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Profile of J.J. Singh

The business card of the longtime president of the India League of America simply read: “J.J. Singh, New York City,” and the font of the embossed heading on the top of his purplish-blue stationary mirrored the loopy “J’s” of Singh’s own signature. [[1]](#footnote--1) This was the man the *New York Times* labeled, an “unofficial envoy,” the *New York Herald Tribune*,India’s “unofficial ambassador,” and *Time* magazine, a “one-man lobby.”[[2]](#footnote-0) Robert Shaplen would later adopt this final designation as the subheading of his 1951 profile of Singh for *The New Yorker*.[[3]](#footnote-1) All of these titles, however, give the impression that Singh impacted the relationship between India and the United States by operating as an individual, when in actuality the true testament of Singh’s work was the remarkable coalition of liberal internationalists that he created in the India League of America. When Singh began attending League meetings in 1939, in the third year of the organization’s existence, 12 members regularly attended.[[4]](#footnote-2) Two years later, the board elected Singh as its new president, a position that Singh would hold until the League’s dissolution in 1959. During Singh’s tenure as president, the U.S. Congress passed the 1946 India Immigration and Naturalization Act, India gained its independence in 1947, and the relationship between India and the United States developed from its practically nonexistent state into one very aware of each other’s positions in the emerging international arena.

Mahomed Ali C. Chagla, the Ambassador of India, gave the keynote address at the India League’s farewell meeting held at the Community Church of New York on February 11, 1959. The Ambassador described the League as an institution that had successfully achieved its purposes. It played an invaluable role during India’s struggle for independence, and when “the voice of India’s distinguished sons was silenced, the voice of the India League continued to be heard in the United States and it was a voice that was eloquent and forceful. The great advantage that the League had in canvassing American public opinion was that it had in its membership leaders of American public opinion.”[[5]](#footnote-3) The Ambassador linked, what he deemed to be the success of the League, to its ability to impact American public opinion, an ability directly related to who called themselves members of the India League of America.

The composition of the League was where J.J. Singh truly made his impact. Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, became a member of the League’s National Advisory Board on July 27, 1944, after over a year of Singh’s persistent efforts to woo the leading civil rights activist to join the organization as a fellow supporter of “international justice and democracy.”[[6]](#footnote-4) Less than four months after becoming a member of the India League, White described Singh in an introductory letter to New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia as “not only a very close friend but one of the most intelligent persons on the Indian and other questions I know.”[[7]](#footnote-5) In fact, White was returning the favor. In preparation for the Secretary’s trip to India, Singh wrote five letters of introduction to leading Indians, writing that White was “a great friend of India and I depend on him for counsel and guidance for my work here.”[[8]](#footnote-6) Singh personally forged mutually beneficial relationships and lasting friendships with leading individuals, like White, who in turn served as outlets for the message of the India League and the voices of the advocates for Indian independence to the people of the United States. Singh’s greatest strength was not his ability to advance the fight for Indian independence in the United States as an individual, but instead his aptitude for recognizing potential allies and zealously convincing them to become part of the struggle. Singh’s development of the India League of America from a tiny philosophic group into a coalition that Vice President Richard Nixon wrote was, “deserving of high commendation for its fine work,” reflected his awareness of emerging liberal internationalism and the greater context Indian independence held is this new world order.

Singh’s correspondence with future Executive Board members Walter White and Congressman Emanuel Celler illuminates how Singh used his understanding of the U.S. political system and his infectious personality to tactically advance the cause of the India Lobby by forming personal relationships with leading American liberals. In the summer of 1944, when Singh was still trying to convince White to join the board of the India League, his eloquent letters displayed a high level of professionalism and a firm grasp of the art of persuasion. In a June 7 letter, Singh addressed White’s previously expressed concern about the time commitment of joining the League, did a bit of name dropping by mentioning prestigious recent additions to the board, and closed his entreaty with the flattering remarks: “my colleagues and I will deem it a great pleasure and privilege to have you on our Advisory Committee. I do hope, sir, that you will be able to accept our invitation.”[[9]](#footnote-7) While White accepted Singh’s petition on July 27 in a letter addressed to “Dear Mr. Singh” that maintained the League president’s professional tone, a mere three months later, White was sharing inside jokes with Singh by addressing a letter: “Dear ‘Harry,’” as well as including personal notes in his correspondence.[[10]](#footnote-8) The strength of the connection between the NAACP and the India League depended on the friendship of their leaders as demonstrated by a letter written by the Acting Secretary of the NAACCP *Roy Wilkins[?]*, rather than White, that was addressed to “Sirdar Singh,” J.J. Singh’s full name, which the personable Indian never used.[[11]](#footnote-9) Even after India gained its independence on August 15, 1947—the ultimate goal of the India League—Singh maintained his relationships with the people that gave a voice to the Indian nationalist struggle in the United States. White and Singh continued to be close friends who shared “real heart-to-heart talk[s],” as well as committed allies in the international fight for the rights of oppressed peoples.[[12]](#footnote-10) The longevity of the friendships that Singh built with leading Americans demonstrated both Singh’s ability to cultivate meaningful relationships for the benefit of the India Lobby, and his ultimate dedication to the people and principles that were important to him.

Singh also developed a lasting friendship with Congressman Emanuel Celler while working as the India League’s president, and their correspondence followed the same pattern as Singh’s exchanges with White: what started as a series of formal, professional letters developed into a correspondence that reflected their personal friendship. Celler joined the National Advisory Board of the India League of America in June 1944, just before Walter White—Singh included Celler’s name in the list of new prestigious members of the League when trying to convince White to join.[[13]](#footnote-11) As a member of Congress, Celler was a key ally, and Singh did not shy away from utilizing the Congressman’s position to the advance the causes of the India Lobby. When the British Government of India appointed, in Singh’s words, “three titled collaborationists,” as India’s representatives to the 1945 United Nations Conference in San Francisco, Singh asked Celler to introduce moderate Indian leader, C. Rajagopalachari’s critique of the appointments to the Congressional Record.[[14]](#footnote-12) Also during the spring of 1945, Celler and Republican Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce introduced bills to the House that would develop into the 1946 Indian Immigration and Naturalization Act, remaining dedicated to the legislation even as the change in administration and Congressional subcommittees caused the bills to be sidelined on multiple occasions.[[15]](#footnote-13) As an association with both legislative and policy goals, the India Lobby’s connections within the Congressional body were crucial to their success. Singh did not merely form acquaintances with members of the U.S. government, he created substantive alliances that produced results.

Well after the India Lobby had achieved its founding goals—support of Indian independence and citizenship rights for Indians in America—Singh continued to consult with “Mannie” on matters of the India League.[[16]](#footnote-14) In a telling 1951 letter, Singh first thanked Celler for using his “good offices” to help grant the India League tax exemptions [*as a non-profit organization?*]. Singh continued candidly, writing:

I am fully aware of the limitations of the India League of America as a non-governmental organization. I am also aware of the fact that better understanding has to be reached at the governmental level. But, believe me, Mannie, there is a hell of a lot that a non-governmental organization…can accomplish on other levels than the governmental level.[[17]](#footnote-15)

Therefore, Singh concluded, rather than giving up because the India League was short on money and the official relationship between the United States and India appeared strained, he and Celler should “have a heart to heart talk” with the kind of people who “(a) have money, (b) can be made to realize the importance of abridging the gulf between India and the United States.” Singh didn’t even want Celler to only invite friends already outwardly supportive of the India, but instead, suggested the Congressmen include “those who are at present against India or Nehru” in his invitation.[[18]](#footnote-16) This letter not only demonstrated Singh’s close relationship with Celler, as Singh trusted the Congressman with the discussion of the inner workings of the India League. It also displayed the president’s savvy understanding of how to perpetuate the influence of a “non-governmental organization,” his head-on approach to a challenge, and ultimately, Singh’s confidence in both the importance of the issues of the India Lobby and his own ability to persuade even non-supporters of that fact.

Singh’s friends and colleagues had the utmost confidence in the India League president’s dedication to causes of international fraternity and justice. After living in the United States for 33 years, J.J. Singh prepared to move back to India with his wife Malti and their two sons Man Mohan and Man Jit in March 1959. Before his departure, messages of goodwill, fond recollections, and flattering accolades flooded in from an impressive group of Singh’s friends and acquaintances. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey spoke on Singh’s behalf on the Senate floor on January 22nd. On February 16, New York Mayor Robert F. Wagner held an official luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria where he presented Singh with a citation for his “distinguished and exceptional service.[[19]](#footnote-17) For final public meeting of the India League and the farewell dinner honoring Singh held on February 11 and 23 respectively, the former Ambassador to India Chester Bowles, Nobel Prizing winning author Pearl S. Buck, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives Emanuel Celler, former Ambassador to India John Sherman Cooper, Editor of the *Saturday Review* Norman Cousins, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, former Postmaster General of the United States James. A Farley, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee J.W. Fulbright, Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee James G. Fulton, U.N. Representative in India and Pakistan Dr. Frank P. Graham, Minister Emeritus of The Community Church Dr. John Haynes Holmes, Indian Ambassador to the United Naitons C.S. Jha, Publisher of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* Henry R. Luce, Consul General M. Gopala Menon, Senator Karl E. Mundt, UAW leader Victor G. Reuther, and Assistant Secretary of State William M. Rountree all sent messages praising Singh’s work as one of India’s most vocal advocates in the United States. While all of these leading Indians and Americans described Singh differently—as a “beacon of goodwill,” a “beloved member of the New York community,” a “universal” man, the India League’s “ever youthful President,” “irrepressible,” a “one man panzer division,” a “human institution,” a “steel bridge connecting two great peoples and cultures” with a “diabolical twinkle” in his eye, and “a source of strength and inspiration to all of us”—they expressed an overwhelming confidence that Singh would continue his work towards improving the relationship between the United States and India, only now from his native country.[[20]](#footnote-18) *[conclusion/transition…]*

1. *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 48: Subject File: “J.J. Singh, correspondence, August 1951-December 1956,” Library of Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. “The Unofficial Ambassador,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1959, pg. 32; Quoted in “Messages of Greetings on the 70th Birthday of J.J. Singh,” New Delhi: 1967, *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 500, Subject File: “India-J.J. Singh, 1946-69,” Library of Congress, “Mr. Singh Goes to Washington,” *TIME*, February 28, 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Robert Shaplen, “One-Man Lobby,” *The New Yorker*, March 24, 1951, pg. 35-55. The glossy magazine of good wishes for J.J. Singh on his 70th birthday, put together by Dr. Gopal Singh, noted that the Shaplen profile was the first profile of an Indian in the *New Yorker*, “a sophisticated… magazine, which is most widely read by the intellectuals of America.” “Messages of Greetings on the 70th Birthday of J.J. Singh,” 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Shaplen, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Mahomed Chagla in “Speeches made on the occasion of the Farewell-Public Meeting of the India League of America, held on Wednesday, February 11, 1959, at the Community Church of New York, 40 East 35th Street, New York,” *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 498, Subject File: “India League of America,” Library of Congress, [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. J.J. Singh, Roger Baldwin and Frances Gunter to Walter White, New York, May 22, 1943, *The Papers of the NAACP Part 14. Race Relations in the International Arena, 1940-1955,* Reel 9; Walter White to J.J. Singh, New York, July 27, 1944, *The Papers of the NAACP*,Reel 11. Though this letter is White’s formal acceptance of Singh’s invitation to join the India League in the *Papers of the NAACP*, White’s name is already listed on the India League’s letterhead as a member of the National Advisory Committee in a July 25 mass letter to all “Friend[s]” of the India League, suggesting White had already informed Singh of his decision by some other (more personal?) form of communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Walter White to Fiorello La Guardia, December 8, 1944, New York, *The Papers of the NAACP*, Reel 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. J.J. Singh to Walter White, November 28, 1944, New York, quoted in Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2008), 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. J.J. Singh to Walter White, June 7, 1944, New York, *The Papers of the NAACP*, Reel 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Walter White to J.J. Singh, New York, July 27, 1944, *The Papers of the NAACP*,Reel 11; Walter White to J.J. Singh, New York, October 20, 1944, *The Papers of the NAACP,* Reel 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. Acting Secretary of the NAACP to Sirdar Singh, April 9, 1945, New York, *Papers of the NAACP,* Reel 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. J.J. Singh to Walter White, New York, June 29, 1948, *The Papers of the NAACP*, Reel 12; J.J. Singh to Walter White, December 28, 1948, *The Papers of the NAACP*, Reel 9. In a brief telegram, Singh requested White’s presence at a meeting to protest Dutch aggression in Indonesia, also demonstrating that Singh’s commitment to the principles of liberal internationalism extended outside of the borders of India and the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. J.J. Singh to Walter White, June 21, 1944, New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. J.J. Singh, “India and San Francisco Conference,” from the India League of America, March 21, 1945, in the *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 497: Subject File: “India-correspondence, 1944-1947,” Library of Congress; J.J. Singh to Emanuel Celler, April 11, 1945, Washington, DC, *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 497: Subject File: “India-correspondence, 1944-1947,” Library of Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Gary Hess, *America Encounters India, 1941-1947* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Singh, apparently, never decided how to spell his friend’s nickname, alternating between “Manny” (used in 1946 and 1959 letters) and “Mannie” (used in 1951, 1952, 1953 correspondence). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. J.J. Singh to Emanuel Celler, May 24, 1951, Washington, DC, *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 498: Subject File: “India League of America,” Library of Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. J.J. Singh to Emanuel Celler, May 24, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Quoted in “Messages of Greetings on the 70th Birthday of J.J. Singh.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. Excerpts from speeches made on the occasion of the Farewell-Public Meeting of the India League of America, held on Wednesday, February 11, 1959, at the Community Church of New York, 40 East 35th Street, New York; Excerpts from remarks made, on messages received, on the occasion of a Farewell Dinner by the India League of America in honor of Sirdar J.J. Singh, President of the India League, on Monday. February 23, 1959 at Ceylon India Inn, 148 West 49th Street, New York, *Emanuel Celler Papers*, Box 498: Subject File: “India League of America,” Library of Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)