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## **PERSPECTIVES**

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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [cst@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:cst@tauex.tau.ac.il). We are glad to share with you the twenty-first issue of Perspectives.

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# **Hindutva and the Jews**

**A welcomed alliance, and a warning**

*Shiven Nath*

In 1947, India gained independence; shortly thereafter, in 1948, the State of the Jews was born. Since its independence from the British, India has remained a secular nation. Though predominately Hindu, it is home to the world's third-largest Muslim population.

Today much has changed.

India seeks to become a Hindu nation like Nepal. Its efforts to do so drive it closer to Israel.

As with Israel, India, too, had a very tumultuous beginning as the subcontinent was divided into two nations.

During the partition, 4.75 million Hindus were massacred and displaced, the memory of which haunts the minds of many Hindus.

Concurrently, in 1947, India faced a war with its new neighbor, Pakistan, and the Pakistani Army occupied parts of Kashmir. The territorial dispute over Kashmir with Pakistan remains a bone of contention.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), the dominant political force in India today, has long admired the Zionist state.

In his book, *Hindutva*, first published in 1923, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), a revered nationalist figure, called for the creation of a Hindu state and looked forward to the fulfillment of the "Zionist Dream" of Palestine becoming a Jewish state.

Like Zionism, Hindutva – the ideology Savarkar formulated – fuses national and religious identities. Indian politicians such as the economist Subramaniam Swamy, one of the current leaders of the BJP and a member of the upper house of parliament, have stressed the close bonds between Hindutva and Zionism and the need for India to be a strong state as hostile neighbors like Pakistan surround it in their speeches.

In India, many find Swamy's reasoning unassailable – India has been colonized, looted, and plundered for centuries, first by the Mughals and then by the British. Hence, it is imperative for the country to be inviolable when it has a rogue neighbor like Pakistan.

To support his arguments, Swamy used the terrorist attacks on Bombay as an example. According to Swamy, both Jewish and Hindu societies were targeted in the 26/11 attacks, aided and abetted by Pakistan.

Calls for "Zionist Israel" and "Hindu India" to curb Islamic extremism have become common in Indian political discourse.

India and Israel share a much deeper bond than defense or tackling terrorism. Politically, land has become a focal point in the politics of Hindutva, as in Zionism. Hindutva leaders have widely praised the controversial West Bank Jewish settlement model for solving the conflict in Kashmir.

Emulating such a model can be onerous but not impossible, as Hindus and Kashmiri Pandits historically inhabited the valley. Moreover, Kashmir prospered economically and culturally when it was ruled and administered by the Hindus.

Israel has always been unequivocal and consistent in its support towards India over the insurgency-wracked region of Jammu and Kashmir, even when the government decided to repeal the special status given to Kashmir in 2019. The move revoked the constitutionally granted autonomous status that it had in India for many years.

Following in Israel's footsteps, India passed a law known as the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, which gives citizenship to Hindus from neighboring countries while denying this right to Muslims.

The law bears a striking resemblance to Israel's Law of Return, under which Jewish people from across the globe can gain citizenship. Israel even provided India with robust support when the citizenship law was passed, despite facing international criticism.

Violent demonstrations broke out, with protestors decrying the law as “discriminatory towards minority groups.” This is erroneous – India has long welcomed different religions, including Jews, who have faced little persecution throughout their long history in the subcontinent.

Propagators of Hindutva have championed Israel's ideals of being a strong Jewish Nation. Political leaders and Hindutva activists like Mohan Bhagwat, the head of the right-wing extremist organization Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), have often sung Israel's praises, using the symbolism of strength and might.

In a 2015 speech, Bhagwat expressed his concern over India's “weak” military preparedness and argued India should learn from Israel's example of “tit-for-tat” as hostile neighbors surround it.

Indubitably, he mentioned that Israel overcame its adversaries and prospered in the field of technology and agriculture. So much so that he stated that India is “a backward country” compared to Israel.

The RSS's views toward Israel run deeper. They consider Israel an ancient civilization and culture that is to be appreciated and admired, but also a modern nation that successfully established a democratic state in a hostile environment.

A growing ideological convergence about the image of a “strong state” in terms of a militaristic and security-oriented approach has appealed also to the BJP leadership. In its vision, the BJP wants India to be identified as a nation with strong military might like Israel.

An example encapsulating this image is when India successfully conducted surgical strikes in Pakistan in 2016. In a speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, “Our army's might is being discussed across the country. We used to hear earlier that Israel has done this. The nation has seen that the Indian Army is no less than anybody.”

During the Gaza War in May 2021, Tejasvi Surya, a BJP parliamentarian and RSS supporter, tweeted, “We are with you. Stay strong, Israel,” while the BJP spokesman in Chandigarh, Gaurav Goel, wrote, “Dear Israelis, you are not alone, we Indians stand strongly with you.”

India has every right to continue its quest to be a Hindu nation and inculcate the values of Hindutva, just as Israel has the right to protect its existence as the State of the Jews. However, there are reasons for concern.

In its bid to be a Hindu nation, India appears to be losing its bearings. The democratic foundations of the country are being harmed and weakened.

Since Prime Minister Modi's landslide victory in 2014 and 2019, activists and journalists have found it increasingly difficult to criticize the government and its policies. Attacks on freedom of speech and freedom of the press have shattered the democratic pillars on which India has prided itself for many years. So, too, has the rise of the partisan press and the concentration of media ownership.

The Modi government has successfully curtailed the media's ambition and criticism through intimidation and legislation. According to Freedom House, Modi's government has advanced security, defamation, sedition, and hate speech laws to silence media critics, including the Information Technology Act and IT Rules of 2021 addressing content critical of authorities. In 2022, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked India 150 out of 180 in its annual Press Freedom Index, down from 142 in 2021 and just ahead of Russia.

Hindu nationalists have also campaigned to discourage expressions and speech deemed "antinational," which has contributed to increasing self-censorship.

India must safeguard the liberal pillars upon which it was established, first and foremost, freedom of speech. So must Israel do. They must also assure the independence and strength of their judiciaries. The bond between the countries is welcomed; it must remain a bond between democracies.

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