INTERVIEW WITH SURENDRA NIHAL SINGH

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
SNS: Surendra Nihal Singh (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Surendra Nihal Singh at Senate House on Tuesday 21st May 2013. Mr Singh, thank you very much indeed for coming in to talk to me. I wondered if you could begin by saying, please; how did you come to be a political journalist?

SNS: Well, I suppose it was a natural progression because in India, at least on the major newspapers, you start as a local reporter, court, police, that kind of thing, local meetings; and then after a certain stage you graduate to parliamentary reporting, political reporting and so on. So, it's a question of going up the ladder professionally.

SO: During your time as a journalist, was there quite a narrow circle of Indian political reportage, or was this a pretty large and competitive field?

SNS: Well, not as competitive as it is today of course and I'm talking of the early 1950s. There were a few recognised political reporters or correspondents and they ruled the roost, unlike today when there is a plethora of political reporting and commentaries and so on.

SO: What sort of access did you have to Indian politicians at that particular point in the '50s; was this quite a small world?

SNS: Pretty good because in those days The Statesman was one of the best newspapers in the country. I had pretty good access to everybody I wanted to see, from the Prime Minister to Cabinet Ministers and others, so there was no problem in getting access to them.

SO: In the 1950s then what was your particular view of the place of the Commonwealth in Indian foreign policy and Indian diplomacy?

SNS: Well, I think after the Nehru era, shall we say, the importance of the Commonwealth was rather limited, I think, from the Indian perspective. I was

quite amused that when I was looking through a Google search on the Commonwealth that there have been certain very acerbic comments on the Commonwealth from various quarters, including Tony Blair and of course Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan who was out of the Commonwealth for a time. He called it 'an anachronistic old boys club' and Blair, I recall, said that it was 'Like fox hunting, it belongs to another era.'

I think you will have to divide it between the Nehru phase and the post Nehru phase. I think that Nehru himself, because of his upbringing and education and attachment to British values, had a particular place for the Commonwealth and he believed that it was a useful institution; but as far as I can recall, I think after him the importance of the Commonwealth in Indian policy making establishments diminished. Of course, then you came to the point of Britain joining the European Economic Community, which meant really that apart from the economic aspect of it that Britain felt, despite its links to the colonies or ex-colonies, that it was time to get to where it belonged, which is Europe.

SO: Sir, just going back to the earlier period of India and the Commonwealth: how small was this Indian foreign policy making establishment in Nehru's time in office? The Commonwealth itself was a very much smaller club at this particular point.

SNS: Yes, of course.

SO: This was the old Commonwealth and India from 1949. But by the beginning of the '60s, the Commonwealth was changing in shape and form and membership dramatically. So, your point about Nehru's demise and the declining importance in the Commonwealth in foreign policy making circles corresponds to the era in which the Commonwealth was expanding.

SNS: Yes, and for the new members or newer members of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth was an important institution because it gave them a certain amount of prestige and the fact that they could rub shoulders with the high and mighty of the Commonwealth which would have been difficult otherwise. So, I think it is a much more useful institution for the newer members especially from Africa, and at a later stage I thought for the island nations in particular, the small countries. A lot of members of the Commonwealth are quite small; we tend to forget that. They found it useful in terms of pushing for climate change and the threat to their countries basically.

SO: In the Indian political system which, after all, is modelled to a degree on the Westminster system, where does foreign policy making sit in terms of decision making and critical input?

SNS: In the Prime Minister's Office. Because the President is a figurehead in many ways.

SO: So the locus of decision making is very much in the Prime Minister's Office. The Prime Minister's advisers then are of critical importance.

SNS: Well, there again you have to distinguish between the Nehru and post Nehru phases because in Nehru's time and the Indian defeat at the hands of

Chinese in the 1962 border war… Until that time Nehru was everything in foreign policy; he was the fountainhead of policy and even people who had reservations dared not challenge him because he was the supreme person. Well, that changed dramatically after the border war and he never really recovered from that defeat, psychologically and physically, then of course he died not too long afterwards. So, you had a concentration of foreign policy making in Nehru's office, in the Prime Minister's Office and with Nehru, with the officials amplifying things up to a point or putting the flesh on his ideas.

So, it was very much a single man kind of concept of foreign policy, on which of course he elaborated the philosophical underpinnings in the autobiography *The Discovery of India*. After the defeat of India in the border war, suddenly the Indian establishment or the policy making apparatus of Parliament got to the point of saying 'This is totally wrong, you can't have one man being the fountainhead of foreign policy. It's a very complex issue'. So, then it still remained the prerogative of the Prime Minister's Office but it was not a one man show in that sense; and it varied dependent on the competence of the Foreign Minister, we call it External Affairs Minister, and the interest of the Prime Minister in foreign policy making. That varied a great deal because there was a phase in 1990, for instance, we had a succession of Prime Ministers who were rather temporary. It was a political crisis which India was passing through. There were men like I. K. Gujral who became Prime Minister who was greatly interested in foreign policy making. For a time he was banished to Moscow during the Emergency because he was Information Minister at that time and Mrs Gandhi wanted a pliant person as Information Minister. So she sent him to Moscow as Indian ambassador. He was very keen on particularly on sub-continental affairs in terms of anything happening in Pakistan and in terms of what came to be called the Gujral Doctrine, which means you do more in terms of giving to your smaller neighbours than taking from them because of your size and so on and importance.

SO: Sir, just to go back to that point of transition where foreign policy was very much the prerogative of the Indian Prime Minister under Nehru: following his death and the reconfiguration of the Commonwealth, where would you place the Indian Diplomatic Service in the formulation of foreign policy? I've been told by others that in fact in contrast to the country's size, the Indian Foreign Service was relatively small and so it was under constraints of personnel: the talent pool was smaller, but the service also faced considerable bureaucratic requirements imposed upon it.

SNS: That's very true, very true. I think they recognised it and they tried to augment the size of the Indian Foreign Service, but it's pitifully small considering the size of India and the relationship it has with different countries in the world. They are overworked and therefore the bureaucracy tends to neglect certain areas of foreign policy because you can't do it, you can't handle all there is to handle. I know, for instance, certain ambassadors in India have complained to me that they don't get enough time with the Foreign Minister and so on. That's not because of us snubbing some countries but it's the physical impossibility of catering to hundreds, more than a hundred odd countries' ambassadors.

SO: Is there then a pattern of representation focusing on key posts which would tend to be political appointments? This would involve making

calculated political decisions, against budgetary restrictions, on where to focus Indian representation. During your time as a political correspondent, where were those political foci?

SNS: Well, the political focuses are very obvious. One was the Soviet Union at that time, the other was China and the third was Pakistan because of our difficult relations with both our neighbours; and the fact that the Soviet Union was an important giver of arms. It sold arms that the West were not prepared to sell in those days, so it was an important relationship in that sense. But China was a difficult customer from the beginning, more or less after the haze of India and China being 'brothers dispersed' - which was the initial phase you might recall. So, it was a difficult relationship which had to be managed and then you had Pakistan which because of the history was a very troublesome relationship.

SO: In terms of India's regional geopolitical calculations and the Soviet Union: this is the context of the Cold War. Yet in a desire to make sure that India was genuinely non-aligned rather than caught up in the contestation between blocs, the Soviet provision of hard weaponry would be attractive. In terms of regional contestation with Pakistan as two brothers who'd fallen out dramatically with the violence of Partition but also the ongoing Kashmir issue; you've also alluded to the border war and the tension between Beijing and Delhi. In all of this, in your particular view, did there continue to be any sense of a London-Delhi axis?

SNS: Not really I'd say, no. No, I wouldn't say so because the Cold War was a phenomenon which went on for quite some time. And the UK was very much tied up with the US of course and the Western Bloc, so to speak. India went to Moscow for materialistic reasons and because of the few other options it had. So, that lasted a considerable time and the fact that the United States had a treaty relationship with Pakistan in terms of armaments and everything else sucked Pakistan into a Cold War relationship because of its own reasons and Pakistan again for its own reasons. So, this complicated our relationship with Pakistan for obvious reasons. And which made us go to the Soviet Union more than we would otherwise have done.

SO: Then how far can it be said that the Commonwealth in this highly charged ideological climate - in which India is determined not to be sucked into siding with one or other superpower bloc - does the Commonwealth, as a voluntary association for India in this period, enable multiple identities? I'm thinking of India with its leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement and the whole Bandung process; Pakistan became ideologically aligned with America; Britain and Canada were leading members of the Western Bloc through NATO. In other words, in terms of the Cold War and Non-Alignment, there were allies and fractured identities; but in the Commonwealth there was a sort of melting pot.

SNS: Yes and to that extent it was useful because it was a forum where you could interact with people who otherwise you wouldn't interact with at that level, so to that extent it was useful I think.

SO: For Nehru's successors, then, you said that there was a reconfiguration of where foreign policy was formulated; that it was dispersed somewhat from the Prime Minister's Office because it couldn't be concentrated in one man. His successor, Nanda, was only in office for a very short time. Then Shastri, of course, served after 1964 until '66. How important was Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, in the formulation of Indian foreign policy?

SNS: My impression was that she was not so greatly interested in foreign policy as such except to make a splash on the world stage in which she was interested. But she had a basic horse sense I would say, in terms of looking at foreign policy issues. Obviously she was influenced by her father and she was basically a pragmatic person in formulating foreign policy issues. I remember I talked to her on a background basis; this was before I left for Pakistan 'cause this was in '67 I think, because I was the first representative of an Indian newspaper allowed to have a correspondent in Pakistan after the '65 war because of *The Statesman's* reputation. And I met her privately for a session on Pakistan and she was quite candid about the prospects of better relations with Pakistan. She was rather pessimistic about the likelihood of better relations. I brought up Kashmir for instance and she said, "What solution can there be on Kashmir considering the Pakistani attitudes?" *[Laughs]*

SO: So, any resolution of this particular problem in her eyes lay entirely in Pakistan's court.

SNS: Well, because she felt, indeed she knew really that you couldn't have a realistic solution on Pakistani terms and everybody knew that. That was her basic argument.

SO: So, this was not a foreign policy issue; this was also a domestic issue of India.

SNS: Yes, of course, very much so.

SO: Intimately related. In your view then what was her style towards foreign policy? You say that she was very pragmatic; was she a woman who would use a very small coterie to advise her? Would she use particular sounding boards in the press? Was she particularly swayed by a particular power bloc within her party on foreign policy? I'm just trying to think about how the dynamics of Indian foreign policy worked at this particular period.

SNS: Well, she had advisers. P. N. Haksar was a principal adviser and I think a great influence on her policy making because she had confidence in him and he was a bit of a leftist in ideological terms but all there. And I recall talking to him before writing, when I was doing my research on my book on Indo-Soviet relations called *The Yogi and The Bear* and I talked to him about the question of after the '71 war, the Bangladesh War, and there was a great controversy in India about releasing 70,000 odd Pakistani prisoners. The general impression in India was that Indira Gandhi was conned because it was a lever which India decided to surrender, according to the popular view, without getting anything substantive in return, and especially on Kashmir which was a vague formulation by Bhutto which ultimately didn't amount to anything. So, he was curious in a sense because he said, "Look, you have to trust people

or nations at a certain point and this was our gesture to Pakistan in terms of future relationships between the two countries". To me, this was not a very convincing argument, but anyway that was his way of putting it.

SO: How far did you see it at the time as a sop to Pakistan, because when India recognised Bangladesh this caused Ali Bhutto to withdraw abruptly from the Commonwealth?

SNS: Yes.

SO: So, this was not simply diplomatic leverage. This was - if not a consolation prize - something of an alleviating factor as India was confronted with four million refugees and a humanitarian crisis on its Eastern Frontier.

SNS: Yes, well obviously India's interest was to get the people back to Bangladesh and one way of doing it was to recognise Bangladesh as a nation state and to speed up the process, because it was quite a difficult period for India in terms of catering to all these millions of people who descended on India.

SO: Did you at this particular point meet Arnold Smith on his trips through the Indian subcontinent?

SNS: I'm trying to recall whether I did. I think I did, because I seem to recall that I interviewed Arnold Smith for All India Radio. But that was so long ago!

SO: Not to worry, sir! I just wondered because I've just been in Canada and have gone through his private papers in addition to reading his memoirs which he co-authored with Clyde Sanger called *Stitches in Time.* I was very struck by the extent to which the Commonwealth Secretary-General - because of his view of the humanitarian disaster in India and on the question of Bangladesh recognition - seemed to be pressing the international community and Heads of Government into the pragmatism of recognition. Because then something could be done about the disaster on the ground.

SNS: No, that certainly it was a factor in India's recognition of Bangladesh which was coming anyway. It was a question of when rather than whether, but that was certainly a factor in India's calculations.

SO: You made a reference to All India Radio. Could I ask you also for your general view about the role of radio, the role of the BBC in helping to support a sense of a wider British world, a Commonwealth identity at this particular point? Or is this a completely false construct on my part?

SNS: Well, I think the BBC is highly respected in India as it is in many other countries, but I doubt if it played a great role in the kind of things you are suggesting. I doubt it.

SO: I'm interested to hear you say that because I've interviewed someone from BBC World who felt very strongly that it did play a role. I thought, I'm going to ask the same question of the other side to say, would you agree with this perspective!

SNS: Well, that's my view.

SO: And it's a very valid one. After all it's all a question of perspective, isn't it; it depends where you're standing. For India then in the 1970s having gone through traumatic events in the '60s with war with China, contestation with Pakistan, the creation of Bangladesh; how important did you feel foreign policy was in Indian politics in the early '70s after the seismic shift of the creation of Bangladesh in '71?

SNS: Well, it was certainly a climactic event also for Indian policy making. I think it projected probably a more prominent role in a certain way for India in terms of having created or helped create a new nation state kind of thing, despite the other problems involved with Pakistan and so on. So, I think it did play a role in terms of maybe broadening India's horizons in terms of foreign policy making, yes.

SO: In the 1970s then, the Commonwealth held its first Heads of Government meeting outside of the UK with the CHOGM held in 1971 in Singapore. As far as you recall, do these Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings start to acquire a greater importance in India's diplomatic networking, in fostering particular contacts and lines of communication between Commonwealth Heads of Government as far as India is concerned?

SNS: I think that's the most useful aspect of the Commonwealth, I would say that it's a question of the background chats which people at that level have, an opportunity of talking to each other and so on. So that's the most useful aspect of it outside the regular agenda and so on, yes.

SO: Because of course in 1971 Britain was in the dock, with the Conservative Government's proposal for the resumed arms sales to South Africa. India at that particular point held a passionately held view on how inappropriate this was. India had long held views on the whole question of discrimination, which had developed into overt hostility to the apartheid state by the 1960s.

SNS: Well, Britain has been, from India's point of view, on the wrong side of the fence in not only in those times but also towards Southern Rhodesia at a later stage. Because when Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister she was very chary of any real sanctions against Southern Rhodesia, wasn't she?

SO: How much could it be said then that, for India, then the Commonwealth became in the 1970s and the 1980s the means by which to pressure Britain on the question of white minority governments in southern Africa?

SNS: Well, certainly I think India used it, as other countries from the developing world, in terms of pressuring Britain.

SO: You mentioned Mrs Thatcher. What was the relationship, do you know, between Mrs Gandhi and Mrs Thatcher?

SNS: Well, strangely a very good one despite their ideological differences because I think both were hard headed pragmatists and they got along very well apparently despite whatever the differences were.

SO: You sound rather puzzled by that! *[Laughs]*

SNS: Well, it was curious in a way *[laughs]* because Margaret Thatcher was Margaret Thatcher; we all knew her attitudes to …

SO: Yes, but in a way they were both ladies of a similar vintage. Both had been to Oxford, to Somerville, so there's a degree of shared experiences.

SNS: Yes, although she hardly.

SO: Indeed.

SNS: *[Laughs]*

SO: Indeed, indeed. So, powerful women…

SNS: Yes.

SO: … authoritative women who also had a very clear conceptualisation of their input into foreign policy although for Mrs Thatcher she certainly grew into that particular role. Now, I'm just struck by that because other female politicians have been quite critical of Mrs Thatcher and yet you say that in fact that there was a paradox here of her good working relationship with Mrs Gandhi.

SNS: Oh yes.

SO: Yes. Did you witness that then at the 1983 Delhi CHOGM; were you close on reporting on that?

SNS: Well, actually I was based in the United States at that time doing a book but I came for the CHOGM to Delhi on a visit and of course there was great drama with Fidel Castro I recall, especially him embracing Mrs Gandhi on the stage and that kind of populous gesture. Yes, I think people recognised that Mrs Gandhi's relationship was very good.

SO: Hmm, but it was more on a Heads of Government basis, rather than giving any particular role of importance as a diplomatic actor to the Commonwealth.

SNS: Yes. Yes, I would think so.

SO: The interesting thing of course by that point is that one of the key members of Mrs Gandhi's private office, Moni Malhoutra, had come to London and was working in the Commonwealth Secretariat here. I'm particularly struck by your statement of the role of the Prime Minister's Office and then for a key member of her team to come here indicates a particular validation of the Secretariat in its diplomacy and brokering between Heads of State.

SNS: Yes.

SO: Do you have any recollections of that CHOGM meeting of 1983? I know that Sir Sonny Ramphal thought that after the settlement of the Rhodesia question in 1980 that 1983 was going to be rather a dull CHOGM and then of course immediately preceding that Heads of Government meeting the Americans had invaded Grenada, with Ronald Reagan completely forgetting that perhaps he might have violated *[laughs]* British sensibilities because the Queen was Queen of Grenada.

SNS: Yes.

SO: Not something I'm sure that his advisers were aware of in any way, shape or form!

SNS: But I think I'm mixing up the Non-Aligned with the Commonwealth. Yes, because Fidel doesn't fit into the Commonwealth.

SO: He doesn't although he made visits to Marlborough House. At one point he did make a suggestion that perhaps Cuba could join the Commonwealth. I don't think it was an altogether serious suggestion! Secretary General Chief Anyaoku also made a historic visit to Cuba, so that there were certainly diplomatic lines of communication there. In this period then the Non-Aligned Movement is really India's preferred forum of action that you saw?

SNS: I think there has been, over the decades, a historical change in India's approach to Non-Alignment. There was a feeling in India that Non-Alignment, which was a valid concept when it was started, for some considerable time, that it was a bit hijacked by the radicals shall we say. In later years I think India valued Non-Alignment less and less in terms of foreign policy making.

SO: Yes. Were you back in India when Mrs Gandhi was assassinated?

SNS: No, I was in Paris. I was doing a book on UNESCO.

SO: Yes. As far as you observed, what was the role of her successors and their contribution towards Indian foreign policy?

SNS: Well, the immediate successors?

SO: Yes.

SNS: Well, not a great deal I would imagine.

SO: She was succeeded by Rajiv Gandhi in 1984.

SNS: Well, Rajiv had more than his hands full in domestic politics but Rajiv had a concept of perhaps vague but perhaps idealistic, but a concept of nuclear disarmament. He was quite serious about it. Of course nothing much came of it in real terms, nor could it because …

SO: Why? Because of institutional resistance within the scientific community and the political community in India, having achieved nuclear capability in '74?

SNS: Neither of the big nuclear powers was going to dismantle them. So it was an idealistic concept, but my view is that perhaps he believed too much in the concept of a nuclear war which again was quite idealistic, to say the least.

SO: So, for those forces within India that contribute to the formulation of policy, and which helped to shape it as well as form it, having acquired nuclear capability there was absolutely no way, in the context of the Cold War and in the context of regional geopolitics, that India was going to surrender this advantage?

SNS: No, of course not. Nobody thought about it.

SO: Do you remember thinking that having acquired this ultimate weapon of mass destruction and that indicator of being at the top table, after all the great power status that comes with nuclear capability, that this had contributed to regional destabilisation?

SNS: Well, I don't know because after all Pakistan acquired one too.

SO: But after India.

SNS: After India, of course, after India, but the fact is that it was neutralised, India was neutralised in that sense, like the Russians acquired it after the Americans and so on so it's a usual chain cycle.

SO: But in the politics of informed discussion among those who followed foreign policy and practice closely, there wasn't a sense of this having initiated a regional arms race?

SNS: Not inordinately I think, no.

SO: So, by the 1980s, did India in any way value the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor? The Commonwealth, through the Secretary-General, had contributed to the resolution of the Rhodesia Zimbabwe issue in 1980 and the Commonwealth was certainly pressing Britain particularly and Mrs Thatcher on the question of policy towards South Africa.

SNS: Well, I think India felt that it was a useful instrument but I think after that phase there was considerable downgrading, at least in psychological terms, of the Commonwealth as far as India was concerned.

SO: Do you mean after the final transition to black majority rule in South Africa?

SNS: After South Africa which was, I think, the height of the Commonwealth's efficacy and then it seemed that the Commonwealth was not so important after all in policy terms.

SO: You've mentioned Rajiv Gandhi's own particular idealism and his continued importance in Indian foreign policy, by virtue of the authority

of his office; and contribution to the Commonwealth. Were there ever any other impulses from within the Indian political machine using the Commonwealth as a way to achieve Indian foreign policy goals, in the 1980s?

SNS: My impression is that not in any great sense, no.

SO: By the 1990s then, you mentioned successful transition to independence and black majority rule in South Africa between 1990 and '94. This also coincided with the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, which was a fundamental reconfiguration of international relations. You're saying at this particular time India really moved further away from thinking the Commonwealth was a useful vehicle?

SNS: I would imagine so, yes.

SO: This was just at the time when, with the change of leadership of the Secretary-General, Chief Emeka was now emphasising the Commonwealth's role as a voluntary association to foster democracy and human rights.

SNS: Yes, but as you know very well that all the great declarations that have been made by Commonwealth meetings, Heads of Government meetings are legion and the net result of all those declarations has been rather poor I think, in terms of all the norms that have been postulated and set up and so on. So it's not a very glorious record in that sense.

SO: Indeed, no. So, then why do you feel it is that India hasn't made more of the Commonwealth? Is it because they don't see it as a useful tool in terms of successive Indian leaders although India's expertise in contributing to the Commonwealth networks, the filigree of relationships that exist, its contribution in terms of knowledge, its linkages through other Commonwealth NGOs, informal organisations, is really very strongly present. It seems to be there is a dichotomy between the lack of political affirmation of the value and usage of the Commonwealth…

SNS: Yes, there is.

SO: … and India's individual contributions to the continued workings of the Commonwealth. Is that fair to say?

SNS: I think up to a point, yes.

SO: Yes. So, you don't see that as paradoxical?

SNS: Well, it's only paradox is the world that is.

SO: Yes. As far as Indian civil society or Indian politics is concerned, does the Commonwealth feature in any way, shape or form in regional politics?

SNS: As far as the politicians in India are concerned, I would say no, that they don't regard the Commonwealth as useful for their purposes in terms of relationships, especially sub-continental relationships.

SO: Yes. Would there be any possibility of an Indian leader seeking to use the good offices of the Commonwealth Secretary-General to foster an improvement of India-Pakistan relations on the Kashmir issue?

SNS: I would doubt it, for the simple reason that India's attitude which is there is no-one else that, this is something we have to sort out among ourselves and the nearest we got to that stage was during General Musharraf's time. When he proposed a set of proposals which were much more realistic than any proposal by Pakistan until that time. So, India would be very, very hesitant to seek outside good offices of the Commonwealth or anybody else in terms of solving the Kashmir issue, which the Americans for instance recognised some years ago.

SO: Yes, indeed. Is it because of a particular sensitivity to domestic politics on this issue? As you say, General Musharraf had made a potentially improved set of proposals.

SNS: Yes.

SO: So, then the weight of resistance comes from within Indian politics rather than Indian decision making?

SNS: Well, there's a great deal of resistance, yes, in Indian politics on that because it's a very sensitive issue; but if there were a realistic proposal basically which is that you have some swaps but the line of control is the final boundary, that would be possible to sell.

SO: In terms of other regional and geopolitical challenges: India's particular position on the Sri Lankan Civil War. Was that an aspect that you followed closely in your own journalistic work?

SNS: Yes.

SO: Again, the potential for an intermestic issue - an international issue that has domestic ramifications. Was India again determined to pursue a bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka rather than to use the Commonwealth as a vehicle to…

SNS: Well, the Indo-Sri Lankan problem is a very complex model from India's point of view because you have the state of Tamil Nadu which takes a rather extreme view in terms of the Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils and their welfare and so on; and you have a rather authoritarian government in Sri Lanka, especially with the present dispensation of Premadasa and his brothers who were running the show. So, it is a question of the importance of Sri Lanka-India relations, as opposed to the regional compulsions that come into play in Tamil Nadu. It's a difficult balancing act for India, for New Delhi to proceed further really.

SO: Was this issue closely and carefully covered in the Indian press since the eruption of the Civil War in '83?

SNS: Yes, of course, but the final act which is still a subject of inquiry and of course Sri Lankans don't want a real inquiry into it and the new authoritarian trends that are so prevalent in Sri Lanka. You can't get very far on this issue whether in the Commonwealth or outside it.

SO: So, in terms then of the value of the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor, although the Commonwealth Secretariat here in London provides the diplomatic machine for the Secretary-General, this really doesn't feature then, certainly in your particular consciousness? That it remains a sub-actor in a global sub-system which doesn't necessarily serve India's regional and great power agenda.

SNS: I think it would be fair to say that, yes.

SO: Yes. What's your view of the contribution of the Commonwealth then over your long involvement in journalism, surveying Indian politics in the international scene?

SNS: Well, there again as I've suggested that is the Nehru phase which was very important in terms of his own links to Britain and his being influenced by British thoughts and so on and the fact that he had a sentimental attachment to Britain and the Commonwealth in a sense. That was no longer the case after him really and so it was a much more functional kind of relationship.

SO: So, the current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh similarly uses the Commonwealth occasionally when it suits certain purposes.

SNS: Yes.

SO: As far as you've observed, there's no particular agenda and strategy of using the Commonwealth Finance Minister's meetings in the run up before the World Bank, or other Commonwealth organisational conventions and conjunction points specifically to fulfil a strategy?

SNS: I think that would be fair to say that, yes, because there are so many other avenues which are considered more important in terms of influencing policy.

SO: The interesting thing of course is that since 2008 there has been an Indian Secretary-General; does this feature at all in the awareness of Indian politics?

SNS: Very little and unfortunately his record has not been brilliant, has it? He is in fact more a diplomat than necessary, I think; that's the general view.

SO: All nations' conduct of their diplomacy certainly have particular characteristics. I'm just wondering if the particular culture of Indian diplomacy is indeed to be discreet but also 'discuss and delay'? In other words, to foster a degree of procrastination in the belief that points of tension will inevitably work themselves out, so you don't want to hurry into it.

SNS: Up to a point, yes *[laughs]* I would say so.

SO: Right. So, if somebody is a consummate diplomat from that particular culture, then by virtue of their very background, they are going to bring that particular national culture to the way that they conduct their office.

SNS: Yes, because if you take a man like McKinnon and his kind of memoir and his blunt statements about the Commonwealth countries, about particular people and so on, and even Arnold Smith the first Secretary-General who was quite forthright; they were both quite forthright. I think it was McKinnon who said that India considered Commonwealth a 'B Team' which is true. So, for instance I think there is this problem of whether the Secretary General of the Commonwealth could have done more in relation to recent events in Sri Lanka, especially the impeachment of the Chief Justice, which is terrible I think.

SO: Is there an undercurrent of that view in India itself? Obviously that certainly is a very firmly held view in other quarters, but I'm just wondering within the Indian political context?

SNS: Well, perhaps not to that extent because India's expectations are rather low as far as the Commonwealth is concerned.

SO: I'm going to suggest this to you and I welcome your comments – was there a desire or a political wish to have an Indian diplomat as Secretary General, a very established diplomat in a prestigious post in London, but that this should not be a complicating factor for India's own foreign policy? So, you don't appoint one of your own who then will provide a destabilising and potentially argumentative point, because the role of the Secretary-General is to coordinate opinion but also to have some autonomy of action within the Commonwealth.

SNS: Yes. I don't think there was much fear as far as India is concerned about that, perhaps because they knew their man *[laughs].*

SO: Indeed. So, it could be said that Indian foreign policy is ideally served by the particular approach of the current Secretary-General.

SNS: Perhaps, yes.

SO: Well, you certainly don't want to put 'a turbulent priest' into a position of authority that immeasurably complicates what you're trying to achieve! *[Laughs]* On India's style of diplomacy; is it very much to be 'below the radar', to have a quiet word, to establish through patient negotiation, consensus and discussion so again not just diplomatic processes and cultures, but also styles that also come into play?

SNS: Well, I think Indian diplomats do tend to be cautious for the simple reason that if you have your head above the parapet you always face difficulties, so to that extent, yes.

SO: Yes. Is Indian foreign policy a hotly debated issue in India's Parliament?

SNS: In relation to certain countries, yes. China, Pakistan, the Soviet Union in the old days, now Russia, and neighbours, particularly apart from Pakistan you

have Sri Lanka and Nepal, which again are somewhat worrisome neighbours in other terms, not in terms of India-Pakistani relations.

SO: Of course other enormous points of friction in the region, in India's backyard, have been the Maldives. I'm just wondering if you were aware of India using the channel of the Secretariat, or the channel of the Commonwealth in any way to achieve a desirable outcome, as far as India was concerned in the Maldives?

SNS: Not to my knowledge.

SO: And the other issues are Burma and Bangladesh. I asked you about the question of Pakistan and of course there's the northern neighbour on the other side of the Himalayas which has been a perennial geopolitical challenge to India since 1949. On Burma and Bangladesh: are these particularly contentious aspects in Indian politics or do they tend not to be?

SNS: Well, Burma is a rather non-controversial aspect of Indian foreign policy because there is not much dispute about what India should do in relation to Burma. As far as Bangladesh is concerned it is guided by domestic politics as well, especially in West Bengal which is one aspect of it; and you will recall the last prime ministerial visit to Bangladesh, there is this Teesta dispute over the Teesta River problem and India had more or less wrapped up an agreement and that was vetoed by the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. So there are domestic constraints on foreign policy in terms of a country like both Bangladesh and Nepal as well as Sri Lanka for different reasons.

SO: Sir, over your long professional life then, from your viewpoint what has been the contribution of the Commonwealth to international politics and to international relations?

SNS: Well, I think initially it was a good influence as far as India was concerned, the Commonwealth concept and it was a 'coming-out' party for India especially after independence. It was a forum where you rubbed shoulders with the high and mighty of the world. But there again over the years it diminished, the role certainly diminished.

SO: So, does it lend itself to Stalin's sneering comment 'how many divisions does the Pope have?'

SNS: *[Laughs]*

SO: I'm very struck by the extent to which within the Commonwealth as a voluntary association which has evolved since '65, there has been a continuum of support for African democratisation; this obviously involves issues of racial justice, but also issues of human rights, economic rights, political rights. But there isn't the same narrative in the Indian subcontinent in nearly the same way.

SNS: No.

SO: I'm also struck by the efficacy of the Commonwealth as a diplomatic agency in the context of Africa and there doesn't appear to have been a similar Commonwealth agency in the Asian sub-continent. Is that because India regarded itself very much as the regional hegemon? Is this great power politics and conceptualisation – as India didn't need the Commonwealth - whereas there was an identification with and a usefulness of the Commonwealth among newly independent African nations achieving racial justice, which of course was indelibly tied up with their own political legitimacy at home. Yet India didn't have that same need for political legitimacy.

SNS: I would tend to agree with you, yes, because, well, India's needs were very different and I think there are two peaks of the Commonwealth with South Africa and the laws, among the laws was the UK's entry into the European Economic Community at that time which, there were two major events with very different ways that influenced India.

SO: What were your particular views about England's entry into the European Economic Community then in '73?

SNS: Well, personally I think Britain had no choice and still has no choice, but that is my view, that it belongs to Europe. We live in a different age, a postcolonial world and your place obviously, though you're an island, your place is obviously in Europe. It's very simple in so many ways, geographical terms and everything.

SO: Well, we like to think that we're a world power of the second rank, rather than a small and insignificant little nation off the coast of Europe. *[Laughs]* We have problems with identity and identities too, I think.

SNS: Yes, of course and, well, hence the attraction of the Commonwealth to certain sections of the people here in any case.

SO: Yes, which was the question I was trying to draw out Dr Kwarteng on yesterday, this whole question of legacies of empire. How much are there insidious legacies that preoccupied British politics, and Conservative political cultures still to conceptualise Britain at the heart of a global trading system - which after all was an indelible part of empire and reinforced through imperial preference. You've also got patterns of communities.

But if I could address those two points then: Britain's entry into the EEC in the 1970s and this question of India and its diaspora. Were you part of the intense political reportage on the negotiations of entry and discussions about how appropriate this was, and the impact that this would have on India and the Commonwealth?

SNS: Well, there's certainly a lot of discussion on the consequences of Britain's entry into the European Community yes, and I think the measure of satisfaction, if I may say so, that De Gaulle told it in the first instance! *[Laughs]*

SO: Ooh! Was that a sense of Britain's got its comeuppance; it can't get what it wants!

[Laughter]

SNS: But yes, certainly there was a discussion. As far as the Indian diaspora is concerned it's a totally different feel in a sense.

SO: No that I appreciate, but for India, Britain going into the EEC: was that yet another step away from the Commonwealth as a wider British world?

SNS: I would think so, yes.

SO: That there was different subcultural understanding of entry into the EEC: that the lines and the contact were becoming more stretched?

SNS: Yes.

SO: Did you see it as an important rupture, or was it just yet another diminution?

SNS: The latter I think, yes. No, there was no rupture as such.

SO: The Commonwealth was, itself, of course was going through yet another transformation in the 1970s and early '80s with the emergence of those small states that you spoke of. So Commonwealth enlargement was taking place just at a time when the benefits of any close relationship with Britain on a bilateral basis it could be said, were being diluted in terms of commercial relationships or financial relationships. So, part and parcel of a fundamental reconfiguring of the Commonwealth and ideas of what the Commonwealth was?

On the Indian diaspora: I'm puzzled why India hasn't used the Commonwealth more, just looking at patterns of Indian migration across the globe and the extent to which there are considerable concentrations of settlement in Commonwealth member countries.

SNS: Well, I think the general attitude in India is that Indians will go anywhere where there is an opportunity, Commonwealth or no Commonwealth. I don't think it's related to the Commonwealth the fact that there is a major presence.

SO: Well, there is a sizeable Indian community in the States. But for Indians themselves, does the Commonwealth provide a validating identity? For the Canadians, given how many different identities there are within that territorial space, the Commonwealth provides a validation against the United States; it allows for multiple identities for the Canadian nation. Does the Commonwealth in any way do the same for India which after all is highly diverse?

SNS: No, not really, because my impression of the Canadians is - I've lived in the United States but not in Canada - that they don't know their identity, they are seeking identity. They are not quite sure what they are between the French speakers and the English speakers, between the Americans and the Canadians.

SO: And also between the First Nations peoples. Canada has multiple histories.

SNS: Yes.

SO: But so does India.

SNS: Well yes, but in a different sense. I don't think that there is any problem with Indian-ness unlike for Canadians. We are not searching for an identity, no.

SO: No, you're very confident and, as you say proud of your very, very long history and identity and your economic growth, your technological advancements, your great power capacity and your democratic institutions.

SNS: Yes, despite all the flaws.

SO: I wouldn't say that our model of democracy is without problems!

[Laughter]

SO: Mr Singh, is there anything else you feel I should ask you about India and the Commonwealth?

SNS: Well, one can speculate about the future of the Commonwealth, yes.

SO: Indeed.

SNS: Essentially what it will turn out to be.

SO: What about the Queen; how much has she been an indelible part of holding the Commonwealth together in your view?

SNS: Well, she is as everybody knows a symbolic head and there is a certain amount of speculation about after her what happens, but I don't think there is any quarrel about that, her being a symbol. Of course a number of countries, especially the old Commonwealth, they regard her as their Head of State, unlike most of the members of the Commonwealth.

SO: How is she regarded in India? I know India is a republic but I'm just wondering how the institution…

SNS: Oh I think she is regarded well in India. India had legions of kings and queens so it can live with multiple identities in that sense. She is regarded well I think, doing her job or trying to do it as best she can, and of course there is a dispute about her not going to Sri Lanka, whether it is a diplomatic way of downgrading or punishing Sri Lanka for its policies.

SO: It's certainly to her advantage that the Palace have reviewed her long haul travel plans as someone who is 87. There are interesting constitutional questions on Prince Charles attending: it could be said that she has deputised her son, but he is not the automatic next Head of the Commonwealth even if he is the heir to the British throne, and therefore the heir to the throne for a number of Commonwealth

countries, but the majority of course are republics. So, there's an interesting quirk there. What do you think on the likelihood of the Commonwealth surviving?

SNS: Well, I think it'll survive because, for lack of inertia. Once you have…

SO: Other people have commented on this question of inertia! *[Laughs]*

SNS: Well, it's a question of dismantling something is a very difficult operation and requires a large amount of willpower and that is difficult to gather at the best of times.

SO: I think the critics of Britain's membership of the European Union haven't quite thought through the difficulties of extracting ourselves from that arrangement.

SNS: Yes.

SO: So, you feel that the weight of habit…

SNS: Well, it will become less and less relevant perhaps.

SO: Well, international politics and the international community has changed so dramatically in the last 60 years. The Commonwealth could be said to have been a pilot fish ahead of its time in instituting regular summit meetings. Now its Heads of Government meetings are now much shorter rather than the original extended types of meeting, and if you've got different patterns of international organisation these take up a lot of time of Heads of State and their officials.

SNS: Yes.

SO: So, is there a continued need for the formal arrangements of the Commonwealth? As you say, the smaller Heads of State do need it, whereas Britain doesn't need the Commonwealth to phone up the President of South Africa. I wonder the extent to which the Commonwealth is fated to go through cycles of decline but also improvement as it has done since 1949. Different parts of the Commonwealth, the informal organisations, are doing extraordinarily well because international politics is changing, with the rise of civil society actors and non-governmental organisations. So, you've got different impulses into diplomacy.

SNS: Well, basically the non-governmental organisations are doing good work and that's a plus factor and of course especially for the smaller countries it's a very important institution because that's their ladder to the bigger folk in terms of interacting and so on.

SO: So, then taking that to the next extension, the Commonwealth was ideally suited into a relatively small world of shifting power relations that relied particularly on personal diplomacy and contacts between Heads of State? With then a reconfiguration of international politics, and a decreasing policy space for leadership initiative, the possibility of

leaders actually initiating policy, I would think are more constrained now than they were, say, in the 1970s.

SNS: Yes. Yes, and of course you also have to consider the fact that most of the developed countries in the Commonwealth are the more substantial aid providers for, especially NGOs and other activities.

SO: In your view, just talking about the future of the Commonwealth, how far do you feel that China might represent a challenge to the Commonwealth as a values based organisation? The very fact that China offers alternative lines of funding and weaponry undercuts Commonwealth attempts to be a seductive club to say, "Please improve your human rights record and your political record, independence of your judiciary, the freedom of your press and do please release political detainees."

SNS: To a certain extent but there again it's a loaded question. As far as the Chinese help is concerned you have to balance the money you're getting with the other obligations, spoken or unspoken, that might be required of you. So, I would imagine that the Commonwealth is more attractive in terms of smaller countries accepting aid because there are no strings like there would be in relation to Chinese aid for instance.

SO: Sir Ron Sanders has written very cogently on the growing financial investment and strategic positioning of China in Fiji and the extent to which there is a contestation with the United States, and the implications this then has as a brake on the necessity of democratisation for the Fijian government. He has said the same process seems to be at play in Sri Lanka, providing alternative finance and alternative infrastructure development.

SNS: But there again for instance - Sri Lanka - you have to consider the risks involved in relation not only to domestic politics but in relation to their, Sri Lanka's relations with India, because that is a factor which they have to take into account.

SO: Yes. Well, it's certainly true that there is a continued reconfiguration of international relations. Whether the Commonwealth as a useful global subsystem will have a validity and an attraction outside small states, really does remain to be seen.

SNS: Yes.

SO: Sir, thank you very much indeed.

SNS: Well, not at all.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]