



Significance of the Contribution of India to the Struggle Against Apartheid

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SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF INDIA
TO THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID

by

M. Moolla

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.]

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"We have... brought before this Assembly the treatment of Indians in the Union of South Africa... The way this Assembly treats and disposes of this issue is open to the gaze, not only of those gathered here, but [of] millions in the world, the progressive peoples of all countries - more particularly the non-European peoples of the world - who ... are an overwhelming section of the human race.

"The issue we have brought before you is by no means a narrow or local one, nor can we accept any contention that a gross and continuing outrage of this kind against the fundamental principles of the Charter can be claimed by anyone, and least of all by a Member State, to be a matter of no concern to this Assembly of the world's peoples.

"The bitter memories of racial doctrines in the practice of States and Governments are still fresh in the minds of all of us. Their evil and tragic consequences are part of the problems with which we are called upon to deal.

"India firmly believes that imperialism, political, economic or social, in whatever part of the world it may exist and by whomsoever it may be established and perpetuated, is totally inconsistent with the objects and purposes of the United Nations and of its Charter."

Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit,
Chairman of the Indian delegation
at the United Nations General Assembly,
1946.

India's pioneer role in the struggle against apartheid

To the informed and concerned generations of Black South Africans - politically conscious and active participants in the struggle against racial discrimination, oppression and injustice - the presentation of the case against a self-righteous, bigoted, chauvinistic and oppressive white minority régime by the representatives of a country that had fought against colonial rule for centuries was a matter of great pride, satisfaction and encouragement. To the oppressed and exploited people of South Africa - victims of a brutal, evil, pernicious and inhuman system - the championing of their cause by India at an august and important international assembly brought hope and confidence. To the

peoples of Africa and Asia still suffering from imperial and colonial domination, India's ringing denunciation of all forms of discrimination and oppression, colonialism, imperialism and fascism was the voice of the emerging free nations of the world and heralded the dawn of a new era. India, so to speak, was the representative of suffering and oppressed humanity at the bar of world public opinion.

It is pertinent to note that, when India raised the question of the treatment of South Africans of Indian origin and the denial of human rights to all Black South Africans at the United Nations General Assembly in 1946, the world body was dominated by Powers which had large and extensive colonial empires. Free, sovereign and independent States of Africa and Asia which today form the overwhelming majority of Member States of the United Nations were then subject colonies, still struggling to free themselves from foreign domination and subjugation. Viewed against this background, it becomes apparent how vital and significant a role India played then and in later years to expose the evils of colonialism, imperialism and racism and to champion the cause of all oppressed nations and peoples.

For the first time in the history of international relations, the subject nations of the world began to view the international political landscape in a different light. There was hope and confidence in their own ability to free themselves. The great struggle for freedom and national independence waged by the people of India against one of the mightiest colonial empires the world had known, and its successful culmination, stirred and inspired millions of Africans and Asians to continue their battle for freedom.

India had become a trail blazer, as it were, and the speeches, writings and works of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and other giants of the Indian freedom movement were avidly read by young and budding nationalists of Africa and Asia, many of whom in later years successfully led their peoples to emancipation. Outstanding leaders of African freedom movements have publicly acknowledged their debt to the Indian freedom struggle and its leaders. In South Africa, great and respected leaders of our people, such as Chief Albert Lutuli, the late President of the African National Congress and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, as well as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and others, have acknowledged the influence the Indian liberation movement had on them.

South Africans have had the rare privilege and honour to have had amongst them one of history's most outstanding figures who began his life's great and enduring work in South Africa. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's satyagraha and non-violent campaigns in the struggle for human freedom first took shape and were applied in South African conditions during the early part of this century. As a young barrister Gandhi

witnessed the disastrous effects on human beings flowing from the policies of racial superiority, exclusiveness and arrogance. Having himself undergone the humiliating experience of racism, Gandhi dedicated his life from then on to the pursuit of human dignity and the liberation of man from all forms of tyranny and oppression. Upon his return to India, Gandhi threw himself, body and soul, into the struggle for India's freedom and independence. The Mahatma's epic role in the struggle for Indian freedom need not be recounted here.

Continuing support of freedom struggles

India's connexion with Africa, however, does not begin nor end with Gandhi. The leaders of the Indian National Congress, Nehru in particular, emphasized time and again their belief that Indian freedom would remain meaningless so long as other countries of Africa, Asia and the rest of the world remained under the iron heel of foreign domination and so long as freedom was denied anywhere in any form whatsoever. As early as 1927, the Indian National Congress became a member of the International League against Imperialism and the delegation of India reaffirmed at its meeting in Brussels their movement's and country's support of all anti-imperialist and national liberation struggles the world over. At its Madras Session held during the same year, the Congress demanded the recall of Indian troops from China and condemned Japan's imperialist designs there, declaring: "the Chinese people ... are the comrades of the Indian people in the joint struggle against imperialism."

Spelling out India's international outlook, Jawaharlal Nehru reiterated in Lahore in 1929 that India was "part of a world movement. Not only China and Turkey, Persia and Egypt, but also Russia and the countries of the West are taking part in this movement and India cannot isolate herself from it."

With the rise of fascism in Europe, the Indian National Congress made it abundantly clear in 1936 that it stood with the progressive forces of the world which were ranged against fascism and imperialism.

Nehru wrote at that time:

"It is clear that any breach in the imperialist front anywhere has its repercussions all over the world. A victory for fascism in Europe or elsewhere strengthens imperialism and reaction everywhere, and a setback to it weakens imperialism. Similarly the triumph of a freedom movement in colonial or subject country is a blow to imperialism and fascism, and it is therefore easy to understand why the Nazi leaders frown on Indian nationalism, and express their approval of the continuation of British domination of India." (India and The World, pp. 200-210, London, 1936.)

The struggle of the Indian people for independence and freedom from a common enemy - imperialism and colonialism - inevitably drew the leaders of Africa and Asia closer together. They had much to learn from each other's experiences and drew general lessons in the common struggle against alien domination and for freedom. Close contact was established by Nehru, Krishna Menon and other Indian leaders with African leaders such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta as well as South Africa's J.B. Marks and Dr. Yusuf Dadoo, and Paul Robeson, great Afro-American freedom fighter, singer and actor, amongst others. This contact, at a time when the decline of imperialism and colonialism had already set in, not only helped strengthen the bonds of friendship and understanding between them and their respective peoples but also led to a greater commitment to the African cause on the part of the leading lights of the Indian freedom movement. That this commitment to the cause of African emancipation has in no way lessened since India attained her independence in 1947 speaks eloquently of this country's fundamental, firm and unshakable position vis-à-vis imperialism, colonialism, racism and fascism.

It is necessary to point out that, both before and after India's independence, the leaders and Government of India have consistently exhorted Indians living abroad to fully identify themselves with the basic aspirations of the peoples of the countries of their adoption, and to integrate themselves in the mainstream of those societies. On numerous occasions, Gandhi and Nehru reminded Indians abroad of their basic responsibilities towards their fellow citizens and warned them to expect no sympathy or understanding from India if they displayed racial arrogance, exclusiveness and bigotry or isolated themselves from majority aspirations. This was done, quite clearly, to underscore India's total abhorrence and rejection of any forms of racism and her deep and sincere belief in the basic concepts and principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Against the above background and over the past thirty years since she first raised the issue of racial discrimination and denial of human rights in South Africa at the United Nations, India has maintained a consistent and principled stand on all fundamental issues relating to the rights of peoples and nationalities to freedom and self-determination and taken unilateral decisions and offered practical expressions of solidarity and support for causes and peoples dedicated to the concepts of human brotherhood, freedom and equality of opportunities. One aspect in particular stands out in bold relief, namely, that this stand and support of India is based on cardinal principles and not on expediency. This basic aspect of her foreign policy has been greatly appreciated by

countries that have freed themselves and by those peoples still struggling to free themselves.

When, during the course of a debate at the United Nations, the Indian representative describes the policies of racial discrimination and apartheid as constituting a grave danger to the peace of Africa and the world, as an outrage on the conscience of man and an evil that must be eradicated, and when India passionately supports African resolutions calling for the total isolation of the racist-fascist régime of South Africa and for stringent measures by the United Nations to put an end to the oppression of our people, then India echoes the voice of exploited and suffering humanity in one corner of the globe and is a source of great inspiration to all those fighting for the dignity and worth of man in our tortured country.

India raised the issue of the treatment of people of Indian origin in South Africa at the first session of the United Nations General Assembly not merely to bring to the gaze of international public opinion the inequities meted out to a minority who happened to be of Indian stock, but to focus world attention to the general problem of racial discrimination and deprivation of human rights as practised by a Member State of the United Nations. with a view to obtaining world support for an oppressed people struggling for freedom and human equality.

The burden of argument of the delegation of India was to emphasize that aspect - the deliberate denial of elementary human rights and the institutionalization of an obnoxious creed and ideology - which constituted a grave violation of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Indian delegation argued that inherent in the system of racial discrimination and oppression were to be found the seeds of a major conflict along racial lines which would have continental and world-wide repercussions. In such a situation, the United Nations could not be expected to remain a passive spectator; it was morally bound to act to remove the sources of such potential conflicts.

The oppressed South Africans recognized that the raising of the issue of treatment of the Indian minority in South Africa at an international forum by India was a purely tactical manoeuvre and welcomed it as a positive development. That India, in subsequent years, relegated this issue to the background and strongly continued to plead for the restoration of all freedoms to all South Africans bears out this contention. India's stand at the time must therefore be seen in its proper perspective - a necessary prelude to mobilizing world public opinion to accept a greater and much more important issue, that is, the whole question of apartheid, as of direct concern to the world body.

It would have been surprising, indeed, had India, the first of the major Afro-Asian nations to attain independence from colonialism, not taken the cudgels on behalf of peoples and countries who were going through an experience similar to hers. India's championing of our cause is therefore seen as a logical extension of her consistent policy of uncompromising support for all peoples struggling against oppression, colonialism, imperialism and fascism.

Concrete action against apartheid

India's unilateral decision to sever all relations - diplomatic, cultural, trade, economic - with the racist Pretoria régime must also be viewed as a profoundly courageous, moral and principled stand on a question which she justifiably considered to be of concern to all countries that profess to uphold the freedom, rights, dignity and worth of the human person. It must be underscored that India took this great step at least a decade before the United Nations passed a resolution, in response to a call by the South African liberation movement, calling for economic and other measures against South Africa and for her total isolation from the world community; it was a decision taken at a time when, as a newly emerged independent and sovereign Republic, India could ill afford to lose the lucrative market and the much needed foreign exchange to develop her own economy - a historic step undoubtedly and a truly magnificent and concrete expression of solidarity with the dispossessed of the world.

To white South Africa, the Indian decision came as a bolt from the blue, a stunning rejection of their false human values and so-called civilized standards of behaviour. To the deprived black masses of our country, it was a clarion call to action - to organize, resist and fight for our liberation. Free India, in effect, told our people not to submit to tyranny but to fight for their inalienable human rights and, in this great adventure, to count on the unqualified moral, material and other support from the Government, leaders and people of India. Such concrete expressions of solidarity with our cause came at a time when white South Africa, under the leadership of a political party avowedly fascist in character and steeped in the herrenvolk ideology, spelled out its blueprint for the country, namely, continued white supremacy and perpetual black servitude.

India's support for the cause of black South Africans came at a time when fresh in their minds were the unspeakable horrors of the concentration camps and the gas chambers perpetrated by the Nazis. It is well known that the ruling National Party of South Africa had received inspiration from the Third Reich, maintained close association with the Italian fascist movement and the top Nazi leaders, had hopes for a German victory and engaged in anti-war activities inside the country. After all

they were birds of the same feather. Viewed against this background, India's practical demonstration of support for the South African freedom struggle assumed greater significance.

From the standpoint of African liberation movements, India's role should be viewed in a much wider perspective and not be confined to the issue of racial discrimination and oppression in South Africa alone, for the very issue of the denial of human rights and freedom in one country necessarily posed the question of such denials elsewhere. It was but natural and logical for India, therefore, to raise the entire question of colonialism and imperialism and to extend her support to all those countries striving to liberate themselves. This was done by various leaders of Indian delegations at numerous sessions of the General Assembly; special mention should be made, however, of the late Mr. V.K. Krishna Menon who, with great passion, articulated the basic desires, hopes and aspirations of a vast segment of humanity still subjected to alien domination.

Lest it be misunderstood or misconstrued, it is not suggested here that India's advocacy of Afro-Asian liberation was a means to gain prestige and stature or respect in the international arena. As pointed out earlier, for India not to have done so would have been a betrayal and rejection of her own glorious freedom struggle, her basic human values and a past which is replete with shining examples of the fight against tyranny. To illustrate the point further, when the Afro-Asian group of nations emerged as a powerful factor in the United Nations and other world forums, India was content to withdraw from her leadership role, and encouraged the group to take a lead in discussions on apartheid, racial discrimination and colonialism. At the same time, she has continued to play an active role on these issues.

Unflagging commitment to the African cause

It is our considered view that India's present role in the struggle for freedom in Africa has in no manner been diminished and is of vital importance to our cause. As a matter of fact, particularly in the last decade, her support for freedom movements in Africa has been intensified. Today, one finds an even greater commitment than ever by India to the African cause. This is reflected not merely in statements of leading members of the Government of India including the President, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, External Affairs Ministers and others, but in the concrete moral and material assistance rendered to the peoples of South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe. It is also a known fact that India extended all possible support to the heroic peoples of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau during their long and arduous revolutionary struggles for liberation. Further, of tremendous satisfaction to us is the fact that the sympathy, understanding and support is not confined to Government circles only but finds an echo in the very hearts of the country's millions.

We have no doubt that, so long as parts of the African continent remain unliberated, so long will the people, Government and leaders of India consider their own freedom incomplete and extend their support to our cause.

As a leading member of the non-aligned movement, India has consistently striven to obtain greater and more concrete support for the cause of Africa; as a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, she played a leading role in South Africa's expulsion from that body in 1961; as a member of the Afro-Asian group at the United Nations and its allied agencies, she has consistently supported moves for the expulsion and isolation of the Pretoria régime and for the recognition of African liberation movements as genuine and authentic representatives of their respective countries. As a country that has experienced the destructive effects of imperialism and the denial of human rights, she has played, and continues to play, a vital role in extending the frontiers of freedom, peace and human progress. There can be no doubt that India's contribution to the freedom movements of Africa and Asia has been invaluable.

In addition to the support given by the Indian National Congress and its leaders, it is necessary to emphasize the role played by a number of other organizations in India in contributing to the general awareness of our problems among the Indian masses, mobilizing public opinion and enlisting support for the South African freedom struggle on a regional and national basis. These organizations include the Communist Party of India, the All-India Youth and Students Federation, the Indian Federation of United Nations Associations, women's organizations, the trade union movement and the All-India Peace and Solidarity Organization, amongst others. There can be no doubt that the work done by these progressive organizations in India over the years has brought the struggle of our people closer to the hearts of the people of India. The climate of opinion these organizations helped create and the general abhorrence of apartheid and racial discrimination thus generated are indeed practical expressions of India's solidarity with our cause.

We might in particular single out the All-India Peace and Solidarity Organization which, since its inception, not only canvassed for more effective support for our cause but was, in large measure, responsible for the establishment of the Asian Mission of the African National Congress of South Africa in New Delhi. We need not mention that the ANC Mission in New Delhi enjoys the total and unstinted support of the Government, leaders and people of India.

In conclusion, we pay tribute to India's pioneering efforts to elevate the question of racial and national oppression in South Africa into a major international issue; her consistent and successful efforts, together with other Afro-Asian and socialist countries, to mobilize

concerted and co-ordinated action by the international community to combat and eradicate the evils of racism, apartheid and colonialism; and her principled stand at all international forums on the question of the racist and fascist régimes of southern Africa. These are, perhaps, among the most enduring contributions India has made in the struggle for universal peace, freedom and a just world.