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Beyond Bandung and Belgrade: Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi, A Forgotten Indian Voice for World Peace

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi (1907–1966) was an Indian polymath best known for his intellectual contributions in a dizzyingly wide range of fields: mathematics, statistics, genetics, numismatics, history, and literature. His enduring reputation seems to have been posthumously sealed as the father of Marxist historiography in India. What has received scant scholarly attention, however, is his role as a key voice of the Indian peace movement after Independence and a crucial liaison between Indian peace activists and the Soviet-aligned world peace movement in the 1950s. Kosambi's politics, characterized both by his association with the undivided Communist Party of India and his arm's-length collaboration with the Government of India, afforded him a unique semi-official, fellow-traveling position to argue for nuclear disarmament and protest wars of aggression. This paper would argue that he consciously refused to be co-opted by either post-colonial nationalism or conformist international communism to advance an Asia-centric perspective on world peace that has now been largely occluded from mainstream accounts of post-war pacifism. This paper would also argue that by leveraging a now-forgotten infrastructure of transnational peace advocacy and interlocking circuits of activism at the local and national levels, Kosambi effectively foregrounded and vernacularized his own ideas of world peace premised on principled non-interventionism. Through a close reading of his extant essays, reports, speeches, and correspondence throughout the 1950s, I would posit that Kosambi's vision for world peace was imbued with a third-world internationalist sensibility that squarely located the roots of warfare in world hunger and structures of imperialism. In so doing, he went far beyond the Afro-Asian promise of the Bandung Conference (1955) when it came to arguing for what is now called 'South–South solidarity.' I further contend that, through his dutiful and maverick peace activism (prior to disillusionment in the 1960s) and increasingly radical critique of nuclear energy, Kosambi also anticipated several talking points of the Non-Aligned Movement, especially those that would only come to the fore in the Belgrade Summit (1961).

1 | The Bandung Spirit: Moods and Myths

'We want peace not only because we are peacefully inclined but because it is essential for our [rapid] progress.'¹ This is what the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, had to say about the 'Bandung spirit'—a feverish resolve that gripped the delegates of 29 Afro-Asian states meeting at the height of an Indonesian summer to 'celebrate the demise of

formal colonialism and pledge themselves to some measure of joint struggle against the forces of imperialism.'² Among other things, Bandung kicked off the formation of a UN block comprising Asian, African, and Latin American countries committed to securing disarmament as a precondition for world peace, the creation of a Special UN Fund for Economic Development (SUNFED), and the condemnation of 'racialism as a means of cultural suppression.'³

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The road from Bandung (1955) led to Belgrade (1961) via Brioni (1956), a picturesque island in the north Adriatic where Nehru met with his Yugoslavian and Egyptian counterparts, Tito and Nasser, and came to be credited with envisioning ‘peaceful coexistence’ as a cornerstone of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The Belgrade summit was characterized by the rhetorical flair of statesmen and diplomats from non-aligned countries against ‘the logic of nuclearism.’ However, it ended in a whimper when the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nehru went to meet Nikita Khrushchev with a timid ‘Appeal for Peace’ (drafted by the latter) and the President of Mali, Modibo Keita, teamed up with the Indonesian President, Sukarno, to convey the same appeal to John F. Kennedy. Both Moscow and Washington made empty promises in return.⁴

It has been argued that the Afro-Asian and the Non-Aligned movements, despite being ideological siblings with roots in Nehruvian thought, actually emerged in rather different political and intellectual contexts and went on to become rivals. The former was ‘based on geography and anti-imperialism’ and the latter on ‘bloc-free status in the cold war.’⁵ Notwithstanding obvious overlaps in membership, these should not be conflated. Both the movements were deeply imbricated in ‘parallel Nehruvian visions of anti-imperialism opposing the outdated colonial system and of international peace in the emerging divided world.’⁶

Yet, non-alignment increasingly became a joint Yugoslav-Egyptian political enterprise, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) sought to appropriate Afro-Asianism for its own ideological purposes. As the PRC lost more and more allies after conducting a successful nuclear test in 1964, the prospect of a second Bandung conference slowly evaporated. The NAM survived fortuitously—India began to identify more squarely with it, especially after the 1962 war with China—albeit in a much weaker form.⁷

In spite of their limited successes, Bandung and Belgrade are remembered as significant moments in Third World international cooperation and in the movement for world peace that went further than mere wartime non-belligerence. This selective remembrance often introduces a statist bias in the histories of post-war peace activism. Politicians and diplomats with institutional support get featured far more prominently than maverick but dutiful peace activists who contributed to the cause both intellectually and organizationally.

Writing them back into history does not take any credit away from the statesmen who founded big-tent movements like the NAM, but pluralizes the ways in which war and its justifications were creatively challenged in the past. The protagonist of this paper is one such forgotten voice for world peace.

2 | Dr. Kosambi: The Scholar and the Man

Dr. Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi (1907–1966) was an Indian polymath best known for his intellectual contributions in a dizzyingly wide array of fields: mathematics, statistics, genetics, numismatics, history, and literature. His enduring reputation has been posthumously sealed as the father of Marxist historiography in India. What has received scant scholarly

attention, however, is his role as a key voice of the Indian peace movement and as a crucial liaison between Indian peace activists and the Soviet-aligned world peace movement in the 1950s. Kosambi’s politics, characterized both by his association with the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) and his arm’s-length collaboration with the Government of India (GoI) afforded him a unique semi-official, fellow-traveling position to argue for nuclear disarmament and protest wars of aggression in Korea and elsewhere.

Born in Portuguese Goa in 1907, Kosambi belonged to an interesting household headed by his father Dharmanand, a practicing Buddhist and renowned scholar of Pali, who had gone on to become a Gandhian activist. When Dharmanand Kosambi was offered a translator’s position by the Harvard Sanskritist Charles Rockwell Lanman, Damodar accompanied him and stayed on for over a decade (barring a brief return to Gujarat for a couple of years) of school and college education.

Having been denied the opportunity to pursue advanced research in mathematics at Harvard for his too eclectic academic interests, Kosambi returned to India in 1929 after his graduation and took up a lectureship, first in Banaras, and subsequently in Aligarh and Pune. In 1946, he joined the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research (TIFR) as its chair for mathematics at the invitation of Homi J. Bhabha, the doyen of the Indian atomic energy program.

Kosambi would be forced to leave the institute 16 years later, in 1962. Among other things, he would fall out with Bhabha over his advocacy of harnessing solar energy instead of nuclear energy, anticipating in the latter’s ubiquitous military application the abuse of both knowledge and power.⁸ His unsuccessful claim of having proved the Riemann hypothesis while pressure mounted on him to publish more in the field of mathematics than on his preferred interests in history and literature had also somewhat chipped away at his core academic credibility.⁹

What seems to have sealed his fate, however, was his globetrotting activism in the previous decade during which he consciously refused to be co-opted, by either post-colonial nationalism or conformist international communism, to advance a Marxist and Asia-centric perspective on world peace, now largely occluded from mainstream accounts of post-war pacifism. In other words, he had become too radical in his opposition to war to be retained on the payroll of a public institution by an Indian government still smarting from the conflict with and eventual military defeat at the hands of China in 1962.

3 | Kosambi the Asian: New York, 1949

In April 1949, Kosambi was in New York to attend the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace organized by the National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. He was the sole delegate from Asia. The conference itself was incessantly slandered in the American Press, the venue was picketed (often with support from the CIA), and the attendees inevitably came under the radar of American surveillance.¹⁰

The infamous House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), in a typical McCarthyite vein, noted in its report that the peace movement was ‘the most dangerous hoax’ to ‘defeat and disarm the United States.’¹¹ This was in spite of the fact that the conference—contrary to similar contemporary gatherings—was intended to be non-partisan, allowing several dissenters with opposing views to participate in it and speak freely. It was funded and hosted by American civilians without any ‘direct or obvious connection to the Soviet Union.’¹²

Kosambi began his speech in New York with a candid admission:

I suffer from an incurable delusion that Asia really exists, that it constitutes a rather large and important part of the world with many millions of population and many millennia of history.¹³

For him, Asia was no cartographic abstraction. It was a continent of ‘newly-born democracies’ that refused to be dictated, advised, captured, or undermined from outside.

He went on to accuse the USA of weaponizing hunger globally by destroying tons of foodgrains to prop up export prices:

Hunger for generations twists and warps and corrodes the mind and the soul of human beings... even the after-effects of the atomic bomb should be no more horrible than year after year, generation after generation having your mind filled with no other thought than that of food. You shorten these people’s lives just as effectively; you sentence them to death just as effectively...May I ask why should the stockpile of food be destroyed when it can be far more effective in the cause of peace?¹⁴

In the midst of well-intentioned American citizens, Kosambi did not mince his words. He spoke about peace implying different things in the first and the third worlds. He pointed out the conference’s own blind spot regarding the forms of warfare it concerned itself with and its attendees’ unwitting complicity in the structures of imperialism. In other words, he was advancing an unabashedly Marxist point of view.

4 | Kosambi the Indian: Bombay, 1950

After his return from New York, Kosambi plunged headlong into the communist-backed peace movement in India. He became one of the most prominent faces of the All-India Peace Council (which eventually gave rise to the All-India Peace and Solidarity Organization), a mass organization of the CPI based out of 14 Munshi Niketan, Kamla Market, New Delhi. Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, a veteran Congress politician from Punjab and future recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize in 1952, was its founding President, and the dynamic communist peace activist Dr. Romesh Chandra was its General Secretary. Kosambi was elected as one of the Vice Presidents.

He was also very active as an organizer of the Bombay Peace Committee (BPC) along with Dr. Kumud Mehta and the Marathi literary critic N.R. Phatak. Eminent physicians such as Sahib Singh Sokhey and A.V. Baliga, the founding editor of *Blitz*¹⁵ Russi Karanjia, and even some prominent film actors were drawn into the orbit of the peace movement in Bombay. The city had a thriving public sphere dominated by the working classes, and the peace activists were keen on disseminating their message through the existing infrastructure of localized mass-contact, such as meetings of trade unionists and mill workers in Parel, *mushairas*¹⁶ in Madanpura, and public gatherings in Girgaon and Sundarbai Hall.¹⁷

Kosambi attended the Sundarbai Hall meetings of the BPC regularly and even addressed a few gatherings of insurance company and bank employees there himself. Mostly comfortable communicating in English, he did lecture in Marathi once in Pune. These meetings brought him closer to a range of influential figures, like the film actor and future Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.G. Ramachandran.¹⁸ In spite of his proximity to the Indian communists, Kosambi never joined the ranks of the CPI. In fact, he did not shy away from criticizing the views of the party’s top leaders and maintained an indulgent distance from those whom he liked to call the ‘official Marxists.’¹⁹

In a scathing review of the book *India: From Primitive Communism to Slavery* by the CPI stalwart S.A. Dange, Kosambi was particularly forthright:

Marxism is not a substitute for thinking, but a tool of analysis, which must be used, with a certain minimum of skill and understanding, upon the proper material. Interlacing groundless conjectures with quotations from Engels does not suffice.²⁰

In his dealings with the leadership of the peace movement in India too, he retained a similar critical attitude.

Kosambi believed that the plank of peace activism had to be broad-based and universalist, not selective and ‘sectarian.’ He urged local and provincial peace committees in India not to simply ‘parrot and pass resolutions sent to them by the All-India Peace Congress’ but ‘broaden the basis of the peace movement... so as to interest the greatest number in their locality.’ He was, however, profoundly aware of the possibility of such vernacularization bleeding into parochialism when not anchored in consensus-building principles.

To this end, Kosambi insisted aspiring peace activists join the movement with an open mind and in the spirit of generosity:

We welcome friends of the American people, and we welcome enemies of Communism or even of the Soviet Union. The only stipulation is that these people must not insist that the peace movement should then enter into a pact with either of the two countries for a war against the other. Similarly, no member of any political party can possibly make it a condition of his joining that some tendentious resolution must first

be passed by the local peace committee before he condescends to join. Finally, even if the members of a given group happen to belong to the overwhelming majority of one political party, they are not to pass resolutions that would fit their party's platform but would conflict with the main broad aim of the peace movement.²¹

This was his cleverly coded message to the 'official Marxists'—members of the Communist Party of India (CPI)—to desist from hijacking the peace movement for short-term political gains, only to derail it in the long run. He urged individual activists to not conflate their own opinions with resolutions adopted by a peace platform and to not dilute the objectives of the peace movement in India by making it overtly concerned with domestic political issues, no matter how pressing, unless they had a concrete link with the cause of world peace. By insisting on self-discipline among the activists of a still-nascent movement, Kosambi wanted to ensure that it did not lose sight of the immediate and urgent goal—the prevention of yet another global armed conflict—in the foreseeable future.

5 | Kosambi the Marxist: Moscow and *Monthly Review*

Kosambi admired the Soviet Union, where he was invited to lecture on several occasions in the 1950s as an Indologist and a peace activist, but his praises were not unqualified. Nor did he fail to respond to the condescension with which he was regarded by a part of the Soviet intelligentsia who called his Marxism 'skin-deep.'²² Kosambi found Soviet science truly inspiring. He was becoming increasingly concerned by the outdated notions of 'scientific freedom' held fast by scientists in America,

while being paid by big business, war departments, or universities whose funds tended to come more and more from one or the other source...in an age and time of extensive witch-hunting, where being called a communist was far more dangerous than being caught red-handed in a fraud or robbery.²³

In an essay that he wrote for the *Monthly Review* in 1951, Kosambi underlined two salient requirements for the peace movement to thrive while locating unambiguously in imperialism the seeds of aggressive and racist wars. These were class conflict and colonial liberation.

He was of the view that the issue of peace and war did not depend on individual leaders but on the dominant class that wielded state power and imperialism's hunger for profit and monopolies. That rent-seeking capitalists often looked forward to wars appeared to him as evidence of the 'twisted logic' of

modern imperialism which wages war in the name of peace and calls any move toward peace an act of warlike aggression, which bombs people indiscriminately to save them from Communism.²⁴

According to Kosambi, class war was universal. It impacted 'the whole of humanity except that tiny portion to whom food is a negligibly small item of expenditure.'²⁵ All other wars emerged from the attempts to turn it outward. Nevertheless, it had to be

settled within each country without foreign armed intervention. The peace movement cannot deny to any people the right to revolution (including counter-revolution), nor even the right to wage civil war.²⁶

Per him, colonial liberation promoted world peace by abolishing 'the great tension between the imperial power and the subject people' and the very basis for inter-imperialist competition. He remained convinced that this could not be achieved through high diplomacy and purportedly well-meaning non-partisan statesmanship alone: 'only mass action by the common people of the world remains as the bulwark of peace.'²⁷ Peace was not to be pontificated from above. It had to be worked into the grammar of everyday politics from below. Kosambi advocated for making world peace a part and parcel of popular aspirations through 'the written word, broadcasts over the radio, or even by word of mouth carried from village to village by local volunteers.'²⁸

6 | Kosambi and the Vernacularization of World Peace: Indore, 1951

One of these local volunteers was Anant Bhaskar Lagu. A 'labor agitator' and CPI activist based out of Indore and Ujjain, 'Lagu had previously been detained under the Madhya Bharat Maintenance of Public Order Act, had escaped from police custody, and was arrested again under the Prohibition of Associations Dangerous to Public Peace Act in 1949.'²⁹ Lagu's petition for a writ of Habeas Corpus had been rejected by the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 1950.³⁰ Soon after his release in 1951, Lagu was found distributing a Hindi Pamphlet called 'Shanti Ke Liye Appeal' (An Appeal for Peace) written by Kosambi and printed at Nagar Press Works in Indore.

Clearly intended for a wider readership, this impassioned appeal was quite generic and deeply personalized at the same time. It started with four declarations emphasizing the importance of maintaining Indian autonomy from belligerent strategic-military alliances and urging the stoppage of Gurkha soldiers' recruitment within Indian territory to defend British imperial interests in Malaya.³¹ It ended with emotionally charged appeals to prominent Indians—President Rajendra Prasad, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress leader J.B. Kripalani, the industrialist J.R.D. Tata, the editor Devdas Gandhi, and the educationist Dr. Zakir Hussain, among others—to rally behind the cause of peace, in Kosambi's personal capacity.

Kosambi was endorsing the 1950 Stockholm Appeal for unconditional nuclear disarmament. It was a Soviet-backed grassroots signature campaign for the international control of atomic weapons and had amassed unprecedented global popularity.³² He preemptively responded to some of the criticisms leveled against it in this pamphlet:

But you will ask, and others will also ask you this: ‘Isn’t the peace movement a communist ruse? Is this not a treacherous communist ploy to deceive others while secretly preparing for conflict?’ I want to say that I do not believe these. The communists are not the ones banning the peace appeal. They are not the ones bombing the peaceful villages of Asia or threatening to unleash a full-scale nuclear war. Communist states are not allocating more than half their budgets for ‘defense’.³³

Criticizing campism, petty bickering, and war-profiteering in the same breath, Kosambi was not interested in advancing a purely moral case against war. He was dabbling in consequentialist arguments as well:

Gone are those days when wars could force open new markets. Now conflicts strangle free markets across the world...The question of profiting from trading with belligerents on both sides while somehow remaining unaffected does not even arise—it is a pipe dream.³⁴

His method was Socratic, his conviction unshakeable. Responding to what he felt were questions likely to be posed to peace activists on the ground, Kosambi was making the work of volunteers like Lagu easier. On the other hand, without the enthusiastic support of dedicated foot-soldiers like Lagu, the lofty message of world peace would never have trickled down among smalltown Indian workers, ushering in a project of peace literacy. The partnership between Kosambi and Lagu effectively vernacularized world peace: making the idea not only digestible in and of itself but also worthy of dissemination in an idiom not too far removed from the more mundane concerns of everyday politics. They packaged peace as a necessary precondition for collective economic survival.

7 | Kosambi the Peace Activist: WPC, 1951

Kosambi’s conviction became firmer on being elected to the World Peace Council (WPC) in 1951 along with Dr. Mohanlal Atal (who had led the Indian Medical Mission to China during the Japanese invasion in 1938).³⁵ The poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz was elected to represent Pakistan.³⁶ Drawn into the now-forgotten transnational circuits of peace advocacy, peripatetic intellectuals like Kosambi were leveraging a burgeoning infrastructure of Soviet-supported citizen diplomacy to lend heft to their own visions of world peace.³⁷

The WPC had succeeded the Permanent Committee of the Partisans of Peace (PCPP).³⁸ The latter had been formed in Paris in 1949 in a Congress opened by Frédéric Joliot-Curie, attended by Charles Chaplin and W.E.B. Du Bois, and to which Pablo Picasso lent his drawing of a dove that eventually emerged as emblematic of the movement for peace worldwide.

The WPC was much more broad-based than the PCPP. It was formed by chance in Warsaw in 1950 when the second World Peace Congress convened by the PCPP had to be shifted from

Sheffield after the British Government refused visas to a number of delegates.³⁹ We know that Kosambi was one of the attendees and received as a souvenir an album containing 50 drawings by artists who also participated in that Peace Congress.⁴⁰

The World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) was yet another broad-based Soviet-aligned organization that Kosambi came in contact with during the course of his transnational peace activism. He was thanked for sending a message in support of the ‘International Day of Solidarity with Youth Fighting Colonialism’ in 1951 by Ranajit Guha (the future founder of the Subaltern Studies Collective) on behalf of the WFDY Secretariat.⁴¹

His growing influence as a frontline figure was becoming increasingly evident in the interlocking circuits of peace activism, both domestically and internationally. He was invited to preside over the All-Parties’ Peace Conference scheduled to be held on 21st and 22nd April 1951 at Madras.⁴² Its preparatory committee was headed by the President of All India Trades Union Congress V. Chakkarai Chettiar, the poet and parliamentarian Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, and the last Governor-General of India Chakravarti Rajagopalachari.

It is tempting to view these dramatic efforts through the lens of Cold War politicking alone and to impute their diverse cast of actors with a singular ideological motivation at worst and unsuspecting complicity at best. However, that, as Rachel Leow puts it,

do[es] disservice to those who rejected ‘the nightmare of war’, and ‘dreamed of peace’ at precisely a time when the rise of new nations, new sovereignties, new global institutions and a new world order seemed to place such dreams, however temporarily, within reach.⁴³

As the composition of various local and global peace committees reveal, notwithstanding the preponderance of communists, they were more often than not truly cross-party groups representing a range of ideologies. Dismissing the world peace movement during the 1950s for its proximity to the Soviet Union amounts to erasing the efforts of conscientious intellectuals ‘engaged in emotive and partisan diplomacy’ like Kosambi from the history of anti-war solidarity in the Global South.⁴⁴ The key destination for which before Bandung in 1955 was Peking.

8 | The Chinese Dream: Peking, 1952

In 1952, a preparatory conference was held in Peking to plan for an eventual Asia-Pacific Peace Conference under Chinese auspices. Kosambi was invited to lead the Indian delegation, but his participation was far from certain until even a few weeks before the start of the conference. In his correspondence with the Harvard Sanskritist Daniel Ingalls, he complained about being under constant surveillance. The Prime Minister’s Office made it abundantly clear that, although the government would not officially oppose his participation, Nehru would be happy to see him refuse the invitation.⁴⁵

In the end, Kosambi was able to resist the Nehruvian pull, attend the conference and even produce a report on it. The CIA noted that his laudatory report ‘was carried in a widely-read article by many Indian papers and periodicals.’⁴⁶ He diligently noted down the rigorous discussions through which consensus in the committee was achieved. The final manifesto was able to express the desire for an uncompromising struggle that would not be “the peace movement of General MacArthur and President Truman, namely ‘peace’ dictated after a total war.”⁴⁷

Kosambi also included here a personal eulogy for China. He saw in post-revolutionary China the image of a future India and in peace the necessity of prosperity. He attributed the strength of the Chinese political leadership and the assertion of the new-found public confidence in the country to China’s intimate experience of the war-torn years. In doing so, he was pleading with his readers to not take for granted the depth of Chinese desire for peace and friendship, especially in Asia.⁴⁸

In his 1952 report, Kosambi had observed how

the Indian government had chosen to turn its face away from the Peace Movement, often denying visas (or withholding them till after the event) for fraternal delegates.⁴⁹

In May 1951, the All-India Peace Conference had to be shifted from Delhi to Bombay due to the GoI’s opposition. India could not be chosen as the venue for the upcoming Asia-Pacific Peace Conference for similar reasons.⁵⁰ All this was to change soon.

9 | Leading the Way: Delhi and Helsinki, 1955

From 6th to 10th April 1955, a Conference of Asian Countries was held in New Delhi, chaired by Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru (a founder of the All-India Women’s Conference and married to Jawaharlal Nehru’s cousin Brijlal), a week before the Afro-Asian delegations met at Bandung. In the CIA’s opinion,

it was designed as a Communist propaganda device to exploit the theme of Asian unity and to do what it could to produce an atmosphere favourable to Communist aims.⁵¹

Letting the Delhi conference take place was an outcome of the Government of India briefly cosyng up to the world peace movement. As a consequence, Kosambi was sent to lead the 90 members-strong official Indian delegation at the World Assembly for Peace held in Helsinki a couple of months later. From being the sole Asian delegate at New York in 1949 to becoming India’s leading voice at the largest international gathering for peace since the Vienna Peace Congress of 1952, he had come a long way.⁵²

Kosambi was asked to lead the Indian delegation ahead of Sahib Singh Sokhey, S.A. Dange, Meghnad Saha, and Mulk Raj Anand—all prominent in their own fields and senior to him—in place of the veteran Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew.⁵³ He also toured Russia with the Indian delegation at the invitation of the Soviet

Science Academy shortly thereafter.⁵⁴ Committed to fulfill his responsibilities as the leader of the delegation, Kosambi had ‘stuck to [his] post at Helsinki’ even after receiving the news of his mother’s deteriorating health. By the time he was able to return to India, she had unfortunately passed away.⁵⁵

In his speech on behalf of the Indian delegation at the second plenary session, Kosambi expressed solidarity with ‘the people of China’ and introduced himself ‘as an Asian [and] as an Indian.’⁵⁶ Citing a number of contemporary geopolitical examples, Kosambi argued that ‘the real independence of nations’—whether from the covert domination of ‘economic aid’ or the overt occupation of colonies—go hand in hand with ‘the guarantee of peace.’⁵⁷

Through his polemic against ‘this new imperialism’, Kosambi located a ‘method of colonial adventure’ in the ‘demands for advanced [military] bases.’⁵⁸ At the same time, he refused to conflate the demand for world peace with the preclusion of all violence, including violent methods in anti-colonial liberation struggles. He was, in fact, drawing significantly on his earlier opinions expressed as the Vice President of the Preparatory Committee for the All-India Peace Congress in 1951.

10 | Kosambi and Non-Interventionism

While explaining the import of the committee’s resolution adopted in Delhi, he had asserted unambiguously that by peace, they meant ‘specifically the prevention of World War III, i.e., peace between nations. The internal questions of each nation [were] to be decided by the nationals concerned.’ Although they preferred a peaceful solution to any question, the committee agreed to respect the choice of any group if it chose ‘violent methods for obtaining its aims, amounting even to revolution or civil war.’ Kosambi further argued that, except for ‘volunteers enlisting in the [internal] quarrel and risking the loss of their own proper citizenship’ no foreign national could have a real stake in an intra-national dispute, whether it amounts to a communist or a fascist revolution or any ‘political upheaval of no clear modern orientation’ for that matter.⁵⁹

His advocacy of such an absolute and unqualified non-interventionism stemmed from a deep suspicion of ongoing ‘foreign intervention[s] under the guise of restoring law and order’ in Korea and Vietnam. Moreover, he anticipated the Cold War doublespeak of partisan intervention under the pretext of preserving peace: ‘[t]here shall not be any non-intervention committee which will actually mean intervention on one side and blockade of the other.’⁶⁰

Kosambi’s suggestion to regard ‘any interventionist, whether acting under the semblance of legality or not,’ as an aggressor could be construed to have handed a *carte blanche* to oppressive regimes domestically. However, by decrying the internationalization of civil wars and by formally recognizing the right to self-determination unequivocally across all geopolitical contexts—especially in the ‘not-yet-independent’ colonies—he was articulating not merely a moralist opposition to wars, but expressing confidence in the ability of an oppressed people to get rid of their own oppressors without any external intervention.

Although this made Kosambi and the peace movement susceptible to accusations of naïveté, it also afforded him the analytical clarity to expose that most, if not all, oppressive regimes around the world were bankrolled by none other than interventionists of one shade or the other. Therefore, to oppose interventionism ideologically while recognizing every struggle of an oppressed people as legitimate in and of itself—as he did by invoking the example of apartheid South Africa—bridges could be built between the world peace and national liberation movements everywhere and all at once.

Moreover, by criticizing the cavalier talk about ‘tactical’ atomic weapons usage, the rearmament of Germany, and the rapid proliferation of military blocks ‘where neither of the two parties are threatened by each other or by any third power,’ Kosambi urged for keeping faith in the force of ‘world public opinion’ and peaceful negotiations.⁶¹

For him, the Bandung Conference was an example of Afro-Asian self-reliance and understanding. He, however, exceeded its promises by stressing the unconditional abolition of military bases, scrutiny of all international economic aid, and the immediate peaceful unification of divided nations.⁶² In the uninhibitedness of its contents, Kosambi’s speech stood out. In its rhetorical prowess, it foreshadowed the kind of orations that would come to characterize the Belgrade summit of non-aligned nations in 1961.

11 | Duty and Disillusionment: Colombo, Calcutta, Surat, Stockholm

Kosambi fell out with the Peace Movement in the late 1950s and withdrew himself from its activities entirely in 1963. The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the split with China in 1962 probably contributed to his disillusionment. The tipping point, however, was reached because of what he regarded as rising opportunism and parochialism among Indian peace activists. He felt that some of them were more interested in touring foreign countries than advancing the cause of world peace, while others were too busy fighting among themselves. According to his biographer Chintamani Deshmukh, small differences gave way to heated disagreements due to his bluntness.⁶³ His failing health was starting to hinder his activism too.

On 22 June 1957, Kosambi received the AIPC circular on the Colombo Session of the World Peace Council urging all governments to end all nuclear tests, de-escalate, and disarm immediately. On 23 July, he wrote to Rameshwari Nehru informing her of his inability to join the Convention of the Indian Preparatory Committee for the ‘International Conference against A & H-Bombs and for Disarmament’ due to ill health while wishing it all success. Kosambi was repeatedly asked to write for the AIPC organ *Peace Review* and invited to take part in the upcoming AIPC and WPC sessions in Surat and Stockholm, respectively.

We cannot be certain if he was able to attend. In all probability, he did participate in the 1959 All-India Conference for Afro-Asian Solidarity in Calcutta at the invitation of Rameshwari Nehru and Dr. Triguna Sen.⁶⁴ His indispensability can be gauged from the fact that Romesh Chandra explicitly asked for

his help to ‘combat the gentlemen who create certain difficulties and attempt disruption in the AIPC meetings’ in this conference as well.⁶⁵ Although he and Chandra shared a good working relationship, there is a cursory allusion in the latter’s letter that Kosambi had started to part ways with the peace movement as early as in 1955.

It is hard to speculate what exactly he might have written to Chandra from only one side of the extant correspondence. The disagreement seems to have been a particularly strong one with Chandra retorting:

As usual you are quite wrong about your colleagues in the [Helsinki] delegation. From your description one would think that they were all crooks! They are doing very good work for the cause of peace by speaking and writing all they can.⁶⁶

Their subsequent correspondence also indicates that Kosambi was feeling increasingly unhappy about his work being ‘wasted in the bureau meetings.’⁶⁷

Notwithstanding his growing sense of disappointment, Kosambi continued to engage in conscientious peace activism at both local and global levels. In 1958, he presided over a condolence meeting for Joliot-Curie organized by the workers of the Department of Atomic Energy and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Bombay. He also donated the amount of money that was due to him for contributing an article in the Soviet journal *Sovietskaya Ethnographia* to the International Institute for Peace in Vienna.⁶⁸

As late as 1960, Kosambi was a fully subscribed member of the AIPC. He continued to contribute to the peace council financially until February 1961 at least. Kosambi was unanimously re-elected as a member of its Presidential Committee at a meeting held in New Delhi on 29 March 1961, which he presumably attended and continued to be a key functionary in the world peace movement in India during the early 1960s.⁶⁹

12 | A Gradual and Graceful Exit: Kosambi’s Final Years

In late 1962, war broke out between India and China over the delimitation and demarcation of the international border between the two countries.⁷⁰ On 24 October, the AIPC resolved unanimously to condemn ‘Chinese aggression against India’ and extended its “wholehearted support to Prime Minister Nehru’s call for national unity.” Kosambi received a copy of this resolution, but we don’t know for sure what he thought of the AIPC’s sudden nationalistic posturing at a time when large-scale state repression was unleashed on Sinophile Indian communists.⁷¹

He resigned from the All-India Peace Council in 1963. In a letter to one of his student-friends around this time, he wrote:

Finally after a long interlude of vacillation, I have resigned. I don’t think anything fruitful that can advance the peace movement, would come out of our

work in the peace [council]. Whatever is happening in this direction would continue to happen even if there is no World Peace Movement or Indian Peace Movement. As far as I am concerned, the Indian Peace Movement has been quite opportunistic. I would have stomachached even this, had there been any concern, honesty and integrity in the main component of the movement. But it is a pity that these communists are fighting their party battles from this platform which I thoroughly deplore.⁷²

Although he resigned from the movement, he did not give up on the cause. In a letter to Prof. T. Yamazaki just months before his death, Kosambi alluded to the unacceptability of the atom bomb yet again:

The beautiful pictures of Hiroshima came today. The world must not be allowed to forget, nor must such a thing happen anywhere else in the whole of human history.⁷³

As Jesse Olsavsky has argued, peace ‘was simply integral to [Kosambi’s] praxis as a scientist.’⁷⁴ His commitment to it was a life-long project. His conviction that Asia had a key role to play in ushering peace across the world was, in his own words, ‘incurable.’ Kosambi’s belief in a brighter prospect was not undiluted idealism. It stemmed from his refusal to passively accept mankind’s ‘gamble with its own future.’⁷⁵ So he agitated, despite lacking the temperament of an agitator.⁷⁶ And he suffered professionally for his political opinions. As a public intellectual, he embraced solitude among comrades. Today his peace activism is mostly forgotten. What I have tried to suggest here is that it should not be.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Endnotes

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- 16 Public poetic symposia typically featuring performances in the evening. The Bombay *mushairas* were frequented by popular and acclaimed poets, writers and artists such as Sahir Ludhianvi, Ismat Chughtai, Kaifi Azmi, Shailendra, Balraj Sahni and others.
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