow Citizens: Aborigines and the Commonwealth Franchise', *Australian Historical Studies* 25, no. 101 (1993): 521–35, doi.org/10.1080/10314619308595934.

Australian Student Christian Movement and Public Questions Society of the University of Sydney. He spoke at the Trades Hall in Melbourne, to the Millions Club in Sydney, was a guest of the Commonwealth Club in Adelaide and the Australian Club in Melbourne, and spoke to students at Melbourne's Scotch College. He met with Indian residents and consulted leading public servants, addressed the Australian Parliament in Melbourne, and conferred with Prime Minister Hughes and his Cabinet. A Commonwealth parliamentary dinner was held in his honour. Sastri followed up particular issues raised by Indian residents – thus Bajpai interviewed the secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Home and Territories about anomalies with the administration of regulations relating to the admission on passports of Indian merchant, student and tourist travellers.<sup>56</sup>

## Sastri's Message

In his speeches, Sastri constructed a commonality based upon what he saw as the esteemed values of the British Empire, the English language and shared wartime experiences. He was a renowned speaker, dubbed 'the Silver-tongued orator'. The following description of the British Empire gives some idea of his rhetorical style:

Imperfect as it was, pressing as it did on the people, in many ways, deaf, as it seemed to be at times to the cries of the people: still on the whole, judged in its good and in its bad aspects, the British Empire stood as the custodians of human liberty, individual and communal: it stood for the ideal of even-handed justice, for the ideal of universal law and jurisprudence, gloriously neglectful of personalities; it stood for the principles of progress, political, commercial and economic, and for every form of equality between man and man, and above all, more than any other known political organization, it had attempted the task of reconciling different races to one another, and – he would not say it had quite succeeded – had made an earnest attempt to weld together the East and West.<sup>57</sup>

Referring to the old age pension and the franchise, Sastri noted:

My request for equity applies only to those Indians who, for long years, have been resident in the country ... I suggest it would be invidious to treat us as an inferior people.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> 'Dr. Sastri Visit to Australia', NAA: A1, 1923/7187.

<sup>57</sup> *Adelaide Observer*, 10 June 1922, 30.

<sup>58</sup> 'India's Claims', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 June 1922, 4.

He appealed to his audiences' better instincts:

Knowing the great enthusiasm, which Australian people felt for peace, equality and brotherhood and knowing the broad-based and justice-loving democracy upon which Australia was founded, it would be unfair if he entertained any other anticipations than those of brotherly and honourable treatment.<sup>59</sup>

The Imperial Conference of 1918 had agreed 'that each dominion had right to determine the composition of its population through immigration restrictions',<sup>60</sup> and Sastri was careful not to place the issue of immigration restrictions on the agenda, although, when pressed, he shared his own view that the White Australia policy was 'somewhat inconsistent with the integrity of the British Empire'.<sup>61</sup>

He was often asked about Gandhi and his growing movement, and while he had been a colleague of Gandhi in the Indian National Congress for some years and both were devoted to the memory of Gokhale, as a Liberal he disagreed with the methods of the non-cooperation movement and distanced himself from it. He claimed, 'Careful observers are of the opinion that the Gandhi movement is not likely to raise its head again'.<sup>62</sup> He was praised as moderate and restrained, rather than as a dangerous firebrand like Gandhi.

## How Successful Was Sastri's Visit?

Sastri's speeches and his visit were widely reported in the Australian press. Most of this was positive, with headlines such as 'A Striking Personality',<sup>63</sup> 'Distinguished Delegate',<sup>64</sup> 'Stirring Speeches' and a 'Remarkable Address'.<sup>65</sup> It was reported that he gave: 'A speech Miltonic in dignity of phrasing and charged with rare eloquence'.<sup>66</sup> Some of his speeches were reproduced at great length. Sastri felt he was lionised in Australia, writing to his daughter:

59 *Advertiser*, 8 June 1922, 10.

60 Thakur, 'Liberal, Liminal and Lost', 9.

61 *West Australian*, 2 June 1922, 7.

62 'Political India: The Gandhi Movement', *Brisbane Courier*, 21 June 1922, 9.

63 'Striking Personality', *Age*, 13 June 1922, 6.

64 'Distinguished Delegate', *Argus*, 10 June 1922, 6.

65 'The New India Grievance Specialists, A Remarkable Address', *West Australian*, 3 June 1922, 9.

66 'The New India', *West Australian*, 3 June 1922, 9.

They treated me very well in Australia. Everywhere the best hotels. Special carriages on the railways ... Ministers to escort and look after me; grand banquets and receptions; crowded meetings; giddy applause; photographs, interviews, autographs.<sup>67</sup>

When Sastri departed from Sydney in July 1922, Prime Minister Hughes wrote him a letter indicating that legislation would be introduced to grant the old age pension to Indian residents. Regarding the franchise, Hughes indicated that Sastri's visit had 'brought within the range of practical policies a reform which but for your visit would have been most improbable, if not impossible of achievement'.<sup>68</sup> In his fulsome letter, Hughes continued:

You have achieved wonders, and in my opinion removed for all time those prejudices, which formerly prevented the admission of your countrymen resident in Australia to the enjoyment of the full rights of citizenship.<sup>69</sup>

Leaders of the federal Country Party and the ALP gave Sastri 'assurances of sympathy and support', and some state premiers suggested they would abolish disabilities affecting Indian residents.<sup>70</sup>

Accordingly, Sastri felt his tour was a success. He admired Australian egalitarianism, its democratic spirit and its prosperity. He reported: 'The Indians say they already feel several inches taller, while the whites declare their eyes have been opened.'<sup>71</sup> He felt the Indians he met fared quite well in Australia:

Nearly all look prosperous and even when economic prejudice operates to their detriment, the remuneration for manual labour for each man is seldom less than 12 shillings per day. Of social prejudice I saw little trace. A good many Indians have married Australian wives from whom they have children and live in friendship and harmony with their neighbours. I visited a few families and was assured by the wives that they suffered from no social disabilities.<sup>72</sup>

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67 Sastri to his daughter Rukmini, 8 July 1922, in *Letters of the Rt Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, ed. T. N. Jagadisan, 2nd ed. (London: Asian Publishing House, 1963), 95.

68 *Report by the Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, P.C., Regarding His Deputation to the Dominions of Australia, New Zealand and Canada* (Simla: Government Central Press, 1923), NAA: A1 1923/7187 (Dr Sastri visit to Australia).

69 Ibid.

70 Maclean, *British India, White Australia*, 152.

71 Sastri to his daughter Rukmini, 8 July 1922, *Letters of the Rt Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*, 95.

72 *Report by the Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*.

Sastri had 'no doubt that my visit will lead to my countrymen being admitted, at an early date, to full citizenship rights'.<sup>73</sup>

But the labour movement and press were suspicious of Sastri, if not openly hostile. Although Sastri often stated that 'no infringement ... is contemplated to the White Australia Policy'<sup>74</sup> and that 'the government of India stood by the reciprocity resolution of 1918', his motives were constantly under suspicion; his 'mission was to the end criticised in certain circles as an insidious attempt to seek a revision of the policy'.<sup>75</sup> *Smith's Weekly* published articles with the headlines: 'What's Sastri's Game?', 'Indian Tiger on the Prowl', 'In Australia with Sheathed Claws', 'An Enemy Invited by W. M. Hughes',<sup>76</sup> and 'Sastri's Poison – A Fatal Dose for White Australia. Will Hughes Administer It?'<sup>77</sup>

A Queensland Labor senator, J. V. McDonald, was very outspoken, declaring: 'Labour with its immovable White Australia ideal, has its hawkeye on the Sastri tour.' He saw Sastri as dangerous:

[not standing] for the workers or democracy of his own country, he is one of the Indian ruling class who would be very ready to help the Barwells to get cheap and servile coloured labour for Northern Australia.<sup>78</sup>

McDonald was not deceived by Sastri's apparent enthusiasm 'for the removal of the minor political or industrial disabilities of a few hundred or thousands of Indians living in other countries' while ignoring the 'wrongs of workers in India'. Rehearsing familiar claims made by the upholders of White Australia, he denounced the spectre of 'coolie labour', which he predicted would see Australian wages plummet. Then there was the danger of Australia becoming a 'second America', as increased migration from Asia 'would speedily bring to Australia the bitter racial conflicts, lynchings and outrages of South-Eastern United States'.<sup>79</sup>

73 *Evening News*, 5 July 1922, 8.

74 'India's Claims', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 June 1922, 4.

75 *Report by the Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri*.

76 *Smith's Weekly*, 7 June 1922.

77 *Ibid.*, 15 July 1922.

78 'Snivelling Sastri, Labour Not Deceived by "Nigger Democrat"', *Smith's Weekly*, 29 July 1922, 25. Sir Henry Barwell, premier of South Australia, had been advocating for 'coloured labour' for the Northern Territory.

79 *Ibid.*

In September 1922, Hughes's letter to Sastri was published in the Australian press and many in the labour movement seized upon this as a sign of Hughes's betrayal of the White Australia policy. Labor was implacably opposed to Hughes, who had defected from the ALP. He was despised as a 'Labor rat'. James Scullin, referring to 'this very extraordinary letter', asked if the concessions were a forerunner of 'the policy of admitting these people freely into Australia'.<sup>80</sup>

Hughes lost office and was succeeded by Stanley Bruce in February 1923. Later that year, Sastri's report was published in India, but nothing was done about the assurances given to him. A group of elderly Indians sought to maintain pressure on the Australian Government about the old age pension; their advocate, James Kavanagh, met with the Cabinet secretary in mid-1924, but to little avail.<sup>81</sup>

The impasse was somewhat broken when a hawker, Mitta Bullosh, a long-term resident in Victoria, challenged his ineligibility for the federal franchise. According to Kama Maclean, Sastri's visit 'helped to reinvigorate a sense of entitlement of citizenship in the Indian community'.<sup>82</sup> Maclean sees the interventions of F. E. Bateman, Bullosh's solicitor, as being crucial in terms of converting the promises made to Sastri into legislative amendments.<sup>83</sup> However, while Bateman may have been influential, it is important to remember that, like a number of Indians in Australia, Bullosh had a history of actively seeking rights in Australia. At Federation he had instructed his solicitor in Chiltern to seek his naturalisation, only to be told this was not necessary as he was a British subject.<sup>84</sup> After a number of years, Bullosh sought to be entered on the Victorian state electoral roll, but when asked whether he was 'naturalized or a natural-born subject', he withdrew his request.<sup>85</sup>

In August 1924, possibly with Bateman's encouragement, Bullosh enrolled to vote in Victorian state elections, but his application to have his name added to the federal roll was rejected. The appeal was heard at the Melbourne Court of Petty Sessions in September 1924 before Police Magistrate Cohen, Bateman arguing against a barrister instructed by the

80 'Mr Hughes Letter to Mr Sastri', *Daily Herald*, 22 September 1922, 4.

81 NAA: A981/INDI 16, Part 2, Rights and Disabilities of Indians in Australia, 1921-1935.

82 Maclean, *British India, White Australia*, 154.

83 *Ibid.*, 156.

84 NAA: A712/1, 1901/N848, Mutta [*sic*] Bullosh, naturalization 1901.

85 NAA: A406 E1925/373, Enrolment of Asiatics, Mitta Bullosh case.

Crown solicitor. Cohen upheld Bullosh's appeal, declaring that his decision was influenced by a statement Justice Higgins had made in the case of Jiro Muramats, a Japanese pearler resident in Western Australia who had also sought the federal franchise.<sup>86</sup> It is possible that Bateman and Cohen were among those whites whose eyes had been opened by Sastri's arguments.

The Australian Government considered appealing Cohen's ruling, but Sir John Latham MHR QC advised Prime Minister Stanley Bruce to reflect upon 'the political aspects of this matter in view of the public statements made by Mr Hughes to Sastri and by yourself'. Latham, a 'supporter of imperial links', cautioned that to continue with the appeal was 'a grave political error, from both an Australian and an Imperial point of view'.<sup>87</sup> The government decided not to appeal the magistrate's decision and paid Bullosh's costs of £70.<sup>88</sup> This meant that Mitta Bullosh and other Indians who sought to be enrolled on the federal roll, like William Fazldad, Nabob Khan and Charles Babakhan in New South Wales, and Charles Sanassee in South Australia, were then able to do so.<sup>89</sup>

This legal decision had the potential to allow other British subjects, such as Indigenous Australians and Chinese residents in Australia, to be added to the federal roll. Perhaps to forestall this, the Australian Government amended the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* in 1925, allowing 'natives of British India' who met certain residency requirements and some naturalised 'Asiatic' Australians, but not other non-Europeans, to be on the federal roll.<sup>90</sup> The following year, another amendment allowed Indians access to the old age

86 D. C. S. Sissions, 'Muramats, Jiro (1878–1943)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, 1986, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/muramats-jiro-7689.

87 NAA: A981/INDI 16, Part 2.

88 Ibid.

89 NAA: A460 E1925/373, Enrolment of Asiatics, Mitta Bullosh case.

90 Jennifer Norberry and George Williams, 'Voters and the Franchise: The Federal Story', Research Paper 17 (Australia: Department of the Parliamentary Library, Information and Research Services, 2001–2). As the authors note on p. 20, after the 1925 amendment, section 39(5) of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* read:

No aboriginal native of Australia, Asia, Africa, or the Islands of the Pacific (except New Zealand) shall be entitled to have his name placed on or retained on any roll or to vote at any Senate election or House of Representatives election unless:

- a. he is so entitled under section forty-one of the *Constitution*;
- b. he is a native of British India;
- c. he is a person to whom a certificate of naturalization has been issued under a law of the Commonwealth or of a State and that certificate is still in force, or is a person who obtained British nationality by virtue of the issue of any such certificate.

pension and the invalid pension. Both were passed with Labor support, curiously attracting little controversy in parliament and were justified with references to the undertakings given to Sastri.

The electoral changes did not assist those Indians living in Queensland or Western Australia, which continued to deny them the state franchise. Despite Indians like Shar Mahomed of Silverspur, Queensland, writing to the prime minister to protest his exclusion,<sup>91</sup> and even though there were only around 300 Indians living in Queensland and Western Australia, neither state government would alter its position.

The matter was raised by various figures on a number of occasions, including by Leo Amery, secretary of state for dominion affairs; by Indian representatives who visited Australia with the Empire Parliamentary Delegation in 1926; at the opening of the Australian Parliament in Canberra in 1927; and at a meeting in London in 1930. Queensland finally amended its legislation in 1930 and Western Australia in 1934.

While Indians might have stood taller as a result of Sastri's visit, any actual improvement of their conditions was slow and hard fought. Peter Prince notes that amended regulations allowing Indians to work in the banana industry were conditional on the men being 'continuously ... domiciled' in Queensland, which could exclude any who spent some time visiting family in India. Moreover, 'even this type of limited exemption was not provided for British subjects of Indian origin for the purpose of the sugar industry, Queensland's most profitable agricultural undertaking'.<sup>92</sup> Other legal disabilities also lingered. Thus, in 1926, a Western Australian man complained to Gandhi's weekly paper *Young India* that he could not own land or get a miner's right: 'When Mr Sastri came to Australia he was only shown the show part got up for the occasion. They never told him the hardships we had to put up with.'<sup>93</sup> As late as 1940, Sher Ali in Western Australia still could not get a miner's licence.<sup>94</sup> In 1948 there were 10 regulations that prevented Indians working in a number of industries in Western Australia.<sup>95</sup>

91 NAA: A981/INDI 16, Part 2.

92 Prince, 'Aliens in Their Own Land', 243–44.

93 *Young India*, 20 May 1926.

94 'Indians in Australia 1928–1947', Collection 108 2A, L/P&J/8/189, IOR, BL; 'The Case of Sher Ali', *Sunday Times*, 17 December 1939, 4.

95 MacLean, *British India, White Australia*, 159.

## Conclusion

Sastri's tour of Australia was the first by an Indian representing the Indian Government. That Sastri, a colonial subject of the British Government in India, would come to Australia seeking the rights of full citizenship for Indians resident in Australia speaks to the awkward and in-between position India, as a 'dominion-like colony', occupied during the interwar period. The tour originated at the 1921 Imperial Conference, at which Sastri, an Indian representative, secured majority support for a Resolution on Equality of Citizenship in the British Dominions. His mission saw him informing political leaders and the public in Australia, as well as in New Zealand and Canada, about the justice of granting full citizenship rights to Indian residents. He appealed to his audiences' notions of fair play and always referred to the ideals of the British Empire as a touchstone.

Due to the restrictive White Australia policy, the Australian public had little knowledge of educated Indians and were amazed and enthralled to hear Sastri's eloquent addresses based on his deep understanding of British history and current events. It is difficult to assess how many among his audiences were persuaded to overcome deeply embedded racial ideas. For many, possibly most, the experience of listening to an erudite address delivered by a man with 'brown skin and a turban', while diverting, did not alter their support of the White Australia policy. Indeed, the White Australia policy continued to receive wide support across the nation and remained central to Australia's national identity until late in the twentieth century.

Although Sastri studiously avoided discussing the restrictive immigration policy, his visit was constantly criticised by the labour press and some Labor leaders as being a precursor to the opening up of the country to Indian immigrants. Sastri's discussions with political leaders at state and federal levels led to a number of assurances and even to fulsome praise. However, once he departed Australia's shores, such promises soon receded down the list of political priorities. Prime Minister Hughes lost office shortly after Sastri's visit and any moral imperative he may have felt to honour such promises disappeared with him. In any case, many of the changes needed were under state jurisdiction and, thus, were subject to the whims of local political leaders with little commitment to more generous interpretations of imperial citizenship and fraternity.

A number of studies point to changes to the federal franchise and to the granting of the old age pension to Indian residents; however, it is important to note that such changes came about as a consequence of continued pressure and activism on the part of Indian residents and their supporters, not (just) Sastri's visit. Further, while some of the changes Sastri sought were eventually made, they were achieved slowly and rather grudgingly. Indeed, some were not made until after World War II. Maclean suggests that Sastri's visit reinvigorated 'a sense of entitlement in the Indian community'. It took Mitta Bullosh's legal action in 1924 (successfully appealing the registrar's rejection of his application for federal enfranchisement) to prompt the Australian Government to deal with the issue of Indian British subjects who were on some state rolls but excluded from the federal franchise. The enfranchisement of Indians in Queensland and Western Australia took much longer, finally being achieved some 12 years after Sastri departed Australian shores. Employment restrictions also lingered, especially in Queensland and Western Australia.

Indian access to pensions had been promised at the Imperial Conference in 1918 and again by Hughes in 1922. During this period, numerous elderly Indian men, some in their late eighties, had somehow to make their living without the aid of kin. These men had come to Australia before 1901 and some had been paying Australian taxes for up to 33 years.<sup>96</sup> Finally being entitled to the old age pension in 1926 would have been of great assistance to such men, but other disabilities endured. Thus, Kodanda Rao, who visited Australia in 1936, found that Indians still suffered disabilities in relation to other benefits such as the widow's pension and family endowment in New South Wales.<sup>97</sup> These remaining disabilities, Rao reported, were a 'humiliating insult to India, wholly gratuitous in the present situation'.<sup>98</sup>

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96 NAA: A981/INDI 16, Part 2.

97 'Notes on the Status of British Indians in Australia' by P. Kodanda Rao (c. 1936) Sastri papers Group III (b), Private no. 51 INA.

98 Ibid.

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