Modi Visit: How Israel Went From 'Contaminated' by Colonialism to India's Strategic Ally

From David Ben-Gurion onwards, Israeli leaders pursued a long, unrequited love affair with India. Why were they rebuffed for so long?

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As Narendra Modi arrives this week for the first state visit ever by an Indian prime minister to Israel, both he and his host Prime Minister Netanyahu will be marking a significant warming up of ties between the two countries. But it will also express the fulfillment of a long-unrequited desire, dating back to the early days of the Jewish state, for close ties with, and recognition from, India.

In those early years, David Ben-Gurion and other key Zionist leaders made strenuous bids for political and diplomatic support from Indian nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Ben-Gurion tried leveraging Einstein to persuade Nehru

Ben-Gurion himself made personal contact not only with central Indian political figures to seek their support, but even convinced Albert Einstein, a reluctant Zionist, to write to Jawaharlal Nehru, soon to be India’s first prime minister, in the summer of 1947 to push for a sympathetic hearing for Zionism. Einstein’s four-page letter presented the nuances of political Zionism and highlighted both sides’ common predicament: that Jews, like Indians, were very much in need of a state of their own:

"Free Jewish immigration to Palestine, and the right of the Jews to continue the upholding of their ancient homeland without artificial restrictions, will increase the sum of wellbeing..."
in the world. It is time to make an end to the ghetto status of Jews in Palestine, and to the pariah status of Jews among peoples. I trust that you, who so badly have struggled for freedom and justice, will place your great influence on behalf of the claim for justice made by the people who for so long and so dreadfully have suffered from its denial.”

But not even Einstein could convince Nehru. India voted against the UN partition plan of Mandate Palestine in 1947 and later, in 1950, extended recognition to the State of Israel but without establishing diplomatic relations.

David Ben-Gurion was enamored of Indian culture, and tried leveraging Einstein to persuade Nehru of Zionism's merits. Ben-Gurion in his study at Kibbutz Sde Boker, 1966Shalom Buchbinder/Tzrif Ben-Gurion Archive

Ben-Gurion wanted much more than formal ties with the new Indian republic; he desired a wider friendship and cooperation. He was personally fascinated with Indian civilization. After a decade of India’s opposition to relations with Israel, Ben-Gurion wrote, in September 1957, to Dr. Indra Sen (of the Aurobindo Ashram) praising the distinctive Indian approach to religion: "From Buddhism I have learned much about the history of religion and philosophy in India in general – and after I was enchanted by the Vedanta I began the study of the schools of Sankhya and Yoga." In his bedroom in the Negev kibbutz of Sde Boker, there was only one leader's portrait: Gandhi's.

In the absence of any ideological or diplomatic support from Gandhi for Zionism, or later from the Indian Republic for Israel, it was an unusual and difficult affection for Ben-Gurion to carry – much like a one-sided love affair.

**For India, Zionism was 'contaminated' by colonialism**

India's diplomatic choices before and after independence were guided by the principles of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and Third World solidarity. Having sought British support through the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the Zionist movement was 'contaminated' by colonialism and as such, poles apart from how the Indian national movement saw itself. That breech was deepened by the choice of Zionist leaders to build strong relations with the
West, particularly the imperialist West, instead of choosing solidarity with the struggling Asian national liberation movements.

Self-determination for the Palestinian people was a significant issue for Nehru, who gave them strong support and turned away from relations with Israel. There was a regional political consideration for India in the 1950s: the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan. India hoped for Arab support for the Indian case against Pakistan by extending its strong support to the Palestinians and not towards Israel. However, India’s support for the Palestinian cause or solidarity with the greater Arab world did not result into any tangible diplomatic gain for India from the Arab world.

It wasn’t until 1992 that India established full diplomatic relations and an exchange of ambassadors with Israel. External factors facilitated this about-turn.

First, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Union created a new diplomatic matrix for India. As a result, Indian foreign policy was revised.

Second, Israel was an excellent source for armaments and defense systems just as the Soviet Union and its associated weapons industries were crumbling. India’s poor military capabilities played a crucial role in opening relations with Israel. Israel supplied arms to India in 1962 during its war with China; Nehru himself wrote a letter to Ben-Gurion asking for help in November that year.

Third, Israel was negotiating, for the first time, with Palestinian leaders like Yasser Arafat on the basis of a two-state solution. That readiness, even though it didn’t lead to Palestinian self-determination, neutered some of India’s long-held reservations about dealing with Israel.

**India's interested, but there's a knowledge gap**

Since then, India-Israel relations have grown increasingly close. In two-and-a-half decades Israel has emerged as one of India’s core diplomatic allies. Both are developing common ground beyond strategic defense and security collaboration issues, including technology transfers in agriculture and water conservation.
How Israel went from 'contaminated' by colonialism to India's strategic ally: Israeli President Reuven Rivlin at the Mahatma Gandhi memorial in New Delhi on his state visit. November 15, 2016. PRAKASH SINGH/AFP

Academic collaboration is another area of growth. The University Grants Commission of India and the Council for Higher Education of Israel have established joint research grants for Indian and Israeli scholars to collaborate. In November 2016, President of Israel Reuven Rivlin visited India with the presidents and heads of the Israeli universities and research institutes. It was no accident that his delegation included a sizeable Israeli academic representation.

In Indian academia, there is a growing interest towards Israel, including think tanks close to New Delhi’s centers of powers exploring potential areas of strategic growth. Yet there is still a lack of substantial knowledge about Judaism, Zionism, Israel’s multi-ethnic society or pluralistic culture. The Jindal Centre for Israel Studies, where I work, was established in 2012 to fill this knowledge gap; it is the first of its kind in the Indian subcontinent.

**Pragmatism isn't a dirty word**

The strategic partnership between India and Israel is fueled by political pragmatism and mutual interests, and as such, it offers a win-win situation for both.

That kind of pragmatism was impossible back in the era of Ben-Gurion, when the challenging dynamics of newly decolonized states meant strategic partnerships were based on strict political affinity. There were few supplementary or alternative cultural or intellectual routes for finding common ground. Today, however, the transnational requirements of trade and commerce have somewhat flattened older political oppositions, and relations between India and Israel are built on these kinds of mutual interests. To some extent this has been India’s instrumental approach towards Israel.

With bilateral academic collaborations growing, and the field of Israel Studies emerging in India, the study of Israel won’t be limited to policy circles. The cultural and intellectual intersections between the two societies is something that will grow slowly but substantially in the long term.

Ben-Gurion himself would have celebrated this. At the end of his letter to Dr. Sen, he expressed a desire to see Indian students at studying at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and for Israeli students to study Indian philosophy. This cultural and intellectual exchange has already progressed far. Israeli academia has advanced studies on ancient India including Sanskrit, Tamil and Buddhism; young Israelis, particularly after their mandatory military service, have flocked to India for decades; more and more, Indian students are choosing Israeli universities for research studies, particularly post-doctorate courses in the pure sciences.

The first 25 years of public India-Israel relations have accrued significant gains. And India's governing party, the Bharatiya Janata (Indian People’s Party), a long-time advocate of Israel in the Indian political system, is likely to anchor India’s ties with Israel with even greater alacrity. That would indeed be a realization of Ben-Gurion's long-held but frustrated hopes of decades ago.
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