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Nehru's Non-Alignment

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A new assessment of non-alignment as a product of a specific historical juncture, where Nehru was simultaneously trying to avert war and prop up hopes from internationalism.

'Why another book on non-alignment?', a reader might be tempted to ask at Swapna Kona Nayudu's *The Nehru Years: An International History of Indian Non-Alignment*. The question is prompted by either an argument of over-saturation or of irrelevance. The former is encapsulated as a dismissive 'Nehru and non-alignment have been done to death'. The latter closely follows, no doubt abetted by current ideological currents, that 'non-alignment is hardly relevant to today's politics'.

Nayudu tackles both objections: the former decisively and the latter with, arguably, some reticence. Her analysis of the ideological underpinnings of non-alignment places it beyond a solely Nehruvian framework and contextualises it within Tagorean and Gandhian thought. This context is something that is often forgotten in both public and academic discourse, where non-alignment and Nehruvian thought are seen as synonymous. In doing so, the influence of Gandhi's ideas of non-violence and Tagore's cosmopolitan ideas is often neglected. Someone equally relevant here would have been Maulana Azad, whose 1929 essay '*Islam aur Nationalism*' (Islam and Nationalism) was one of the earliest attempts to engage with the idea of nationalism and universalism, and whom Nehru had acknowledged as an intellectual influence in his writings.

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Nayudu takes up four cases to shed new light on the concrete aspects of non-alignment as foreign policy (as opposed to non-alignment as idea/ideology): the Korean war, the Suez Canal crisis, the Soviet intervention in Hungary, and Congo. The cases are selected by a logic of understanding and recovering the principles and contradictions of non-alignment, rather than of glorification or castigation, as is the case in much of contemporary discourse surrounding foreign policy. Korea and Suez represented relative successes of India's non-alignment. In Korea, India played an active role in promoting understanding between America, the Soviet Union, and China; during the Suez crisis, it upheld the legitimate interests of Egypt without fuelling armed conflict. Hungary revealed the internal tensions within non-alignment, as India's refusal to unambiguously condemn the Soviet intervention was seen as hypocritical, especially so in the wake of Suez. India's involvement in Congo exposed its racial blind spots and made India vulnerable to critique from within the decolonised world.

Through these instances, Nayudu succeeds in presenting non-alignment as a product of a very specific historical juncture, one where the leader of a prominent decolonised country was trying to avoid the outbreak of war within the exigencies of the Cold War, whilst simultaneously trying to prop up the hope of an internationalism symbolised in institutions such as the United Nations. Instead of rushing to judge India's seemingly equivocal stance on Hungary as a failure of non-alignment, Nayudu offers a fresh interpretation that places India's actions within the logic of non-alignment. In the case of Congo, her criticism of India's (and Nehru's) race-blindness is more pointed, which also spills over in the epilogue, where she critiques the "localized and parochial notions of Indian non-alignment".

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This is where, even when Nayudu notes instances where logics other than non-alignment prevailed, they are not given adequate attention. For instance, the shadow of Kashmir on India's attitude towards Soviet intervention in Hungary, while acknowledged, could have been discussed in more detail, particularly in light of more recent readings of non-alignment by scholars such as Priya Chacko's theorisation of the politics of "friendship" (as opposed to fear), Itty Abraham's and Nabarun Roy's critiques and re-interpretations of Nehruvian foreign policy, or its more vociferous indictment by Perry Anderson. Similarly, Nehru's refusal to help Nasser militarily, his reluctance to exclude Israel in Bandung, and the race-blindness vis-à-vis Congo could have benefited from more engagement with critical accounts of Indian foreign policy on race and caste, for example, those of Alexander Davis, Sankaran Krishna, Kalathmika Natarajan, and Vineet Thakur.

This is also where the book tends to underplay its own relevance. Indian foreign policy continues to be dogged by the simultaneity of moral rhetoric and the tendency to succumb to vague neutralism. While reading the book, I couldn't help but draw parallels between Nehru's almost "status-quoist" stances and India's current ambivalence on matters such as Palestine and Ukraine, and the diplomatic isolation it currently faces despite its considerable heft. Reading Nayudu's discussion of the Suez crisis, India's refusal to lend material support to Egypt's resistance against Europe's (admittedly declining) imperial powers seems almost exasperating and reminds one of tepid statements that urge 'both sides to resolve their differences peacefully' issued by the foreign ministry even today.

Nayudu characterises non-alignment as post-ideological, which in the context of the book implies its opposition to the Cold War-era capitalist (or 'democratic') and communist blocs. I would have preferred to see a deeper conceptual engagement with what being 'ideological' implies, and more importantly, whether a post-ideological position is even possible. Perhaps it would be possible to understand the limitations of non-alignment (or more accurately, Nehru's limitations) not only within its limited theorisation of the state (as Nayudu rightly argues), but also its failure to go beyond a mere ideational critique of colonialism and fully appreciate its political-economic basis in capitalism and imperialism.

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This tack would in turn allow for a more concrete analysis of non-alignment as an ideology itself (in the garb of being post-ideology). This would also problematise the characterisation of non-alignment as a "radical political vision", and I would stress here the historical material/revolutionary antecedents of 'radical' as a term. Any politics that claims to be radical must offer a systematically different political-economic alternative, closer to Castro's Cuba rather than Nehru's India. To use Robert Cox's typology, given Nehruvian non-alignment's problem-solving/neutralist tendencies, its radicalism may have been overstated, at least in Nehru's case.

My critiques notwithstanding, Nayudu deserves all the praise for presenting a fresh and empirically rich account of India's non-alignment that remains accessible to a wider readership. Specifically, her detailed engagement with Congo helps correct the erasure of Africa from accounts of Indian foreign policy, a problem that paradoxically ails narratives of even its non-alignment. As India again faces a new restructuring of the international 'order', this book will help us better understand a similar moment in the past, and the predicaments of the present.

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