

India and Israel: The Need for a Nuanced Understanding

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In the post-WWII bipolar world order, two countries emerged facing similar problems – India (1947) and Israel (1948). Both had to fight wars immediately. While for India it was about the accession of a territory (Kashmir), for Israel it was about survival, following an attack by seven Arab nations (Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iraq). Despite many trials and tribulations, both nation-states have managed to survive and prosper. In addition to their defence, strategic, space, agriculture and educational ties, the cultural and commercial connections between the two countries date back to ancient times. India is the only country where Jews were able to reside and practise their religion freely without withdrawing into a ghetto and without experiencing any form of antisemitism for the past thousand years (according to documentary evidence) or two thousand years (according to legend). Hence, even today, the Indian Jews who emigrated to Israel (of their own free will) retain strong ties to their Indian roots, unlike Jews from Europe and the Arab world, who were forced to leave everything behind and start from scratch.

Initially, both tried to adopt a non-aligned neutral diplomatic stance, which gradually fell apart as India grew closer to the Soviet bloc and Israel became a key ally of the United States. David Ben-Gurion, the founding-father of Israel, had a high regard for Mahatma Gandhi (whose picture he hung in his bedroom) and Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru and Ben-Gurion had similar leanings – socialist and secular – and tried to steer their countries in crucial times until the early 1960s. They exchanged letters, with Ben-Gurion even asking Nehru to intercede with Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt (who was Nehru's friend) to mediate peace between Egypt and Israel. At present, both countries have shed the socialist (and to some extent secular) image dreamed up by their founding fathers due to emerging right-wing majoritarian politics under Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and under Narendra Modi in India.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel, which only occurred in 1992, was delayed by the presence of a large Muslim population in India (the third largest in the world), the country's need for oil and its pursuit of West Asian support in international forums against Pakistan over the Kashmir issue. Similarly, India only recognised Israel in 1950, after a Shia country (Iran, which withdrew its recognition after the Islamic revolution) and a Sunni country (Turkey) had established relations with Israel. Today, anti-Israel sentiments unite Indian Muslims across their sectarian divisions, as India tries to maintain a balanced stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict, advocating a two-state solution.

A flawed understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict has divided Indian opinion. While right-wing and Hindu organisations support Israel to the extent of engaging in Islamophobia, left-wing and Islamic groups support Palestine and often engage in blatant antisemitism (but without directly targeting Indian Jews). Indian leftist intellectuals have often supported terrorist groups, including Hamas, that oppose the two-state solution agreed to in the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993. This was especially evident in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, in which Hamas and several other Palestinian terrorist groups launched an armed incursion from Gaza into Israel, killing some 1,200 people, injuring thousands of others and taking over 250 hostages.

In my city of Kolkata, India's third largest city, a group calling itself "Concerned Citizens of Kolkata" organised a week-long programme boycotting products from Israeli brands (although in practice the brands were mostly American), including Nestle, Coca-Cola and McDonalds. The boycott took place on November 17-24, 2023. The group organised meetings and put up posters across the city. I happened to spot one such poster urging people to substitute Nestle Maggie noodles with Indian noodle brands and Coca-Cola beverages with local alternatives. In November, a screening of three Palestinian movies was organised by a student group called Sangharsh at Presidency University, at which a 3-metre-wide banner reading "Free Palestine" and posters proclaiming "From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free" were displayed. Protests were held across the city, with some protestors even spotted at Eden Gardens Stadium waving Palestinian flags during a match in the ICC Cricket World Cup 2023. Rising anti-Israel sentiments have led the authorities to close the city's three synagogues – Beth El, Maghen David and Neveh Shalome – to non-Jewish visitors. Even non-Indian Jews now require permission to visit them. While expressing solidarity with Palestinians, the protests chose to ignore the fact that 132 people are still being held hostage by Hamas in Gaza in inhumane conditions.

Within this atmosphere, the Jindal Centre for Israel Studies (the only such centre in India) at O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonipat organised a workshop entitled "Israel: A Nation That Dwells Alone" on January 17-23, 2024. The workshop was sponsored by the US-based Israel Institute. Even before it started, an "open letter" called for the cancellation of the workshop on the grounds that it was problematic amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Similar sentiments were expressed in response to presentations by Professor Rafal Pankowski and Dr Natalie Sinaeva-Pankowska at a seminar on "Distortion of History and Competitive Victimhood" at Presidency University on February 15, 2024. Accusing the speakers of being insensitive to the plight of Palestinians, some students protested by mutilating flyers of the [Never Again Association](#).

There is a general lack of understanding of the complex history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in India. This ignorance partly informs the above-mentioned protests and actions. In this simplistic understanding of the conflict, all Israelis are painted as Jews, whereas all Palestinians are perceived as Muslims, overlooking all other socio-cultural diversities. To achieve a proper understanding of the conflict, one needs to have a knowledge of both sides of the conflict, including its historical realities. This can only be achieved by educating people about both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives, as done in some institutions in India such as Presidency University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, O.P. Jindal Global University, among others. The only way forward is for students to develop a multi-faceted understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through education and dialogue by means of lectures, seminars and workshops.

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