The Bandung Spirit
Little over six decades ago in 1955 to the immediate post-colonial period, India hosted an important gathering that sought to make a major contribution to the ordering of the system of international relations in the post-Second World War period and the onset of the Cold War. This was the first Afro-Asian conference which was held in Bandung, Indonesia on 18-24 April 1955. It was sponsored by India, Indonesia, Burma, Ceylon, Pakistan and an additional 24 Asian and African countries. Fifty years later, on 20-24 April 2005, the second Asian-African Conference was also held in Jakarta and Bandung. The Bandung Conference considered problems of common interest in the histories of Asia and Africa and discussed ways and means by which their people could achieve fuller economic, cultural and political cooperation, thus launching an era of Afro-Asian cooperation.

Among others, this conference extended its warm sympathy and support for the courageous stand taken by the victims of racial discrimination, especially by the peoples of African and Indian origin in South Africa. The Bandung Conference was a direct product of the victories scored by the people of Africa and Asia in their historic struggle against colonialism and imperialist domination. To the vast majority of the peoples of Africa and Asia, the Bandung Conference provided a source of inspiration, a step in the right direction of meeting the aspirations of the vast majority of mankind, particularly the oppressed people of Asia and Africa.

From a historical perspective, Africa’s relations with Asia, particularly India, go back many centuries. Until the 20th century, India’s relations with Africa were mainly cultural and economic. There was very little political interaction. Linked across the Indian Ocean, Indians have lived in large numbers in other parts of the world, creating a constellation of interactions that has been called the ‘Sister Continents’. This term, which gained currency at the Bandung Conference, refers to the stories of affinities and exchanges between peoples of African and South Asian descent from ancient times to the present. More recently, it has gained popularity as a metaphor for the fraternal links between ex-colonial peoples in the wake of decolonization, when Africans and Indians (and others) joined forces to create the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the Cold War world dominated by the USA and the USSR. Briefly put, this book represents an unconventional, critical, and refreshing account of Afro-Asian interactions in the post-Bandung era, taking India as a case study.

The author, Antoinette Burton, is Senior Professor of History and Global and Transnational Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Campaign. In this study, she turns her acute moral, intellectual and analytical attention to how twentieth-century Indian nationalists used Africa and Africans as reference points for imagining an independent identity. Powerfully acting on its own injunction to universalise empire by meshing postcolonial critique with feminist one, Burton’s bold and erudite study redraws the map of intercultural relations and trans-nationalist collaboration in the twentieth century. She contributes to a growing scholarly interest in the histories of the global South. In fact, Burton here joins a number of scholars, mainly diplomatic historians, in challenging the narratives of solidarity by arguing that Asian and African relations were fraught with tension and competition. A seasoned colonial and postcolonial scholar, Burton advances our understanding of Afro-Asian relations more so because she offers a detailed and cultural history of the India-Africa relationship and delves deep into previously unexplored archives and sources.

Burton’s essays are largely concerned with Indian works of fiction and non-fiction that depict the subcontinent’s relations with Africa. Burton contends that Indian writers cited or referenced Africa as a buttress of Indian identity. At the same time, they produced a hierarchically positioning of ‘brown over black’ that served to empower Indians and refashion Africans as their radicalized others. As Hofmeyr rightly notes in the Foreword, in its form, content and making, this book is a portable experiment. Each essay is devoted to one novel or work of fiction and the volume constitutes a speculative book shelf comprising texts whose authors and readers engage widely – from Bombay to Durban; Goa to Ghana; Uganda to India. These itineraries crisscross previously colonized parts of the world, creating a constellation of pathways in what we now call the ‘global South’, itself between the fault lines of configurations whose outline and import are currently far from clear. Focusing on India’s imagined (and real) relationship with Africa, Burton historicizes Africa’s role in the emergence of a coherent postcolonial Indian identity. She shows how, despite Bandung’s rhetoric of equality and brotherhood, Indian identity elided colonial racial categories in its subordination of Africans and blackness. Underscoring Indian anxiety over Africa and challenging the narratives and dearly held assumptions that presume a sentimentality of historical solidarity, Burton demonstrates the continued need for an anti-heroic, vexed and fractured postcolonial critique.

As the significance of the global South as a political force gains momentum, opinion on what it is or how it might be understood proliferate. Is it the post-American future towards which the declining West is inevitably evolving? Could it be the point of what a sustainable future might look like? Or is it in fact the future of capitalism itself, as post-colonial elites entrench themselves by enabling devastating forms of extractive labor where power aligns like BRICS? Or, is this multilateralism in fact an anti- or perhaps semi-capitalist arrangement that could shift the gravity of world power southward? One might insist on global South as the post-1989 situation of the ‘Third World’, where older traditions of anti-imperialism will be repressed in the neoliberal order, making the global South the locus of radical and sustainable transformation. Methodologically, the book assembles a series of texts each of which opens up a miniature world where ‘Africa’ and ‘India’ intersect: African Indian interactions around the anti-apartheid struggle in Durban; the travelogue of Frank Moraes, editor of the Times of India, through several African countries in 1960; and a novel about East African Students in Delhi. It tracks the racial hierarchies that were often at work in the lived experiences and geo-political imageries of men and women for whom the ideals of Afro-Asian solidarity pose a genuine challenge.

Significantly, the study also takes gender and agency as indispensable categories in the history of postcolonial India in and the world. It draws on the writings of Ansuya R. Singh (Chapter 1, ‘Behold the Earth Mourns’, 1960); Frank Moraes (Chapter 2, ‘The Importance of Being Black’, 1965); Chanakya Sen (The Morning After, 1973) and Phyllis Naidoo’s Impressions of Anti-apartheid History 2002-2006 (Ch. 4) and also, briefly, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s 2007 novel, Wizard of the Cep, (Epidoge, pp. 167-71), providing praise for India’s post-colonial achievements, her appreciation for the example of the Indian prime minister and his frank admiration of Gandhi as a political model. As both a veteran historian and a gifted literary critic, Burton dissects these novels, listening to the possibilities they open up while the book tracks the fault lines of which these become knotted. For her, novels are not simply reflections of the world; they are imaginary attempts to resolve contradictions, to use the narrative to settle the ambiguity. Her readings breach the ideological projects embodied in each text. According to the author, the Indian
conception of Africa that emerges is bi-ased by ‘racialised’ capitalist relations, ‘colonial-era racial hierarchies and entrenched practices of racial endgame’. In this Indo-centric conception of the postcolonial world, she again foregrounds the superstructures of intra-colonial interdependence that the British empire had created, a hierarchy in which India was subordinate to the ‘motherland’ and other colonies like those in Africa occupied in turn a place inferior to India, which signify the idea of ‘brown over black’. According to Burton, India’s efforts to create a national identity entailed a vision of ‘Afrindian’ oneness, a process that was intrinsically defined by the assumption of their inferior status, in civilizational and racial terms. Although Burton is careful to observe that this does not deny the ‘two novels’ (Ch. 1 & Ch. 3) on India and Africa and their archive of cross-racial interaction, she invites her readers to consider Afro-Asian solidarity, and the modern and contemporary history of connections from the vantage point of friction and fault lines. One may conclude that Africa in the Indian Imagination covers a cognate domain of complexity: the historical archive of interactions between ‘Africa’ and ‘Asia’ is coherent, that we may agree with Burton’s chapter title: ‘The linkage of legacies between these two world regions is indeed old and deep – ancient monsoon-driven trade routes across the Indian Ocean, relationships of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid support and solidarity; and, more recently, a neo-liberal wave of Indian investments in the continent. Focusing on India’s imagined relationship with Africa, Burton historicizes India’s role as a participating member in the coherent post-colonial Indian identity. She demonstates how to – despite Bandung’s rhetoric of equality and brotherhood – Indian identity echoed colonial racial hierarchies in its subordination of Africans and blackness. Undercutting Indian anxiety over Africa and challenging the narratives and deeply held assumptions that produce a sentimentalized, nostalgic and false history of Afro-Asian solidarity, Burton shows the continued need for anti-rhetic, vexed, and fraction postcolonial critique.

Analysis

Burton’s main chapters offer close reading of two novels (Ch. 1 & Ch. 3) on travel narrative (Ch.2), and one memoir (Ch.4). The first chapter brings to the reader a commentary on the first novel written by a South African Indian, and on South-South comparisons, from the legacies that arise from a method that is attuned to the citatonary politics that plays out within—and beyond—the text. Written in 1960, Ananya R. Singh’s novel, ‘Behold the Earth Mourns’, is the story of a group of students set in Durban against the backdrop of the passive resistance campaign of 1946-1948, which was organized in response to the Smuts government’s introduction of the national pass that limited the rights of Indians to own or occupy land.

One hundred years after the arrival of the first indentured Indians in South Africa, Ananya R. Singh published this first novel, which is the story of this transnational marriage between a Bombay woman, Yogeshwari, and a Durban man, Sterinka. In order to capture the full historicity of Singh’s book, Burton rightly suggests that this be read not only as a diaspora novel that portrays the struggles of the Indian community in South Africa but through its intertwined gender, and race, but also as a work of fiction where African characters, and the possibilities of interracial encounters and collisions, are central to the plot. Most of the ‘Afrindian’ novels and non-fictional narratives that are used as specific accounts of the ways in which Africa was imagined by Indians or by Africans of Indian descent.

The second chapter (Ch.3) is Chamayak Sen’s ‘Morning After’ (1973), which also tells stories of diaspora across Africa-Asia. In The Morning After, Sen narrates the story of African students studying in India. Since independence, India’s drive to enroll African students in India’s then 55 universities was motivated by Jawaharlal Nehru’s commitment to cultivating Africa’s technical capabilities as part of his vision for post-colonial African governance. Nehru also took the initiative to establish a separate Department of African Studies in Delhi University in 1955. As the author notes, if such a scheme sounds patronizing, it should come as no surprise (p. 92). The post-colonial Indian market was dependent on African markets – including Kenya, Zambia, Zanzibar, Ghana and Nigeria. This was part of a larger scheme of developing long-range policy objectives for Africa – known as ‘economic diplomacy’ – which accelerated in the wake of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Burton also points to the anxieties about crossing Afro-Asian boundaries. But, in Sen’s novel, we also find Indian women and African men crossing racial boundaries in intimate spaces. Such crossings proved devastating for the African characters and provided a cautionary tale of the intermixing within the Afro-Asian communities in India.

Burton’s final essay on Phyllis Naidoo’s Memoirs (Ch. 4) about Indian and African collaboration in the anti-apartheid struggle is noteworthy. She argues that Naidoo’s book, Footprints in Grey Street, captures the internal struggle against apartheid in South Africa and registers a new way of narrating solidarity across the Afro-Asian experience. Burton finds promise in Naidoo’s ‘Afrindian’ story because it ‘cites’ interracial solidarity, by identifying Afrikaners as the ‘frictons between brown and black that were characteristics of the struggle’.

Epilogue and Conclusion

In Ngugi waThiong’o’s 2007 novel, Wizard of the Crow, the hero Kamiti, university-educated and unemployed, poses as a wizard and toffles a fictional African regime gluited on corruption and seduced by the evils of global capitalism. Among the many characters he is – i.e., what makes him a threat to the Republic of Aburiria’ and its would-be leaders – is that he has traveled through and studied in India. Just as irrigating to his enemies like Kimathi, this book reveals his rather racist orientation:

The average African truly certainly lacks the education, training and experience not only of the European, but of the Indian. If he is a hundred years behind Europe, he is at least fifty years behind Africa in the development of his aptitude and abilities (p. 60).

No wonder readers generally found a book that alternates between the centrality of women and gender and race, but also as a work of fiction where African characters, and the possibilities of interracial encounters and collisions, are central to the plot. Most of the ‘Afrindian’ novels and non-fictional narratives that are used as specific accounts of the ways in which Africa was imagined by Indians or by Africans of Indian descent.

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India-Africa Synergy in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

Burton’s final essay on Phyllis Naidoo’s Memoirs (Ch. 4) about Indian and African collaboration in the anti-apartheid struggle, stands out. Phyllis insists, ‘Do not call me an Indian. I am South African’. In the mid-1950s, Naidoo threw herself into activism in South Africa, initially by raising funds for treason trials of underground leaders to flee the country, a role that became ‘comrades’ to ‘Afrindian’ story because it ‘cites’ interracial solidarity, by identifying Afrikaners as the ‘frictons between brown and black that were characteristics of the struggle’.

Earlier in Chapter 2 (pp. 57-87), Burton’s study of Frank Naidoo’s ‘The Importance of Being Black: An Asian Looks at Africa (1965), reaffirms the significance of racial hierarchies in Indian perceptions of Africa. Burton believes that Moraes, a journalist who had covered his travels through South Africa in 1965 and relied on older discursive hierarchies of the colonial era to position African states ‘below’ India developmentally. However, this book only provides the view of ‘Africa from an airplane’ (Moraes never lived in Africa!). It is nonetheless a critical ethnography of emergent African nation-states – re-fracting the fate of postcolonial India through its internalities about gender, and race, and also as a work of fiction where African characters, and the possibilities of interracial encounters and collisions, are central to the plot. Most of the ‘Afrindian’ novels and non-fictional narratives that are used as specific accounts of the ways in which Africa was imagined by Indians or by Africans of Indian descent.

To the extent Burton points out that her criticisms of India in the book is not to suggest that Indians were simply racist or did not participate in fighting apartheid in South Africa or in shaping Afro-Asian solidarity in the wake of the 1955 Bandung Conference. The analysis in this book is compelling, although it has its limitations. Burton’s overdependence on primary sources leaves little room for exploring the geo-political context and material forces. The generations of South African Indians who succeeded Gandhi put their bodies on the line to protest racial segregation and we are coming to appreciate the impact of joint struggles by Indians and Africans to secure a platform for Third World issues, and to re-configure the post colonial globe, in the heat of the Cold War and beyond. As this author rightly points out, Ngugi’s approach makes it impossible not to take the centrality of women and gender and sexuality in his story seriously (p. 169). As such, Burton’s analysis is riddled with tensions that, perfomce, generate friction: the heat and light we need to make new histories!