

# A fool's errand? Black Consciousness and the 1970s debate over the "Indian" in the Natal Indian Congress

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## Abstract

Bantu Stephen Biko, born in Tarkastad in the Eastern Cape was murdered by the South African apartheid regime in September 1977, aged 31. The year 2021 marks the 75th anniversary of his birth. Biko remains iconic, but a figure that exists on the margins in South Africa. His impact in challenging both apartheid-imposed race categories and the dominant thinking of the African National Congress (ANC) inspired a whole generation through the 1970s. This article seeks to illustrate this through a previously under-researched topic; the debate between members of the fledgling Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and those advancing the revival of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Through the mining of interviews and newspaper articles, the authors show how BCM adherents attempted to move the planned Indian Congress into a People's Congress that went beyond ethnic and racial boundaries. The move was ultimately defeated, but it resonated through the 1980s and creates the possibility of new ways of thinking about still prevalent apartheid racial categories in the present.

**Keywords:** Biko; Black Consciousness; Natal Indian Congress; Non-racialism; Apartheid; South Africa.

## The imagination

On 18 December 2021, Bantu Stephen Biko would have been 75 years old. For a long while he was consigned to the footnotes of liberation history. However, as South Africans seemingly continue to rely on apartheid racial categories and with non-racialism coming under attack by a populist and exclusive African racial nationalism, spearheaded by Julius Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF),<sup>2</sup> there is renewed interest in Biko's approach to identity.<sup>3</sup> Biko was determined that there

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2 A Desai & G Vahed, *A history of the present. A biography of Indian South Africans, 1994-2018* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 319 - 338.

3 A Conradie, "Sedition à la mode? The transfiguration of Steve Biko in post-apartheid fashion and décor design", *Image & Text*, 34, 2020, pp. 1-22; A Veriava, & P Naidoo, "Remembering Biko for the here and now, in Biko lives! Contesting the legacies of Steve Biko", A Mngxitama, A Alexander and NC Gibson (eds), *Biko lives! Contesting the legacies of Steve Biko* (York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 233-251; A Mngxitama, A Alexander and NC Gibson, eds. *Biko lives! Contesting the legacies of Steve Biko* (York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); S Hill, *Biko's ghost: The iconography of Black Consciousness* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

should be unity of the disenfranchised that would bring Africans, Coloureds and Indians under one banner. In this imagining, he was to come up against the dominant current in liberation politics, the Congress movement that, as the Congress Alliance of the 1950s showed, saw South Africa's four "races" – African, Coloured, White, and Indian – organising separately.<sup>4</sup>

Biko's ideas of Black Consciousness were honed on the streets of Durban while he was a student at the Non-European Medical School in the 1960s, and one of the immediate antagonists of this philosophy were Indian activists seeking to resurrect Mohandas K Gandhi's Natal Indian Congress (NIC), which had been formed in 1894 but was dormant following the state crackdown after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. The decision to resuscitate the NIC generated a debate between proponents of Black Consciousness and activists in the Congress tradition as to its identity. Should "Indian" be retained or should the NIC reconfigure itself as People's Congress without reference to race? The authors were confronted by this debate while doing research for a book on the NIC in the period 1971 to 1994.<sup>5</sup> In local newspapers, Biko and co-conspirators Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper engaged with supporters of the NIC. This debate provides fascinating insight into the way that they attempted to confront race.<sup>6</sup> While studies on the NIC allude to these debates, no one has examined the arguments in any depth.<sup>7</sup> Even the authors of this article only came across these detailed debates after they had completed their longer study.

## Death

Biko, the inspiration for the BCM and a whole new politics sweeping the land, was detained on 12 September 1977. Beaten and brain damaged, Biko, the "avatar of brokenness as virtue",<sup>8</sup> was bundled into the back of a police van. Beaten. Bloodied. Bound. Body. Bare. He was driven overnight from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria, a journey of 1 200 kilometres. According to Wilson:<sup>9</sup>

In the slow and tortuous manner of his death, he endured a kind of crucifixion, chained and unable to move, his feet in irons hooked to a wall; with people always watching. After suffering a blow to his head so severe that

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4 T Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (London, Longman, 1983), pp. 175-193.

5 A Desai & G Vahed, *Colour, class and community. The Natal Indian Congress, 1971-1994* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2021).

6 R Singh & S Vawda, "What's in a name: Some reflections on the Natal Indian Congress," *Transformation*, 6 (1988), pp. 1-21.

7 S Bhana, *Gandhi's legacy. The Natal Indian Congress 1894-1994* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1997); U Dhupelia-Mesthrie, "The revival of the Natal Indian Congress", South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The road to democracy in South Africa. Volume 2 1970-1980*, 883-904 (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2006); G Vahed & A Desai, "An instance of 'strategic ethnicity'? The Natal Indian Congress in the 1970s", *African Historical Review*, 46(1), 2014, pp. 22-47.

8 E Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering conformism* (London, Pluto Press, 2000), p. 9.

9 L Wilson, *Steve Biko* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2012), p. 147.

it gradually undermined his mind and consciousness, his capacity as a human being, he was after five days, declared fit enough to be driven, naked in a back of a Land Rover 1 133 kilometres overnight. Yet, on arrival in Pretoria, he was still not dead. He died alone shortly thereafter.

A brutal death at the age of 31.

Two days after Biko's death (14 September 1977), Minister of Justice Jimmy Kruger, in a jocular mood, received applause from the Transvaal National Party Congress when he said:<sup>10</sup>

It leaves me cold [Laughter]... We are now asked "When you saw he went on hunger strike why didn't you force him to eat" [Laughter].... Mr Chairman can you imagine that these same people who smear the police day and night because they touched this man – there's a mark on his foot, and there's a mark on his ankle, and here's a mark behind his ear and it must be the police - do you think the police must force a man to eat?...Incidentally...yesterday one of my own lieutenants in the prison service also committed suicide and we have not yet accused a single prisoner.

A few months before his detention, Biko spoke of death in an interview: "You are either alive or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can be a politicising thing".<sup>11</sup> And it was. Over 20 000 gathered to enter a body that could not care anymore.<sup>12</sup> But they could.

Magaziner argues that subtle but profound changes took place in the theology that powered the BCM:<sup>13</sup>

Teachings about Christ emphasised the materiality of the Crucifixion far more than resurrection and elevation to God's right hand.... Death was the ultimate triumph over fear... its own point – resurrection did not enter into conversation.... for Christ, resurrection had been irrelevant while people continued to suffer.

It is hard to gauge how much this entered the mind-set of the BCM activists beyond the preaching and posing. But as events turned out, the man who was the iconic figure of BCM would embrace death as "the ultimate triumph over fear" and so would some of the foremost disciples.<sup>14</sup>

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10 S Hill, *The iconography of Biko's ghost* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 50.

11 S Biko, *I write what I like*. 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2017), p. 173.

12 Staff Reporters, "World outcry over Biko death", *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 September 1977. For a detailed description of the funeral, see H Bernstein, *No. 46 – Steve Biko* (London, International Defence and Aid Fund, 1978).

13 D Magaziner, *The law and the prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, Ohio University Press; Johannesburg, Jacana, 2010), p. 174.

14 This is an idea from the Bible. Paul describes death as "the last enemy." He says that with the resurrection of Jesus, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians. 15:54).

However, in its historic unfolding, first there would be the resurrection of belief and confidence and power, then the crucifixion, followed by a scattering.

Biko's journey to Black Consciousness started at a young age with the 1962 arrest and banning of his brother Khaya, who was a member of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). His early years shaped his thinking.

### **Towards a gathering**

Biko's body had been snatched many times before on account of the mind it held. Detained at age 16 by the Security Branch and expelled from the famous Lovedale Institution in Alice in the Eastern Cape, Biko found a home at St. Francis College in Marianhill, KwaZulu-Natal. Ten years later, aged 26, excommunicated from the congregations growing across the land, he was banned and restricted to King Williams Town. No visitors, never to be in the company of more than one person, never to be quoted. In 1965, Biko had written in the Yearbook of his matric class:<sup>15</sup>

It is not without a painful wrench that we part from our beloved Alma Mater. And as a good son or daughter growing up and having to leave the shelter of a dearly beloved home, so will each of us cherish the memory of the few happy years we have enjoyed in the kindly, albeit scholarly and disciplined atmosphere of this unique education centre....

Biko had high hopes for the future:<sup>16</sup>

The history of the College shows that she has produced teachers by the thousands, doctors and lawyers galore, priests and many other distinguished figures. Therefore, may we not expect to swell this list one day also?

Biko enrolled at the Natal Medical School (now Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine). There is a picture of him, standing tall, as a member of the 1966 Student Representative Council (SRC). Biko espoused the idea of Black Consciousness, and adherents to the movement included a number of young Indians, such as Saths Cooper, Strini Moodley, Sam Moodley, and Asha Moodley. As a Black man versed in liberation texts and active in building a sense of assertiveness, Biko felt racial stigmatisation intensely but had the capacity to wear it lightly and often with wry humour. Barney Pityana remembers that in the early 1970s he and Biko:<sup>17</sup>

... were walking on the beach with a group of friends in Durban. One of our friends was an Indian chap. The police came and said: You're not supposed to be here, this is a beach for white people. So Steve says: 'You're a white person,

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15 S Biko, *I write what I like*, pp. xxi-xxii.

16 S Biko, *I write what I like*, p. xxi.

17 D Hook, *(Post-)Apartheid conditions: Psychoanalysis and social formation* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 17.

yes. This chap, my friend, what is he? He's an Indian. What is this ocean called? It's called the Indian Ocean. So you have nothing to do with this ocean. It is *his* Ocean'.

Biko was teased and mocked for his fraternisation with Indians. He smiled back and determined to achieve a broad Black unity.<sup>18</sup>

Biko was involved in organising students and attended the conferences of the white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). At a NUSAS meeting in Grahamstown in 1967, Rhodes University insisted on separate white's only residences: "Those classified 'Indians and Coloureds' were to stay in town, whilst Africans were required to stay some distance away in a church hall in the 'location' ...".<sup>19</sup> NUSAS condemned this segregation but wanted to get on with the issues of the day. Biko insisted that a non-racial venue be arranged before proceeding. Anxious that the resolutions condemning apartheid not be postponed, NUSAS protested that their political declarations should not be delayed. A Biko-led walk-out by Black students saw the congealing of Black Consciousness and the birth of the South African Students Organisation (SASO). The upsurge (or was it unshackling?) in student militancy was immediate. At Fort Hare in 1968, students began a long sit-in. They were marched off at the end of a barrel of a long gun.<sup>20</sup>

Biko became SASO's first president in July 1969, at the tender age of 23. These were heady days. But Biko never lost his. Remembering the smashing of the ANC and PAC in the early 1960s, many Black Consciousness cadres worried that the state would crush their fledgling movement before it really took off. As much as they accepted the duty to fill "a political vacuum",<sup>21</sup> they took care not to overtly break the law.

The rise of BCM unleashed a new confidence. This attitude became every bit as threatening to the apartheid order as armed struggle. Intellectual ideas fermented and spread, especially at "Bush" campuses. There was constant tension between building structures, spreading the word and satisfying a militant push from below. SRC President Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro's speech at Turfloop's graduation ceremony in 1972 proved to be a catalyst that ignited mass protests. And so, whether planned or not, SASO was swept along as protests spread from Turfloop to the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), Fort Hare and all the other "Bush" campuses created by

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18 M Ramphela, *A life* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1995). Ramphela writes: "Aubrey Mokoape used to engage Steve in serious all-night discussions.... Aubrey argued from his Africanist perspective against the inclusion of 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' in the Black Consciousness Movement.... He would argue that Indians should be reminded that there was a ship leaving Durban harbour every Thursday for India which they should be encouraged to make use of...", p. 60.

19 L Wilson, *Steve Biko*, p. 30.

20 X Mangcu, *Biko: A life* (London and New York, IB Tauris, 2014), pp. 160-178; D Woods, *Biko* (New York and London, Paddington Press, 1978), pp. 119-122.

21 S Buthelezi, "The emergence of Black Consciousness: A historical appraisal", B Pityana et al. (eds), *Bounds of possibility: The legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (London, Zed Books, 1991), p. 111.

the Extension of University Education Act of 1959.<sup>22</sup>

The apartheid plan to create universities along ethnic and tribal lines as part of separate development instead exploded into newfound radical identities and unities. It impacted in the public domain as the Johannesburg-based *Rand Daily Mail* newspaper, *Daily Dispatch* of Port Elizabeth, and the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) replaced the use of the term “non-white” with “Black”.<sup>23</sup> This was not just a word but the embodiment of a real, living, pulsating existence in the everyday. In embracing and theorising that one word, politics moved from the era of grievance to assertion.

Debates and splits took place in anti-apartheid politics, such as a tense standoff with the recently revived NIC. Black Consciousness adherents wanted it open to all Black people. The NIC grandees thought otherwise. This debate, and its outcomes and consequences is closely examined in the section below.

### **Debating Black Consciousness in the NIC**

In 1971, Mewa Ramgobin, a university graduate and activist married to Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, decided to revive the defunct NIC. At the meeting that the ad hoc committee of the NIC organized at Bolton Hall in Durban on 25 June 1971 to revive the NIC, Indian and African university students held placards that read “We want a people’s congress” and “Black unity now”.<sup>24</sup>

Sensing the dangers of a revived NIC, the state banned Ramgobin. A meeting to protest his five-year banning was convened at Bolton Hall on 26 September 1971. Around a thousand people attended. According to one newspaper report, “loud cheers and Black Power exhortations greeted a call for ‘togetherness’ among Black South Africans”. Speakers included Keith Mokoape, president of the Black section of the SRC, University of Natal; Sociologist and anti-apartheid activist Fatima Meer; Biko; law student DK Singh; and Dempsey Noel of the Coloured Labour Party. Mokoape described Ramgobin’s banning as an affront to human dignity. The revival of the NIC must receive the support of the masses for their rightful aspiration. The fate of the Indian and Coloured people is intertwined with that of the African and our salvation lies in our togetherness as Black people. Although there may be different

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22 J Brown, “SASO’s reluctant embrace of public forms of protest, 1968-72”, *South African Historical Journal*, 64(2), 2010, pp. 716-734.

23 H Adam, “The rise of Black Consciousness in South Africa”, *Race and Class*, 15(2), 1973, pp. 149-165. Adam writes on p. 152: “It is symptomatic for the South African domestic debate how both Whites and Blacks are preoccupied with labels at the expense of the real issues. Thus the South African Institute of Race Relations asked the public to search for a more appropriate name for the country’s subordinate castes before deciding to use the term Black, as did the Rand Daily Mail in 1972, while the ‘Progressive Party’ resolved after an elaborate debate to use only the group names: African, Coloured, Indian. SASO delegates continued in the same vein by evicting journalists whose papers continued to use the term non-white”.

24 *The Graphic*, 30 July 1971, p. 1.

views to the problems – and the problem is the white man – Blacks should overlook minor points of difference and caucus themselves under this one issue.

Mokoape called on Black people to reject government “quislings, dressing them up, and showing them up to us and the world as ‘Black leaders’”.<sup>25</sup> Fatima Meer<sup>26</sup> described apartheid as “undiluted arrogance typical of white society”. She added that people had the right to “... their freedom and dignity. Freedom is the only reality which has any dignity for us. Freedom is the only reality worth dying for. I know that we are playing with fire but rather we are consumed by the fire of freedom than being cowered down”.<sup>27</sup>

At the NIC convention in Phoenix on 3 October 1971, its Durban branch submitted a memorandum calling on the NIC to drop Indian from its name and work towards creating political awareness among Black South Africans. The key message of the four-page memorandum was:<sup>28</sup>

It is the intention of the Black people of South Africa to rid themselves of the psychological and physical oppression they are subjected to, and in this regard Black [C]onsciousness and the drive towards Black awareness are seen as the most logical and significant means of ridding the Blacks of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude.... This should not be interpreted as anti-Whiteism but merely as a more positive, tactical manoeuvre to attain a normal situation in South Africa. Social contact with Whites therefore – although it should not be legislated against – should be discouraged.... The oppressed communities should reject all value systems that seek to make them foreigners in the land of their birth and attempt to build up value systems of their own.

There was argument over whether the memo should be discussed at all. The Durban branch delegates stated that they had attended the meeting on the understanding that the memo would be debated. Chair L Bhika agreed to the contents of the memo being discussed, and the result was heated argument. The view of DK Singh of the Asherville branch was that while “this idealism is good, I don’t believe you can fight one form of racism with another form of racism”. He described the memo as “the height of irresponsibility”. Rabi Bugwandeen objected to the exclusion of whites “who had identified themselves with the struggle and who had suffered through bannings and imprisonment....”.<sup>29</sup> George Sewpersadh’s view was that Congress should “...aspire towards the unity of all the oppressed. Although this Congress

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25 *The Leader*, 1 October 1971, p. 3.

26 Fatima Meer (1928-2010) was a Sociologist based at the University of Natal and an internationally renowned anti-apartheid activist who served several terms of bannings and a period of imprisonment with Winnie Mandela. Although most people associated her with the Congress Alliance, she was never a formal member of the NIC and publicly expressed her tolerance of all anti-apartheid groupings.

27 *The Graphic*, 1 October 1971, p. 5.

28 *The Leader*, 8 October 1971, p. 1.

29 *The Leader*, 8 October 1971, p. 3.

bears the name “Indian” we must not forget our humane responsibilities and regard towards other sections of the people”. Ela Gandhi felt discussion of the memorandum was “futile as we have already accepted Congress which has definite aims and objects. Discussion now negates some of the existing ideals of Congress”. Saths Cooper of the Central branch said that he was “disappointed at the attitude of some of the delegates who were intent on silencing us even before we were given a chance to explain our memorandum”.<sup>30</sup>

According to one news report on the debate over Black Power:<sup>31</sup>

... tempers flared and delegates snatched microphones and launched into petty points and arguments.... Delegates sat back in frank amazement at the sometimes trifling and bitter arguments over technicalities, none of which in fact had any relevance to the fundamental problems facing Congress. Many calls for calm were made. Congress has not been created with so much effort and dedication to be the repository of all miscellaneous resentments.

What is evident in these debates is that proponents of Black Consciousness were regarded by advocates of the Congress Alliance (NIC) position as racists for excluding Whites from the formulation of who constituted Black. On the other hand, it was ironic that those making the criticism were not willing to let go of “Indian” in the name NIC. Would this not perpetuate race identity?

In response to the criticism from NIC advocates, the Durban branch of the NIC, most of whose members supported Black Consciousness, organized a symposium on Black Consciousness at Bolton Hall on 12 December 1971 in order to clarify the meaning of Black Consciousness. According to Saths Cooper, the convention in Phoenix showed that: “Black consciousness is often misunderstood by many simply because they have jumped to conclusions. Black Consciousness is often misunderstood for Black Power, and we would like to place both in proper perspective”.<sup>32</sup> Speakers included Fatima Meer; SASO executive member Strini Moodley; SASO president Temba Sono; social worker Daphne Masekela of Johannesburg; Durban law student Ashwin Trikamjee; Dr Dilly Naidoo of the NIC; Cape Town poet Adam Small; and lawyer DK Singh of the NIC.

At this symposium, the voice of Daphne Masekela was very clear on Black Consciousness and in particular, on the role of White liberals in anti-apartheid activism, and it is pertinent to quote it in more breadth. She said that:<sup>33</sup>

... for more than 300 years white liberals had been involved in designing strategies that are meant to confuse the Black world and this made it impossible

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30 *The Leader*, 8 October 1971, p. 3.

31 *The Graphic*, 8 October 1971, p. 3.

32 *The Leader*, 10 December 1971, p. 1.

33 *The Leader*, 17 December 1971, p. 3.



for Blacks to identify and isolate their enemy. It should be made clear to Blacks that there is nothing to integrate because this liberal establishment in the very asking of the question assumes and takes for granted that they have something precious which Blacks want, or should want, as if being close to white people ennobles and enriches the humanity of Black people.

Masekela further added that Black Consciousness was:<sup>34</sup>

...not a product of frustration or rejection by Whites, it is a product of self-realisation. Black Consciousness is a philosophical medium through which Black people find themselves and their own identity in an environment which threatens to destroy or dilute their Blackness with a view to dehumanize them. Black Consciousness sprouts from the depth and heart of Black people who, with their peculiar problems, a peculiar cultural heritage, a unique history of oppression and sufferings are solving their own problems and difficulties in the midst of White racism. This is necessarily so because Black people are not a reflection of others but they are human beings and complete in themselves. Blacks should reject integration. Black Consciousness was therefore the key to the emancipation and liberation of Black people from their distorted self-image that once tried to realise White personhood rather than seeking to integrate with itself and its own mind. It must be seen as a means to an end and an end in itself.

The two key points made by Masekela are that the rejection of White liberals was not due to racism but to the fact that their past involvement had not led to any objective improvement in the condition of Black people and instead made them dependent on White liberals. Black Consciousness was intended to allow Black people to formulate their own demands and strategies to achieve this. It was not anti-White racism but an affirmation of Blackness. These points were expressed in a more strident manner by SASO president Temba Sono who described Whites as "exploiters ... some exploit directly, others indirectly". White liberals were "directionless multiracialists or integrationists who, after sympathising with Blacks in their plight, prefer their 'bulleting baas' and his trigger happy morality during election time. When the baas is back into power, these tearful apologists once more come with their sentimental hubble bubble about how bad the 'other' white is".<sup>35</sup> Like Masekela, Sono did not see any benefit accruing from involving Whites in anti-apartheid activism since Whites continued to vote in ever-greater numbers for the apartheid regime.

This theme was furthered by poet Adam Small, a Cape Coloured writer who was an advocate for Black Consciousness, and wrote in Afrikaans about racial discrimination in South Africa. He emphasized that "our movement towards our Blackness means the clear realization that no one, no man, holds life in their hands for us. We are not beggars for life." Small rejected White liberals who "cast themselves in the role of

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34 *The Graphic*, 17 December 1971, p. 4.

35 *The Leader*, 17 December 1971, p. 3.

guardians for us, love to approach us as little children are approached, love to tell us ‘You too have beautiful values, can’t you see?’”.<sup>36</sup>

Dr Dilly Naidoo of the NIC affirmed these views. While not discounting the role that they could play in anti-apartheid activism, it was his view that they should focus on conscientising Whites. Dr Naidoo observed that Whites:<sup>37</sup>

... enjoyed the fruits of the system. He does not plough as large a portion of his wealth into Black services, instead he does not pay normal wage, and even if he does better than this, his main contribution is some liberal protest or muttering, which, he feels, justifies his exploitation. The White liberal can easily fall back on his White privileges if he got tired of being sincere. Secondly, if he has annoyed the Government, he at least receives better prison treatment. And until such time as liberal Whites shake themselves off the yoke of white privileges, we will have no choice but to exclude them from our discussions. White liberals could make a positive contribution by working towards a ‘white consciousness’ among whites as is being done among Blacks.

Speaking on “The value of Black Culture”, Strini Moodley also stressed the value of Black Consciousness as self-affirmation. Moodley argued that it was necessary to give Blacks “a sense of self-reliance and a firmer faith in the work of the Black man”. He called for the rejection of missionaries whom he viewed as an “evil, blonde-haired, pale-skinned, blue-eyed Satan equipped with the Bible and a cruel god”. The Anglo-Boer culture in South Africa had “escaped into the lifestyle of Black people. All the good cultural and moral aspects of the Black man was shoved aside as more Blacks began to change into little White puppets”.<sup>38</sup>

However, Moodley went further to warn Indians that it was in their self-interest to embrace the African majority. Indians were a minority sandwiched between the politically and economically powerful White group and the numerically powerful African. They had already experienced violence during the 1949 race riots, which loomed large in the memories of many Indians.<sup>39</sup> Moodley argued that Indians were being used as a “stop gap” between the minority Whites and majority Africans, and African enmity against Indians was understandable if Indians sided with Whites.<sup>40</sup>

Dangling a carrot before a donkey was the easiest thing to do with the Indian. Promise him the world, his own education, his own home, and he will become the natural ‘middle class’ who because he has been taught to fear the African will always look towards the white man for his protection. Indians had come to believe that Africans hated them. If Africans did hate Indians, this was

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36 *The Leader*, 17 December 1971, p. 5.

37 *The Leader*, 17 December 1971, p. 3.

38 *The Leader*, 17 December 1971, p. 5.

39 For an overview of Afro-Indian relations, see A Desai & G Vahed, “Stuck in the middle: Indians in South Africa’s rainbow”, *South Asian Diaspora*, 9(2), 2017, pp. 147-162.

40 *The Leader*, 17 December 1971, p. 5.

justified. If one oppressed group is prepared to sell its soul at the expense of the liberation of the majority group, then surely the majority must hate the group.

According to a report in the *Graphic* newspaper, NIC delegates from the Clairwood and Isipingo branches, who wanted to speak against Black Consciousness, "stormed out of the meeting when they were denied an opportunity to speak".<sup>41</sup>

If the aim of the conference was to convince NIC members and the community at large that Black Consciousness was a positive development in the political landscape, and the optimum way for Indians to engage in anti-apartheid activism, then it failed to achieve its objective. A week later, at an NIC provincial meeting on 19 December 1971, the organization passed a resolution rejecting "Black exclusiveness" and directed "all members of Congress not to identify Congress in any way whatsoever with any philosophy or creed of racial exclusiveness and not to associate Congress in any way with such principle". This affirmed that all NIC branches, except the Durban branch, were against the concept of Black Consciousness, which they saw as "advocating the exclusion of sympathetic whites from the Black man's struggle in South Africa". The Durban branch's Saths Cooper abstained when the resolution was moved. While this branch had proposed from the beginning that the "Indian" tag be dropped, others in the NIC saw the embracing of Biko's Black Consciousness as advocating for Black nationalism. The resolution stated that the NIC was committed to promote peace, understanding, and goodwill between the various races and sections of the South African population. This meeting confirms that any dogma or group that propagates racialism of any kind is not an answer to the problems facing the Black people of South Africa. Congress therefore reaffirms its basic principle and belief in non-racialism.<sup>42</sup>

### **SASO and the NIC: The rhetoric intensifies**

These debates left a bitter taste in the mouth. Black Consciousness advocates called for NIC members to apologize for comparing their ideology to that of the PAC. However, in a letter to SASO's Barney Pityana, Ramlall Ramesar, the NIC's Provincial Organizer and future General Secretary, "flatly refused to apologise for his remarks that Black Consciousness equated to black exclusiveness as it was made in an NIC meeting when the organisation's approach to 'Black exclusiveness' was being debated and was not for public consumption". He further maintained that in his view he was "factually correct" that SASO, like the PAC, believed in Black exclusiveness. Ramesar countered that it was SASO that was interfering in the NIC by trying to get it to embrace the Black Consciousness ideology. He concluded that his statement was not intended to deter any students from joining SASO nor was

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41 *The Graphic*, 17 December 1971, p. 3.

42 *The Leader*, 24 December 1971, p. 1.

any “malice” intended.<sup>43</sup>

SASO president Temba Sono, threatened legal action against the NIC because Ramesar had stated that SASO was “the architect of Black Consciousness” which was equated with the Pan Africanism of the banned PAC. This was an issue with Black Consciousness activists because the PAC was deemed to exclude all non-Africans from its definition of African while Black Consciousness included Indians and Coloureds in its formulation of Black.<sup>44</sup> Sono described the attack as “devious and specious”. He said that whenever their meetings ended in disagreement, the NIC, “like the typical racists they are – despite their non-racial professions – they always saw SASO as the propagator of this dissension”. Sono regarded these attacks as an indication that the NIC was feeling insecure as SASO was “fast outstripping the NIC”. The NIC’s perceived “smear campaign” and “witch-hunting” was also bringing students to the attention of the security branch.<sup>45</sup>

In turn, the NIC issued a statement to the press through its president, George Sewpersadh, which dismissed Sono’s threats. It stated that “the vast majority of NIC members have sufficient decency and culture not to intervene in the cultural affairs of other organisations. It seems that members of SASO still have to acquire and develop this degree of culture and decency for they obviously do not find it crude, vulgar and coarse to probe into and interfere in the internal affairs of the NIC”. The NIC, the statement added, was striving to attain “a united democratic South Africa. Racialism and racial hatred are anathema to us”. It added, sarcastically, that if SASO members were so opposed to the NIC, “why are they holding so tight to their positions?”<sup>46</sup> This barb was directed at those like Saths Cooper and Ashwin Trikamjee who held positions in the Durban Central branch of the NIC.

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43 *The Leader*, 28 January 1972, p. 1.

44 In his inaugural speech at the founding of the PAC in April 1959, Robert Sobukwe stated: “In South Africa we recognise the existence of national groups, which are the result of geographical origin within a certain area as well as a shared historical experience of these groups. The Europeans are a foreign minority group, which has exclusive control of political, economic, social and military power. It is the dominant group. It is the exploiting group, responsible for the pernicious doctrine of White Supremacy, which has resulted in the humiliation, and degradation of the indigenous African people.... The Indian foreign minority group came to this country ... as indentured labourers. In the South African set-up of today, this group is an oppressed minority. But there are some members of this group, the merchant class in particular, who have become tainted with the virus of cultural supremacy and national arrogance. This class identifies itself by and large with the oppressor but, significantly, this is the group, which provides the political leadership of the Indian people in South Africa. And all that the politics of this class have meant up to now is preservation and defence of the sectional interests of the Indian merchant class.... The Africans constitute the indigenous group and form the majority of the population. It is our contention that ... the illiterate and semi-literate African masses constitute the key and centre and content of any struggle for true democracy in South Africa. And the African people can be organised only under the banner of African nationalism in an All-African Organisation where they will by themselves formulate policies and programmes and decide on the methods of struggle without interference from either so-called left-wing or right-wing groups of the minorities who arrogantly appropriate to themselves the right to plan and think for the Africans.” Available at South African History Online, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/robert-sobukwe-inaugural-speech-april-1959>, as accessed on 18 June 2021.

45 *The Leader*, 28 January 1972, p. 3.

46 *The Leader*, 28 January 1972, p. 4.

The *Leader* newspaper reported that the Durban Central branch was holding meetings to decide on policy in light of their disagreement with the central body. Rabi Bugwandeem said that the branch had no authority to have convened the symposium on Black Consciousness on 12 December 1971.<sup>47</sup>

An indication of the breakdown in relations is that The Phoenix Settlement Trust, which oversaw the settlement in Phoenix that had been established by Gandhi in 1904, and which in the past had made its premises available to SASO students for various projects, rejected an application by SASO for its members to stay at the settlement in February 1972 while conducting its 'New Farm' Project which aimed to assist the poor farming community at New Farm, just outside Phoenix. Gandhi's great-grandfather Ela Gandhi, and then husband Mewa Ramgobin, who lived at the settlement, were both executive members of the NIC.

According to Strini Moodley, SASO executive member, given that students had stayed there in the past when working at New Farm, that final year Medical students had assisted at the clinic in Phoenix on weekends; and that the project aimed to build a water tank for the community which did not have any water, his organization regarded this refusal as a blatant attack by "non-whites" on a Black organization. He promised that organizations like The Phoenix Trust, which were "there to perpetuate the status quo", would be exposed because they were "major stumbling blocks in the Black man's search for his humanity and true identity." White Liberal Party politician and author Alan Paton, then chair of the Trust, issued a statement that SASO had submitted the application late, and disingenuously stated that the Trust did not know much about who SASO was and what it represented.<sup>48</sup>

The first anniversary conference of the NIC at the Gandhi Library in Durban on 28 April 1972 was dominated by three issues: whether the NIC should contest positions in the South African Indian Congress (SAIC); whether the NIC should go non-racial and become the Congress of South African Democrats with membership open to all races; and whether the NIC should embrace the philosophy of Black Consciousness. On the latter two issues, the NIC resolved that "it would not be in its interests of Indians in the present climate to become non-racial" and on the issue of Black Consciousness, it resolved (after an intense four-hour debate, with 24 votes against, 13 for and 10 abstentions) not to embrace a policy which aims at "racial exclusiveness".

NIC executive member and Professor at the University of Natal Non-European Medical School, Jerry Coovadia, presented a paper in which he argued that there was a "fundamental contradiction" between the NIC and Black Consciousness. By

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47 *The Leader*, 4 February 1972, p. 1.

48 *The Leader*, 11 February 1972, p. 3.

defining themselves as Black, he said, the proponents of Black Consciousness:<sup>49</sup>

have fallen into the trap set by the White man. It is he who has defined himself by his colour – must we follow his perverse logic. We reject colour as a criterion for recognizing a man's worth.... In the final analysis we are men, regardless of colour. All the theorizing in the world is of little avail unless the basic inequalities alter and allow of a free and complete expression of the oppressed man.

While the aim to create Black solidarity was “laudable”, Coovadia felt that solidarity did not come from similarity of religious customs or religious affinity but, a similarity in a desire for progress and recuperation.... Black Consciousness goes against an all-encompassing humanism which we envisage for society. Blackness is the rallying point. We believe that there are genuine dangers in Black Consciousness leading to a form of Black Power. Although it is not racism now, it has grave potential of racism and racial exclusiveness. The proponents of Black Consciousness say it is a tactical manoeuvre until a normal situation is reached. That millennium will never come. The chances are that the manoeuvre will become Ultimate Belief.

Coovadia wanted an organization that did not reify race, arguing that Black Consciousness had the potential to perpetuate racial divisions in South Africa, just as apartheid was doing. Despite the rejection of the proposed People's Congress, supporters of Black Consciousness felt that the conference was a success since they had “succeeded in the sense that more and more people are now sitting up and having a closer look at the concept”.<sup>50</sup>

Barney Pityana, responded to Coovadia in a letter to the *Leader* newspaper, which was published in the 12 May 1972 issue. The letter was titled “Blacks can no longer live in the afterworld”. He described Coovadia's presentation as displaying “gross imperviousness to understanding so fundamental a social issue as Black Consciousness.” He accused Coovadia of “misleading the house” and said that he would have intervened during the talk but “my kinky negroid hair did not pass me as an Indian”. It was a “distortion of facts” to believe that embracing Black Consciousness amounted to “falling into the trap set by the White man”. Pityana went on to write:<sup>51</sup>

The fact is that the blackness of our skins is a fact of creation. Black Consciousness then takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plans in creating Black people black. It is a universal fact that colour is the determinant for social involvement of whatever kind. Black people can no longer afford to live in the afterworld. We must be realistic in our approach to political problems....

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49 *The Leader*, 5 May 1972, pp. 1, 3.

50 *The Leader*, 5 May 1972, p. 3.

51 *The Leader*, 12 May 1972, p. 1.

There is no gainsaying the fact that White colonialist missionaries were here to conquer. Hence they had to rape the soul of the innocent and gullible Black heroes, undermine their religion which had well sustained them and bound them into tightly-knit community. Black Theology is then telling all self-respecting Black that: "In Christ God identified with the politically disinherited poor for the purpose of affirming their humanity liberating them, and calling them to a vision of society which would bind the devil of economic and political disparity".

The theory of culture and history are intertwined. This is one aspect where Black Consciousness is clearest. You see a danger of reverting to forms of life ill-suited to a modern industrial society like South Africa. Yet in order to increase their contribution and relevance to the developing community, Blacks have come to view as absurd the assumption that people had no life that was not somewhat regulated by White stimuli. No longer are we satisfied with merely knowing what White people have done to Black people. Rather we are now beginning to view Black people not as pathological or invisible adjustment of White people especially in the cultural domain but as creative makers of their own cultural destiny....

You say "solidarity comes not so much from religion, customs, tastes and racial affinity as from the similarity in economic and social conditions and from a similarity in economic and social conditions and from a similarity in a desire for progress and recuperation". Let me tell you that the wealth of evidence and authority is against this view. Customs, tastes and race – are all essential elements of a bid for closer links. The pursuit of common goals, aspirations and a fight for common survival are the issues that bring about solidarity.

Jerry [Coovadia], you seem to think that the Blacks' state of oppression is a past event. It is an issue that confronts us daily. We live with oppression, and subjugation in the hands of the Whites and other 'colonised' Blacks. ... Oh, you are a dreamer. 'We want a free and equal life for all our citizens.' These are the pious incantations that deflect Blacks from their realistic pursuit.... Your understanding of South African society is very minimal. Your class consciousness will never be true. A White man, a drunk, won't work, vagabond goes gaily to the ballot-box while I have to watch! They are protected by White power. The major polarization is between black and white. Liberals would jump high at your patronizing them. The truth is that the likes of you are over-preoccupied about flirting with Whites.<sup>52</sup>

And so the debate went. Rather than some sense of an ending, a meeting point, it became more acrimonious. When the BCM raised the dropping of the "I" in the NIC, its defenders raised the issue of the exclusion of Whites. When the NIC supporters raised class, the BCM argued that the central division was in Pityana's

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52 Verbatim quoted from Barry Pityana's thoughts in *The Leader*, 12 May 1972, p. 3.

words “between BLACK and WHITE”. The issue of class and race was to bedevil both intellectuals and anti-apartheid activists despite a growing commitment to non-racialism. The BCM’s power lay in the fact that it was determined to draw Africans, Coloureds and Indians into a single organization. While the movement never captured the imagination of significant numbers of Coloureds and Indians, its problematizing of racial organizing was to spur the ANC to open its doors to full membership for all racial groups and encourage the United Democratic Front’s commitment to non-racialism. In many ways, the debate continues into the present as the voice of a narrower African nationalism is raised both within the ANC and more openly by the Economic Freedom Front (EFF). The furore over the naming of Monopoly Capital as White and backlash over the Guptas only served to indicate how immediate are the debates about race that have their echoes back into the 1970s.

### Concluding thoughts

The split between supporters of the SASO/BC and the NIC was acrimonious. The groups went their separate ways. In 1972, the Black People’s Convention (BPC) was formed, hoping to structure the BCM and move it beyond the universities. SASO/Black Consciousness activists within the fold of the NIC joined the BPC. Eight SASO / BPC leaders were banned in March 1973: Steve Biko, Saths Cooper, Drake Koka, Bokwe Bafuma, Jerry Modisane, Strini Moodley, Harry Nengwekhulu, and Barney Pityana. Vino Cooper, then wife of Cooper, told reporters that Black people were “already restricted in some way. Five years of physical restriction will not kill my husband’s determination to fight for the freedom of Black people from physical bondage and psychological oppression”.<sup>53</sup> Moodley’s wife Sam Moodley, called on “all Black men in the country to become a soldier in the struggle. The fighting force for Blackness is still small. She needs more committed soldiers to take her message to the people”.<sup>54</sup>

Despite their impression on young people, Biko and Black Consciousness were attacked from all sides, and not just NIC activists. On the left, the South African Communist Party (SACP)’s magazine, *The African Communist* railed that Biko was “a ‘liberal’, an idealist, insufficiently anti-capitalist, a pacifist, and lack[ed] any understanding of mass struggle...”.<sup>55</sup> How ironic that Biko, who put the liberals on the back-foot, was labelled one himself. More sardonically, the SACP could argue that Biko did not understand mass struggle as they hung on to the coat-tails of the ANC, too petrified to walk alone.

However, the onslaught was unrelenting. In 1984, Rob Davies, Dan O’Meara and Siphon Dlamini published Volume Two of *The Struggle for South Africa: A Reference*

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<sup>53</sup> *The Graphic*, 9 March 1973, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> *The Graphic*, 16 March 1973, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> L. Wilson, *Steve Biko*, p. 148.



*Guide to Movements, Organisations and Institutions*. Speaking of the BCM, they argued that there were:<sup>56</sup>

...intensified attempts by various imperialist interests to turn the BCM into a 'third force', as an alternative to the ANC and PAC. While it would be untrue to suggest that these forces in any way controlled the Black Consciousness Movement, the Geneva-based International University Exchange Fund (UEF) in particular gave the BC movement a great deal of support as part of its 'third force strategy'.

How nonchalantly Davies et al. spread the smear "Third Force". In the South Africa of 1984, to be associated with the Third Force in any way was to be seen as being an agent of the apartheid state and fair game for beatings and assassination. What exiled academics like Davies et al. failed to understand is that all of this was not at the level of high theory, despite the BC high priest pretensions. It was "the" inspiration. The word organization is a misnomer. As the Reverend Aelred Stubbs wrote in 1978-1979, in what were really contemporaneous notes: "The political genius of Steve (Biko) lay in concentrating on the creation and diffusion of a new "consciousness" rather than in the formation of a rigid "organisation".<sup>57</sup>

It was a consciousness that liberated the generation of the 1970s. The idea of Blackness. Black Consciousness was the inspiration to break out of apartheid-imposed identities. It was truly a "mental insurrection".<sup>58</sup> In this sense, the challenge of BCM was far from a fool's errand.

The issue of race is still with us and will be for some time to come. Biko and his lieutenants had the courage to challenge the way we thought about race. In the 1980s, the commitment to Black unity folded into a nascent non-racialism. It is a debate to be had once more as deepening poverty and inequality forces South Africans to confront both race and class divisions.

Some might argue that it is a fool's errand to try and think beyond race in a country with South Africa's history. But fools in the Royal courts of old always saw more than the King and his courtiers.

A quarter century after liberation, how does one think about BCM? Wendy Brown is instructive: "...theory is never 'accurate' or 'wrong', it is only more or less illuminating, more or less provocative, more or less an incitement to thought, imagination, desire, possibilities for renewal".<sup>59</sup> Since 1994 democratic elections

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56 R Davies, D O'Meara & S Dlamini, *The struggle for South Africa: A reference guide to movements*, 2 (London, Zed Books, 1984), p. 307.

57 A Stubbs, "Martyr of hope: A personal memoir", S Biko, *I write what I like*, pp. 175-244, p. 205.

58 R Fattouh Jr., *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The dialectics of ideological resistance to Apartheid* (New York, New York University Press, 1986), p. 78.

59 W Brown, *Edgework: Critical essays on knowledge and politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 80.

have taken place under the watchful gaze of the Constitution and the rule of law. Still, one continues to have a sense that freedom has to be fought for. Who will lead this fight? What forms will it take? How does one guard against messiahs who want to jump on the bandwagon to plunder the fruits of liberation rather than deepen and broaden our freedoms?

Every day we witness the intellectual laziness of racial nationalism and the reflexive demand for nationalisation. It may do well to remind ourselves that Stubbs described BCM as “the movement of an idea, almost a mood... the creation and diffusion of a new ‘consciousness’ rather than in the formation of a rigid ‘organisation’”.<sup>60</sup> As we show, at the heart of this consciousness was the BCM’s insistence on puncturing apartheid’s racial categories, and thinking identity anew. This might sound like an impossibility, as the state reinforces these racial markers every day through a variety of means.<sup>61</sup>

But it appeared even more impossible during Biko’s time, the height of apartheid’s madness and the Congress movement reinforced the “four nation thesis” of organising. Nonetheless, tribal identities were pushed back and Blackness became a way of living for a whole generation.

And despite the exclusion of Whites, it was always flexible enough to broaden its ambit, as the terrain of power and privilege shifted. Both the NIC and BCM of the 1970s were wanting to break free of apartheid racial categories, albeit in different ways. Over 50 years since Biko first refused imposed apartheid categories, it is time to move his legacy and imaginings from footnote to centre-stage.

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60 A Stubbs, “Martyr of hope...”, S Biko, *I write what I like*, pp. 205-206.

61 G Mare, *Declassified: Moving beyond the dead-end of race in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2014).