



### About This Book

The entwined histories of Blacks and Indians defy easy explanation. From Ghanaian protests over Gandhi statues to American Vice President Kamala Harris's story, this relationship—notwithstanding moments of common struggle—seethes with conflicts that reveal how race reverberates throughout the modern world.

Shobana Shankar's groundbreaking intellectual history tackles the controversial question of how Africans and Indians make and unmake their differences. Drawing on archival and oral sources from seven countries, she traces how economic tensions surrounding the Indian diaspora in East and Southern Africa collided with widening Indian networks in West Africa and the Black Atlantic, forcing a racial reckoning over the course of the twentieth century. While decolonisation brought Africans and Indians together to challenge Euro-American white supremacy, discord over caste, religion, sex and skin colour simmered beneath the rhetoric of Afro-Asian solidarity.

This book examines the cultural movements, including Pan-Africanism and popular devotionalism, through which Africans and Indians made race consciousness, alongside economic cooperation, a moral priority. Yet rising wealth and nationalist amnesia now threaten this postcolonial ethos. Calls to dismantle statues, from Dakar to Delhi, are not mere symbolism. They express new solidarities which seek to salvage dissenting histories and

to preserve the possibility of alternative futures.

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## FEARS OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

### *Introduction*

In 1943, Sir Frederick Lugard, the former British Governor of Nigeria and representative to the League of Nations and International Labour Organization, spoke with Abubakar Imam, the editor of the main Hausa-language newspaper in Northern Nigeria, *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* (The Truth is More than a Penny), to take the pulse of African opinions on British rule. Imam described the fear of discussing decolonisation: “If you talk this over to the average Administrative Officer in Northern Nigeria, they think of you as another Ghandi [sic], a trouble maker”.<sup>1</sup> When asked if Nigeria was another India, he answered not yet, because propaganda in the newspapers and the lack of education amongst the masses had kept many Nigerians ignorant. He urged Lugard to use his influence in Britain to allow social development in his part of Nigeria:

Since a country can progress with Islam as its faith, there is, as far as we can see, no reason whatsoever why that line of progress should not be encouraged in the Moslem areas of Northern Nigeria,

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especially as in that area anything Islamic, nay, anything Eastern, is what is respected, at any rate up to the present time. A Northern Nigerian will accept more easily what is eastern than western.<sup>2</sup>

Imam asked for more opportunities for Nigerians to travel to the East, but Gandhi's India is not what he meant. He meant Arabia, where some Northern Nigerian emirs had recently flown to perform hajj, or perhaps Japan, where Muslim anti-imperialists and African intellectuals studied the measured modernisation of the traditional monarchy.<sup>3</sup> India—even as a model of resistance against the British—did not offer much hope to Muslims like Imam. Whether Nigeria should even aspire to be an India, with its imminent independence but seemingly irresolvable Hindu-Muslim conflicts, was in doubt.

Even at the height of his power, the Mahatma was still just a man to many Africans. The reason was not simply that Northern Nigerians, who had a reputation for their loyalty to the British in contrast to their neighbours in the South and other Africans, did not want to ruffle any of the colonial master's feathers. Religion, specifically Islam, represented a source of difference from and ethical superiority over European imperialism. The Gandhian movement, by this time fully committed to non-violence and to *swadeshi* (economic independence from foreign imports), was but one kind of political possibility. Africans also understood Muslim Indian nationalism through Ahmadiyya missionaries, whose leaders promoted independent Muslim statehood. One of the most prominent Ahmadis, the barrister Zafrullah Khan, presided over the All-India Muslim League in 1931, and despite theological disagreements with other Muslims helped nurture the idea of Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> A theocratic state held out a real possibility for some Africans, who did not see Indian nationalism in the ways the British did or in the way Indian nationalists sought to export it.

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Gandhi's influence was indeed great, but the question of India and Indians in Africa and African-Indian relations with the coming end of European empires was not viewed by Africans in any singular way. While the Indian diaspora in Africa represented a new kind of problem, African independence was being articulated not only through a push for economic independence but also through expressions of cultural autonomy and self-respect that were being thwarted by British efforts to quash anti-colonial protest and Indian protectionism over its idea of Indianness. The nature of African-Indian entanglements became a distinct sphere of resistance to exclusion and superiority in everyday life, while the political rhetoric of Afro-Asian solidarity in the 1950s masked many of these grassroots negotiations.

### *Danger in a growing diaspora*

African-Indian tensions in East Africa were rising in the interwar years because of increasing numbers of Indians arriving and their changing economic fortunes.<sup>5</sup> In Kenya, Indian labourers who had worked on the British railway and other colonial schemes began to open small shops (*dukka*) that were supplied by European importers and wealthier Indian merchants, allowing them to gain a stronger economic foothold. Tanganyika, which changed from having a German colonial government to becoming a League of Nations Mandate Territory under British administration after World War I, saw its mainland Indian population grow. Whereas in decades past Muslim Indians had lived on the island of Zanzibar, Indian railway workers now opened small shops in rural areas on the mainland. Throughout Eastern Africa, whites feared competition with the Indian-origin population in import businesses and land acquisition. The discourse of a British government "protecting" Africans from

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Asian predations filled the newspapers by the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> In Kenya, Sana Aiyar notes, Indian leaders responded with different kinds of arguments—about their civilising influence on Africans and their protection towards them—to prove they had historic and positive connections to Africans, and to refute British depictions of their rapacious greed for African wealth and land.<sup>7</sup>

In Ethiopia, Indians joined the global protest against the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. As one of two African states that had remained independent in the early twentieth century, the invasion unified African anti-colonial activists, African-American communities, and Indian leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. Mass demonstrations against the British in India were turned towards the cause of opposing the Italian fascists.<sup>8</sup> British officials worried that resident Indians in East Africa might show vocal opposition, which had to be tamped down, “lest the appearance be given that [the] government of India supports Ethiopia”.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between Ethiopia and India stretched back thousands of years. Many of the Africans descended from slaves, warriors, and others who travelled to India in the medieval era from the Horn of Africa. In the nineteenth century, many Indians from Gujarat, working as merchants as well as unskilled craftsmen and labourers, began settling in Aden and then Ethiopia—they were able to establish trading businesses under the Emperor Menelik II’s rather open policy towards foreign exchange and networks.<sup>10</sup>

Yet behind the unity against European occupation, a dark cloud was brewing. Many Indians in Ethiopia were Muslim, which appears to have worried Haile Selassie once he was reinstalled in 1943 after the Italian occupation. Two years later, the Ethiopian government ordered the expulsion of an Indian and a Yemeni who were given ten days to vacate the country.<sup>11</sup> The Indian had lived in the country for 42 years. The British government in India was told that both men

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had been discovered to be members of a secret fanatical Moslem society, working against Ethiopian interests and interfering in local politics. The Indian has been granted a further delay because of a civil case brought against him by an Italian, but is being prevented by the local authorities from going to Addis Ababa to defend his case in High Court.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian Ethiopian government had tolerated Muslims as long as interreligious relations were asymmetric and clearly defined—Muslims were classified as “Muslims living in Ethiopia” until 1974.<sup>13</sup> And the sense of rising Muslim activism worried the Ethiopian and British authorities, given the wider regional politics from Egypt to Arabia. Moreover, the rising calls amongst Indian Muslims for a two-state solution exposed intra-Muslim conflicts—in 1935, the writer Muhammad Iqbal had recommended that the Ahmadiyya sect start their own separate state, which prompted questioning from Nehru about Muslim unity.<sup>14</sup>

Muslim Indians in Africa began to worry that a Hindu-dominated India would leave them permanently displaced. In 1941, for example, two Muslim Indians in Nyasaland exchanged correspondence about their bad situation: “it is certain that the condition of the Indians is in no way better than that of the Jews in the world. The colour distinction in the minds of the white races has not diminished one bit”.<sup>15</sup> The analogy to the Jews was an increasingly common turn in Muslim Indians’ arguments about the unique displacement they suffered.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly such talk heightened fear of Indian colonisation in Africa. In a communiqué from 1944 intercepted by the Egyptian censors, an Indian identified as Dr Nazir Ahmed appeared to invite Ahmadi missionaries to evangelise in Ethiopia. He wrote:

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In this country God has arranged for the improvement and reform of the inhabitants after bringing a great change twice in a century. The original inhabitants of this country have become a ruling nation and possess power and dignity. They do not like to see the white nation and keeping in touch with them. The question of liking Indians and Asiatics and keeping their service is under consideration. For example I have been given the position of Civil Surgeon here.

Moreover we are enjoying the liberty of a free nation under their easy and simple laws. There is a great demand in this country for skilled and qualified mechanics, doctors, physicians, compounders, stenographers, typists and ordinary clerks ... All needy persons particularly belonging to the Ahmadya [sic] Movement should communicate with me by air mail through Nazir Ahmed Aama and Kharja (Supervisor of General and Foreign Affairs), so that arrangements could be made for obtaining their permits to enter this country. All correspondence should be made by Airmail as it takes more than three months by seamount. The Almighty Lord is creating favourable circumstances for the spreading of the Ahmadya movement in this country, which is very widespread for getting employment. All the officers of this government have become unpleasant and doubtful of the white nation. Even Indian officers serving under the white ruling nation are not liked by them. There is so much abundance of money here and food stuffs are so cheap, as has never been seen in any other country.<sup>17</sup>

The invitation was for more Indians to come to Ethiopia to seize on rich opportunities, including to exploit the anti-white feeling after the Italian occupation. When the Indian government sent a “goodwill” mission to Ethiopia in 1948, with the stated purpose of building on the “general good impressions of Indians in Ethiopia, more so than in other countries”,<sup>18</sup> the Indian delegate warned that the “Indian Muslims are giving financial assistance to the Arab League”. The Ethiopian representative in turn emphasised that if any “drastic action were taken against the Muslims”, it should be seen as anti-Muslim, not as anti-Indian.

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In West Africa too, Muslim Indians, amongst the relatively small diaspora there, began to claim they were being targeted by Africans and being forced to assimilate. The Ahmadiyya's past pronouncements of a shared cause with Africans gave way to complaints to the British of their mistreatment in the Gold Coast and Nigeria. In the 1930s, M. Nazir Ahmad, the Indian Ahmadi in charge of the Saltpond mission, defended his freedom to preach in Northern Ghana, amongst historically Muslim African communities. An Ahmadi convert, Salihu, the son of the Liman of the town of Wa, became the focus of riots that broke out to stop the Ahmadiis from continuing their activities in Wa. Despite British sympathy for the Ahmadiyya, the colonial chief commissioner reported with some concern that this was the first time he knew of "religious differences being the direct cause of a riot in the Gold Coast".<sup>19</sup> Disfavour for the Indian mission grew. For his part, the Liman denounced his son in a letter, calling him a "confusionist" and "the key which opens all disorder".<sup>20</sup>

The presence of the Indian Ahmadiis was escalating the chaos and British involvement in African-Indian affairs, where there had once been relatively peaceful relations. In 1947, in Zaria Province of Nigeria, Mr F. R. Hakeem, an Ahmadi Indian missionary, wrote a letter to the British Resident to complain of a recent ban on his sect from praying in its own separate mosque. The emir of Zaria for his part lodged his own complaint, and explanation, with the British authorities, reporting that the Nigerian Ahmadi community had long had a divisive effect due to its insistence on multiple Friday prayers (*qutba*), control over its own mosque, denouncing of non-Ahmadi Muslims, and imposition of directives from the sect's leadership thousands of miles away.<sup>21</sup> The emir of Zaria, after consulting with other Muslim leaders and fearing the agitation of the *ulema* (scholars), felt he had to "assert his position as a religious leader and to put right things which they considered had gone wrong".<sup>22</sup> He saw



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his measure not as a ban but rather an effort to unify Muslims, whom the Ahmadi missionary had attempted to divide by publicly announcing that “any Muslim not following him [the Indian missionary] was dead”.<sup>23</sup> To put the rights of the Ahmadiyya, who numbered only 31, over those of the nearly 500,000 Muslims of Zaria would be a failure, he argued, on the part of British authorities who had vowed to protect Islam if Muslim rulers remained loyal to the colonial government.

The tactic of the missionary Hakeem in pleading his case to the British authorities on the grounds of religious freedom is telling. He wrote that the Northern Nigerian Muslim rulers “act like poison and say they are an antidote. They are an enemy to society and an enemy to Islam. Their hearts are void of sympathy but they conceal themselves”.<sup>24</sup> Decrying the emir’s Maliki interpretation of jihad as violent struggle, the missionary recounted how he and his sect had long supported Britain’s “peaceful rule”, citing the pamphlet “The British Government and Jihad” penned by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1907, to prove his point. He also cited his own letter published in a Nigerian newspaper denouncing the African workers’ strikes that had rocked Nigeria in 1945. The Indian painting of Africans as dangerous jihadists did not work with the British officials, who resolved the conflict by requiring the Ahmadis to join the single Friday prayer to be allowed in town, led by a new imam appointed by the emir.

Indians in Africa had to acknowledge African authority, but around the continent many Indians continued to petition the British for special dispensation. Indians often appealed to the British on the grounds of potential African violence, making the most of Indians’ international reputation for non-violence. In Kenya, during the Mau Mau struggle against colonial occupation, some prominent Indians supported the fighters and defended violence as the last option; even Nehru took this position, albeit with some consternation. Yet many other Indians felt under

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physical threat from the Mau Mau and sided with the British and African loyalists. They joined the Home Guard, beating and stealing from Africans in retaliation.<sup>25</sup>

The political strategy of situational separatism was hardly new. Gandhi deployed it decades earlier by emphasising the “civilisational” and racial superiority of Indians over Africans in South Africa. Indian racialisation of militant resistance in the era of Indian independence was a feature of the self-righteousness and victimisation that Indians were cultivating.

Economic grievances were also growing. Even in West Africa, grumbling about Indian shopkeepers regularly appeared in African newspapers. Fluctuations in the prices of everyday goods available in Indian shops impacted large segments of the population, whereas fewer Africans were able to shop at the more expensive European and Lebanese shops.<sup>26</sup> Cultural competition and the fear of Indian cultural domination were significant too. Indians spread throughout the British Empire were no longer simply migrants working in African colonies, but were those “whom Indian nationalists thought of ... as dispersed fragments of a great Indian nation-in-the-making who had their role to play in the struggle for freedom”.<sup>27</sup> India was constituted by those outside through unlikely elements:

Religion, more than an Indian culture which remained largely undefined, was often seen as the major link between these dispersed communities and the “Motherland”. Hindu preachers, both Arya Samajists and “Sanatanists” as well as Sikh priests, and Muslim mullahs often visited these communities, and, in a reverse movement, pilgrims from as far away as Fiji or Guyana travelled to Benares, Amritsar, and other holy places in India. Obviously, before the era of mass air travel, these movements were on a relatively modest scale, but they occurred nevertheless. So, if the notion of “diaspora” did not exist, some of its underpinnings were already there.<sup>28</sup>

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Religion, particularly religious nationalism, was not, however, defined simply by primordial attachments, but developed in a cultural economy spread far beyond India.

Even after the slaughter of millions of Jews during World War II, comparisons between Indians and Jews were used to stoke fears of Indian settlement in Africa. A 1953 letter in *The East African Standard*, signed by a “Kenya African” (but blamed by Indian leaders on British propaganda), argued:

History so I read, says Indians visited the Coast of East Africa during monsoon winds many thousand years ago even before the first white man set foot on African soil. The purpose undoubtedly of their visit, was to purchase slaves and other obtainable goods from the Arabs who were a nuisance by then in Africa. This ungodly game dragged on for many years, the Indian eagerly awaiting the arrival of slave caravans in the coast, risking nothing but money, while the Arab penetrates the interior among hostile Africans, risking both life and money. During the whole of this period, the East Africa coast visitor the honourable Indian friend never thought of developing the country or teaching the primitive African something new worth his visit. I do not see also what assistance or Liberation the Indians in India could give the Kenya African if they never rendered them any in the whole of that period of the dark days ...

The birth rate of Indians, on which I must say a word, is terribly increasing that in a hundred years' time we will have a million and this will just mean more trouble as to where to accommodate them. The Government should take the responsibility of checking and controlling their present birth rate system.<sup>29</sup>

The author goes on to compare the Indian in Africa to the Jew in Palestine, both of whom wanted to “drain these lands to the last drop”. The spectre of Indian colonisation began to infect West Africa as well, where anti-Indian feelings were rising in the Gold Coast on the eve of Indian independence. In a secret report,

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the High Commission in Accra relayed fears that British propaganda of Indian support for the Gold Coast's independence was part of "a well-thought plan by India to colonise Africa beginning with the Gold Coast after the British had left the country".<sup>30</sup> Articles in the *Daily Graphic* newspaper suggested the plot was working. While Britain was still very much part of the problem between Africans and Indians, there was no denying the growing resentment in reckoning with the past.

### *Desires for cultural independence*

While local tensions simmered, the independent Indian government took a strong public stance in supporting Africans' rights to self-determination. In 1946, India withdrew its High Commissioner to South Africa in protest against racial segregation, and Nehru's interim Congress-led government brought the issue of the poor treatment of Indians in South Africa before the General Assembly of the United Nations.<sup>31</sup> Not long after, in 1947, Kwame Nkrumah returned to the Gold Coast from overseas to work with the United Gold Coast Convention party to lead protests against the British government, with Nehru voicing India's support for Nkrumah and what would become Sub-Saharan Africa's first independent nation.<sup>32</sup> A few years later, Nehru would host the acting secretary of the Kenya African Union, Joseph Murumbi, in New Delhi and voice some modicum of support for the Mau Mau.

Yet these overtures did little more than paper over grievances. In South Africa in 1949, the year after the Nationalist Party victory formalised apartheid, anti-Indian riots broke out in Durban. Indians were killed, beaten, and raped, and their property was defaced. Over 140 people died.<sup>33</sup> While the government authorities blamed long-simmering tensions, other reports,

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including from the Indian High Commission's office, refuted this conclusion, saying that the Nationalist Party had disseminated anti-Indian propaganda with promises that seized Indian property would be turned over to Africans. Both of these explanations ignore the working-class sympathies of some of those who destroyed Indian property.<sup>34</sup>

Afterwards, leaders of the African and Indian political parties felt that the white authorities had manipulated both sides, trying to use the riots to prove that Blacks were violent and unfit for self-rule and to lay the groundwork for repatriation of Indians. The government of India under Nehru, for its part, wanted a return to good, friendly relations and encouraged Natal Indians, as it did with Kenyan Indians, to work with Africans. Though middle-class Indians felt betrayed by Nehru, they worked with the African National Congress leaders in Natal and the Natal Indian Congress to resolve lingering conflicts and normalise relations. African grievances about being blocked from securing transport operators' licences, and the contemptuous attitudes of Indians towards Africans, including their segregation of African cinema-goers, were aired and discussed. Though some of these conflicts were resolved, segregation effectively took the issues off the table and left some festering wounds: "Even though [Natal ANC leader] Champion welcomed Government of India stand on African economic advance and even quoted Nehru at public meetings in Zulu to promote inter-racial harmony, he remained unconvinced of the local Indian middle class and as long as he was its leader, Natal ANC kept its distance from the National Indian Conference".<sup>35</sup>

Tensions grew in Ghana too, despite Nkrumah's solidarity with Nehru. The Anti-Inflation Campaign Committee in Accra, founded by Chief Nii Kwabena Bonne II, organised a boycott of imported goods sold by local Indian shopkeepers, as well as their European and Lebanese counterparts, in 1947. They saw all of

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these sellers as part of the apparatus that was profiteering off African consumers.<sup>36</sup> On the last day of the month-long boycott, ex-soldiers who had fought for the British in World War II were preparing to present a petition to the British Governor when police shot and killed two men and wounded others.<sup>37</sup> Protests ensued, and the police arrested Nkrumah and several other leaders. The British also struck back with ferocious censorship of the African press, jailing anyone suspected of writing “seditious” articles and blaming communism and Blacks’ “racial hatred”. They also banned any migrants entering the Gold Coast who appeared to have no visible means of support and, of course, anyone appearing to be anti-British.<sup>38</sup> The immigration surveillance led to restrictions on all Indians other than demonstrably successful businesspeople, thus creating even more reasons for class conflicts between Africans and Indians.

Yet in the Durban and Accra episodes, Africans were voicing more than anger that foreigners sold goods at high prices. The protests of the ex-servicemen in the Gold Coast—as a vanguard in the growing anti-colonial movement—and the Zulus who detested segregated cinema, were both protests against exclusion from a cultural economy. African soldiers numbering in the hundreds of thousands had served in European armies—Allied and Axis—during World War II, and the British Army’s employment of West and East African troops to defeat the Italians in the African theatre and the Japanese in Burma, brought to the fore a number of problems: the discrimination non-white soldiers faced, the more meagre rations they received, and, for Africans, their very long distance from home. The soldiers wanted and sometimes got, as a result of their agitations, better food and comfortable clothing, as well as access to sex, alcohol, cigarettes, and entertainments such as newspapers, illustrated books, films, handset radios, and sports equipment.<sup>39</sup> In Burma—a difficult, remote theatre of operations that even British and Indian soldiers complained about—East and

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West African soldiers far from home were refused the leave they were promised and subjected to discrimination from Indian soldiers and civilians even more than from the British.<sup>40</sup> While Africans faced scorn from local communities, who spread rumours of cannibalism and rape, Africans also held contempt for Indians. Yet new African-Indian relationships formed, such as liaisons between African men and Indian working women that provided both parties with domestic comforts and physical intimacies. What made life endurable for African soldiers on the frontlines, “comforts funds” like those created for Nigerian forces in 1940, disappeared once they were finally repatriated to Africa. Some returned to the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and elsewhere many years after the end of the war, and were denied recognition, benefits, employment, and the life they had once had.

Indian cultural goods brought entertainment and a certain freedom from the intense censorship the British colonial authorities imposed. After the protests in the Gold Coast, the British cracked down on films to exclude the importation of virtually any films that were not about “British life and civilisation”. Just as pictures and printed materials in earlier decades provoked interest and led to the invitation of Ahmadi missionaries to come to West Africa, from the latter 1920s, Indian films became popular not only amongst Indian audiences but also amongst Africans, even more so than the American, Arab, or “African” films that were made specifically to cater to African audiences.<sup>41</sup> Indian films proved to be far more lucrative than others. For their part, Indian cinema operators, whose numbers grew in colonies like South Africa and Tanganyika with large Indian diasporas as early as the 1930s, became embroiled in racial segregation of filmgoers and African protests against their unequal treatment.<sup>42</sup> Indian owners in Tanganyika who stood against desegregation in the theatres found themselves in an alliance with British authorities and conservative Africans, mostly elders, who felt the films could desta-

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bilise the moral order. After the nationalist fervour grew in India, Indians used the cinema to publicise their pride. Images of the Mahatma flashed on screens before each film at Indian cinemas. With Indian films becoming more political and popular, film distributors with networks from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Africa had to plan for the possibility that aggressive censors might stymie their business.

Only fragments of the history of Indian films in Africa and around the world before the 1950s remain, but they reveal changing African-Indian dynamics. Cinema threatened racial segregation and older Africans felt the films challenged traditional authority. Fears about Indians sowing division came from the Empire's cracking-apart and the heavier hand that Britain might take in its remaining African colonies—through violence and censorship. These measures in turn brought about more demand for the cultural goods Africans had come to enjoy. By 1953, the Indian government estimated that its film industry was second in the world after that of the United States—India produced 259 films that year.<sup>43</sup>

The interests of Africans in early Indian films should not be understood apart from those that inspired Mami Wata worship and Ahmadi affiliation. Indian films in the 1930s employed “a visual field between chromolithography, theatre, and other genres”.<sup>44</sup> They brought alive the sorts of images that had evoked such a strong response in religious imaginations. Many of the early Indian filmmakers had worked as painters and photographers, in media that drew on Indian myths and religions. Besides the colourful Hindu goddesses and gods, even Islamicate prints, which could not depict human figures, used images of roses, calligraphy, praying hands, birds, and mosques that could be worked into films.<sup>45</sup> A favourite theme, recalling the interspecies snake charmer and Hindu gods and goddesses, was *Tarzan Ki Beti* (*Tarzan's Daughter*, 1938), adapted from Edgar Rice Burroughs



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and Hollywood, which in the 1920s and 1930s, “became a locus of debate over the appropriateness of mingling [South Asian and American] cultural traditions”.<sup>46</sup> In Senegal and Ghana, by the 1950s and 1960s, African viewers identified a class of Indian god films that reminded them of their own epics and myths.

Cinema soundscapes too were drawn from religious forms, particularly the *ghazal*, the romantic poem popularised through Persianate influences, with refrains that worked especially well in musical cinema. Its long and varied history from pre-Islamic Arabia, with roots in the ode (*qasida*), resonated in much of the world, including in African Islamic devotional poetry in Kiswahili and Hausa. In the twentieth century, African poets used these rhymes to express nationalist themes in a neo-classicism that expressed nostalgia for the precolonial age.<sup>47</sup> The Sufi and Shi’a *ghazal* traditions focused the attentions of singers and audiences towards divine love and, in seeming echo of this theme, many of the first and most popular, like *Anarkali* (1928, about an affair between a Mughal courtesan and emperor), *Yousuf Zuleikha* (1930, *Potiphar’s Wife*), and *Al Hilal* (1935, an Ottoman Roman-Muslim love story with an anti-slavery message), were intense and tragic love stories.

These films played in packed theatres, but African viewers were restricted due to limited viewing spaces. Not surprisingly, a common anxiety appeared in many locations throughout the British Empire about whether the uneducated masses could or should comprehend such “cosmopolitan” culture. When cinemas were eventually desegregated, or, in the case of South Africa, used to foster a sense of Indian culture apart from others,<sup>48</sup> Indian importers of films recognised the enormous potential amongst African consumers and thus expanded their imports and cinema openings, although in different ways in these separate markets.

Cinema was not the only cultural arena in which the Indian presence in Africa grew. In the expanding print culture of African

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cities, Indians, or now Pakistanis, took on a new role in journalism. Ahmadi missionaries in Anglophone West Africa and East Africa undertook intensive efforts in English-language writing and publishing. With newsletters such as *The Moslem Sunrise* published in Detroit and *The Moslem Outlook* published in Lahore, and later briefly in Cape Town, the missionaries added a new dimension to African print culture. These were not solely religious texts but also tools for expanding English literacy. Indian-origin books and other printed matter were exported from the 1930s, but in 1943, the Indian firm Asia Publishing House was established in Bombay and led to an enormous growth in exports of publications in English and Indian languages.<sup>49</sup>

The Indian population in Africa was growing in the years immediately preceding independence: men were increasingly bringing their wives and children to settle, and Indian employees outnumbered their African counterparts. The increase in migrants meant an expanded flow of cultural goods. These changes led to contradictory effects of fear of migration alongside the whetting of African tastes for Indian goods, that were often cheaper and distinct from European and American products. It was debatable what and how much Indians were willing to sell to Africans as consumers.

### *India's eyes towards the West*

Like Gandhi, Nehru realised he could learn valuable lessons from studying happenings on the African continent. In the early years of a decolonising Afro-Asia and the Cold War, solidarity meant many kinds of networks—trade unions, literary collaborations, and anti-apartheid struggles—but they were multidirectional in surprising ways.<sup>50</sup> Nehru recognised the need for India and Indians to tread softly, and soft power meant careful negotiations

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with African political leaders and potential allies to iron out local issues between Africans and Indians in Africa, while not disturbing the narrative of solidarity between the nations.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded in 1950 by the first education minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, to play a significant role in establishing India's soft power in Africa. Amongst Azad's work was expanding India's overseas scholarship programme, which started in 1945. Azad had the reputation of being a staunch nationalist who worked closely with Gandhi, and who later in his life often criticised sectarian approaches to communal interests, particularly amongst Muslims. Yet as a young man in the 1910s, Azad was a "celebrated theorist of transnational jihad" as "closely imbricated" with anti-colonial agitation.<sup>51</sup> Western Christian hostility to Islam had shaped his effort to decolonise education in the same way as it had affected Africans like Blyden and the Ahmadiyya.

ICCR scholarships for Africans to come to India in the intervening years between Indian and African independence produced a very secular kind of solidarity. Africans on tour saw factories, public works projects, and universities. They also saw at first hand the caste system and the inequalities it produced. Yet Indian caste did not apply to men like R. Mugo Gatheru, who felt a sense of freedom from the *kipande* (pass) system he endured in Kenya.<sup>52</sup> Less well known was the ICCR's sponsorship of religious tours of Indians to Africa. It was perhaps Azad's "universalistic vision" of the Islamic world that undergirded the religious work the ICCR began in 1954 by organising the trip of a swami (Hindu religious teacher) of the Ramakrishna Mission to explore the possibilities of a humanitarian mission for East Africa and an intellectual one for West Africa. Swami Nisreyasananda, who spent nearly four months travelling around the African continent, reported on the high interest in spiritual matters in West Africa and the challenges in Kenya, where the

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Mau Mau emergency had exacerbated tensions between Africans and Indians and seemed to offer little room for cross-cultural dialogue.

The ICCR, forwarding the swami's notes, commented that "the African in East Africa is backward educationally. West Africa—and particularly the Gold Coast—presents a different picture. The percentage of educated Africans is, perhaps, nowhere in Africa to the South of the Sahara as high as in the Gold Coast".<sup>53</sup> Swami Nisreyasananda had met Muslim Ahmadis in both Kenya and the Gold Coast, and based on these meetings recommended strongly that in the latter, Indians should establish a centre that was "completely multi-religious and multi-racial, in which the people gathering for philosophic and religious discussions would have the opportunity of forming their own views".<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the idea of East and West African difference was one echoed by West Africans themselves. One Gold Coaster, an ex-soldier, wrote: "We West Africans are quite different from those from East Africa. I say this because in East Africa there were some whites who had been able to build their own part of the town for whites and a part for Blacks, but we never experienced anything like that in our own country".<sup>55</sup> A similar sentiment, though made in an altogether different vein, was espoused by the former South African minister Oswald Pirow:

Nehru is just another coolie ... There are some non-whites who, with White education, have made White moral principles their own. One example of this is Booker T. Washington ... There is another sort of non-White—you get them on the west coast of Africa but particularly in India, who accompany a great amount of book learning with a total lack of moral responsibility. An outstanding example of this undesirable type is the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Nehru.<sup>56</sup>

In exploring the possibility of an Indian religious mission to West Africa, the Ramakrishna Mission sought to construct a kinship between West Africans and Indians that was by design

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distinct from and superior to the race relations in East Africa. This strategy involved a denigration of East Africa as a region and East Africans as “unprepared” for certain kinds of transnational projects. The intended audience of the government-sponsored spiritual mission was multireligious and African and only incidentally included any resident Indians. Following such a proposal would, it seemed from the swami’s tour, unite Hindu and secular Indian actors in West Africa with Muslim missionaries to symbolise India’s pluralism.

Indian officers building relations in West Africa saw many of the same elements that the swami had. In 1955, the year after the swami’s tour, the Indian press attaché, Mahesh Jugran, completed his own tour of Nigeria and the Gold Coast as part of the formal opening of the Indian Commission for West Africa in Accra. He noted a number of key observations. First, he, like others, made a very clear distinction between West Africans and East Africans, claiming that Jomo Kenyatta and “immature youth” would “turn to the path of violence” with little hesitation. Second, he blamed the British for not investing in public works, transportation, or educational institutions apart from a few exceptions—of the road between Lomé and Lagos, he wrote: “it is indeed intriguing to notice the road on the British side of the Custom barrier all in pits whereas across the barrier hardly two yards from the British territory is an excellent road comparable to any first-class highway in the world”.<sup>57</sup> Third, while Jugran heard admiration for Nehru, he fielded harsh questions on all sides about India’s entry into the Commonwealth despite being a republic, doubts about its food production to date, and religious politics, convincing him that the British controlled the West African media about India. The common refrain about Indians’ anti-Muslim sentiments in Nigeria all but confirmed his suspicions:

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At every party that the British had arranged for me, I met Nigerians who were as suspicious about India as perhaps a Nigerian nationalist was about the bonafides of the British intentions. Repeatedly when I saw men who accused Pandit Nehru of imperialism in Kashmir, in Goa and in other parts of South East Asia, I could not but conclude that all these receptions and all these parties were a deliberate attempt to impress upon me that the people of Nigeria were not so blindly the followers of India, as was perhaps believed by some people in the world ... there was a strong desire to know about the plans for Pakistan.

A few Northerners dressed in their long Arab-like robes were introduced to me as Muslims and they took me to task for what they described as our shameful treatment of Muslims in India, of our aggression in Kashmir and so on. The usual type of questions, as one heard in Pakistan, were put to me. My trip to the North confirmed this too, that the British were trying their best to introduce the Pakistani idea and perpetuating it in Nigeria. It was indeed a clever game of the British to kill two birds with one stone.<sup>58</sup>

Jugran also recounted the deliberate attempts to embarrass India on the caste problem. One British officer asked him his caste in a meeting with several others: “When I told him that I was born in a Brahmin family he went on to introduce me to all the African guests as a man belonging to the highest caste in India. It provoked Africans to remark that they hoped I was treating my ‘untouchables’ kindly”.<sup>59</sup>

Finding Naseem Saifi, an Ahmadiyya missionary who had been in Nigeria since 1945—before Partition—proved to be useful for Jugran to refute the perception of Hindu discrimination:

I am sure, they [the Nigerians] never expected me to embrace the head of the Ahmadiya [sic] movement in Nigeria, Mr. Naseem Saifi when he was introduced to me as a Pakistani. Fortunately for me this man too did not indicate anything which would have given a hint to strangers that we were a separate people. Apart from his work as an

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Ahmadiya Missionary, he displayed the same patriotism, the same unity of India irrespective of its religions, as was expected from any citizen bred and brought up in a secular country. I felt proud of this man and deliberately spent most of my time with him just to indicate that this question of Muslims in India was a bogey started by the British in India.<sup>60</sup>

Though Jugran did not mention Saifi's background in his notes on the visit, the missionary was an important figure known throughout Nigeria for his work in journalism. In 1947, he began regular radio broadcasts via the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, focusing specifically on Muslim affairs. He helped spearhead the first English-language Muslim weekly newspaper, *The Truth*, published out of Lagos starting in 1951. This work kept him in close contact with Muslim Nigerian intellectuals and political leaders, as well as non-Muslims like Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who both had careers as journalists.<sup>61</sup> Saifi joined Nigerian delegations, meeting honoured guests from Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to American boxing champion and civil rights activist Muhammad Ali, who visited Nigeria in 1964. Saifi identified as a Pakistani, as his publication of the book *In Defence of Pakistan*, a collection of his editorials and other writings, revealed, though not until after Jugran's visit. Jugran also probably did not realise, or at least did not acknowledge, that Nigerians' views about India were not shaped entirely by British propaganda but were also constantly reshaped by the Nigerian press, which was itself no unified voice. Saifi, with his connection to this literary world of West Africa, had commanded enormous influence.

It is entirely possible that the Indian government wanted to keep good relations with the Ahmadiyya for other reasons. With Partition and the move of the Ahmadiyya headquarters from Qadian, India, to Rabwah, Pakistan, the Indian authorities discovered a large cache of arms, many modern and foreign made.<sup>62</sup>

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Moving to Rabwah uprooted the Ahmadis from farmland and other sources of income. The community's internal structure changed in relation to the shift in national boundaries, and critics of the Ahmadiyya argue that Ahmadi leaders financed their activities and lavish lifestyle by "sale of title to burial in the 'heavenly graveyard' at Qadian".<sup>63</sup> Transnational connectivity became all the more important. With Partition, the Ahmadiyya Khalifatul Masih Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmad emphasised the role of missions in the sect:

At the present time Africa may be regarded in some respects the weakest, in other respects, the strongest part of the world. It is weak to outward appearance, but strong in its possibilities. Ahmadiyyat spotted this secret about 24 years ago and sent her missionaries to Africa. As a result of this timely action thousands of people abandoned Christianity and became Muslim. At present the best organisation of Muslims in Africa is the Ahmadiyya. Christian missionaries and workers now hesitate to confront Ahmadiyyat.<sup>64</sup>

Arguing that neither Arabs nor anyone else controlled Islam, he wrote that Ahmadiyyat, by its missionary expansion, had established a jamaat where none had existed. With Hindus having little idea of religious missions, the success of the Muslim missionaries could help India shape a pluralist outreach promising "goodwill to all religions" (*sarva dharma sambhava*). This was no natural outgrowth of Hinduism, but instead a carefully constructed practice that had an important root in Africa.

Fears of religious conflict and partition dividing Nigeria at the moment of its independence were also at work. Jugran had taken his cue from Nigerian statesman Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who had recently travelled to India and suspected the British of cultivating pro-Arab Islamic brotherhood sentiments in the North of Nigeria to force a difficult situation of separatism, while also degrading



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Nehru and India as anti-Muslim to paint Nigerians who sympathised with Nehru as troublemakers to the Muslim Nigerians:

“It is amazing”, said Awolowo, “that the British refuse to learn from their mistakes. They created Pakistan with the hope that Pakistan will remain in their pocket, but it has instead gone into a pocket which the British do not like. The same thing can happen to the North [of Nigeria]. The British are encouraging these tendencies. They are helping in the revival of Islam in the North. They are telling them of Pakistan, of the advantages of having an Islamic State. The British are telling the Northerners that they were a people who had a background, unlike the Southerners who were 50 years ago bushmen”. This, added Awolowo, pleased the Northerners. They saw themselves as Arabs, as members of a big Islamic brotherhood, as the people who created civilisations on [sic] the valley of the Nile. They now looked towards the Sudan, of living with the Sudanese than with the people who lived in Lagos.<sup>65</sup>

Ill feelings were being caused by the British in order to prevent agreement on the path forward to independence.

Jugran highlighted other new factors, notably the competition between Nigeria and Ghana. Nigerians like Nnamdi Azikiwe, whom Jugran trusted, expressed annoyance that they had not been invited to the Bandung meeting, to which the Indian replied that they did not know which region's premier to invite.<sup>66</sup> The Indian government vowed thereafter to include all three regional premiers in international invitations. The location of the Indian consulate in Accra also provoked Nigerian disagreement. Perhaps most surprisingly, Jugran felt nothing but contempt for the Indian businessmen, mostly Sindhis, who were popular with West Africans for the varied goods they carried but an embarrassment to the Indian government:

It is because the Indian businessman is so dishonest himself that he considers everybody in the world dishonest. He lives in West Africa,

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he sells his goods and makes money from the people of West Africa ... but his ideas are ... treacherous ... Perhaps an Indian is the only man who openly addresses an African as a “Blackman”! Ironic it may appear to be a citizen of India in the Gold Coast and Nigeria considers himself “whiter” than the man who has actually passed as a “whiteman” for a century.<sup>67</sup>

In opening formal relations with West Africa, the Indian authorities learned they needed to tread carefully in religious politics and, besides presenting India as a tolerant and plural nation, also consider African complexity. Swami Nisreyasananda’s visit suggested a way for Hindu missions to present themselves as non-proselytising and universalist. This idea, however, was quickly challenged within Indian government circles as idealistic and naive. One Indian officer in the Gold Coast reported that he had recently met an American visitor who mentioned groups of people in West Africa who were seriously interested in Vedanta and were taking correspondence courses from an American group called “The Self-Realization Fellowship”, founded by the yogi and guru Paramahansa Yogananda in California:

You will appreciate that it would be unwise to allow credulous Africans to be exploited by money-making centres, professing to teach Indian philosophy, especially of America and for that matter even of India. You will observe that there has been a great deal of exploitation of this credulity of the African by various societies and manufacturers in India professing to send out charms and medicines. Official action is being taken to stop this. However, intellectual hunger for metaphysical thought cannot be bottled up and, in any case, we cannot ban contact of people in West Africa with places in America or India.<sup>68</sup>

America had become a virtual mecca, as it were, for Hindu-inspired movements like Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship founded in 1920. That it had appeared in West Africa so quickly seemed to surprise the Indian government. Just as the Ahmadis

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had found a conduit to West Africa via the United States, Hindu “new religions” appeared to be doing the same. However, in the political circumstances of the time, with the Indian government worried about its reputation, the circulation of Hindu ideas from America implied an illegitimacy that the officer suggested his superiors should nip in the bud. He recommended that the government recognise and encourage respectable societies and individuals who could “make available true philosophic ideas of India” to Africans. This recommendation also contained the familiar suspicion of the Indian diaspora as rapacious entrepreneurs, this time peddling inauthentic Hinduism.

The idea did not generate immediate enthusiasm, and in fact led to an intense debate in India’s Ministry of External Affairs over the idea of Indian religious missions. Should India send doctors with “missionary zeal” or a Hindu swami to talk about Vedanta philosophy and other non-controversial topics?<sup>69</sup> As one opponent lashed out:

I am quite certain that our funds will be far better spent in starting libraries and in giving more scholarships to African students etc. I also fear that even “non-controversial religious” activity on the part of Indian religious Missions in Africa will be misunderstood and will lead to embarrassment rather than understanding and better relations.<sup>70</sup>

During the colonial era, Hindu Indians of the higher castes in particular had vociferously denounced Christian proselytism, and beginning in the twentieth century, became locked in a virtual war with Muslims over the issue of reportedly forced conversions. The word “missionary” held negative connotations for many Indians in the first Congress government, but it was of course historically powerful for Africans and could be malleable.

India’s commercial diaspora created the impression of having a colonising agenda; Indians who had fiercely resisted European

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Christian missions had to see the hypocrisy of Hindu missions. Yet African interest in Indian religions was undeniable. Thus the government of India began to regulate Hindu missions in particular, and sponsor some more directly such as the Ramakrishna Mission. The proliferation of Indian-made religious goods has been traced to this period in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, with items including Indian devotional literature, Hindu images, and other paraphernalia including beads, particular herbs, and statues.<sup>71</sup> Anthropologist Rosalind Hackett refers to the Hare Krishna “Bookmobiles” in Nigeria and Togo, which began to appear by the 1970s, if not earlier, probably from a US source.<sup>72</sup> The situation was different in Southern and Eastern Africa, argued Shri Apa Pant, independent India’s first Commissioner to British East Africa, where

if we desire that our Indian friends settled [there] to do their duty by their adopted mother country, we shall have to assure that emotionally and intellectually they get guidance that would enable them to act properly. The visits of people like Shri Swami Nisreyasananda to East Africa does indeed help the Indians chiefly.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas in those areas, Indian settlers’ behaviour undid any good work of the Indian government, in Western Africa, the absence of Indians as well as the cultural independence of indigenous peoples was ideal. Pant saw this after transferring from Nairobi to Accra, and wrote:

In Nigeria and Gold Coast they say that after attaining their freedom, the first monument they will erect would be to their greatest general—the Mosquito!! Right from the start, it was evident that white dominions or large scale European settlement would be impossible in this zone. Africa conquers the white man here ... Thus, though the West will take part in the developments here and exploit economically this Zone, build industries and run big business concerns, the West will not “influence” this part of Africa in the sense that West Africans

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will never be subservient to the rule of the West or will ever become an imitation of the West. West Africa will remain West Africa after absorbing all that Western capitalism has to give.<sup>74</sup>

In celebrating West Africans' freedom, Pant seemed not only to be contrasting it with other parts of Africa but also with India, where the influence of the British ran so deep after hundreds of years of colonial rule. His comments reflected too the self-doubt of Indians about what being Indian meant in the modern world, an issue that also came to the fore in the debate about missions that persisted through to Ghanaian independence in 1957. Seeking to put a hold on the Ramakrishna Mission centre in Accra because of the impending changes, the Under-Secretary of India's Ministry of External Affairs asked about one of the stated aims of Indian policy in Africa:

Namely, "to show to the people in this country something of our way of living and thinking, with special emphasis on our philosophy of life." Should this be one of our aims? If so, what exactly is meant by "our way of living." Are our people—particularly our own officers in East and Central Africa—living as the masses live in India? Perhaps, the answer is in the negative. European way of life is the order of the day in East Africa. It is no use making the already confused situation in Africa more so by introducing a new way of life there. As regards the propagation of our philosophy, it may [be] pointed out that the needs of Africa today are material, not spiritual. Let the metaphysical activities be put over to a later date [when] Africa will be materially well off.<sup>75</sup>

In other communications, notably with the representatives of India's Commonwealth partner Canada, officials expressed bitterness about the racial politics then prevailing in Africa, where Europeans, Indians, and Africans all seemed entirely self-interested and incapable of cooperation.<sup>76</sup>

The most hopeful outlook an Indian government officer could have at this time, it seemed, was to blame the West and blur its

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dichotomising and divisive racial hierarchies. Apa Pant, whose close relationship with Nehru and long experience in Africa gave him a lot of sway, refused the false choice between African or Western and placed India in the role of forging a third way:

Was there a third alternative? Could one envisage a synthesis of all that was vital, satisfying, beautiful and energising from all the cults and cultures, backgrounds and histories, African, Indian, Islamic and Christian? ... It was a dream of some of us that a new identity, a new personality, should be developed: more mature and more versatile, a new man for the modern age, with the potential of a world citizen ...<sup>77</sup>

This third way fit with Nehru's idea of non-alignment that marked India's biggest contribution to foreign relations during this period. But the wrangling behind the scenes reveals how much this was merely aspirational.

### *Conclusion*

As racial segregation was breaking down, tensions were rising about cultural exclusion and superiority. The government of India wanted to combat the Indian diaspora's exclusivity and arrogance by tapping into the cultural economy that had emerged in earlier decades; but they had to avoid creating a new problem of cultural imperialism. Playing directly with religious politics in Africa did not seem to be a good strategy for the new government in India to take. African challenges to the way India had decolonised was, in fact, a mirror held up to the idealists in Nehru's administration—India did not symbolise any kind of noble future to many Africans, even if they were willing to ally with Indians in their ongoing struggle to become independent of European rule. Moreover, Britain and India's own diasporas were active in undermining what goodwill Gandhi and Nehru had built with Africans.

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If religious missions could not be the answer, Indians had to take the lead from Africans themselves to find bases of postcolonial commonality and solidarity. In this, West Africa continued to be the object of Indian admiration, a view that of course placed Africans in the kinds of racial hierarchy that the Europeans imperialists had. Yet, as the next chapter shows, Indians were themselves fractured, and understood racial differences in Africa through their own divisions and desires.