Remembering histories of Third World internationalism between India and Palestine: An interview with Vijay Prashad

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Linda & Chandni: Your notion of the Third World Project is important for investigating past and present connections between Third World liberation struggles. Can you begin by discussing the historical formation of the ties between the Palestinian liberation struggle and Indian anti-colonial and Communist movements? What are some of the historical connections between India and Palestine and the modes of identification across these Third World territories that preceded and prefigured the formation of these relationships?

Vijay: From about 1936 to the 1980s there was a complete consensus across the width of Indian nationalism on behalf of Palestine. It is striking how unanimous the verdict was, that the Palestinian national aspiration is identical to that of the Indians in our freedom movement. Only one small section – the Hindu nationalists – had a view that favored what would become Israel. Their politics marinated in the sauce of hatred against Muslims. Since many Palestinians were and are Muslims, the Hindu nationalists favored their enemy. But the broad assessment of Indian nationalism – a subset of the ethos of Non-Aligned internationalism – was on behalf of Palestine.

In 1936, the All-India Congress Committee in no uncertain terms bemoaned that the Jews of Palestine had ‘aligned themselves on the side of British imperialism’. The Congress hoped that ‘a free and democratic state in Palestine’ would be created that would offer ‘adequate protection of Jewish rights’. This formulation is very important. It is what the Indians would – over a decade later – argue for in the United Nations General Assembly and then in the UN Special Committee on Palestine. India, with Iran and Yugoslavia, took a
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position against the partition of Palestine and in favor of a federal solution (what now would be the ‘one-state solution’). India’s representative at the UN – Sir Abdur Rahman – grilled the Zionist leader and later President of Israel – Chaim Weizmann – at the UN Special Committee in 1947 on the issue of discrimination against Arabs. Rahman said to Weizmann that the policy of discrimination against Arab workers ‘may have been very good for a community [namely, the Jews], but from the point of view of country it was probably a very unwise thing to do’. Rahman asked the Zionist leadership to distinguish between political rights and religious rights, the rights of a citizen and the rights of religious belonging. This was all prescient. It foreshadows Israel’s ambiguity about being a ‘Jewish state’. It was part of the consensus view in India, articulated by India’s first Prime Minister – Jawaharlal Nehru – and its first ambassador to the United States – Asaf Ali.

When Israel entered the United Nations, India felt obliged to recognize it – that was a fait accompli. Nehru went to Parliament in 1949 to say that some kind of recognition ‘cannot obviously be indefinitely deferred’. The point was engagement of some kind, but not to lose sight of the consensus view for Palestine. India was key to preventing the emergence of Israel as a player in the Third World bloc, from Bandung onwards. It played an important role in the United Nations to push for the establishment of the institutions for the Palestinians. During the 1948, 1956, 1973 and 1982 acts of Israeli aggression, the Indians led the defense of Palestine in the United Nations. Indian troops were at the – then – Egyptian border in Gaza as UN peacekeepers, led by the legendary Major-General Indar Jit Rikhye. India was a key player in the UN resolution that defined Zionism as a form a racism.

There was no difference in this era between the broad Indian nationalist view and that of the Indian Communist movement. Both had the same opinion about West Asia, and were committed to Palestine’s freedom at this time. Later, when Indian nationalism changes its colors, the contrast with Indian Communism is heightened. But that comes in the 1980s.

With the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1960’s what types of ties, relations, alliances and forms of solidarity were forged? For example, Bangladeshi fighters went and fought with the PLO in Beirut, are there other similar silenced histories of connections between the PLO and Indian or other South Asian resistance movements that can be recovered?

It is important to recognize that the Indian government developed close ties with the PLO since its foundation in 1964. A decade later – in 1975 – India formally recognized the PLO as the sole leader of the Palestinian movement, offering the PLO the right to an office in Delhi in 1980. This office was given the status of an embassy. It should be mentioned that China recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian movement as early as 1965. But India waited for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), whose 1973 summit in Algiers was the place where the PLO was accorded this status by
the Third World bloc. India followed the NAM here. In 1981, an Indian parliamentary delegation visited the Palestinian National Council in Damascus (Syria). This was significant because it suggested that the Indian parliament saw the Palestinian National Council as the parliament of the Palestinian people.

There is no evidence of any Indian or Pakistani fighters joining the fedayeen. Even the story of the Bangladeshi fighters is slightly exaggerated. There is no clear evidence that thousands of fighters came to Lebanon in 1982. One has to tread carefully here. It is true that some fighters came – from Japan, from Bangladesh, from Europe – but not significant numbers. You might want to see Naeem Mohaieman’s *Abu Ammar is Coming* (2016), a fine little film on Bangladesh and the PLO.

One of the important aspects of Indo-Palestinian relations is that India – from 1977 – strongly opposed the settlement activity of the new Likud government. At that time, India was governed by a coalition that included the Hindu nationalists. Nonetheless, the External Affairs Minister Morarji Desai informed Israel’s Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan – during a secret visit to India on 14 August 1977 – that India would like to see a two-state solution and that Israel must stop the settlement policy. Dayan said that a Palestinian state would threaten Israel’s security, a view Desai rejected. Desai also refused an exchange of ambassadors and refused to travel to Israel – even in secret. Two weeks later, the Indian government released a statement about the settlement activity – a plan set in motion by Ariel Sharon to seize the West Bank into Greater Israel: ‘India has always been against acquisition of territory by any country by use of force. India, therefore, strongly deplores the action taken to regularize existing Israeli settlements in occupied areas and to authorize new ones’. India consistently put the settlement issue on the map of the NAM and the UN. It did not let it rest. Indeed, at the 1983 NAM summit in Delhi, India initiated the creation of a NAM Committee on Palestine, which took special note of Israel’s illegal settlement project. It was at the NAM Committee on Palestine that the issue of a UN seat for the PLO was broached. This is a significant part of the India-Palestine relationship, particularly given the centrality of the settlement issue today. It is a largely forgotten history – that the Third World bloc played such a key role in shaping the parameters for Palestine in the UN.

It is also important to bear in mind that when regional powers – Syria in particular – tried to shape the PLO in its image, it was India that led delegation upon delegation to the region in order to insist on a united and independent Palestinian movement against Israeli colonization. Palestine’s Chargé d’Affaires of the PLO in Delhi – Jamil Hajaj – asked Indira Gandhi to intervene with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and the Lebanese to allow the PLO freedom to maneuver. Indian support for Yasser Arafat in this period was crucial. When he was close to being ejected as PLO chief in 1984, an Indian delegation went to Amman to the Palestine National Council to plead for unity. It succeeded. When Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984, Arafat came to her funeral. He called her his sister.
We are aware that the Indian Communist Party has adopted very strong positions supporting the Palestinian struggle. Can you speak to this history of Communist internationalist solidarity with Palestine? What are some of the important historical moments, political factors, forces and debates that prefigured and solidified the Indian Communist party’s positions on Palestine?

Perhaps the most important aspect here is the shift in India’s official stance vis-a-vis Palestine. Under economic pressure in the 1980s – and for a host of political reasons – the Indian bourgeois parties, led by the Congress, sought a rapprochement with the United States. It was made clear to the Indian diplomats that there would be no such new alignment unless India adopted a new posture towards Israel. The road to Washington, in other words, had to go through Tel Aviv. This was the first reason for the new relationship between India and Israel. India would eventually accord Israeli diplomatic status in 1992, and would lead the charge to rebuke the UN definition of Zionism as a form of racism. Washington was pleased, India received its economic assistance from the IMF and a new axis was beginning to be created between Washington, Tel Aviv and New Delhi. None of this is precisely about Hindu nationalism. Bourgeois Indian nationalism shifted its eyes from non-alignment to alignment with Washington. The price it had to pay was to modify its views on Israel.

The second aspect – in 1998 – came when India tested nuclear weapons for a second time (the first was in 1974). This test shut down US military sales to India as a consequence of the requirements of the Glenn Amendment against nuclear proliferation. All assistance – economic and military – between India and the United States ended in 1998. Before the fall of the USSR, India had relied on the Soviet Union for military imports. After 1992, India relied on the United States and France for its military supplies. With the Glenn Amendment, the American road was closed. Israel – which produces US-quality arms but without the barriers of the Glenn Amendment – entered the equation. India began to buy arms from Israel and is now Israel’s largest customer. This was again not because of the Hindu nationalists, but because of the ecology of the arms trade and nuclear non-proliferation. When the US lifted the sanctions on India in 2001, India had already become reliant upon Israeli weapons manufacturers. India has also wanted to create a domestic arms industry. A recent cancellation of an Israeli contract with the hope that the arms would be manufactured internally shows that Israel plays a useful role for the Indian arms buyers, but it is not essential to it. If domestic arms manufacturing begins or if Russian arms are available at a cheaper cost, India will likely cut its military purchases from Israel.

The third matter to deal with is the rise to prominence of the Hindu nationalists. When they came to power in 1998-2004 and then since 2013, they have sought a very close relationship with Israel. The Hindu right is temperamentally and ideologically proximate to the Zionist right. They share an antipathy to Muslims and much else. There
has been an attempt to link up fully with the Israeli world-view.

It is when Indian nationalism begins to shift from the consensus that the Indian communist movement becomes important here. While the bourgeois parties began to accommodate themselves with the new reality regarding Israel, the Communists maintained the view that the fight for Palestinian freedom is essential. The Communists have taken a firm position against the suffocation of Palestine and are some of the few political forces – apart from some of the Islamic political parties – to defend the Palestinian position in India. It is because of the Left, the Islamic parties and remnants of the older view in the Congress – as well as rational actors in the Indian foreign policy bureaucracy – that there has been no wholesale abandonment of the Palestinian cause. India continues to finance parts of the Palestinian Authority – for what its worth – and India, under pressure from political movements within – continues to use its diplomatic power against settlements and the ongoing occupation in general. The Communists give some of these views a backbone. That is essential work.

Can you briefly discuss the political consciousness that underpins the Communist Party’s internationalist solidarity towards Palestine?

It is very important to understand that the main fault-line for an assessment of world affairs is one’s understanding of imperialism. Those who understand the productive base of contemporary imperialism – structured around the global commodity chain, disarticulated production, the dominance of finance and the role of intellectual property rights – and its military aspect – the hub and spokes system of US power, the archipelago of military bases around the planet, the use of force to protect the power of the global 1% - have a certain view of the world. This view of the world acknowledges that the United States is not a humanitarian power. It is a geopolitical power, with ambitions to continue its role as the most powerful country on the planet. Israel is part of the network of allies for the US project. The current Indian government has also put itself forward as one of the US allies. This is a policy direction that is antithetical to the Indian communist view, which is deeply anti-imperialist.

Therefore, the Indian communist position on Palestine is not merely a moral position – angered at the mistreatment of the Palestinians – but it is an anti-imperialist one. It seeks to transform the social and infrastructural basis of imperialism. Imperialism’s West Asian base is Israel, who operates as a purveyor of weaponry – an essential drug of the imperialist order. Indian communists are often accused – around the question of Palestine – of being weak-kneed when it comes to the ‘Muslim world’. But this is a bogus criticism. There is no romanticism in the Indian communist line, no looking back at the days of the fedayeen or no eagerness to please a ‘Muslim constituency’ (as the right often argues, suggesting that the Palestine position is captive to a ‘Muslim vote bank’). Instead it is the anti-imperialist framework that insists on a position that opposes the Israeli occupation.
and calls for the self-determination of the Palestinians.

Older nostalgic positions on behalf of the Palestinians remain, but they are not significant. Nostalgia is not enough to base a real politics upon. There are tangible issues at stake here. In India, the camp of anti-imperialism has shrunk as India deepens its linkages to the United States corporations and military and continues its ties with the Israeli arms industry. To fight back against this is a very long and difficult road.

What do you think can be done to revive and strengthen internationalist ties between Indian movements and the Palestinian struggle in this historical moment?

Connections between India and Palestine are essential. These have to be tangible and also ideological. One example is the close collaboration between the Indian theatre group – Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) – and the Palestinian theatre group – Freedom Theatre. JANAM and the Freedom Theatre worked together in India over several weeks to develop a play together and then toured it across India. Their ‘jatha’ or procession across the country took the Palestinian cause to different cities and towns, developing the framework for people to understand the importance of tangible solidarity. Then JANAM went to Palestine and worked with the Freedom Theatre in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Along with JANAM came some Indian writers and artists – including Orijit Sen, who developed an original mural to link the two organizations on the walls of Jenin.

We, at LeftWord Books, have also made it part of our mission to deepen these organizations ties and to provide informative work for our reading public. We are currently doing two books with the Freedom Theatre on their work for an international audience. We also published books on the Gaza war (by Max Blumenthal) and on the India-Israel relationship (edited by Githa Hariharan). It is important for us to develop these ties and to produce work that challenges our readership.

The BDS movement in India, at its infancy, has pushed hard when Indian artists go to Israel or when Israeli sponsorship is provided to Indian shows. The activists have also targeted the purchasing of Indian arms. But this is not a mass movement as yet.

It is to be welcomed that the All-India Kisan Sabha, a farmers’ union of 17 million members, has endorsed BDS. The Kisan Sabha is a mass organisation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The Indian Communist movement continues to struggle on behalf of the Palestinian freedom movement by mass protest as well as by building up an independent BDS movement in India. This will take time, but it is already on the way to being a reality.

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