

PHD STUDENT, HISTORY, INDIA

Few moments in history reflect the spirit of international cooperation and cross-cultural dialogue more than the Bandung Conference, held in 1955, and organized by a collection of newly inaugurated leaders from formerly colonized nations across Asia and Africa. In 2005, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the conference, world leaders again returned to Bandung to renew the 1955 sentiments that Asia and Africa had much to benefit from strengthened networks of communication. The notion of inter-regional cooperation among formerly colonized nations, so eloquently stressed in the rich speeches by the 1955 Bandung delegates, remains a source of inspiration for contemporary politicians in Asia and Africa. The proposed project will add a much needed historical dimension to the process by which cross cultural encounter and dialogue emerged among Asian and African anti-colonial leaders early in the twentieth-century leading up to the monumental meetings in Bandung.

As an advanced doctoral student, having passed my comprehensive exams in July 2007, the finished project will provide ample material for the completion of my dissertation. My study will trace the history Jawaharlal Nehru's cross-cultural interactions with other anti-colonial leaders as a case study, because, as the first Prime Minister of India, 1947-64, he became one of the leading advocates of Third World activism and a primary organizer of the 1955 Bandung Conference. Nehru's earliest encounters with anti-colonial nationalists from other parts of the colonized world can be traced back to a little known, yet significant institution, the League against Imperialism, founded in 1927. Unique for its time, the League brought together high profile nationalist leaders of the colonized world and leftist sympathizers from Europe and the Americas. The first meeting in Brussels drew many delegates from places like China, the Dutch East Indies, Korea, Indo-China, and Persia who traveled, often illegally and at great risk, to attend. A young and impressionable Nehru, then representing the Indian National Congress, had been profoundly influenced by his encounters with other anti-colonial leaders. After this formative experience, Nehru began a lifelong quest for greater communication channels among Asian and African leaders who shared in their struggle against colonial rule, and later collectively envisioned a postcolonial world of greater interdependence. My study will trace Nehru's cross-cultural interactions from his first encounter in 1927 until the Bandung Conference of 1955.

Nehru's relationships with leaders in other European colonies in the 1920s and 1930s, beginning with the League and evolving into a significant anti-imperial network spanning the globe, remains a crucial and unexplored aspect of Nehru's private and public life. Biographers of Nehru stress his British education and elite upbringing as the foundations of his worldview (Gopal, Brown). Members of the Subaltern collective, too, have argued that Indian Nationalist discourse, particularly that of Nehru, served the interests of elites and its epistemological foundations were derived from British, not Indian origins. Often, Nehru emerges as the central figure to blame for what subalterns have called the 'failure of the nation to come into its own' (Guha, Chatterjee). Ironically, the Hindu Right also criticizes Nehru and his British credentials, although for entirely different purposes. My research seeks to enlarge the geography of Indian anti-colonial nationalism and the postcolonial politics of Nehru, and to challenge the notion that Nehruvian ideas were just a facile derivative of British epistemology.

Two research questions guide my study. First, who were the anti-colonial activists Nehru encountered in Brussels in 1927, and how did Nehru's relationships with them change over time? In answering this, I will chart the correspondence between Nehru and other anti-colonial leaders as their countries moved from colonial status to independence, and as they matured and assumed increasing responsibilities in their own countries. Second, my study asks how widening the lens through which we examine Nehru might enable us to rethink his postcolonial politics after 1947? Evidence that Nehru's international politics were rooted in his political dealings with other world leaders beginning in the 1920s enables us to move beyond assertions that super power politics of the Cold War entirely determined third world foreign policies. It also frames the history of Indian international relations beyond the confines of colonialism by emphasizing the agency and opportunities for colonized individuals to transcend the imperial boundaries of the British Empire and reach out to new, alternative forms of international politics.

Trained as an historian, my approach to studying Nehru's cross-cultural networking is archival research. I have already researched the League against Imperialism documents at the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) and the British Library (London). The most significant archival material for my research, however, are Nehru's papers kept at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi, India. I will trace his interaction with other leaders before 1947. Unfortunately, the post-1947 Nehru papers are closed to scholars, but I intend to make full use of his published post-independence sources to draw connections to his rich, pre-independence archival materials. I have allotted nine months to work at the NMML, from July 2008 to March 2009. My research in India will provide ample material to complete a stand-alone article, as well as my doctoral dissertation to be completed from March 2009 to December 2009. The finished project will offer an important historical study of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange, a topic that seems to fit naturally with the Fulbright mission.