

Bandung's New Global Agenda

MANORANJAN MOHANTY

In the last week of October 2015, activists from 25 countries met in Indonesia to revitalise the Bandung agenda in the context of challenges of the 21st century. The meet showed how new global movements for justice and equity are building new solidarities and forging a new politics of internationalism.

Building Sovereignty and Countering Hegemony” was the theme of the Bandung Spirit Conference held in Jakarta and Bandung on 27–31 October 2015 to observe the 60th Anniversary of the 1955 Bandung Conference of Asian and African countries.¹ This included scholars and activists from 25 countries from all the continents of the world, though the vast majority were from Asia and Africa. In April 2015, the heads of states and governments had already met and adopted a number of significant declarations to advance the Bandung agenda in the context of the 21st century challenges.

The 41-point Bandung Message 2015 for strengthening South–South cooperation for promoting world peace and security was a major declaration reaffirming the 10 principles (*dasa-shila*) of 1955 and the New Asian–African Strategic Partnership (NAASP) of 2005, while charting concrete programmes of action on contemporary issues, such as climate change. But this conference convened under the initiative of an international academic group took up many issues going beyond diplomatic confines and formulated a research and policy agenda to address some of the critical political, cultural, economic and environmental challenges confronting the contemporary world.

The main thrust of the papers and deliberations was on the need for a new

intellectual agenda that could break the still persisting colonial knowledge system and the communication monopoly that had emerged during the recent decades of capitalist globalisation. The participants took particular note of the fact that this hegemony was currently accepted by the ruling elites of many developing countries, thus frustrating the visions of liberation from all forms of domination that had crystallised during the anti-colonial struggles, articulated during the Bandung Conference of 1955 and later reaffirmed by numerous people’s movements in different parts of the world.

Memory of the World

The commemorative academic conference began in Jakarta at LIPI (Indonesian Institute of Sciences) in a mood of celebration as the UNESCO had in early 2015 accepted the 1955 Bandung Conference as Memory of the World (MOW). That there was such a category of recognition besides World Heritage Sites was not known to many. UNESCO established the MOW programme in 1992 as an international initiative to safeguard and facilitate access to documentary heritage of global significance. This process was studiously pursued by the Indonesian National Archives over several years and it needed the consent of the other sponsoring countries of the 1955 Bandung Conference, namely, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. With this step by UNESCO the archives of all these countries were obliged to open their Bandung-related documents to researchers.² The Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in 1947 that was frequently

The author participated in the Bandung Spirit Conference on the invitation of Centre for Policy Analysis and Development, Jakarta.

Manoranjan Mohanty (mmohantydu@gmail.com) is with the Council for Social Development and Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

mentioned as a precursor to Bandung may also qualify for the status of *mow*.

A highlight of the inaugural session was the remarks of Wardiman Djonegoro, a former Education Minister of Indonesia who served the Secretariat of the 1955 conference as a 21-year-old young student volunteer under Indian leadership. While detailing the bold initiatives taken, he also presented glimpses of the dynamics and variety of perspectives that operated during the event reflecting the impact of the Cold War.

No doubt, President Sukarno is rightly credited to have taken the initiative for convening the Afro-Asian Conference. But little is known outside Indonesia about his Prime Minister, Ali Sastroamidjojo, who was for long a strong anti-imperialist, had attended the Brussels Conference against Imperialism in 1927 and had met Nehru. Apparently, he was the key person who persuaded Sukarno to accept the idea of convening this conference. One researcher said that Nehru was initially sceptical pointing out the difficulties such a proposal involved, but once his points were taken care of, he was very enthusiastic and played a key role in shaping the outcome of the conference.

The first phase of the academic conference at LIPI, Jakarta focused on recalling the agenda of the 1955 conference, reviewing its documentation and research, assessing its impact during the past six decades and debating its current relevance. That there was a continuing interest in pursuing serious research on Bandung was evident from the presentation by many experts. For example, a paper on “Women Performing ‘Diplomacy’ at the Bandung Conference” pleasantly surprised everybody as it brought out the visuals of the leaders’ wives and daughters (Indira Gandhi attended) and other women among the assembled people greeting the Bandung leaders (almost entirely men) and women’s cultural performances. It showed how the later day women’s movement interpreted the Bandung spirit as a movement for equality and owned its legacy as an important part of its own liberation agenda. In fact, the gender panels at this conference were among the most interesting ones. Some of the essays submitted to the

conference were put together for the occasion, in a book edited by the Paris-based Indonesian historian and architect, Darwis Khudori, who has led this initiative for over a decade.³

Deliberations at Bandung

The participants conducted the next round of discussions in Bandung where they travelled by bus just as the leaders had done in 1955 and also in 2005, on the Golden Jubilee when India was represented by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and in April 2015 by Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj.⁴ The academic conference took place at the same venue, now the Afro-Asian Conference Museum at Bandung.⁵

That the Indonesians were very proud of the Bandung legacy was evident from the many steps they had taken in the recent years. After the 60th anniversary summit level celebrations in April 2015, the Padjadjaran University in Bandung had been awarded a major grant to launch an Institute of Asian-African Studies to promote collaborative research among scholars from Asia, Africa and other developing countries. The leaders had announced their decision to observe 24 April every year as the Bandung Day. Bandung was also christened as the Human Rights City.

Among all the specific cases of colonial subjugation, including apartheid in South Africa and the occupation of Palestine, it was the independent statehood of Palestine which still remained as an unfinished agenda of Bandung. A special session on Palestine brought out the continuous oppression and violence suffered by Palestinians and how Israel’s aggressive, militaristic actions persisted due to Western support and acquiescence by a number of countries. The conference pledged its solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian people and hoped for steady steps towards a two-state solution.

Contemporary Global Crisis

The dominant model of economic development accompanied by the cultural and political frameworks backed by military power of the developed countries came for detailed scrutiny in the panel discussions in Bandung. Some of

the group discussions continued in the third phase of the Conference again in Jakarta at Trisakti University. Incidentally, this university had a chequered history. It was called the “Res Publica (Public Interest) University” in the Sukarno era and was the target of the military during Suharto’s military takeover in 1965.⁶ It should be noted that a mass killing of members of Communist Party of Indonesia and their suspected supporters estimated at 5,00,000 took place during that time. Over two decades later, it was the students of this university whose demonstrations in May 1998 sparked off a countrywide protest that resulted in the overthrow of the military dictator, Suharto and started Indonesia’s new phase of democratic politics.

That the current wave of capitalist globalisation had created an ever intensifying crisis was the running thread of the economy panel. The uncontrolled spread of markets and a central role given to speculative capital were seen as major causes of the increasing imbalances and uncertainties in the economies of the developing countries. The new initiatives in the international financial system came in for discussion at the conference. The New Development Bank (NDB) set up by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries in Shanghai and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) set up in Beijing on China’s initiative were seen as welcome developments. But whether they would maintain the existing unequal world economic system, merely achieving a geographical “rebalancing” of powers, or they would be the instruments of “global restructuring,” helping create an equitable, just and fair political and economic order was the question.

It was recalled that the Bandung process had resulted in the debates on

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building a New International Economic Order (NIEO) which had been sidelined by the surge of the neo-liberal economy on the initiative of the United States (US). After the global economic crisis of 2008, many lessons had been learnt on the operation of the free market and the need to redesign a world political economy that would reduce inequalities and protect the environment. The BRICS countries, especially China and India had a special obligation to facilitate the “restructuring process.” Rather than treating African countries, for example, merely as sources of raw materials and a market for their products as was the dominant trend at present and evident in the summits of African countries that these two countries hosted, they should rather enable the resurgent African countries to develop their productive capacity and social infrastructure.⁷

The discussion on the global ecological crisis had an alarming context in Indonesia itself. As the conference was on, devastating forest fires had spread to vast areas in the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan and had caused serious damage. What was remarkable was that many Indonesian civil society groups had characterised them as “crimes against humanity” as they were man-made. Corporate agents had reportedly caused them to get ashes for palm oil and paper pulp! The Japanese environmental crusader Yukio Kamino of the Organization for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement International presented a fundamental critique of the currently dominant development strategy and how it was widening a conflictual relationship between humans and nature. He and several others presented important ideas on how peace and freedom were integrally connected with sustainability.

The Bandung vision reiterated in 2005 and 2015 had in fact reaffirmed this perspective of many anti-colonial thinkers. The centrality of indigenous people’s knowledge and culture about sustaining their natural environment and their right to local resources had been totally undermined in the recent decades of neo-liberal globalisation. The seven-country comparative study on economic reforms and their social, environmental and political consequences presented by

Chinese scholars representing the Global University of Sustainability had some revealing facts on the extent of environmental degradation in China.

The Culture and Religion panels were rich with many innovative formulations such as “theological citizenship.” Some scholars pointed out the neglect of moral and spiritual elements of modern life which was one of the causes of human alienation. That religion had to be understood in its historical, contextual framework respecting the alternative cosmologies that accompanied them was debated intensely by the participants. Taking the Abrahamic religions and the numerous other religions of the world together, one had to study in-depth the impact of modern economic, communication, military and political strategies which various regimes had pursued.

Global Swaraj and Ubuntu

The Bandung Spirit Conference not only alerted everyone on some unfinished tasks of liberation such as Palestine, but equally stressed on the need to struggle against all forms of domination and hegemony. Hence the idea of “Global Swaraj”—self-rule or self-realisation at every level—resonated throughout the conference. This notion of “self” treated others also as “self,” by striving to transform the relationship of domination into one of freedom and equality. Thus the notion of mutuality of existence or *Ubuntu* (“I am because you are” in the Zulu language) always went along with Swaraj, encompassing not only the human species but entire nature. It was pointed out that the newly announced Sustainable Development Goals for 2015–30 could not be substantively realised unless people and nations at the ground level took responsibility and exercised freedom to achieve them.

The new agenda now tied up Asia and Africa with Latin America and produced an ASAFLA (Asia–Africa–Latin America) framework on global futures. This framework was not confined to this ASAFLA region alone. This new discourse and pedagogy of liberation existed in all parts of the world, including in the US and in Europe, where too forces of peace, equality and justice uphold the

Bandung vision. Conversely, among the elites in ASAFLA many were wedded to the hegemonic agenda of capitalist globalisation with its multiple inequalities and environmental unsustainability. Some of the Latin American countries had shown signs of hope for pursuing the Bandung vision of a peaceful, equitable and sustainable world. To the making of that process, people from all parts of the world had the capacity to contribute as indeed they all possessed a common yet differentiated civilisational heritage. As a Brazilian scholar pointed out, *Once upon a time the world spoke Arabic*—the title of her book.⁸

NOTES

- 1 See the website www.bandungspirit.org for the documents, detailed programme and the *Bandung 60+Declaration* of the International and Multidisciplinary Conference which was presented to the President of Indonesia after the conference.
- 2 As a preparatory step to nominate both the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement as Memory of the World, the National Archives of Indonesia hosted a preparatory seminar on 26–29 May 2015 where Algeria and Serbia participated. Absence of India in this event was conspicuous. Indonesian archives have already put many of their documents online and digitisation of all the documents was in full swing. For Indonesia Documentary Heritage, see www.mow-indonesia.org.
- 3 Darwis Khudori (ed), *Bandung at 60: New Insights and Emerging Forces* (Jakarta: Pustaka Pelajar 2015 in the Bandung Spirit Book Series: <http://pustakapelajar.co.id>) co-published by ARENA (<http://blog.world-citizenship.org>), CIRFA (<http://centreinternationalsterfa.org>), COD ESRIA (<http://www.codesria.org>) and GLOBAL U (<http://our-global-u.org>).
- 4 The absence of India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi was noted by many observers as indication of Modi’s distancing his foreign policy from some of Nehru era’s major initiatives such as Panchasheel (Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence), Bandung Conference and Non-Aligned Movement. See Manoranjan Mohanty, “Bandung Spirit and the New Indian Regime” in *Mainstream*, Vol LIII, No 26 (20 June 2015). See also the special issue of the magazine *Latin America in Movement* on “60 Years later: the Bandung Spirit Is Alive,” <http://www.alainet.org/es/revistas/169851>.
- 5 See the website for its activities: www.asianafrikanmuseum.org.
- 6 Trisakti referred to the three principles championed by Sukarno—political sovereignty, economic self-reliance and cultural confidence—which have gained a new prominence under the present regime of Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, President of Indonesia since 2014.
- 7 India–Africa Summit attended by leaders of 53 Countries that was going on in New Delhi at the same time as the Bandung Spirit Conference was mentioned many times in this context.
- 8 The book is in Portuguese by Beatriz Bissio, Chair of the Department of Political Science, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.