

**Amit Das Gupta.** *The Indian Civil Service and Indian Foreign Policy, 1923–1961.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021. xvi + 314 pp. \$160.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-138-06424-9.

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There has long been a voluminous literature on India's postindependence foreign policy. However, at least three recent developments have significantly leavened the scholarship on the subject. First, within the past decade, the Government of India has declassified significant numbers of documents pertaining to foreign policy decision-making and have placed them in the National Archives in New Delhi. Second, as a consequence, a number of able, young, and enterprising scholars have made deft use of these newly accessible documents. Their work has led to some reinterpretation of key events and turning points and have also provided more granular accounts of foreign policy decision-making at critical junctures. Finally, there has also been an effort on the part of a number of younger scholars to go beyond descriptive accounts of Indian decision-making. To that end, they have applied theoretical concepts and frameworks to the study of Indian foreign policy. These forays have started an incipient process of bringing the study of Indian foreign policy into the mainstream of foreign policy analysis. Owing to these three advances, the study of Indian foreign policy is undergoing a significant renewal.

It is against this intellectual backdrop that it is best to examine Amit Das Gupta's book, *The Indian*

*Civil Service and Indian Foreign Policy, 1923-1961.* At the outset, it is important to make clear that this is a work of meticulous scholarship. Most importantly, it draws on a range of primary and secondary sources ranging from multiple archives, diaries, memoirs, and newspapers. Furthermore, Das Gupta, a former Indian Foreign Service officer and now a research scholar at a German university, has also drawn extensively from a wealth of prior scholarship. He has then carefully melded his original research with the vast trove of earlier work on the subject.

The other striking feature of this work is its temporal focus. Even though India did not obtain independence until 1947, key members of the Indian Civil Service, who were in the employ of the British raj, nevertheless played a vital role in promoting the colony's interests in a range of countries as well at various international forums. To that end, Das Gupta focuses much of his discussion on the lives and roles of three key individuals with very different social backgrounds and personal dispositions who were nevertheless vital players in the foreign policy arena of pre-independence India.

The three stalwarts he dwells upon were Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai, Kumara Padmanabha

Sivasankara Menon, and Submal Dutt. Bajpai and Menon, to varying degrees, were to the manor born. Both of them hailed from well-heeled families and obtained much of their higher education in the United Kingdom. Bajpai, in particular, conformed to the colonial stereotype of the quintessential “brown Englishman.” As a loyal civil servant, he had little use for agitational nationalist politics and looked askance upon demands for self-determination and independence. Menon, however, did not quite share Bajpai’s Anglophilia. Of the three, Dutt, who hailed from more humble origins, was educated in India and had little or no use for much of the frippery that characterized the lives of colonial civil servants.

Apart from the focus on the lives of these three key individuals Das Gupta devotes a substantial section of the book to the issue of Indian expatriates in a number of other British colonies. Much of the time and effort of Indian civil servants were devoted to investigating and addressing their living and working conditions. Often their work brought them into conflict with intransigent colonial authorities in these far-flung areas. Local colonial administrators deemed that any steps to ameliorate the conditions of Indian expatriates, many of whom were indentured laborers, were intrusions on their authority.

The book then turns to a set of epochal events in the twentieth century and shows how Indian civil servants dealing with foreign affairs responded to them. In this context, for example, in the discussion of the outbreak of World War II, Das Gupta ably contextualizes his analysis with the historical record. To that end, he reminds readers that despite its abhorrence of both Nazism and Fascism, the principal nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, refused to support the war effort. Their demurral was entirely principled: the British colonial authorities had committed India to the war effort without consulting Indian elected representatives.

During the war as early as 1941, Bajpai was posted to Washington, DC, with the rank of minister and attached to the British Embassy. Soon enough he was to discover the ambiguity of his status, as he was not the representative of an independent country. The foreign secretary to the Government of India, Sir Olaf Caroe, placed significant constraints on Bajpai’s room for maneuver in diplomatic matters. Such restraints must have grated on Bajpai despite his chosen role as a loyal civil servant. In 1943, he finally displayed a streak of political independence when he explicitly called for India’s eventual move to dominion status and its right thereby to pursue an independent foreign policy.

Despite this seeming display of independence, Bajpai did not stray far from British directives. For example, in a speech he referred to the popular (if deeply misguided) Bengali nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, as a “Quisling who did not represent the heart or mind of the real India.” It is also worth noting that Bajpai appeared to have imbibed British upper-class prejudices about Americans. In a number of his dispatches, he roundly criticized Americans for their “self-righteous ... idealism” and an apparent tendency to subject questions of foreign relations to the imperatives of domestic politics (p. 161).

It is worth noting that unlike Bajpai, K. P. S. Menon, while also remaining a faithful civil servant, seemed to have a more independent cast of mind. His diaries, which Das Gupta has effectively culled, reveal his admiration for a number of Indian nationalists, and especially Jawaharlal Nehru. Also, unlike Bajpai, he had little or no time for Indians who emulated the British. On matters of policy, his views reflected considerable nuance. While lamenting the decision of the Congress not to support the war effort, he nevertheless blamed the British for their failure to commit to granting India freedom in a postwar world. He also displayed a remarkably astute understanding of

China and the possible problem that the status of Tibet might pose in future Sino-Indian relations.

Beyond his discussion of the role and views of these key personalities, Das Gupta also demonstrates a remarkable grasp of the minutiae of British colonial policies. To that end he notes the important differences in the policy positions that various British colonial officials held at crucial moments.

The final section of the book deals with the role of the same key individuals in the wake of India's independence. All of them, as scholars and analysts of Indian foreign policy know well, made successful transitions from serving the British colonial regime to the postindependence Indian Foreign Service. Even before independence arrived, Menon was one of the Indian delegates to the San Francisco Conference, which would lead to the creation of the United Nations. At this meeting, Menon, Das Gupta notes, saw the Soviet delegates and their policy positions with remarkable clarity and dispassion. As he writes: "There were neither traces of the instinctive disgust felt by so many British and Indian officials and politicians nor the whitewashing so characteristic for leftists all over the world, including Nehru or V. K. Krishna Menon" (p. 196).

As independence approached, Nehru asked Bajpai to leave Washington and return to New Delhi. Bajpai, who had never really warmed to the United States in any case and had been excluded from the Indian delegation to the San Francisco Conference, was eager to leave to move. Ideally, Das Gupta informs us, he would have liked a posting in Paris, his favorite city in Europe. Recalling Bajpai was somewhat ironic as Nehru had initially hoped to rid independent India of the Indian Civil Service, which he had seen as a colonial appendage. However, the exigencies of governance, which required a substantial cadre of trained bureaucrats, forced him to consider otherwise.

Not surprisingly, once again, Bajpai, with his long years of service, came to the fore. Despite his

colonial service he quickly ingratiated himself to Nehru. Accordingly, before being appointed the governor of Bombay as his health declined, he served as the first secretary general of the Ministry of External Affairs.

In one of the last chapters of the book, Das Gupta discusses the onerous task that the country faced in setting up its diplomatic service. A paucity of trained personnel, interpersonal disputes, and the demands of global representation all taxed the nascent government. Even trusted individuals who had previous experience with diplomacy—for example, Nehru's sister, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, who was made the first ambassador to the Soviet Union—proved inadequate to the task.

This book can best be summed up as one that evinces a remarkable attention to historical detail, provides nuanced political judgments, and covers a time span that few historians, let alone political scientists, have traversed. Consequently, Das Gupta's careful scholarship has addressed a critical lacuna in the extant literature on Indian foreign policy making.

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