



What India can teach Israel

31.05.2011 | Alex Stein *

Tel Aviv - In June, I will be travelling to India for a year. Globalisation and vast changes in our concept of leisure have turned travel into an activity enjoyed by huge numbers of people, particularly in the West. For me, the act of travelling to India for such a long stretch of time will be an opportunity to ask questions and satisfy my curiosity.

For one, I wonder, how my journey might influence my understanding of my own country, Israel, particularly regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict?

Despite the vast and obvious differences, there are a number of uncanny parallels between Israel and India. Both countries became sovereign nations through partition in the late 1940s, their territories having been previously been part of the British Empire. Both countries were de facto one-party states for 30 years, with political competition concentrated within the (left-wing founding) party, rather than between parties. By the 1980s, a strong right-wing alternative, playing to religious nationalism and deriving from movements that had previously used violent tactics had emerged to become serious players in the government, seen in the Likud in Israel and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. Both countries have fought a series of wars with their neighbours over land. Both have a Muslim minority of around 20 per cent. Both are modern states based on ancient civilisations seeking to renew themselves.

What Israel lacks, though, is a robust culture of pluralism, and it is this that India has in abundance. During my first visit to India, in the summer of 2008, I was struck by the country's religious diversity. I hiked with Sikhs to the pilgrimage site of Hemkund, sat with Muslims at the 13th century Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya's shrine in Delhi, and walked with Hindus through the famous temple town of Khajuraho. This diversity characterises the entire country, whether it be the language, the food or the literature. Even though the majority of Indians are Hindus, the way each group practices their religion is remarkably diverse and pluralistic – and all this in a country with a robustly secular constitution.

Of course, there are still major problems – communal violence, the Kashmir dispute, the conflict with Pakistan, corruption and widespread poverty. But there is much that we can learn from India, and I believe it offers a particularly interesting prism through which to consider the Israeli experience. Crucially, it has managed to create a proud and all-encompassing national culture without forcing its citizens to compromise on their other identities, including their religious identity. It has even done this without a shared language.

Both Israel and Palestine can gain from this. Solving the conflict is currently presented in unnecessarily black-and-white terms. People say: "either Israel or Palestine", "either Jewish or democratic" or "either viable or untenable." This is not constructive. The current state of affairs is not an either-or situation. There are shades of grey.

For example, if final-status negotiations focus solely on the zero-sum question of how to separate the two peoples, then this will be reflected in a future of fear and mistrust. But if agreement can be reached that both sides have national rights that can only be played out somewhere between the river and the sea, then there is the possibility of a more optimistic and pluralistic future. There may be some interesting models to find in India.

It is becoming increasingly clear that whether the solution is two states, one state or a federation, the one-state/two-states dichotomy is false. The unique nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires creativity and flexibility, and a willingness to learn from other countries' experiences.

The Indian experience demonstrates that pluralism needn't mean giving up on a nation's *raison d'etre*, and that there is nothing to fear from ensuring that minorities have full rights. There is no reason why Israeli nationalism has to come at the expense of Palestinian nationalism. There is no reason why Israeli Arabs cannot play a full part in the life of the Jewish state. We just have to be courageous enough to open ourselves to these possibilities.

* Alex Stein lives in Tel Aviv and is an activist in Combatants for Peace. He blogs at www.falsedichotomies.com. This article is part of a series on globalisation and religious pluralism written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews). Source: Common Ground News Service (CGNews), 17 May 2011, www.commongroundnews.org Copyright permission is granted.