

INDIA AND THE HOLOCAUST: PERCEPTIONS OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

P. R. Kumaraswamy

India was one of the few non-Arab and non-Muslim powers that was reluctant to normalize relations with Israel. After initial hesitations, it recognized the Jewish State in September, 1950, but it waited for more than four decades to establish diplomatic relations.¹ This approach was largely the continuation of the pre-1947 position of the Indian Nationalists. Their inability and even unwillingness to understand the Jewish problem and their unsympathetic attitudes towards the demand for a Jewish national home in Palestine come out distinctly in their attitude towards the Holocaust.

Ever since its formation in 1885, the Indian National Congress has been more than a political party; rather it was a nationalist movement fighting for India's freedom. As a result, the Congress Party influenced and molded the policies of free India when the Indian sub-continent was partitioned in 1947. Similarly their persecution and destruction at the hands of Nazi Germany marked the most crucial period of Jewish suffering and survival and played a vital role in the emergence of the Jewish State. How did the Congress Party react to such a colossal event which influenced international opinion in favor of a homeland for the Jews?

Asia in general was indifferent to the Jewish problem and the Jewish longing for Jerusalem. According to one school of thought, Asian apathy was due to the absence of the Judeo-Christian heritage.² The history of the Jewish people and their claims to the Holy Land were alien to the Asian masses as well as to their Western-educated leaders. Others, however, have attributed the Asian reluctance to endorse the Zionist enterprise in erstwhile Palestine to Asia's suspicion and disapproval of the goals and objectives of the Zionists.³

Neither of these arguments can be dismissed easily. The Judeo-Christian heritage significantly facilitated the formation of the Jewish state. The reasons for the support differed. For some Christians, it was the fulfillment of the Prophecy and for others it was an atonement for centuries of persecution of the 'chosen people.' This was also seen as an honorable solution to the age-old Jewish problem in non-European and non-Christian Palestine.

Likewise, Islamic countries and countries with large or sizable Muslim populations perceived Jewish claims to Palestine through an Islamic prism. While persecution of Jews was alien to Islamic civilization, the latter was also unfamiliar with the concept of equality. In the words of Bernard Lewis, "How could one accord the same treatment to those who follow the true faith and

those who willfully reject it?"⁴ As a result, countries with sizable Muslim populations opposed the 1947 UN Resolution calling for the partition of Palestine, and India was no exception.

India was largely indifferent towards the Jewish problem and was primarily concerned with the plight of the Arabs in mandated Palestine. Nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had shown considerable understanding and sympathy towards the European treatment of the Jews. The former called them 'untouchables of the Christianity' and the latter described them as 'people without a home or nation.' However, due to a variety of reasons, developments and compulsions, the Indian nationalists did not support the demand for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Even though towards the end of his life, Mahatma Gandhi type spoke favorably of a Jewish homeland, this did not affect Indian thinking.⁵

On the specific question of the Holocaust, the Congress Party maintained an unusually subdued silence. It adopted no formal resolution either on the Jewish problem or on the Holocaust. Making a passing reference, the foreign policy resolution adopted in its 1939 annual session declared:

International morality has sunk so low in Central and South Western Europe that the World has witnessed with horror, the organized terrorism of the Nazi government against the people of the Jewish race... The Congress disassociates itself entirely from British policy which has consistently aided the Fascist powers and helped in the destruction of the democratic countries. The Congress is opposed to imperialism and fascism alike and is convinced that world peace and progress required the ending of both of these...⁶

Earlier the Congress Party mentioned 'the plight of Jews in Europe' for the first time in December, 1938. The Congress Working Committee (CWC) resolution on *Palestine*, declared *inter alia*: "While sympathizing with the plight of Jews in Europe and elsewhere, the Committee deplors that in Palestine the Jews have relied on British armed forces to advance their special claims and thus aligned themselves on the side of British Imperialism."⁷ The primary focus, thus, was on Jewish 'collaboration' with Imperialism and their 'persecution' in Europe. However it is essential to remember that both these resolutions were adopted well before the Nazi decision to annihilate Jews through mass murders and gas chambers.

The Jewish Refugees

Besides these two instances, Nehru, the chief architect of the foreign policy of the Congress Party, unsuccessfully attempted to declare the party's support for Jewish refugees. Keeping in view 'the terrible pogrom in Germany against the Jews,' Nehru sponsored a resolution in the CWC. Even though the exact date is not clear, this probably happened in December, 1938, at the

Wardha session in that took place shortly after Nehru returned from Europe. The draft resolution read:

The Committee sees no objection to the employment in India of such Jewish refugees as are experts and specialists and who can fit in with the new order in India and accept Indian standards.⁸

This move however was not accepted by the Congress Working Committee and especially by Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose and hence was rejected.

Nehru had just returned from an European tour. Besides this first hand experience in Europe, what motivated Nehru to seek such a resolution? In his letter to Congress President Bose, in April, 1939, Nehru remarked:

...I felt that we must express our opinion in regard to it (that is, pogrom). You (that is, Bose) say that you were 'astounded when I produced a resolution seeking to make India an asylum for the Jews.' I am surprised to learn that you felt so strongly about this as, so far as I remember, you did not express yourself definitely at the time. But is it fair to characterize my resolution as one seeking to establish an asylum for the Jews in India?... *It was not from the point of view of helping Jews that I considered this question, though such help was desirable where possible without detriment to our country, but from the point of view of helping ourselves by getting first-rate men of science, industry, etc., on very moderate payment.* Quite a number of countries sent special commissions to Vienna, after the Nazi occupation, to pick out good men. Turkey has profited greatly from such specialists. It seemed to me an ideal chance to get the right type of technicians and specialists. Their coming here on low salaries would have helped us also to bring down other salaries. They would have come for a period and not to settle down for ever. And only a limited number would have come, and only such as were of definite use to us and accepted our standards and political outlook.⁹

Nehru was candid.

Nehru was primarily motivated by the benefits that would accrue to India by the entry of Jewish refugees from Europe and humanitarian considerations were of secondary importance. It is however essential to remember that Nehru's views were not different from the prevailing international situation; nor was he alone.¹⁰ Nehru was not holding any public office when he advocated the absorption of the Jewish refugees. Even while fighting against foreign rule, he was merely seeking to promote India's interests through selective absorption.

Furthermore, during the war a number of refugees did come to India and Nehru pleaded for their accommodation in various provincial governments.

Some Indian leaders and future diplomats such as Shiva Rao and R. K. Nehru, were married to Jewish refugees from Europe.¹¹ More over, after the war, India served as a transit point for a number of Iraqi and Afghan Jews prior to their emigration to Israel. As Prime Minister, Nehru was more than accommodating and repeatedly extended their stay in India.¹²

Rationale

Given the magnitude of the human tragedy, the response of the Congress Party was mild and muted. A more general and common explanation could be that during World War II, normal functioning of the party was seriously hampered. Severe restrictions were imposed by the British and the war crippled its normal functions as most of the Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru were incarcerated. For the first time since 1885, the Congress Party was prevented from conducting its annual election for party president and was unable to hold its annual session. As the entire leadership was in British prisons, party forums such as the Working Committee were unable to function.

This position continued through entire course of the World War and once the war ended the leaders were gradually released. But the Indian nationalists focused their attention towards the immediate domestic agenda. Pre-occupation with the impending partition of the sub-continent along communal lines prevented them from paying any attention to the outside world and the question of the Holocaust took a back seat.

The Holocaust undoubtedly accelerated the realization of Zionist political aspirations in Palestine and in certain ways it was instrumental in generating a favorable view towards the idea of a Jewish homeland. At the same time, however, there were skepticisms concerning this linkage and many, including the Indian nationalists, deliberately adopted a policy of delinking the Jewish annihilation in Europe and the fate of Palestine. For example, when the Special Session of the UN General Assembly met in April, 1947, to deliberate the future of Palestine, India vehemently opposed the proposed United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) visit to the Displaced Persons camps in Europe. Even the UNSCOP, of which India was a member, rejected such a linkage and the majority of the members recommended that "any solution for Palestine cannot be considered as a solution of the Jewish problem in general."¹³ While the majority of the members of the UNSCOP recommended the partition of Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states, India, Iran and Yugoslavia proposed the creation of a federal Palestine with adequate autonomy for the Jews.¹⁴

However, these factors alone do not explain the position of the Congress Party. It is possible to offer a few reasons why the Congress Party, which had championed the cause of oppressed and subjugated people, was indifferent towards the Nazi gas chambers. This omission becomes more revealing if one

looks at the Congress position on the rights of the Arabs in Palestine; since early 1920 it had adopted as many as six resolutions on Palestine and expressed its sympathy and support.

First and foremost, there was no Jewish constituency in India that could lobby the Congress Party to adopt a more vocal stand vis-à-vis the Holocaust. On the contrary, the Muslims and Congress Party's arch rival, the Muslim League, actively lobbied for their co-religionists in Palestine. Unlike the Congress, the League was vociferous in its opposition to the Balfour Declaration and British policies towards Palestine. In its view Palestine was an Islamic land and hence could not be placed under non-Muslim control. The Jewish population in India has been microscopic and, due to historical and religious reasons, they faced no animosity in India. Unlike Christianity or Islam, Judaism is not a proselytizing religion and this facilitated Hinduism adopting a more favorable attitude towards the Jews. At the same time, however, centuries of tolerant atmosphere also eliminated the possibility of Zionism taking serious roots in India. Thus there was no political compulsion for the Congress Party to show any special attention towards the Jews.

In this context it is essential to remember that the mainstream leaders of the Zionist movement were not keen to cultivate India. Literature on contacts with India often refer to efforts made by the pre-state Israeli leaders in seeking India's support and understanding; attempts by Immanuel Olsvanger and Martin Buber figure prominently. Olsvanger went to India in 1936 as the first official emissary of the Jewish Agency and met a number of Indian leaders including Gandhi and Nehru.¹⁵ Likewise, in 1939 Martin Buber, together with Judah Magnes, wrote to Gandhi outlining the philosophical underpinnings of the Zionist movement and their explanations were later published as *Two Letters to Gandhi*. These letters are commonly understood and described as *Buber-Gandhi correspondence*. However there is no evidence to suggest that Gandhi had read Buber's letters, let alone replied to them,¹⁶ and hence the term *correspondence* appears inaccurate and misleading.

Important as they were, neither Olsvanger nor Buber can be treated as the principal figures in the Zionist movement. Nor were they towering personalities who can be compared to the influence and leadership that Gandhi or Nehru wielded in India. Their contacts with the Indian leaders were important primarily because of the absence of any other contacts. For its part the Zionist leadership was aware of its priorities. For example, speaking to the Zionist Executive on April 6, 1948, just weeks before the establishment of the State of Israel, David Ben-Gurion remarked: "When we say the whole world, it is an exaggeration; we never think of India or China or similar countries, but rather about the countries in which Jews have lived or are living."¹⁷ Until 1948 there were no personal contacts between the principal figures on either side and the contacts with Gandhi were minimal and occasional. Until 1956 when Moshe Sharett visited India, no leading

Zionist personalities had come to India and even Sharett was no longer in office when he met Prime Minister Nehru.

This indifference of the pre-state Israeli leaders contrasts with the position of the Arabs of Palestine. Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem, began courting India's support for enlarging the Palestinian problem into an Islamic agenda in the early 1920s. British India had the largest Muslim population in the world and Palestine was a serious religious issue for the community. When the Congress Party was trying to forge Hindu-Muslim unity against the separatist slogans of the Muslim League, it could ill-afford to adopt a more pronounced stand on the Holocaust.

Two, Nehru, the architect of the Congress Party's foreign policy, looked at the prevailing international situation through his anti-colonial prism. Writing to Zionist Orientalist Immanuel Olsvanger in September, 1936, he remarked: "I cannot tolerate this imperialism in India or Palestine and the question I ask everyone is whether he stands for this imperialism or against it."¹⁸ Predisposed towards the Arabs, neither he nor the Congress Party considered Zionism a genuine national liberation struggle but saw it as a collaborator with British imperial designs in the Middle East and elsewhere. Even while seeking Gandhi's support, the Zionist leadership was unable or unwilling to reciprocate and endorse India's struggle against the British. As the Jewish nationalist movement, Zionism was unable to support and endorse India's struggle for freedom.¹⁹ Their association with and dependency on the British inhibited the Zionist leaders from identifying with the political objectives of the Congress Party, for such a move would have alienated them from the British. As a result while the Arabs and the Mufti were supporting India's freedom struggle, even the limited Zionist contacts with Gandhi were not accompanied by a reciprocal support for his struggle for freedom.

A third explanation could be found in the pro-Nazi influences of Subhas Chandra Bose, especially while he was Congress President during 1937-39. Commenting on his influences, Nehru remarked:

He (that is, Congress President Bose) did not approve of any step being taken by the Congress which was anti-Japanese or anti-German or anti-Italian. And yet such was the feeling in Congress and the country that he did not oppose this or many other manifestations of Congress sympathy for China and the victims of Fascist and Nazi aggression...²⁰

As discussed earlier, Nehru's resolution on the Jewish refugees was rejected by the CWC primarily due to the opposition from Bose. Quoting German sources in November, 1942, the *Jewish Advocate* (Bombay) charged that Bose had argued that "anti-Semitism must become a part of the Indian freedom movement since the Jews—he alleged—had helped the British to exploit and suppress the Indians."²¹ By that time Bose had broken off from the Congress but even after his departure, it appeared that he had a sizable

influence in the party. Rebellious against the pacifist policy advocated by the Congress Party reeling under the influence of Gandhi and Nehru, Bose sought to militarily overthrow British rule with the support of Germany and Japan. Since anti-Semitism was alien to Indian culture and history, irrespective of his motivation, Bose's alliance with Nazi Germany was a retrograde move and complicated things for the Congress Party.

And lastly, during the critical years of 1940 and 1946, the Congress Party was headed by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. He had strong Arab connections with his mother being the niece of Sheikh Muhammed Zahir Vatri of Saudi Arabia and himself being born in Mecca.²² After India's independence he was regarded as Nehru's adviser on Arab and Islamic affairs.²³ According to Michael Brecher, Azad had vetoed Nehru's proposal for the normalization of ties between India and Israel that was promised to Walter Eytan when the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry visited New Delhi in early 1952.²⁴ Given his sympathy for the Arabs, it is extremely likely that under Azad's influence the Congress Party adopted a milder and indifferent posture vis-à-vis the Holocaust.

Conclusion

Even half a century later, the Holocaust plays a central part in Israel and haunts Jewish life both in Israel and in the Diaspora. The role and attitude of various countries, powers, groups and individuals towards this human suffering have repeatedly come under closer scrutiny and criticism. The passage of time has only intensified the interest. As India was a colony, the British represented and handled its international functions. This however did not prevent but rather facilitated the nationalist leadership's decision to adopt and articulate a position that registered India's opposition to Nazism and Fascism. At the same time, the Congress Party and its leaders, who for most of the war period were incarcerated by the British, adopted a somewhat indifferent and muted position towards the Holocaust.

Unlike the newly found champions of Jewish rights and Jewish defense against persecution, India has nothing to atone for. The Congress Party's position did not imply its endorsement or tacit compliance. It adopted a muted position partly due to the imprisonment of key leaders and partly due to its erstwhile position on the Arab-Jewish dispute over Palestine. The prolonged neglected and indifference of the Zionists further complicated the picture. After the war, when the magnitude of Jewish suffering began to unfold, the Congress Party was pre-occupied with the future of India and the impending partition of the sub-continent. It appeared content that India was neither a tacit accomplice to nor a beneficiary of the Jewish sufferings in Europe.

NOTES

- 1 Among others see, P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India's recognition of Israel, September, 1950," *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 31, no. 1 (January, 1995), pp. 124-138; and "India and Israel: Prelude to Normalization," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 19, no. 2 (Winter 1996), pp. 53-73.
- 2 Michael Brecher, *The New State of Asia: A Political Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968 reprint), pp. 125-127.
- 3 M. S. Agwani, "The Palestine Conflict in Asian Perspective," in *The Transformation of Palestine: Essays on the Origin and Development of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, by Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), p. 443.
- 4 Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, paperback), p. 4.
- 5 P. R. Kumaraswamy, "Mahatma Gandhi and the Jewish National Home: An Assessment," *Asian and African Studies* (Haifa), Vol. 26, no. 1 (March, 1992), pp. 1-13. See also, Gideon Shimoni, *Gandhi, Satyagraha and the Jews: A Formative Factor in India's Policy Towards Israel* (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 1977); Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and His Jewish Friends* (London: 1992); and Leonard A. Gordon, "Indian nationalist ideas about Palestine and Israel," *Jewish Social Studies* (New York), Vol. 37, nos. 3-4 (summer-fall 1975), pp. 221-234.
- 6 A. G. Zaidi and S. G. Zaidi, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1977ff), Vol. 12, p. 160.
- 7 Zaidi and Zaidi, *Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, p. 497.
- 8 Quoted in Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to Subhas Chandra Bose, 3 April 1939, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, First Series*, edited by S. Gopal (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972ff), Vol. 9, p. 537.
- 9 Gopal, Emphasis added.
- 10 For instance, after the war US President Harry S. Truman urged the British to allow 100,000 Jewish refugees into Palestine and implement one of the recommendations of the Anglo-American commission. At the same time he was not willing to relax the immigration policies of the US.
- 11 S. H. Bergmann and Ya'acov Shimoni, "Report on the Inter-Asian Conference," 17 April 1947, *Central Zionist Archives* (Jerusalem), S25/7485.
- 12 It was in this context that Nehru allowed a Jewish Agency immigration office in Bombay shortly after India recognized Israel in September, 1950.
- 13 *United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, Report to the General Assembly* (New York: United Nations, 1947), Vol. 1, p. 46. Only Guatemala and Uruguay refused to endorse this recommendation.

- 14 During the UN General Assembly vote on the partition of Palestine on November 29, 1947, India joined the Arab and Islamic countries in opposition to the move.
- 15 For a detailed discussion see, Shimoni, *Gandhi, Satyagraha and the Jews*, pp. 28-31.
- 16 Shimoni, p. 47.
- 17 Quoted in Michael Brecher, *Israel, the Korean War and China: Images, Decisions and Consequences* (Jerusalem: Institute of Asian and African Studies, 1974), p. 39.
- 18 Jawaharlal Nehru to Immanuel Olsvanger, 25 September 1936, *Central Zionist Archives*, S25/3583.
- 19 While seeking the support of the Indian nationalists Olsvanger drew parallels with the Zionist and Indian struggles. Such comparisons were made only in India or conversations with the Indian leaders. Even in private individuals such as Olsvanger were unable to identify with India's struggle against the British.
- 20 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1985), p. 422. However one cannot underestimate or ignore the political rivalry between the two and the threat Bose posed to Nehru's future in a free India.
- 21 Report in the *Jewish Chronicle* (London) reproduced in *Jewish Advocate* (Bombay), Vol. 12, no. 3 (November, 1942), p. 22.
- 22 Rajmohan Gandhi, *Understanding the Muslim Mind* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1987), p. 219.
- 23 M. S. Agwani, "Ingredients of India's Arab Policy," *Indian and Foreign Review*, (New Delhi), Vol. 10, no. 12 (April 1, 1973), p. 12.
- 24 Michael Brecher, *Nehru: A Political Biography* (London: 1959), pp. 571-72.