Despatch from the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, M. Peterson, to Prime Minister, C. Atlee: record of a conversation with the Indian Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit[[1]](#footnote-1), dated 6 January 1948

Sir,

[1.] The Indian Ambassador, Mrs. Pandit, returned from New York and India around Christmas on the special Dakota which had taken Mr. Novikov down to New Delhi. She complains that the Russians were unwilling to fly for more than four hours a day with the result that six hours were spent on the journey, mostly at places where the accommodation available was very primitive […]

3. I asked Mrs. Pandit what she hoped to achieve in Moscow and her reply may be summarised somewhat as follows. In the first place the Government of India wishes to secure a period of tranquillity vis-à-vis all her neighbours for the prolonged period which will be necessary to fulfil in all its implication the transfer of power. In the second place the Government of India felt compelled to pay some attention to the small but persistent body of Communist opinion within India. Mrs. Pandit explained that the present Government might fairly be described as a Right Wing one although her brother, the Prime Minister[[2]](#footnote-2), himself stood towards the Left. There was small tolerance of Communists. But at the same time there was an uneasy feeling that the Communist minority was beginning to be mischievous. Its hand could be traced in recent strikes and disturbances and it seemed worthwhile to neutralise it by cultivating friendly relations with that power, namely the Soviet Union, to which the Indian Communists might be inclined to turn. The Indian Communists, Mrs. Pandit went on, were mostly of the student type and were narrow in their outlook and especially compared with the Chinese Communists of whom Mrs. Pandit appears to hold a high opinion. But they could not be safely ignored.

4. Beyond this the Government of India hopes to establish mutually profitable commercial relations and to conclude in due course a commercial agreement with the Soviet Union. The Indians wanted wheat above everything: in return they could offer oil seed, jute, cotton and tea. Jute now came mainly from Pakistan but India had still enough to offer to meet what Mrs. Pandit is convinced is an urgent need in the Soviet Union […]

6. More generally, Mrs. Pandit went on, India sought a closer relationship with the Soviet Union because she felt that she had much to learn from a society which had only recently advanced beyond the stage to which India had herself by now attained. From this point of view it was hopeless for India to try to learn from America which was so far more developed. Mrs. Pandit gave as an instance of what she had in mind the spreading of health services throughout the countryside in the Soviet Union. I told her that her difficulty here would to get permission for any enquirers to travel. This she recognises and has indeed herself already been refused tickets for the Volga boat services on the score that such tickets are not issued to holders of diplomatic passports.

[…]

Maurice Peterson

Commentary by T.S. Tull[[3]](#footnote-3), dated 6 January 1948, on the recent despatch from the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, M. Peterson, to Prime Minister, C. Atlee: record of a conversation with the Indian Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 6 January 1948

Views of the Indian Ambassador on Indo-Soviet relations on her return to Moscow

The real background to this despatch is the pro-Russian propaganda carried out inside India, as part of our official during war. This propaganda met with enormous success with all classes of Indians, particularly the student classes, who were being induced to take part in the war effort as technicians or fighting men, and before whom the example of Russia, who within 20 years had become a modern compact state, able to withstand a German onslaught, was placed. It is, therefore, only natural that the Government of India should feel it necessary to pay deference to the views of this section of the population.

Had Nehru failed to do this, he would have been playing into the hands of Jai Prakash Narlin[[4]](#footnote-4) and the extreme socialist Left-wing.

If conditions settle down in India, a commercial agreement between her and the Soviet Union will become a distinct probability. H.M.G. could only welcome this, and it is probably, as Sir M. Peterson points out, that the Americans would not be offended since it might reduce the call on their own supplies of wheat and other grain.

Significantly, the arrival of M. Novikov in India coincided with a renewed outbreak of Communist activity. The process of Communist infiltration in the trade unions has now reached an advanced stage, and the occurrence of strikes in Bombay, Calcutta and elsewhere indicate that the Communists are now trying out their new machinery. It remains to be seen whether the Government of India will appreciate the presence of M. Novikov, when he and his massive staff have lent their support and influence the Communist movement. Mrs. Pandit in her remarks in paragraph 6 appears still to be harbouring some illusions about the Communist system, but will not, I think, do so for long. […]

T. S. Tull

[TNA, FO 371/69738B]

Keywords: post-war Asia, post-war USSR

1. Pandit, Vijaya Lakshmi (1900 - 1990) - Indian diplomat and politician. Indian Ambassador to Moscow (1947 - 1949), Indian Ambassador to the United States and Mexico (1949 - 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nehru, Jawaharlal (1889 - 1964) - Indian independence activist and politician. First Prime Minister of India (1947 - 1964). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tull, Thomas Stuart (1914 - 1982) - British diplomat. Member of the Indian Civil Service (1938 - 1947), Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office (1947 - 1948), First Secretary at the British Legation, Berne (1948 - 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Probably Narayan, Jaiprakesh (1902 - 1979) - Left-wing Indian independence activist and politician. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)