

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

Home > Book Review: V. Suryanarayan - "Together in Struggle: India and Indonesia 1945-49"

Book Review: V. Suryanarayan - "Together in Struggle: India and Indonesia 1945-49"

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Tue, 03/13/2018 - 07:32

(*Prabhat Prakashan, 4/19 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002, pp.152 Rs.300.*)

Paper No. 6355

Dated 13-Mar-2018

By Kandaswami Subramanian

Looking back at the years when a "War to end all wars" was coming to an end, it was beyond human imagination to assess the damage inflicted on humanity as a whole. All countries, whether directly involved in the war effort or not, were affected. Further, the closing years of the war gave birth to newer and exaggerated fears of damage to political and economic systems rising from a vicious ideological rivalry between capitalism and communism, otherwise described as "cold war." These frictions led to alliances or groupings of countries to safeguard their economic and strategic interests. The U.S. had dislodged the UK as a hegemon, strategically and economically. However, it had to contend against the growing influence of the USSR. And, more importantly, the former colonies of the West in Asia and Africa, witnessed the collapse of imperialism and withdrawal of colonial powers from their fondly-held possessions (jewels!). In their trail, they perpetrated outrageous massacres and bloodshed.

Decolonization resulted in greater measure due to nationalist struggles, armed or non-violent, for liberation and to a smaller measure due to the weakening of colonial powers. Some, like the U.K., lost their ability to defend their empires while some others, like the Dutch, needed them to draw on (exploit) resources for post-war growth. Thus, the responses of colonial powers to vacate colonies were varied, even though the overall trend was clear.

These were not isolated or unrelated trends. They were inter related thanks to global cooperation among the leaders of liberation movements. Indeed, there were under or cross currents which deflected the pace and pattern of liberation for a while. However, it was evident that Western colonials were on retreat from Asia as colonial masters. The US, with its own tradition of revolution and democracy,

would broadly extend support to liberation movements. In fact, it had given an assurance to that effect before the war. However, cold war strategies and compulsions necessitated support to European allies when liberation issues cropped up in the UN or other forums. For the US, eliminating communism and communist parties commanded higher priority than supporting freedom struggles. The picture was complicated by the fact that in many countries in Asia and Africa communist parties lent support to nationalist struggles and grew in strength. Often, the US policy was in a quandary to decide whether to support nationalist (freedom) struggles or suppress them with fire power as proxies for communism. Perhaps, Indonesia offered the worst example.

If we look back at the year of 1945, the *Annus Mirabilis* for Indonesia, Asia was in the melting pot. It appeared that the time for Asia to enter the world stage had arrived. Struggles for freedom were on the ascent and expectations very high. Freedom was in the air to be seized. Asian and African countries were waiting for their tryst with destiny and to enter the promised heaven. Liberation struggles, especially in countries like India, were influencing each other and gaining strength. It was truly the *golden hour* for India and Indonesian when they could cooperate and lead others in the region. They had common cause and identity of views, as one leader from Indonesia said. Another said that India had become the sounding board for Indonesia's policies. Prof. Suranarayan captures the spirit of the golden hour graphically in this book.

The study is limited to a short period of five years: from 1945 when Indonesia declared Independence to 1949 when the Dutch rule formally ended. In part, his narration has the makings of a sentimental journey drawing on nostalgia; in greater part, it draws heavily on archival material, both public and private. One may readily discern the author's passionate attachment to Indonesia and his yearning to revive and reinvigorate the relations which have withered in later years.

National struggles for liberation date decades back to the end of the Second World War, but acquired a new vigour and momentum with the end of the war. Some countries had been promised independence after the war; however, many had to fight for them for longer years. There were clear signs of cooperation and empathy among the leaders of the liberation movements as was witnessed in the Congress of the Oppressed Nationalities held in February 1927 at Brussels and attended by Jawaharlal Nehru. Among others, it was attended by Mohammad Hatta who played a leading role in the liberation movement of Indonesia. Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam was also there. Though the Brussels Congress was later mired in controversy due to communist domination, as Prof. Suryanarayan describes with insight, the personal bonds Nehru had built with Hatta during the congress and which endured for long years, along with Nehru's own continuing commitment to Indonesia's freedom. (Pp.56-58.)

The chapter narrating 'Glimpses into Indonesia Nationalism' traces the roots of Indonesian nationalism and how Sukarno attempted to transform Indonesia's nationalism into a fusion between Islam and Marxism. He had drawn a lesson from India where Gandhi and Ali Brothers advocated "indissoluble union" between the nationalism and *Pan Islamism*. During those years, the Indonesian nationalist triumvirate –Sukarno, Hatta and Shirr- repeatedly admitted how they derived their inspiration from India's struggle for freedom.

It is also interesting to observe how closer relations or bonhomie between the two countries were contributed by the personal cordiality and trust between their leaders, especially during the period from 1945 to 1949 covered in this book. Sadly, Nehru himself began to observe the growing differences among the triumvirate when they failed to agree on some issues while negotiating the freedom agreement with the Dutch. Breaching his own code, Nehru wrote letters to them individually advising them to cooperate. This is described in pages 150-51. As he concludes, rather sadly, "The greatest tragedy of Indonesia after independence was the lack of unity among those who built up the national movement"

It is to the credit of the author that, after digging deep into the archives of MEA, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, National Archives, Indian Council of World Affairs, etc., he retrieves several statements, documents or letters which narrate interesting developments or anecdotes which throw insight into the extremely cordial atmosphere that prevailed among the leaders during those years. The book is enriched by discussions held for long days with veteran diplomats like P.R.S. Mani, etc. who could not only explain or elaborate, at length, the background to many developments and decisions, but even share confidences. For instance, the bickering between Mohamad Yunus and N. Raghavan, both Consul Generals, during the transition days is one such.

There are other revelations like the background to the rice deal with Indonesia. It was agreed to readily on the basis of personal discussions and implemented expeditiously. As he adds, "*the Agreement was signed even before the formation of the Interim Government.*" (Emphasis added.) And "Nehru used his personal clout with the British Government to ensure that the rice deal went through without a hitch." (p.86) It is interesting to learn how, later, the sale proceeds of rice were utilized to finance the Indonesian Office which had been set up after the birth of the new Republic. The Delhi office was later converted as the Embassy of Indonesia and received support in other ways such as through secret service funds. As he explains, this experience proved to be a model or precedent to be adopted to extend financial support to other liberation movements like the ANC and the PLO.

India's support to Indonesia in its liberation struggle was unswerving and the author narrates with *panache* India's diplomatic efforts in New Delhi and the U.N. Assembly in New York during those critical years. (Chapter 9, Indian Diplomacy at its best.) Similar are the narration of the exploits of Biju Patnaik in taking leaders like Hatta secretly to safety in his single engine Dakota. It has the ring of war time detectives a la James Bond. It was natural that such acts of friendship and cooperation led to deeper and abiding relationship. Sadly, the honeymoon was brief and the author gives hints at some points in passing.

By design, Prof. Suryanarayan has limited the period of study to five years. Those years were *sui generis* and may not be regained. They were marked by very special historical circumstances. They were intrinsically *nationalist* in character and untainted by cold war infractions. As explained in the introductory paragraph, the cold war had altered the relative power balance of freedom movements in different ways. World came to be divided into two camps; the nature of liberation movements got vitiated in some countries. The later history of Indonesia when it witnessed the emergence of a strong communist party (PKI), the rising role of the army generals and the US intervention through the

CIA, etc. exemplify this point. During this imbroglio, the triumvirate turned into bitter rivals and Sukarno took over. He had to battle his way through and began to support to the army for his survival. He dissolved the parliament and introduced “Guided Democracy.” He also began to move closer to China or away from India. Tragically, it led to the rise of Suharto and his despotic rule for over three decades. Indonesia had become a victim of the cold war and gave ideas of cooperation with India.

One may well take the view that Prof. Suryanarayan has tended to portray a rosy view seen through an ideology- tinted prism, given his own attachment to freedom struggles, non-alignment, etc. He has possibly glossed over some of the rough edges or trends visible even during the years of his study. Dealing with the same years, Prof. Nitish K. Dutt said, “So long as there was a similarity of views and objectives the two countries were able to cooperate admirably in various fields. But when Indonesia’s views and objectives differed from those of India, the two countries found themselves at loggerheads with each other,” (India-Indonesian Relations, 1955-67, Asian Studies, ASJ 10.2 (1972).

Prof. G.V.C. Naidu explains the developments more trenchantly. As he says, “The bonhomie and shared views along with strong empathy towards each other was such that Nehru and Sukarno convened the famous Bandung Conference of Asian and African nations in 1955 and became the founders of non-aligned movement when the world was engulfed in the bitter cold war rivalry.” (Deergayu India-Indonesia Relations, Vivekananda International Forum, 1 Feb.2011) Yet, Prof. Naidu discerned signs of clash of two strong and charismatic personalities in a way both vying to emerge as the principal leader of newly emerging Asian nations starting from that conference. Nehru was surprised to see the support Chou En-lai received from Sukarno at the conference.

Fast forward, we have taken several steps to improve our relations based on mutual interests such as trade, defense, and terrorism and especially in improving our Indian Ocean strategies through training, naval exercise, etc. There are clear signs of improvement in bilateral relations and these are based on well perceived and orchestrated common objectives. Yet, the pace of cooperation is tardy and lot more needs to be done.

Prof. Suryanarayan’s book may be said to have a lesson and also a warning. The lesson is, when bilateral relations are based on shared objectives and on personal cordial relations and trust, policy objectives are achieved better and faster. The warning is that there is more to achieving common objectives (foreign policy, economic or strategic) than mere personal relations. Policymakers and diplomats need both: hardware to perceive and work out common objectives; and software to build a camaraderie among Asian leaders.

Tags:

[India-Indonesia](#) ^[1]

[Decolonisation](#) ^[2]

Indonesia & Liberation Struggle [3]

Category:

Papers [4]

Countries:

SEAsia [5]

India [6]

Topics:

Political [7]

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2272>

Links

[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1860>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1861>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1862>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/se-asia>

[6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/india>

[7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>