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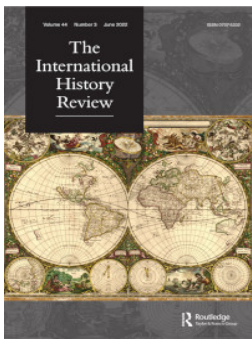
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Stirring Africa towards India: Apa Pant and the Making of Post-Colonial Diplomacy, 1948–54

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the making of independent India as an international actor through Apa Pant, a diplomat posted to East Africa in 1948—a time when India's interests there were fuzzy and potentially contradictory. Appointed while adrift professionally and desperate financially, Pant struggled to make sense of his role as a diplomat, to elaborate an “African policy” for India in the absence of firm guidance, and to juggle between professional, private and public life. He poured out these feelings in hundreds of frequent, unguarded, and often moving letters to his wife and family. Unusually for diplomats, who tend to leave behind carefully scripted and redacted writings, these letters form an emotional and experiential archive of diplomacy. Pant's experiences reveal what it meant to be a diplomat serving a newly independent nation trying to assert itself in the international order. Beyond the recent focus on ideas and institutions in India's international history, this article reveals Indian diplomacy as an embodied practice and effort of imagination, whose contours were negotiated not just in Delhi but in fledging missions by diplomats whose individual efforts to learn and adjust “the rules of the game” mirrored, and sometimes clashed, with those of the nation they represented.

KEYWORDS

diplomacy; India - foreign policy; India-Africa relations; decolonisation; East Africa

On 15 August 1948, one year to the day after India's independence, its brand-new High Commissioner for East Africa, a thirty-six-year-old man unexperienced in diplomacy, landed in Mombasa. His name was Apa Pant (1912-1992). The journey had allowed him to glimpse what lay ahead. The ship's passengers were East Africa in microcosm: African travellers, European missionaries and engineers, Punjabis, Goans, or Maharashtrians. Pant had spent his time wooing them. Friends made on board would become propagandists on land, he boasted. “But. Why am I doing all this”, he added. “I will talk ... of bettering the lot of humanity ... (yet) within me there is only doubt and despair and dissatisfaction.”¹

This uncertain young man would become one of India's most celebrated diplomats. In a few short years in the mid-1950s, Apa Pant prepared India for Bandung, liaised with Himalayan states, and helped negotiate the 1954 Sino-Indian agreement on peaceful coexistence. A string of ambassadorships followed: Indonesia, Norway, Egypt, Britain, ending with Italy in 1975. Above all, Pant remains associated with India's drive to champion African decolonisation and build Afro-Asian partnerships. Scholars associate his long tenure as High Commissioner for East and Central

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Africa (1948-54) with the heyday in India-Africa relations, a time when Indian “tutelage” of African nationalisms was most intense and most state-driven.² While less well-known than Nehru’s “evil genius” Krishna Menon or the ICS stalwarts who headed Indian diplomacy in the post-independence years, like Girja Shankar Bajpai or KPS Menon, Pant’s name conjures key narratives about Nehruvian India’s foreign policy.³

Yet East Africa was also Pant’s very first diplomatic post. As his misgivings upon touching African soil hint, beneath the ostensible diplomatic success-story lay a complex, unsettling set of experiences and emotions. Grasping this diplomatic inner world—specifically that of a “rookie” like Pant—offers new avenues to investigate the making of independent India as an international actor.

India’s international relations were once thought to begin with independence—the country landing on the world stage somehow fully formed, assertive, arresting and, for some, infuriating in equal measure. But India’s importance to the British Empire meant that its governance had always dealt with the international, especially after 1918. As winners and losers met at Versailles, India took its place among them. When the League of Nations and the UN were founded, India was there too. Together with supervising trade and overseas Indians, participation in international fora produced a small diplomatic cadre of Trade Agents or Consuls. Often embedded within British embassies, these envoys were British or, when not, removed from the political struggle against colonialism.⁴ Colonial India occupied the strange position of a “subordinate but systemically significant” actor in the international order.⁵

Then independence came. Many felt that India’s existing diplomatic practices and institutions were now insufficient, lacking, or just somehow in need of change. Independent India would “need to increase considerably her own representation abroad”, for one.⁶ Independence, proclaimed Nehru, “consists fundamentally and basically of foreign relations. That is the test of independence.”⁷ This would affect India’s entire practice and infrastructure of diplomacy.

Studying diplomats is a fruitful way to explore the difference the transfer of power *actually made* for India as a diplomatic actor. Theirs was a mission to manifest independence internationally, even as colonial legacies shaped diplomatic structures. How did these diplomats imagine and perform their role, at home and internationally? How did this affect behaviours and decisions couched as “India’s”? And how did these micro-level negotiations shape India’s assertion of its place in an international system marked by enduring hierarchies? In short: what did it mean to serve as the representative of a country undergoing decolonisation?

Pant is an ideal entry point into these questions—and not primarily because he counts among the more celebrated Nehruvian envoys. Diplomats generally leave behind carefully scripted, self-censored, and redacted writings. Pant, conversely, released an extensive collection of intimate papers. This archive allows us to peer into the inner world of a budding diplomat while India was finding its feet diplomatically—and, in so doing, to revisit the origin story of post-colonial India-Africa relations.

Appointed while adrift professionally and desperate financially, Pant came to East Africa at a time when independent India’s interests there were schematic and potentially contradictory. He struggled to make sense of his identity and role as a diplomat, to elaborate an African policy for India in the absence of concrete guidance, and to juggle professional, private, and public life. He expressed these feelings in hundreds of frequent, unguarded, and often moving letters to his wife. Combined with government correspondence and other diplomats’ archives, Pant’s experiences and reflections reveal what it meant to be a diplomat serving a newly independent nation trying to assert itself in the international order, and the consequences this had for the shaping of foreign policy at the top.

For Pant was more vital to the making of India’s Africa policy than traditional narratives allow. His is a familiar figure in accounts of India-Africa relations and diasporic histories; but the nature of his influence, and what it says about the workings of Indian decision-making, remain under-analysed.⁸ Absent precise instructions from Nehru, Pant evolved his own ideas about what India

should do, and represent, in East and Central Africa. Early on he championed educational issues and economic schemes; later, he decisively shaped Delhi's take on the Mau Mau crisis. His increasingly close interactions with African nationalists and their Indian supporters, and the demands Indian groups made of him, decisively shaped his ideas. Acting beyond his brief, he took up Indian permanent residents' cause with an irate colonial government, even as he counselled them to keep their British status, join forces with Africans, and identify squarely with their territorial homeland.

Pant's search for professional, psychological, and ontological security lay at the heart of this. Diplomacy in the context of decolonisation entailed intense political, emotional, and intellectual labour, and this labour shaped foreign policy. Beyond the recent focus on ideas and institutions in India's international history or assessments centred on a diplomat's "calibre", this article reveals Indian diplomacy as an embodied practice and effort of imagination, whose contours were negotiated not just in Delhi but in fledging missions subject to diasporic demands and facing multiple practical pressures. Pant's individual efforts to master the diplomatic "game", as he often called it, became India's game in Africa.

I begin by discussing how a considered methodology can rectify diplomats' traditional elision from South Asian international history, before exploring diplomacy's nature as a complex experiment for early independent India—an experiment encapsulated by the messy circumstances of Pant's appointment and the latitude given to him. I then highlight how India's East Africa policy was concretised not so much in Delhi's nerve-centres as by Pant himself, in an African context where he faced multiple professional, personal, and emotional pressures. Post-colonial diplomats became celebrities invested with meaning by local audiences, making them amenable to conflicting bottom-up interests. The fourth section charts Pant's gradual identification with an Indian diplomatic community over the course of his tenure. Individual diplomats' drive to shape foreign policy's concretisation also resulted from the competitive pressures to establish themselves within a competitive bureaucratic eco-system, where one's advancement depended on policy innovation and negotiation "coups". Finally, I take Pant's East African tenure to its tense conclusion, a forced recall to Delhi during the Mau Mau crisis that almost ended his career. Indian diplomats' entrepreneurship could take Nehruvian foreign policy further than Nehru himself had intended.

Diplomats behind the mask

Diplomacy meshes with the lifeworlds of those tasked with enacting it: diplomats themselves. Until recently, the historiography of India's international relations paid little attention to diplomats' understanding of the process they engaged in, and its connection to their professional and personal sense of self. Envoys seemed less important to South Asia's international history than statesmen—above all Nehru—or even generals. The tendency was to treat diplomacy as a secondary aspect of foreign policy. Whether at home or in the missions, the people on the ground were mainly channels to enact external worldviews and strategies devised from above.

Historians and IR scholars are now re-evaluating the role of diplomatic institutions and actors in shaping India's international behaviour. Studies of the institutional and ideational structures underpinning the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) complement micro-level ones. The importance of Subimal Dutt, KPS Menon, or Srinivasa Sastri has been re-emphasised, from studies of foreign policy issues to dedicated biographies.⁹ All this is gradually eroding Nehru-centric narratives of India's foreign policy.

The question of what or who is a diplomat in this Indian context remains implicit, however. The next step is to investigate the behaviour and thought patterns of the men (and rarely, women) at the heart of Indian diplomacy—how they went about their work, how they understood their role and persona, how they experienced it.¹⁰ The individuals who manned India's

diplomatic ship in the transition between colonial rule and independence are particularly interesting. Pant and others were “at the coalface” of Nehruvian foreign policy.¹¹ They grappled with questions of diplomatic process, identity, and self-fashioning with greater urgency (including because many became ambassadors relatively young) than any other generation save the first one, in the 1920s.¹²

Studying diplomats is not without challenges. Diplomacy entails the interpenetration between public and private life. Its practitioners constantly juggle potentially contradictory scripts: the representative of a country, the bureaucrat operating in a reticulated administration, the private person.¹³ Diplomats are not mere individuals, in other words; yet it is their personhood—their personality, their actions, their socialising—that provides the conduit for international relations.¹⁴

More importantly, diplomats are simultaneously a presence and an absence. They crop up everywhere in the historical record, yet who they are often disappears under what they are. Supporters and enactors of the drama of international relations, their function envelops them, their professional effectiveness partly connected to their capacity to stand in for something and someone else—a cypher made flesh. Existing studies of Indian foreign relations participate in this elision of the diplomat. The vast collections of diplomatic private papers at the Nehru Memorial Library (NML) in Delhi are staple fare for South Asia’s international historian. So and so is “looking at Tikki Kaul”, one hears when their archive is being consulted. The diplomat is not so much the study’s subject as its channel.

Diplomats actively contribute to their ontological fragmentation. If Nehru long seemed the fount of India’s external behaviour, and his Prime Ministership a time of foreign policy idealism, it is also because generation after generation of diplomats proclaimed this in speeches and writings. Pant’s rapport with Nehru fluctuated, yet he made his own contribution to the edifice. Diplomats are thus made hyper-visible and erased in the same sweep. *They* are never quite *here*.

Diplomatic writing, curated to an unusual extent, fosters this elision. Questions about the selection and organisation of information, and considerations of power and access shaping the archive, are especially pregnant here. The books of KPS Menon were vetted by Nehru’s office. There is no reason to think this was unique to him.¹⁵ It is therefore problematic to see accounts of India’s international relations that rely overwhelmingly or uncritically on diplomats’ autobiographies. Diplomats were “specialists in meaning”, experts at crafting and conveying a message.¹⁶ Many were prolific writers for the wider public (sometimes during their career, certainly after it), making storytelling a central goal of such writings. An interview might be an oral version of a story told multiple times in multiple forms, with diplomatic orality the precipitate of the written. This does not mean diplomats’ personal outputs are uninteresting, but they necessarily require fine-grained unpacking and confrontation with other material. All this makes diplomats elusive research subjects, especially in historical perspective.

In Apa Pant, historians can glimpse what might otherwise stay hidden: the complex personal, professional, and political negotiations at the heart of India’s diplomatic transfer of power. Pant’s written traces outside government archives ostensibly anchor him in a broader tradition of semi-private diplomatic archives and modes of expression. With eight books to his name, seven of which retrace aspects of his life and worldview, Pant belongs to a distinguished group of “diplomat-writers”. He counts among the many diplomats interviewed for the NML’s oral history project. His interview reveals a consummate storyteller, with each response a coherent story onto itself—complete with hook, context, dialogue, climax, and resolution.

The reason we can look beyond this façade is that, beside these well curated traces, Pant (or perhaps his wife Nalini Devi) bequeathed NML intensely intimate archives, notably correspondence between the couple. Diplomatic life involved considerable time away from one’s family. Pant poured out his thoughts about his job, his state of mind, and his relationships onto the page, writing hundreds of letters to his loved ones—Nalini mostly—over several decades. His

formative years, which coincided with independent India's international emergence, are particularly well represented.

Pant was perhaps not the only Indian diplomat to use writing as a tool to externalise his internal drama.¹⁷ What makes him unusual, in a profession that frowns on the expression of emotion, is his choice to hand over this intimate archive.¹⁸ Earnest to the point of rawness, Pant's letters gift us the possibility of studying diplomacy's experience in an exceptionally granular fashion. Entering such intimate places requires caution and sensitivity. Yet, the vulnerability such correspondence (and its donation) convey is unusual, precious. These letters form an emotional and experiential archive of Indian diplomacy in the face of decolonization.

The experiment of post-colonial diplomacy

Pant joined Indian diplomacy at a seminal moment. By assuming the British Raj's personhood, treaties, and agreements, independent India had chosen to present itself "as a continuous international entity rather than a new one".¹⁹ This did not mean stagnation or replication of the colonial inheritance. Decolonisation entailed the conjunction of great ideals and ambitions for India on the international stage, including a push for "One World".²⁰ This meant a corresponding diplomatic activism but also—especially given material, human and logistical constraints—creativity in the carrying out of that post-colonial diplomatic mission.

Change raised its head in subtle ways. Months before Nehru's Interim Government took office in late 1946, a specially formed committee prepared a memorandum to place Indian diplomacy "on a regular footing".²¹ An independent country could not continue with British India's stunted diplomatic infrastructure. A colony needed representation for instrumental and limited purposes. A sovereign nation was independent *through* its diplomatic representation.²²

This meant re-envisioning diplomacy's entire set of practices, institutions, ideas, and people. There were big picture questions like commercial and "traditional" diplomacy's integration; infrastructural and organisational updates, from transferring properties to streamlining administrative responsibilities; and symbolic matters, such as the rituals of presentation ceremonies, diplomatic correspondence, and how to furnish missions.²³ Everything seemed up for discussion. Two issues took precedence. The first was the necessity, seemingly self-evident, for a systematic expansion of India's diplomatic footprint. This had quantitative aspects (opening new missions) and qualitative ones (upgrading and expanding existing ones, who often were tiny offices, and sometimes weaning them from British tutelage).²⁴ This also meant forming "what amounts to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs" out of colonial departments.²⁵ The second priority was to launch, "helter skelter", an Indian Foreign Service (IFS).²⁶ The country had been served by a cluster of colonial servants with an uneven aptitude for external relations. It was time India had a proper diplomatic corps—fully Indian, properly trained, and on par with the nascent Indian Administrative Service.²⁷

Realising this ambition was not easy. Independent India's financial and logistical pressures curtailed its capacity to increase its diplomatic presence. Conceding that expanding representation abroad was "unavoidable", the Finance Ministry sanctioned funds with less scrutiny than customary, but not in full: the MEA wanted more than it could chew. Even reduced expansion targets were difficult to fill. Some colonial diplomats had opted for Pakistan, leaving missions like the new Embassy in Washington depleted. Efforts to find men ready to retrain had mixed results. Senior MEA officials spent much time on interview panels, but suitable candidates, whether junior clerks or conference delegates, were not always forthcoming. Many appointments proved a headache.²⁸ It was imperative to be resourceful, even for higher-level posts. It was during this decisive recruitment drive that the MEA began searching for candidates to lead a new mission in East Africa.

Pant had never thought of becoming a diplomat. In winter 1947, he was a man without a job and without a purpose. For years, he had toiled in the villages of Aundh, a Deccan principality his family had ruled for generations. With fewer than 90,000 souls spread over 1,298 square kilometres, Aundh would scarcely have stood out among India's five-hundred or so Princely States were it not for Pant's father who, inspired by Gandhian ideals, had transferred governance to the villages. The young prince had thrown himself into this endeavour, living and working alongside Aundh's peasantry. Now that independence had materialised, the "Aundh Experiment" was at an end. The Princely States themselves would soon cease to be. What was a prince without a principality to do?

An answer presented itself when an acquaintance secured him a meeting with Nehru. They already knew each other. Nehru had kept an eye on Aundh and invited Pant to incarnate progressive princes on the All-India Congress Committee. When Nehru suggested the IFS, Pant hesitated. If we believe a later interview, the thought of exchanging a life of want in Aundh for the trappings of diplomacy was unsettling. His father persuaded him: by becoming a diplomat, Apa would honour the Pant dynasty's history as Emperor Shivaji's *pratinidhi* ("representatives"). "Well, if you want me I will have a go at it", Pant remembered telling Nehru. In May 1948, two months after Aundh's merger into India, Nehru formally asked Pant to become India's first Commissioner in East Africa. Pant claims he did not even know where East Africa was. Nehru reportedly replied: "you will find out!". "What do you want me to do in Africa?" "Well, you can shoot a few lions if nothing else!", the answer reportedly came, alluding to a princely passion for hunting.²⁹

This characteristically humorous anecdote echoes across Pant's interviews and writings. The picture it paints is that of an accidental diplomat. Having served India so well he was now without a position in life, a young man stumbles into representing his country at a critical juncture; an outward fit of an absence of mind that is, in fact, pre-destination. Pant's story emphasises the workings of a bittersweet serendipity—the re-connection with Nehru and the passage into diplomacy responding to the disconnection and disorientation consequent to Aundh's success and ultimate loss. Yet, what Pant describes a strange personal fate to become a diplomat takes on a different meaning when viewed in institutional perspective.

The transfer of power that left Pant the individual as a crossroads was doing the same for the diplomatic system he was to join. His appointment was symptomatic of a liminal period when necessity, creativity, and ambition pushed into the diplomatic arena a range of individuals who might otherwise never have thought of it, at least as a career. Nehru himself selected them and matched them with postings. How he did so is unclear. Often, they got parachuted straight into the higher diplomatic echelons. If Britain, China, or the USSR went to Nehru's intimates like his sister Vijaylakshmi Pandit or veteran diplomats like KPS Menon, newcomers could nevertheless be trusted with sensitive postings, starting with Nairobi. Some, like Pant, were princes—perhaps because their education and socialisation predisposed them to diplomacy, perhaps to give them a stake and justification in independent India. Others were scholars or journalists. Most had contributed to India's freedom in one way or another. Like Pant, many were ambivalent about the offer. Nehru convinced them. They had fought colonisation and imperialism at home; they would now do so abroad.³⁰

The transfer of power proved an experiment in diplomacy, an effort to adapt existing personal skills (for Pant) and colonial legacies (for the MEA). A lasting debate concerned how to train post-colonial diplomats.³¹ Indian authorities envisioned a class of professionals endowed with "some appreciation of the history and civilization of India and of her current problems", familiar with the workings of government and unlikely to become a caste apart. A concrete training programme needed to be devised. Priority postings could not wait however.³²

The first crop of independent Indian diplomats thus had very little time to prepare. Two months were all the "joining time" Pant got to wrap up in Aundh, acquaint himself with the MEA, organise his departure, learn about his posting, and decipher how to handle himself.³³

There were a hundred things to do, reams of information to assimilate, intricate protocols to remember, and secrets to keep. Pant was overwhelmed. “I have been showered with files and ... really secret, ‘hush-hush’ stuff”, he complained; “the job is much more difficult than I ever dreamt of”. Pant began to doubt his choice. Could he bear playing the diplomat for a few years? His superiors wanted him to commit to the nascent IFS—a step into the unknown, and one with a drastic impact on his life. His family had stayed in Aundh. Already this was taking a toll on him. Pant refused to commit. “I will try a hand at this game for a year and then perhaps it will be possible for us to do something definite”.³⁴

Pant’s hesitations echoed that of a diplomatic system that was finding its feet. Various incidents marked the late 1940s. Post-colonial diplomats’ relative autonomy backfired when the envoy to the Vatican implied Gandhi valued the Bible over the Gita, to hue and cry back in India.³⁵ MEA officials were regularly taken unaware by the publication of confidential information. Some incidents only caused embarrassment. Others forced Delhi to open embassies where it had no plans to do so.³⁶ Pant’s own appointment filtered in the press too soon, infuriating MEA officials.³⁷ These mishaps indicated a trial-and-error process by which independent India’s diplomatic apparatus was evolving a set of rules.

That post-colonial diplomacy was an important experiment was made clear to Pant. India’s ambitions were great, where Africa was concerned—and East Africa was crucial to them. The region boasted a big, varied Indian diaspora. Complicated relations with Africans notwithstanding, its advocacy of *swaraj* had shaped anti-colonial African nationalisms, and some of its members had financially supported them.³⁸ Nehru now aimed to apply independent India’s state power to African decolonisation.

The Prime Minister personally briefed his senior diplomats before departure.³⁹ Nehru worried about “a race war developing in the next, fifteen, twenty years’ time on that ‘Continent of Dawn’”. India had to prevent this. Pant would have to participate in African freedom struggles and encourage local Indians to become part of local society.⁴⁰ Nehru likely continued with a pep talk on how India’s ambassadors should behave: in accordance with their status, but not “lavishly”. Delhi’s purse was limited.

We cannot obviously seek to rival other embassies in pomp and show. Nor has it been our habit to try to show off. We might indeed be more effective ... by adopting somewhat simpler ways.

We are new to this business of sending Ambassadors... But there is no reason (to) consider ourselves bound by (dominant diplomatic norms). When considered necessary we can strike out a new line, provided this is not unbecoming.⁴¹

Pant recalled his Prime Minister’s words in terms both lofty and ominous. They contribute to the mythology of Nehru as an idealist, rooted in the deep impression he made on his diplomats and the sense of mission he conveyed. “You see, this job in East Africa can be a frightfully important one”, Pant wrote to Nalini afterwards,

the whole course of History depends upon how we play our cards there; either we build up our ... solidarity in East Africa by integrating ourselves with the Africans, or we get into our shell and lose this opportunity ... of being something outside our country.⁴²

Nehru’s behavioural instructions, by contrast, are nowhere to be found; they do not make for good anecdotes. But this also betrays the clay feet on which Nehruvian ideals rested. Nehru’s brief was higher on principles than on concrete instructions. Indian ambitions notwithstanding, handling foreign affairs alongside the prime ministership made Nehru an extremely busy man, and the financial and material strictures confronting post-partition India were substantial. Early diplomats, even rookies like Pant, would perforce enjoy a degree of autonomy and creative license. In the early years at least, Nehru seemingly privileged conveying ideals and momentum over micro-managing or prescribing a specific course of action. Yet, as KPS Menon later noted,

between grasping principles and “apply(ing) them to particular situations” there was a difference—and a big one.⁴³

Given this leadership style and the uncertainties surrounding India’s diplomatic system, Pant himself would determine India’s actual East Africa policy. The leeway Nehru gave ambassadors would eventually fuel a dare-devil attitude. For now, he was not sure he could handle the task: “they have not given me a clue. I think I shall have to make up their minds for them.”⁴⁴ Pant went to Africa with little sense of what to do or how to do it. It was on the ship that he began to find answers. Sea journeys entailed mingling with others in a small space for days on end. Pant used the trip to experiment with diplomatic socialisation: “winning friends and having a good opinion of every section of the public” would iron out his implantation in African society.⁴⁵ He wooed missionaries and the governor’s private secretary, learnt Swahili, and befriended Gujarati travellers to ensure they would accept him, a Maharashtrian. It was in this contradictory mood of excitement, doubt, and anticipation that Pant reached Africa.

Navigating diplomatic celebrity

Pant’s arrival in Mombasa gave an added charge to popular moods in East Africa—celebratory on the part of Indian communities, hopeful among Africans, suspicious for white settlers and authorities. The Indian diplomat became many things to many people. For Indians, he represented a country of citizens, not subjects; one whose position vis-à-vis its overseas population was yet undefined. Pant became a channel through which claims of representation were asserted and local power-plays reconfigured. For Africans, India was an inspiration and a patron for decolonisation. Pant was that possibility made flesh, a chance to intensify the struggle and acquire political legitimacy by virtue of the diplomat’s role as an engine of international relations. The diplomat became invested with meaning from below and acquired the outsized stature of a hero. Heroes, however, can be weighed down by the contradictory hopes placed in them, by the day-to-day grind of their job, and by isolation and inner doubts. India’s envoy would be no exception.

Pant spent his first fortnight in a rush of meetings, interviews, and parties. In East Africa in 1948, making oneself known as a newly arrived diplomat carried unprecedented weight. It rendered independence manifest overseas and asserted the establishment of inter-national relations and codes of behaviour surrounding it. Recognition worked at multiple levels.⁴⁶ The Italian consul taught him his “diplomatic paces”; Kenyan authorities proved more elusive. They seemingly went “out of their way to be good”, but the governor would not meet him.⁴⁷ This was no coincidence. Many Raj officials had relocated to Kenya; some were against accepting India’s envoy. Absent a credential ceremony, Pant remained in a liminal diplomatic position.

Pant’s primary targets were Indian and African audiences, however. East African society was diverse and increasingly segregated. Colonial rule placed Africans at the bottom of a hierarchy dominated by white settlers, with Indians in an intermediary position. Their presence predated the British but had intensified with the building of railways. Most had come for economic and professional opportunities. If early on they had largely been traders and shop keepers, some rich and influential, by the 1940s they were also professionals and artisans. Much of East Africa’s internal and external trade was in their hands. Homeland, for them, came in two interlocking forms: the civilisational one, India (which many visited for business, education, or family visits), and the territorial one in Africa.⁴⁸ Indians’ intermediary status in this racially ordered society caused tensions with Africans. Their economic clout and mobilisation for equality and *swaraj* (notably through the East African Indian National Congress (EAINC), formed in 1914) simultaneously helped inspire and, sometimes finance, Kenyan anti-colonial nationalism.⁴⁹

Early independent Indian authorities sought to regulate the behaviour and identity of people identified as overseas citizens, promoting a singular, non-communal Indian-ness.⁵⁰ They

simultaneously wanted these citizens to join African society and participate in its liberation. “Diaspora as foreign policy” was a tricky enterprise.⁵¹ East Africa’s Indians were a heterogeneous community “with differing and often competing economic and political concerns”, segmented and sometimes divided by caste and class as much as by language or religion—as the existence of the Patel Brotherhood, the Sikh Central Council and the Jain Youth League, or the dominance of Punjabi workers in the East African Trade Union signalled. By the 1940s, communalism and partition in India as well as demographic changes in East Africa (Muslims, initially a majority within that diaspora, had dropped to 30% of the Indian population in Kenya) had given rise to Hindu-Muslim competition and demands for separate Muslim and Sikh representatives.⁵²

Pant’s initial efforts therefore focused on building bridges among East African Indians. He began identifying influential contacts to reach different communities: “nice & saintly” for one, “a good friend” for the other, “most influential” for others.⁵³ If some groups, like Gujarati Hindus, seemed supportive, others like their Punjabi brethren—often following the Arya Samaj, a Hindu revivalist and proselyte movement in tension with Nehruvian secularism—were less welcoming. Some, among non-Ismaili Muslims, asked for a Pakistani High Commissioner to counteract Pant’s presence. Portugal monitored the Indian High Commission, wary of its influence on Goans.⁵⁴ Pant started a charm offensive across class, caste, religious and professional lines. He attended community parties, reached out to working classes *via* the trade unionist Makhhan Singh, patronised Indian cultural life, and employed original methods, leading *surya namaskar* sessions modelled on those his father had promoted across India.⁵⁵

Ensuring Indians learnt to “live together” was essential to Pant’s other aim: building momentum for political, economic, and ideological changes across Africa and ensuring Indians embraced it.⁵⁶ “Oh! to have such a beautiful country and to have it exploited by someone else”, he railed on the train to Nairobi. He would do “everything in my power to help them achieve ... equality.”⁵⁷ Within weeks of his arrival, Pant was formulating plans and strategies to bring India and Africa together. He quickly found local Indian allies. Since the alliance between Manilal Desai, the *East African Chronicle’s* editor, and the Young Kikuyu Association’s leader Harry Thuku in the 1920s, many voices had called for Indians to join forces with Africans.⁵⁸ Pant started to liaise closely with Pio Pinto and Joseph Murumbi, Indians at the heart of the Kenyan independence movement, and campaigning for Indo-African brotherhood.

A few months after his arrival, Pant met Jomo Kenyatta for the first time in Githunguri. Shivabhai Amin, a Gujarati Muslim campaigning for racial equality and Indo-African unity, introduced them.⁵⁹ Within months, Pant was in close touch with Kenyatta and other Kenya African Union (KAU) leaders, particularly James Beuttah, Peter Mbiyu Koinange, and James Gichuru. His office and residence became places for Indians and Africans to debate together, while he patronised joint EAINC-KAU events and launched an Oriental Art Circle, gathering dramatists, poets, and artists.⁶⁰

Pant paid particular attention to education. Visiting the KAU’s Kenya Teachers College in Githunguri and observing its Independent African Schools initiative—meant to bypass missionary-led education—was decisive. Nehru had authorised the creation of scholarships for Africans to come to India. Pant increased their numbers, seeking James Beuttah’s recommendations on selecting students. Many went to KAU activists, giving them a first-hand experience of India. Having promised Kenyatta to encourage desegregated education, Pant pushed Indian-run schools to enrol Africans and lobbied for a Gandhi Memorial College where Africans and Indians could study together.⁶¹

Pant’s creativity also concerned the economic sphere, where Nehru had little to say. He realised that many Indians’ occupational niches placed them at a distance from the African majority and could in fact be a source of tension, especially if stoked by Europeans. Under his impulsion, the MEA envisioned a multi-pronged economic strategy for India-Africa relations: reinforcing trade and promoting African development, while providing incentives and facilities for the diaspora to invest beyond trade, notably in agriculture. Pant spared no effort for this, pressing his

superiors and lobbying Bombay and Gujarat industrialists to invest in Africa during sojourns in India.⁶² Fostering decolonisation would make India “a country whose word becomes respected in this territory”.⁶³ British authorities, for their part, balked at Pant’s refusal to accept “the part that we [Britain] have played in the process of African development.”⁶⁴ Worse, they started worrying that “not only is the Indian High Commissioner going beyond the terms of his appointment, but he is also endeavouring to create a solid bloc of the coloured races in the Colony.”⁶⁵

The welcome Pant received fuelled his buoyancy. Pant arrived in Nairobi garlanded in flowers, his train covered in tricolour flags. Thousands welcomed him to shouts of *Jai Hind* (Hail India) and *Inqilab Zindabad* (Long Live the Revolution). Government officials were “completely mobbed”.⁶⁶ The fever had only begun. 7,000 people and 50 cameramen attended India’s flag hoisting. Nairobi Broadcasting Station broadcasted his Hindi speech. Requests for talks, interviews, meetings flowed in. Cricketers wanted him for their top team. The Aga Khan, who led Kenya’s influential Ismaili community, wished to meet him. The Governor, initially unavailable, held a diner in his honour.⁶⁷ Similar scenes occurred on tour. A day on the road could mean “120 miles . . . , 6 speeches, 5 teas, 2 dinners” and countless other engagements, processions and encounters—not to mention signing autographs.⁶⁸ From Uganda to Zanzibar, Indians and Africans gathered to petition him. “They are all simply mad. If I simply stand out somewhere there is a crowd.”⁶⁹ Pant was a star.

Diplomatic celebrity extended beyond Pant. Diplomats enjoyed an exalted profile in early independent India’s public life. Their activities generated publicity, and the press presented diplomacy as a practice of freedom.⁷⁰ Indians’ relations to those who were now *their* diplomats changed. Overseas Indians asked for travel documents, pre-empting Delhi’s efforts to determine who was or was not Indian.⁷¹ From room & board to chauffeured cars, travellers made countless requests to their embassies abroad. Overstretched missions were exhausted.⁷² Nehruvian diplomats’ high profile coincided with the intensification of demands the public made on them.

The hopes placed in Pant were particularly high. In May 1947, the EAINC had petitioned Nehru for a High Commission in East Africa. The EAINC hoped Pant would take over the defence of Indian interests vis-à-vis white settlers.⁷³ When the MEA agreed to open a mission, the editor of Kenya’s biggest Indian daily wrote to request “an absolutely first-rate man”—ideally no less than KPS Menon, then ambassador to China.⁷⁴ East African Indians wanted an end to colour discrimination in hotel and entertainment locations, and farmers among them the right to settle in the Kenyan highlands and government assistance in developing the land. Newspaper readers asked “our beloved Commissioner Apasaheb” for better medical and educational facilities for Indians.⁷⁵ Notables courted India’s representative as much as he courted them. His attendance at their party increased their position in a competitive society. Preferential access to Pant became a political, social, and economic resource.⁷⁶

The same was true for activists for Indo-African unity and African nationalists. India’s envoy provided them a statist boost.⁷⁷ Kenyatta, Chief Koinange, and his son Mbiyu Koinange frequently met him in the house of the businessmen JM Desai, whose house was always open to African nationalists—unless Pant himself entertained them at the High Commission.⁷⁸ They placed high hopes in him, not just to finance African education and visits to India but also to forge transnational networks and promote their independence struggle abroad.⁷⁹

Bringing together these two audiences, demanding in different ways, was easier said than done. Even Indian demands were often embedded in specific communities’ concerns. Kachchi labourers and masons complained about poor wages. Sikhs asked Pant to lobby for a Sikh representative on Kenya’s Legislative Council and complained about being ignored by other Indian communities. Goans feared being forgotten. Pant replied that “it was no good criticizing each other but that Europeans, Indians and Africans should jointly do their best for the welfare of the colony”.⁸⁰ Within a few months, he despaired. Pant thought Indians were riddled with infighting and incapable of empathising with Africans. Kenyans and Ugandans’ treatment by leading Indian

traders worried him. Could African enthusiasm for India last, when Indian “capitalists” made so much money from Africans? “I do not really know whether unless this exploitation stops anything concrete can be done at all”, Pant complained.⁸¹ In December 1948, he openly took Indians to task. In a lengthy article in the *Kenya Daily Mail*, he reminded them the Indian Government could not do everything for them. They were

forgetting that it was the duty of Indians to ensure that they were working for and to serve properly the country of their adoption. Unless dishonest business methods, blackmarket dealings, collection of key money etc., were put into disuse, help should not be expected from Mr Pant or the Indian Government.⁸²

Yet, precisely because of the complexities of relations between Indians and Africans, Delhi’s envoy had a particular aura in late colonial Africa. Its Indian diaspora, growing anti-colonial movements, and the novel nature of Indian diplomatic presence made the region a startling example of the diplomat-as-celebrity. For Indians, colonial diplomats had represented the top echelons of the empire; the post-colonial diplomat, conversely, was at the service of the nation, at *their* service. For Africans, Pant was the living, smiling embodiment of a country freed from British rule, his response to local Indians a demonstration of the substantive quality of independence. For both, his presence was an opportunity to make demands on the new Indian state.

These multiple demands generated deep tensions for Pant. The chasm was great between the need to rise to the occasion and the uncertainties within the Indian diplomatic apparatus and Pant’s professional and intimate life. India had neither embassy nor residence in Nairobi. Its feted envoy had little at his disposal to conduct a politics of prestige and influence. The unappealing day-to-day desk work Pant had to conduct behind the scenes was made more cumbersome by the flurry of business requests, letters, and requests for studentships assailing him and his small staff. Delhi refused him a car and sometimes forgot to pay him. It was thanks to Kenya’s wealthy Indians that Pant settled in.⁸³

This unsettled infrastructure left diplomats even more vulnerable to bottom-up pressures. Pant felt indebted to his landlord, an influential merchant, and to a mine owner who had “attached himself to me... and does every little job for me”—leaving him far too tied to Gujarati Hindus.⁸⁴ To avoid offending other communities and reduce his dependence on others, he shifted accommodation. The sense of being constrained, however, would never go away.

These expectations had a mixed impact on Pant’s sense of self. Letters to Nalini betray shifting moods. Initially he felt giddy. “I am sailing along superbly”, he wrote a few weeks in. “I am like a King – wherever I go I am acclaimed... and looked up to”. But this ostensible popularity intensified inner fragilities. Pant began to fear for his ego: “how nicely I am perched for a terrific fall.” He wanted to fly away.⁸⁵ At the same time, the tactical nature of diplomacy in an African colony was revelatory. He discovered he liked “playing for high stakes”, amidst “cross-currents and double crossings & intrigues”.

They all are sitting on a volcano here. You should see me blustering and shouting “ideals” ... I feel like a young boy, audacious and naughty – I take the greatest delight in putting the wind up of everybody. I am going to try that at the governor’s too.⁸⁶

Pant had accepted the High Commissionership as his personal tryst with destiny. Now he saw diplomacy itself as one long, exhilarating game. Years later, he would still find thrill in it.⁸⁷

Pant’s princely background eased his adaptation. He slipped back into playing the most important person in the room. His education had endowed him with charm and poise, and Gandhian activism exposed him to contact with the masses. This was probably why Nehru had chosen him. The relationship between the British Crown and princely states had involved complex diplomatic rituals. In another twist on decolonisation, princely para-diplomatic experience became an advantage in post-colonial India’s arsenal. “This sort of thing I have done all my life. I have ... sold Aundh outside, I can sell India more easily and in a much better way.”⁸⁸

This idea of diplomacy as marketing oneself—one's princely self—to enhance a country's value returns regularly in Pant's early writings: "being a prince counts very much here ... (T)o sell myself and ... my country I have everything that is required.⁸⁹ Familiarising the world with India was a key task of ambassadors, and princes, with their glamour, could show as much as tell.⁹⁰ The ease with which Pant mustered "smiles & charms & bright wit" nevertheless left him uneasy. So did the contrast between his curiosity towards human beings and the calculating mind necessary to determine "what use they will be to me to make my social political position secure". Nor could he be sure, for all his lofty speeches, of "advancing humanity".⁹¹

Meanwhile, society dinners, political meetings and enthusiastic crowds belied the stress of learning on the job. Pant had to incarnate the pre-destined envoy of a ready-to-lead nation with little infrastructure or routine. So, he vacillated between hyper-confidence and despondency, sometimes within the same sentence. In Delhi, "the enormity of the task" had frightened him. In Nairobi, he was sad and unhappy, fearful a catastrophe would expose him.⁹²

Financial woes heightened the sense diplomacy's theatre could collapse around him any minute. Nehru wanted his ambassadors, representing "a poor country where millions live on the verge of starvation", to eschew splendour.⁹³ But living like a diplomat still wasn't cheap, and Pant, for all his princely allure, not that rich. He had debts, and regularly had to wait for his work expenses to be reimbursed. He had never kept a budget and no intention of doing so. Money weighed heavily on him. Like some other colleagues, early diplomatic life meant a constant search for funds.⁹⁴ Behind closed doors, India's High Commissioner struggled to get a loan. To appease creditors, he begged Nalini, a doctor, to sell her equipment.⁹⁵ Making "a proper business" of the diplomatic career, with its decent salary, was essential—at least until his debts were paid.⁹⁶

The intensity of his public profile and the clash between idealism and money concerns intensified Pant's emotional stress. Popular attention masked deep loneliness. His letters became pleas to his wife to join him overseas. But Nalini, who would exchange professional success and personal independence for a life of unrecognised, unpaid service and non-identity, saw little appeal in the prospect.⁹⁷

Diplomacy, for Pant, was an adventure where excitement mingled with doubt and self-estrangement; a game, played partly by going with the flow, that held the contradictory appeal of a necessary and easy business opportunity for a cash-strapped prince, and of a radical dream to transcend the Aundh Experiment. In upbeat moments, Pant thought he would quickly be made ambassador; "then I wouldn't like to leave this job – my word it is cushy".⁹⁸ Yet, like all dreams, diplomacy had a lack of consistency. Pant wondered what he was doing and who he was becoming. Diplomacy's trappings felt like empty promises. "I have cars, radio, company, money, people, admiration, position in society, everything." But what was the point? Pant thought he could see "through all this game I am playing."⁹⁹

Selling Africa to sell Pant

The conflicting pressures on Pant's professional and intimate self were not a distraction from carrying out his task as a diplomat. They fuelled it—and indeed shaped his vision for India's Africa policy. Nine months into his post, the accidental diplomat began metamorphosing into a career diplomat, and with it, into a bureaucrat mindful of Delhi's intrigues and what could help his advancement. Pant's professional confidence deepened. Quietly, surreptitiously, diplomacy seeped into his identity, even as it lost its aura. "Selling" African decolonisation to his hierarchy and to the world became an ever-greater leitmotiv.

By 1949, his letters had changed in texture. Concerns that Delhi would not let him renounce diplomacy had been replaced by insecurities around his status within the profession. Now Pant

wanted to stay in the IFS at all costs, even without promotion: “I for one am no good at anything ... (this) is perhaps the only thing I can really do.”¹⁰⁰ But what if “others are making their mark and I am being left out, perhaps to be thrown out?”, he worried; “night or day I am producing reports & dispatches, some of them quite brilliant too, but it is all a hunger ... (for) security”.¹⁰¹

Diplomacy-as-celebrity turned into diplomacy-as-bureaucracy. Unlike generations inducted into foreign service through extensive training and institutional socialisation into the ICS or later, the IFS, Pant learnt diplomacy on his own. His Delhi sojourn had been too brief for him to grasp its nature as a bureaucratic endeavour, and not just one of external representation. Gradually, however, Pant began to understand himself as a bureaucrat inserted into India’s state structures, instead of the representative of these structures.

The search for security was the underbelly of this transformation. The “we” of diplomacy concealed a fiercely competitive world, made stronger by the IFS’ unsettled nature.¹⁰² Nehruvian diplomats had different careers, mindsets and pay conditions. Thanks to experienced diplomats like KPS Menon and GS Bajpai (respectively Foreign Secretary and Secretary-General), ICS veterans dominated the IFS. Menon and Bajpai saw Nehru’s hand-picked appointees with suspicion; their suitability was unproven, their dedication to the career unclear, and *they*, after all, were not ICS.¹⁰³ Bajpai had warned Pant he would be under watch. Pant took this to mean that he, one of Nehru’s “blue-eyed boys”, was but a “raw, rank outsider usurping a diplomatic posting.”¹⁰⁴ Pant’s freedom to experiment left him unmoored from the MEA, with little purchase on the game played out there, and yet on which he felt his future depended. Delhi sent little reassurance he was doing well. “I talk so big & strut on this stage but inside I am a ‘nothing-but-a-nothing’. I ... can neither swim nor sink. But to the outside world, I have to show that I am a swimmer – oh!!! It is all a stupid game.”¹⁰⁵ Whatever success he could achieve in East Africa would become a tool to prove himself in Delhi.

Activism for Indo-African unity notwithstanding, tensions were rising in eastern and southern Africa. Pant blamed this on colonial governments’ drive to minimise India’s clout and on European “diehards and racialists”. In 1949, anti-Indian riots erupted in Durban. When Pant visited Dar-es-Salaam soon after, he encountered “a very stiff front”. Increasingly, he saw his two missions—bringing the diaspora together under Delhi’s fold and championing African decolonisation—as contradictory. To make more than “a loud noise”, he had to choose.¹⁰⁶

The choice was quickly made. Pant disliked local Indians, deeming them inward-looking, sectarian, and “callous” towards Africans. Riots in Uganda confirmed his sense that Indian attitudes hindered the emergence of a multi-cultural, independent, India-allied East Africa.¹⁰⁷ His efforts to advocate for Indians gave way to a new approach: urging them to take up British citizenship and fully accept their destiny away from India. From then on, Pant’s priorities would be helping East Africa’s independence.

The disappointment was mutual. Indians were “rubbing their eyes and realising that what I have been saying, though very true, is hard to swallow”, wrote Pant.¹⁰⁸ For Indians, the pride of having a High Commissioner went together with the possibility to assert their rights and influence as Indian citizens through him. Yet Pant’s arrival in Africa had yielded few tangible benefits. His African nationalist connections threatened Indian civil servants. Post-colonial diplomacy was a tool for making demands on the state *back home* and state and society *right here*. When these demands were not met, Indians’ relationship with “their” diplomat deteriorated.

Meanwhile, colonial authorities’ ostensible welcome was disappearing. White settlers railed against the “hero-leader” diplomat dropped into their midst. As Pant’s perceived meddling and calls to end racial discrimination intensified, their unhappiness turned into active opposition. The mission’s access to Indian permanent residents and Africans was curtailed. Informants were dropped in its midst. Europeans and their supporters in the administration mobilised against the High Commissioner. Pant’s diplomatic endeavours were now precariously perched between the

drive to increase India's influence and the need to avoid upsetting the government. Pant would choose the former.

Rejecting the "mad rush" to do everything or be everywhere, Pant lambasted the idea diplomats had "to play to the gallery and do anything (our audiences) want".¹⁰⁹ Fears that "something is brewing against me somewhere" had replaced the glow of popularity. Depression reared its head. Pant wrote of "enemies" spreading tales and rumours against him to the Foreign Office, of a "personal animosity" surrounding him, of people "anxious to do me down". His ego hung "on a good word ... from Delhi so that I am rushing madly about showing work & good deeds. I am afraid I am just no good."¹¹⁰ Anxieties about the East African here and now were magnified by the impact on Delhi's there and then.

Pressured by colonial authorities, disappointed by the diaspora, and uncertain of his relationship with Africans, Pant grew increasingly concerned about his standing with the powers-that-be in Delhi. The diplomat inhabited different worlds at once, his mission and the diplomatic-bureaucratic nerve centre, and his work to respond to all of them shaped foreign policy. Pant's performance would soon reverberate through another world: the United Nations. It was there that Pant's transformation into a fully-fledged diplomat—one embedded in a community of practice, taking on an *esprit de corps*, and so, contributing to the formation of a truly *Indian* diplomatic system—would take place.

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In 1951, Pant joined India's UN delegation. Delhi's influence in the General Assembly partly hinged on championing Africa.¹¹¹ Pant had promoted its decolonisation from within; he would now do so from without. The UN proved an entirely new scene. The stakes were different. The players and the rules changed. The diplomat behaved differently. Pant's efforts to adjust would shape India's UN diplomacy in the first half of the 1950s.

The UN was a game noticeably different from Pant's diplomatic experience so far. Hard as it was to manage Indian-African relations, he did so as the lodestar of a compact and relatively autonomous mission. Nor did Nairobi's small diplomatic circle require much maintenance. Geneva was another matter. Multiple issues competed for attention. Countries argued and clashed. Hundreds of diplomats mingled. Conflicts of global importance unfolded. India's goal for "One World" hung in the balance.¹¹² The UN was an ever-changing theatrical performance, teeming with actors old and new, rehearsals, reversals, and coups de theatre, props and optical illusions.¹¹³

Pant's encounter with the UN entailed personal and conceptual scale-jumping. He began acting "very wild". Nairobi's star diplomat was now one small cog in Geneva's diplomatic machine. BN Rau, the delegation's head, thought Pant "too young and much too enthusiastic to be a diplomat." His colleagues thought Nehru had "overrated me, that I had to be kept in check if the work of the mission was not to be jeopardised". Pant had to prove himself—not just to the world, but to his colleagues.¹¹⁴

India's UN mission was a bureaucratic ecosystem onto itself. It emphasised the diplomat as a bureaucrat, embroiled in personal rivalries and jockeying for status within and without the delegation. Pant initially thought he was "pretty high up". In fact, he was one of five alternate delegates. To prosper, he needed "to *shine* in spite of that handicap".¹¹⁵ Doing so meant representing India on the more coveted committees, such as the "frightfully important" Political Committee that covered everything from Korea to new member-states' admission. The delegation's first meeting, where Indian diplomats "solemnly sit around" to assign portfolios, was as such a diplomatic negotiation in itself, with "bickerings and heart-burnings" aplenty.¹¹⁶

Pant struggled. This new separation from his family, who had finally joined him overseas, weighed on him. Ever cash-strapped, he cursed the "miserable pittance" Delhi gave him.¹¹⁷ The gap between the ideals meant to animate India's representatives and the reality continued to strike him. His fellow envoys seemed to be "play acting ... , anxious perhaps to 'keep a job' or

'look clever'.¹¹⁸ Witnessing the Cold War and 'the falseness . . . , the arrogance, the fear' coursing through the UN's corridors made him fear another world war.¹¹⁹

Pant overcame his moods through extroversion. He began "running faster and faster ... to prove to myself and all others that I was good."¹²⁰ Trips to London oiled his relations with Britain and the media. A Moral Re-Armament conference he attended with African contacts introduced him to soldiers, diplomats, and bankers from across the world.¹²¹ Networks outside the UN helped him circumvent his lack of status within the delegation. Appointed to the lowly Fourth Committee, Pant capitalised on it. The Committee notably dealt with trusteeship matters. Pant rallied countries to pressure South Africa to surrender Southwest Africa (Namibia). When Pretoria's British, French, and American supporters offered to talk, Pant scored his first UN victory. In the committee, he had enhanced India's role as mediator. For himself, he got Rau's public congratulations.¹²²

In Nairobi, Pant had promoted India by showcasing himself as a diplomat-prince. In Geneva the game took another turn. The goal was now to "sell Africa to everyone" to promote his posting and so, himself.¹²³ Pant would be India's "Africa man". By 1952, "almost every important personage interested in Africa" in Europe knew him. Senior diplomats started delegating African issues to him. Delhi sent him to convince the World Bank to refuse South Africa a development loan. Vijaylakshmi Pandit took him to parties in Washington to extol a post-colonial, multi-racial Africa.¹²⁴

If contacts made or unmade a diplomat's career at the UN, so could a speech or two. In October 1951, Pant got his chance. Invited to speak after a "studied, well brought out" intervention by Britain's representative, he responded for forty minutes. His counterparts rushed to congratulate him, news agencies to interview him. Henceforth, Pant seized every opportunity to give memorable speeches and present himself as an architect of inter-diplomatic teamwork.¹²⁵ The effect within the delegation was immediate. His colleagues, who had treated him like "a *strange creature*", began to invite him "to dine, lunch & what not."¹²⁶ Rau began to see him "a favourite child . . . , over enthusiastic", yet able to "carry things through".¹²⁷ Pant became the target of professional jealousies, some to become personal rivalries. He forged alliances. Soon, he had enough friends and influence in the delegation to supplement Krishna Menon on the Political Committee. His professional capital was rising.

Pant's efforts to be professionally valued through the UN intersected with India's ambitions to establish itself as a key architect of a new global order. Denouncing South Africa belonged to the strategy. By mobilising against its domination of Southwestern Africa, Pant gave Delhi's activism against Pretoria, hitherto focused on local Indians' ill treatment, a more disinterested flavour. Eventually, he achieved broad-base support.¹²⁸ India's diplomatic victory over South Africa merged into Pant's own. "Africa, Korea, everywhere we have made our mark—now we move about... as a *big power!*" Putting his personal stamp on these Indian successes was key. Reputations could be swiftly unmade, after all. To sustain his success, Pant circulated his Southwestern Africa motion to all and sundry, from governors and MEA bigwigs to the Colonial Office and missions across Africa.¹²⁹

Professional capital had to be managed, and not left to the whims of bright yet transitory moments. It also needed to diversify. Pant's endeavours to establish himself as India's Africa-man gave way to concerns about being pigeonholed. To prepare the next step in his career, he sought involvement on issues beyond the continent:

If ... you are only an African expert in order to keep yourself 'up there' you have to all the time shout & shout & shout that Africa is important, urgent, explosive i.e. 'For heaven's sake give me importance!!' But if I ... demonstrate my capacity to tackle (other things), then I need not be ... so tense and anxious.¹³⁰

Africa would not let go so easily. But Pant's UN sojourns had given him the feeling of being fully integrated in a diplomatic eco-system, and the desire to participate in it. Institutionalisation

was but one aspect of the IFS' formation. If Indian diplomats became a corps, a "community of practice" despite their heterogeneity and tensions between ex-ICS and the rest, it was also through their prolonged, messy interaction at international organisations like the UN, themselves in the process of formation.¹³¹ The pressures of the UN's diplomatic eco-system simultaneously intensified the efforts of diplomats like Pant to make themselves known and indeed renowned – reinforcing their drive to be recognised as foreign policy's inventors rather than mere mouthpieces.

All or nothing

That Pant was a diplomatic entrepreneur in his own right became manifest in the manner of his departure from Africa. By the early 1950s, the "volcano" he foresaw was erupting. In Kenya's central highlands, the Mau Mau movement was gathering place, feeding on accumulated grievances among the Kikuyus, Embus, and Merus—starting with the dispossession of their lands by white settlers. The violence was as much an intra-Kikuyu conflict over land, power, and authority as a struggle against colonial rule, but it wreaked havoc over the highlands. In October 1952, Kenyan authorities declared a State of Emergency and launched counter-insurgency operations. Kenyatta and other KAU leaders were arrested, accused of managing the Mau Mau.¹³²

Pant—still at his post between UN sessions—refused to stand still. The situation fuelled his idealism and eagerness for the game. And yet, he would lose almost everything to it. Pant had begun clashing with colonial authorities soon after his arrival, when he enthusiastically overstepped his brief by deciding to advocate for permanent Indian residents. Colonial governments protested, but he continued.¹³³ Pant would not lay low, nor let the European press "(discredit) our work in Africa"; it was "through suffering ... that the diverse elements in a multiracial society fuse together."¹³⁴ Sending Pant to the UN, far from settlers' sight and less capable of ruffling up colonial governments, was a manoeuvre to calm things down.

But Pant redoubled his support for Kenyan nationalists in connection with the EAINC. When Kikuyus asked him to become one of their elders, Pant accepted. The ceremony was secret, but colonial governments had him under watch.¹³⁵ The High Commission began to report the reality of the crisis and call out the colonial government for its brutal repression. Pant disagreed with the violence unleashed by the Mau Maus, but thought it by no means atavistic. He convinced Delhi that its origin lay with European actions and colonial policies. When Kenyatta was put on trial, Pinto and Murumbi sought Pant's help. Delhi sent the lawyer Dewan Chamanlal to join the defence team. Calling out the British government for its actions in Kenya and supporting Kenyatta in turn allowed Nehru to stake its claim to lead emergent Afro-Asian solidarity.¹³⁶

Colonial authorities and settlers now considered the Indian High Commission a full-blown threat—and not just because of events in Kenya. When the Baganda king, in conflict with Uganda authorities, had arrived unannounced in 1952, Pant had given him India's hospitality and introduced him to Kenyatta. In the revelry that followed, "the future Kenyan flag ... (had fluttered alongside) innumerable Indian ones; the Union Jack was noticeable by its total absence."¹³⁷ The European-controlled press attacked India, accusing Pant of encouraging rebellion—along with Swahili broadcasts on the Delhi Radio "exaggerat(ing) every incident of African defiance", Indian traders "financing ... the Mau Mau itself", and "Sikh deserters" accused of being the movements' tacticians.¹³⁸ Allegedly, a "certain Indian diplomatic representative" was fraternising with Moscow's agents and subverting Africans with "personal kindness", while his mission circulated tendentious pamphlets on Nehru's struggle against British rule. Rhodesia banned Indians from disembarking, accusing Delhi of sponsoring large-scale immigration into the region.¹³⁹ Pant revelled in this charged atmosphere. Might Delhi not congratulate him for defusing European attempts to blame Africans' plight on India and its diaspora? When Nehru openly declared his support for a Central African federation, he thought himself vindicated.¹⁴⁰

The reality was that his credit in Delhi was evaporating. In January 1954, Delhi recalled Pant. In private, British authorities hoped for a successor as “pleasant and friendly” as they found Pant irritating.¹⁴¹ In public, the announcement caused a media storm. Kenya’s European newspapers exulted. Pant had waged a “cold war” to “push the ‘White Masters’ out of Africa and the tropical colonies and let India take over”. India’s “cuckoo imperialism” had to be thwarted, and Pant, “the number one cuckoo”, thrown out. They had been heard, they claimed: Delhi had buckled under London’s pressure and recalled its embarrassing envoy.¹⁴² Indian newspapers countered that Pant had stayed in post longer than was usual and earned only praise from Nehru.¹⁴³ Left-wing British newspapers concurred: Pant had done India proud and had Nehru’s “complete confidence”.¹⁴⁴

Pant’s recall has become almost legendary. Denied at the time, his ousting from Africa under pressure from London belongs to a series of episodes seen as the high point of India-Africa relations—episodes that underpin narratives of the pre-1962 period as a time of post-colonial idealism. Months after his departure, British troops launched a decisive drive against the Mau Mau. During Operation Anvil, meant to root them out from Nairobi, they raided the Indian High Commission. African staff were arrested, the premises searched, and Indian diplomats accused of assisting the insurgents. In government correspondence, Pant declared his pride in one of his peons, fired because suspect.¹⁴⁵ These incidents cemented his aura as a maverick, passionate diplomat, ready to incur the Empire’s wrath to achieve India’s post-imperial dream. By the end of his career, Pant even claimed personal involvement with the Mau Mau.¹⁴⁶

The reality was less glorious. Pant’s recall betrayed a major crisis between Delhi and its diplomat. Far from rewarding him for his activities, the MEA stayed silent. Pant grew dissatisfied, irate even. He dreamed of going to Delhi to demand

more pay, better status, shout ... nonsense about ... the “continent of dawn” – meet mugs ... (to) “build myself up” and talk more nonsense about love & goodwill & nonviolence (!!!) and all that rot. No, no, I will be decent and decorous and try to behave as a successful “diplomat” should, and I will not ‘shock’ anyone else by showing the ‘demon’ in me. I do not think I will immediately kill anyone – not yet.¹⁴⁷

Weeks later, Pant received “terrific bombshells”: Nehru wanted to talk. His tone presaged a “head-on collision”. So did the knowledge that IFS rivals had the Prime Minister’s ear. After years playing diplomacy’s game with its highs and lows, Pant could lose it all. He hesitated between the desire not to go without a fight—“Either I re-establish my former position & give hell to them all or I get out”—and conciliation. Nehru himself wavered. Furious at his diplomat for overstepping his brief, he “calmed down considerably” after a week of reflexion.¹⁴⁸

A trip to Delhi and the credit accumulated among some IFS grandees during his UN stints thus rescued Pant. Away from the capital, Pant struggled to plead his case. Meeting the Prime Minister face-to-face allowed Pant to argue for the righteousness of his African policy. Nehru, “explosive in the beginning”, eventually agreed that India couldn’t countenance European atrocities in Kenya. The reconciliation between diplomat and prime minister was mutual. Critical of a man “as usual, wavering and sticking to generalities” during the crisis, Pant’s returned to calling Nehru *Panditji* and *Jawaharhalnehrjee*.¹⁴⁹ He had narrowly avoided dismissal and obtained a return to Delhi. The higher post would wait, however. Moreover, India had agreed to take a back seat on East African issues. Diplomat-driven foreign policy had its uses, but also its pitfalls.

Conclusion

Apa Pant’s five-and-a-half-year tenure in Nairobi represents the African segment of the Nehruvian myth. Subsumed into this narrative to the point of becoming a standby for Nehru, and for India itself, Pant embodies the fact that, even visible narratively, diplomats are excised interpretively from the story of India’s international relations. Yet India’s East Africa policy in the early 1950s was as much Pant’s as Nehru’s. More, perhaps: that Nehru had big *ideas* did not mean he had a well-developed *policy*. India-Africa relations were made on the ground as much as in Delhi. Within

months of his arrival in East Africa, India's envoy was convinced that his first general aim—to look after the diaspora—clashed with his other mission, encouraging Africa's national development and support its anti-colonial leaders. Activists for Indo-African unity excepted, Pant increasingly criticised the diaspora, considering it too “encased in their own caste groups” to “climb over the walls” and join Africans in a common future of equality, freedom, and prosperity.¹⁵⁰

Revisiting the notion of Nehru's centrality that still animates many accounts of Indian foreign policy requires us to deconstruct diplomats and understand what drove them. Pant later lambasted the “raw ignoramus” he had been early in his career. Now lauded and recognised, poking fun at himself spiced up his diplomatic tales.¹⁵¹ Yet the cluelessness and the lack of confidence had been real, back then—a lack of bearing that had to do with liminality in his private life as much as Delhi's lack of guidance and the scale of the task.

Pant did not figure out an “Africa policy” for India despite his personal and professional struggles, *but through them*. Underneath India's famous-infamous envoy to Nairobi lay a tempestuous inner self, eager for material and psychological security. Charm, confidence, and aristocratic ease papered over anxiety and doubt, themselves partly rooted in the clash between the apparent facility of *acting* the diplomat and the difficulty of identifying the job's actual content. Indian diplomats' outsized status after independence made them prey to powerful, and often conflicting, demands from below. For Pant, the transfer of power therefore entailed complex personal, professional, and political negotiations—reminding us that in diplomacy, the personal and the national are always imbricated.¹⁵²

Decolonisation was an extended moment of pressure for the everyday structures, procedures, and people through which Indian diplomacy was imagined and transformed. The micro-level level struggles Pant went through matter. For India and other ex-colonies, entering the international system as an independent country involved individual, institutional, and national transformations. Looking seriously at diplomats—including, or even especially, those not necessarily as legendary as ‘the Menons’—can offer new explanatory avenues in understanding international relations, including by bridging the gap between foreign policy and diplomacy and by refining our understanding of decision-making in external affairs.

For India, post-colonial envoys' understanding of diplomacy could form part of a broader research agenda on the “diplomatic” transfer of power. Colonial India's diplomacy had largely functioned in an ad-hoc and uncoordinated manner, some sections improvising or acting of their own accord. The question of learning presented itself in countless forms for post-colonial diplomacy, from major organisational reforms to nitty-gritty debates over Indianising correspondence or embassy artwork. It meant re-adjusting colonial structures and methods, or conversely unlearning them. This involved considering British colonialism but equally existing international custom. Individual selves—including Indian missions' rank-and-file, even more uncharted than diplomats—formed one terrain on which this played out.¹⁵³

To understand decolonisation then, we should study diplomats for their own sake. Can Indian diplomats be put in the same basket as an ambassador representing a country with no diplomatic infrastructure prior to independence, or with other “non-status quo” diplomatic traditions like Latin America's?¹⁵⁴ How did Pant's prolonged contact with African freedom fighters like Murumbi, who became foreign minister after independence, shape the diplomatic learning processes of countries like Kenya? Exploring what doing diplomacy and being a diplomat meant during independence's first decades can help us better envision the role of emotions in foreign relations. Pant's experience of diplomacy was a deeply emotional one. Pride, ego, fear, self-doubt, amusement, anger, frustration collided and shaped his reactions. For diplomats tasked with embodying it, decolonisation had a distinct emotional colour. Serving a country that was tasting freedom was *not* anodyne.

What South Asian and Global South historians can contribute, in turn, is a better understanding of diplomacy-as-practice. From the New Diplomatic History to International Relations' “practice turn”,¹⁵⁵ from anthropologists to geographers,¹⁵⁶ diplomacy has been re-envisioned as a set of contested practices entwined with changing identities, materialities, and socio-cultural

norms. Yet, by and large, discussions of what it means to do diplomacy in modern times remain focused on Western contexts, and often under-historicised. We still need to de-centre Europe from discussions of diplomacy-as-practice.¹⁵⁷ Pant reveals what we can gain from attending to process to understand how different countries grappled with independence as international actors—and in so doing, to re-envision decolonisation as a phenomenon affecting the daily process of international relations.

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