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## **Bandung Conference: The Quest for a Moral Resolution to the Color Question**

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In January 1955, Richard Wright, an African-American writer living in exile, in France, was intrigued by an item in the newspaper: “Twenty-nine free and independent nations of Asia and Africa are meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss ‘racialism and colonialism’”. The list of the countries set him wondering. What did “China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Burma, Egypt, Turkey, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Gold Coast, etc” have in common? They had all experienced Western European domination. And it was a domination justified by racial superiority. “Only broken, black, and yellow men who had long been made agonizingly self-conscious, under the rigors of colonial rule, of their race and their religion could have felt the need for such a meeting.... I felt that I had to go to that meeting; I felt I could understand it.”

The account of the conference, that Wright subsequently published under the title, *The Color Curtain*, is a memoir of his perceptions rather than a reporter’s record of the meeting.

Of the 29 countries attending, Wright was particularly keen to discern the motives, the feelings and the expectations out of the conference, of Chou En-lai, the Chinese premier, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian premier and of President Sukarno, the host.

About Chou, Wright was wary. He had been a member of the American communist party for twelve years, before he broke with them in 1942. He thought they were not committed enough to finding a solution to the problem of racism against American blacks.

But he was impressed by Chou’s suave restraint and deliberate avoidance of issues liable to raise contention at the conference.

On the question of Taiwan’s sovereignty, Chou En-lai refused to be drawn into a trap. Rather than seeking international support among the predominantly Asian delegates, and thus forcing them to make choices whether to support China or America, he held that Taiwan and the “coastal islands” were Chinese territories and so the task of liberating them was entirely “a matter of our internal affairs and the exercise of our sovereignty”. And far from antagonizing delegates on the issue of ideology, Chou sought to assure all and sundry that, like them, China was a victim of the same forces of Western domination that oppressed and humiliated them: “We Asian and African countries, China included, are all backward economically and culturally. Inasmuch as our Asian-African Conference does not exclude anybody, why couldn’t we ourselves understand each other and enter into friendly cooperation?”

In Richard Wright’s considered view, Nehru was the linchpin to the Bandung conference. His presence reassured other Asian and African delegates, in the presence of China, as represented by Chou En-lai. Indeed Nehru had precisely drawn Chou into the conference in order to make it viable. With China on board, Afro-Asian solidarity would be more likely to command international credibility.



Nehru had finessed the pact with Chou, allaying the fears of the other participants that China was out to spread communism. He knew the voice of a multinational Afro-Asian grouping of nations would have the political clout to stand up to the West only if it included the two Asian giants, China and India. He was aware of the dangers of being branded by the West for associating with the communist nemesis. The cold war was getting increasingly frigid after the Korean War. The January 1, 1955 *Newsweek* had warned that “an Afro-Asian combination turned by Communists against the West was being contemplated” and had to be stopped. But the risk was worth it, given his resolve to make Afro-Asian solidarity a realistic proposition.

Nehru was acutely aware of the perils of flirting with Peking. But his imperative, the building up of India economically, gave him little choice. Without economic independence India could not wrest itself from western subordination. And Asia and Africa had to develop together, in solidarity and co-operation, or else, not at all. The quest for Afro-Asian unity was a moral crusade as well as a bid for power-bloc formation. In a world buffeted by superpower rivalry, a bloc of neutralist nations was a rational choice for the hitherto disregarded nations of Asia and Africa.

If Nehru was the cool, calculating strategist, always alert to the need to maintain a balance between the East and the West, and Chou E-lai the “trained and disciplined Bolshevik” who knew he could appeal to the feelings of fellow victims of Western colonialism and racialism, Sukarno, the host president, was a flamboyant master of ceremonies. He, in his opening address, was profuse in stock phrases of the populist politician. Richard Wright observed, wistfully, that “this man had done nothing all his life but utilize words to capture the attention and loyalties of others”. He talked of the “past sacrifices” which paved the way for the meeting, of the fears that beset the world, of the need for the poor and the powerless people of Asia and Africa. He exhorted them to harness what they had, which was, according to him, spiritualism, religion and racial consciousness induced by colonial oppression, in order to “mobilize what I have called the *Moral Violence of Nations* in favor of peace”.

Sukarno’s asphyxiating ambiguity was tempered, somewhat, by his prime minister’s (Ali Sastroamidjojo) address. He reminded the delegates that colonialism was still a painful reality in Asia and even more so in Africa. He called on the independent countries of Asia and Africa to do their utmost in supporting the independent movements in areas still under colonialism. And next, after colonialism, he targeted racialism and reminded his audience that it is often an aspect of colonialism, with the latter often being based on feelings of superiority of the dominating group. He closed his address by condemning the policy of apartheid, saying “it was a form of absolute intolerance more befitting the Dark Ages than this modern world”.

Sastroamidjojo, who was unanimously elected to the conference presidency, brought an air of clarity and focus to the conference, which was reflected in the final conference communique. While the communique clearly condemned racial injustice and colonial exploitation, it eschewed ideological partisanship, for or against Communism. Instead, it appealed to the “moral conscience of the West”, hoping that the West would heed to its call to help the newly emergent nations enter and participate equitably in the global economic arena. Richard Wright empathized with



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this appeal and warned that if it was spurned the West would, unwittingly, be delivering the Afro-Asian countries unto communism.

Specifically, the communique urged the Asian and African countries to promote trade, investment and general economic co-operation between themselves, but not to close doors to foreign investment. And here, Japan, which was participating, was seen, and saw itself, as capable of playing a crucial role since it was the lone, non-Western developed country in the Afro-Asian community. Indeed, an Indonesian who had been interviewed by Wright before the conference started, opined with the oft-heard view that Japan proved itself, in the Russo-Japanese war, to the West and undermined the myth of the superiority of the West over the rest of humanity. He said: "The biggest event of the twentieth century was the defeat of Russia by Japan in 1905. It was the beginning of the liberation of the Asian mind".

If Japan was seen in such positive light, how did it take this? Going by the contribution of the principal Japanese delegate, Takasaki Tatsunosuke, Japan, at least in the context of the conference and the time period, was deeply conscious of its historical responsibilities and their implications in its future relations with Asian neighbours, and, by extension, the Afro-Asian community at large. Takasaki, evidently with the Japanese Peace Constitution in the background, told the conference: "In World War II, Japan, I regret to say, inflicted damages upon her neighbor nations, but ended by bringing untold miseries upon herself. She has re-established democracy, having learned her lesson at immense cost in lives and property. Chastened and free, she is today a nation completely dedicated to peace. As the only people who have experienced the horrors of the atomic bomb, we have no illusion whatever about the enormity of an attempt to solve international disputes by force. In the light of the foregoing statement, the Japanese delegation will submit to the Conference certain proposals on economic and cultural co-operation, together with a proposal for the maintenance of international peace".

Wright thought Takasaki's address brought the tone of the conference to a rational level, but lamented that even he had to adopt a confessional tone. The previous speakers, and some after Takasaki, tended to harp on the theme of the evils of war, colonialism and racism with a deadening repetition. Wright felt shortchanged; he hadn't come all that way to Bandung to be regaled by this "outpouring of emotion". He suspected that even Nehru did not expect this "battery of speeches" with little variety in substance, when he planned the conference.

Besides the issue of repetitiousness, a more fundamental problem was that fear of disagreements which might threaten the conference meant that no participant could be faulted on any position if he insisted the matter was beyond the purview of the conference. Chou En-lai did precisely that in relation to Taiwan.

An even more disturbing case in point was the endorsement of Indonesia's claim to "West Irian", in the conference communique, without even the courtesy of a discussion. West Irian is that western half of the island of New Guinea, which had been under Dutch colonial suzerainty. When the Dutch left Indonesia moved in



rationalizing that since the Dutch had ruled Indonesia along with West Irian (or West New Guinea as some preferred to call it) it was only right and proper for Indonesia to annex it. Never mind that the Melanesian people of West Papua (yet another name for the same territory) strongly objected to what amounted to colonialism by Indonesia.

Now, as it happened, the other eastern half of the island, Papua New Guinea had been a UN trust territory under the jurisdiction of Australia. If Australia had chosen to hold the territory after the end of its legal mandate the condemnation in Bandung would have been overwhelming. And Australia, being geographically and historically close, knew Indonesia well enough not to be taken in by pretensions to moral rectitude of its leaders. The Tasmanian newspaper, *The Lancaster Examiner*, had, on December 30, 1954, observed resignedly, that “The decision to support Indonesia in its claim of sovereignty over West New Guinea, though not unexpected, should show Australians where the sympathies of most neighbours lie”.

This moral relativism, condemning racialism when it was perpetrated by the white West and condoning it when Malay-Polynesian Indonesia practised it on Melanesian West Papuans, unfortunately, weakened the moral force of Sukarno’s exhortation for united Afro-Asian action “in favor of peace”.

The moral ambiguity besetting the Bandung Conference notwithstanding, there are undeniable tangible achievements accruing to it. Nehru, for one, backed the independence movement in Kenya, politically by backing up nationalists like Joseph Murumbi. Murumbi had fled British oppression in Kenya, in 1953, with the assistance from India and Egypt and was, thus, able to maintain contacts and solidarity with the outside world. Through Nehru he secured scholarships for Kenya students, in India.

Another Nehru connection with the liberation movement in Kenya, and Africa at large, was through the Goan socialist and freedom fighter, Pio Gama Pinto. Pinto’s contribution to the Mau Mau war for Kenyan liberation was immense. In a country where solidarity among the races ( Africans , Asians, Arabs and Europeans ) was near impossible Pio Gama Pinto stood out as “the only non-African who had the confidence of the people”; “the first Asian to win and penetrate the African hearts”. He acquired arms, ammunition and food for forest fighters, worked tirelessly to ensure that the African nationalists would win the crucial independence elections of 1961 and founded the Pan African Press with funds obtained from Nehru.

Murumbi acknowledged the moral and political contribution that Nehru’s brainchild, the Bandung Conference to the liberation of Asia and Africa, in his article in the *Tribune* (London) of 8 June 1956, entitled, “Human Rights: Let’s Make them Real”: “British policy over the past fifty years forced the colonial peoples, by resorting to violence, to wrest step by step a measure of human freedom. Ireland, Malaya, Kenya and now Cyprus are tragic examples, and one often wonders when Britain will learn the folly of repression and denial of human dignity. The Bandung conference brought the peoples of Asia and Africa together for the first time. If the peoples of Britain are not going to stand with them in the fight for Human Rights, the peoples of these two great continents, representing nearly two thirds of human race, would have to depend on their own efforts to gain their Rights”.



The legacy of the Bandung Conference is self evident in the 114-nation Non-Aligned Movement. Although cynics must be having their day smirking at the attempts by the movement, in their February meeting in Kuala Lumpur, to stop the United States attacking Iraq, it was to the great credit of Prime Minister Mahathir and the other 113 leaders, presidents, ministers, kings and sheikhs representing more than half the globe refused to bow in despair and stood up to the arrogance of an unilateral, cynical superpower.