

Abolitionist Struggle and (Fractured) Solidarities: Notes from India

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Figure 1: "We Are Palestine" graffiti in Srinagar by Mudassir Gul. Photo: Kamran Yousuf

I

In May 2022, a group of activists, artists, poets, academics, musicians, and many others organized an international Dalit Panthers-Black Panthers Conference, hosted in the city of Nanded, in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Perhaps for the first time, a conference on a global abolitionist struggle was organized in India. Black Panther icons such as Michael D McCarty and Henry Gaddis attended the conference alongside Dalit Panthers' leaders such as J V Pawar. The Dalit Panthers movement, an anti-caste movement, was started in 1972 by educated Dalit youth from the slums of Mumbai in India. The Dalit Panthers modeled themselves after the Black Panther Party. Interestingly, J V Pawar, one of the founders, named her daughter Angela after the African American radical scholar and activist Angela Davis. Although the organization was short-lived, it started a flow of revolutionary ideas and discourses resisting caste hierarchy and motivating scores Dalit youth to create Dalit resistance.

After fifty years of the Dalit Panthers' formation, the international Dalit Panthers-Black Panthers Conference brought together Dalit activists, scholars, artists, and others from different parts of India along with Black Panther icons. The conference was not limited to discussions and debates contemplating racial prejudice and caste discrimination; it had creative ways of expressing dissent and dialogues through theatrical performances, poetry readings, modern rap, and folk songs rooted in Dalit resistance. As a [tweet](#) from Panther

Talks reads, “the conference was about celebrating Dalit Renaissance.” This conference was a step towards a global struggle and solidarity. Many such engagements are taking place in different ways and on various platforms and scales. The Dalit Panthers-Black Panthers Conference tells us how solidarity networks can bring meaningful changes against racist, casteist, and oppressive regimes worldwide, even if these changes are minuscule. The conference demonstrates that activists, academicians, and civil society organizations have been creating a community internationally and finding ways to situate abolitionist struggle in a broader fight against imperialist powers. The Afro-American Dalit solidarity network is another example that shows how people have been examining and addressing the casteist and racist logic of oppression and discrimination in post-colonial states. Within a global abolitionist struggle, such linkages and connections between different movements are important, as are strategies, methods, and choices to continue a long tradition of internationalist movements about dismantling racist and casteist structures, the logic of settler colonialism, and abolishing militarism.

Based on my prolonged research in the Kashmir Valley, I have observed that Kashmiris are critical of the linkages of military, security practices, and surveillance networks between Israel and India. They see these two nations as oppressors. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2015 and 2021, India accounted for 42% of all Israeli weapons sales.

Further, Israel and India collaborated on counterterrorism training and strategy, including intelligence-sharing and joint exercises between the two states. The use of drones, cyber security, and algorithmic surveillance are new instruments of war, which these two nations are learning from each other. During Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel in 2017, the Israeli Foreign Ministry said: “I really don't see any difference between the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Hamas...We feel that India has a right to defend itself against terrorists in the same way as Israel has a right to defend itself from terrorists.” Israel has expressed its solidarity with India on many occasions against the ‘scourge of terrorism’. In January 2022, the New York Times reported that India and Israel had “agreed on selling a package of sophisticated weapons and intelligence gear worth roughly \$2 billion—with Pegasus and a missile system as the centerpieces.”

If India and Israel are learning from each other to maintain their status quo, reflecting forms of colonial and imperial practices, then the practices of resistance adopted by Palestinians and Kashmiris have some associations too. Kashmiris and Palestinians are building solidarities to reclaim the rights of self-determination, which can also be seen as a sign of a global anti-colonial struggle. The international media often invoke the word “intifada” for Kashmir’s struggle, calling the situation in Kashmir an ‘intifada-like popular revolt’. Similarly, international journalists often compare young Kashmiris (called *sang-bazan*) throwing rocks at Indian security personnel with Palestinian dissenters hurling stones at the Israeli security forces. I heard many other parallels between the Kashmiri struggle and Palestinian resistance during my field visits from 2012 to 2017 to Kashmir. Some of the common expressions I heard included that Kashmir is an “occupied territory” similar to Palestine, and both Kashmir and Palestine are fighting for the “right to self-

determination”. People in Kashmir and Palestine feel connected based on their constant struggle and resistance against the occupying powers. For example, it is not uncommon to spot graffiti in Kashmir supporting Palestinians and vice versa, hinting at linkages between the struggle of Kashmiris and Palestinians. Further, the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement also acknowledged the Kashmiri peoples' struggle and wrote in solidarity with Kashmir: “Our oppressors are united, and our struggles will be stronger if we too unite.”

In my fieldwork, I listened to expressions of Kashmiri youths who drew analogies between their and Palestine peoples' struggle and grit. People in these two contested zones have bonded together to form solidarities.

As Angela Davis (2016: 135) writes in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement*, “our histories never unfold in isolation... we cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories.” In constructing solidarities across borders, we need to recognize localized struggles and how these struggles are intimately interconnected on a regional and global scale. For instance, activist and journalist Gizele Martins, during her visit to Palestine, observed the parallels between the Israeli army's treatment of Palestinians and the conduct of military police back in her community in Brazil. Upon her return to Brazil, based on her observations in Palestine on policing and prison, Martins said: “...when I came back, I said: ‘if they globalize militarization, racism, and apartheid, it is our duty to go against that globally. I learned that we need to globalize our fight.” Carceral practices, political oppression, and human rights abuses are not confined to one place; neo-colonialism seems to exist everywhere. Under such conditions, building a global abolitionist movement resisting the logic of colonialism and militarism is imperative. Such efforts must also entail connecting local struggles in different countries with a global movement to internationalize the struggle and extend the reach of the abolitionist movement dismantling the structures of military occupation and settler colonialism.

At times, during my field visits to different locations in India, I have been asked by my friends and/or respondents: “Why do people extend solidarity to one section of society but remain silent on the other? Why does the inclusion of some mean exclusion of a few? Can we afford to be selective in supporting the rights of different groups inhabiting different spaces created by conflicts and discriminatory statist discourses?” Similarly, when well-known Indian social activist Yogendra Yadav visited Kashmir to interact with Kashmir's fruit growers, he faced some difficult and troubling questions about India's liberal democracy. One young Kashmiri asked him, “how do I trust liberals like you? When liberals in the US opposed Vietnam, they refused enlistment and paid the price... How many of you Indian liberals have suffered anything for our sake?” During my conversations with young Kashmiris, they shared similar sentiments, questioning the intent of certain solidarity movements and support of the Indian and international NGOs working there. They believe that, more than anything, some work done by such NGOs is nothing more than fact-finding tourism. Under the garb of fact-finding missions, some

missionaries visit Kashmir like tourists, oblivious to lived realities and everyday struggles of Kashmiris and often obfuscating lives surrounded by conflict with humane stories. I found that the locals in the region problematize the intent and design of such ‘projects works’ in Kashmir. I wonder why such skepticism and alienation exist when people are constructing coalitions to achieve a degree of solidarity, whether locally or globally. There is a need to look at fissures and categorization existing between different movements at the local level.

The meanings attached to abolition struggles in different locations may differ based on locally rooted contexts and movements. But in developing solidarities with different groups within the same country, it may be detrimental to emphasize one's struggle and be silent about others, even if such impressions are created unconsciously. Examples might include supporting the Indian farmers’ protest but keeping a distance from the Kashmiri struggle, or not paying attention to contentious engagement and politics of resistance in the northeastern states. As The Global Prison Abolitionist Coalition emphasizes, “selective anti-imperialism” is fatal to the abolitionist movement. For example, within the Indian border, other territories also function under similar patterns of repression and resistance, like one in Kashmir. Though these locations operate under varied material conditions and inhabit different spatial-temporal dimensions, the struggles in these places evoke similar sentiments stemming from lived experiences built on grief, pain, and a constant struggle. For example, Nagaland and Manipur, northeastern states in India, there is a long history of resisting the state powers.

The states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Tripura witnessed insurgency since the 1950s, with a more recent decline in insurgents’ activities. The conflicts in these states are rooted in border disputes, inter-state conflicts, and power struggles between states demanding greater autonomy and India’s central government. These states, like Kashmir, operate under similar logics of militarization and state biases. The localized struggles and resistant movements rooted in these regions implore anti-imperialists to broaden their scope and foster solidarities across scales, be it Kashmir in northern India, Nagaland, or Manipur in the northeastern region of India, or Palestine. I wonder if people from these spaces are talking to each other and combining their energies in their struggles. Several scholars, including Virginius Xaxa, Dolly Kikon, Papori Bora, Sanjib Baruah, and Mélanie Vandenhelsken have argued that northeast India remains invisible in the popular imagination of Indian people, as do their struggles. But the Kashmir conflict and its hypervisibility have brought the Kashmiri struggle to center stage in Indian politics, coloring it with contested claims and opinions.

Discussing the idea of solidarity, a publisher from Nagaland commented to me that scholarship and academic discourses centered around terms like occupation, oppression, and settler colonialism mention the Kashmiri struggle, at least in the context of the Global South. But she has not come across any specific work that looked at the parallels between Nagaland (or other states in northeast India) and Kashmir. The publisher added that she was unsure if people were trying to bridge this gap by bringing them together in their respective struggles. But she is hopeful and believes that as scholarship about these

regions grows, people will come together to build solidarities. Perhaps it is true that sometimes solidarity movements operate in fragmented spaces and in disconnected ways. We need an abolitionist framework adaptable to different locations and struggles that can detect, decode, and desist carceral practices and militarism. Perhaps there is a need to revisit our question(s) about solidarity work. How, for us (non-Kashmiris, non-Palestinians, non-Nagas), do the sites of protests, resistance, and abolitionist struggles serve as a critical method between scholarship and politics, anti-colonial politics, and global solidarity? We must keep asking ourselves difficult questions, challenging our scholarly assumptions so that we do not become too comfortable in our work challenging authoritarian regimes. Finally, solidarity should be taken as a contentious engagement and continuing conversation within and across the contexts of India, Palestine, Brazil, and elsewhere.

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