THE JOURNAL OF INDO-JUDAIC STUDIES

Number 6 June, 2003

I. Articles

THE JOURNAL OF INDO-JUDAIC STUDIES

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Canada	$15.00 (Can. funds)
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The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies is subsidized by grants from the Publications Fund Committee of the University of Saskatchewan, and the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Religious Studies, and Institute for Jewish Studies of Florida International University. Additional support is entirely welcome.

ISSN 1206-9330

From the Editors

The sixth issue of our journal comes to you with a flush of enthusiasm. During the summer of 2002, eighteen of us met at Oxford University for a first-ever conference on Indo-Judaic Studies. A report on the conference is included herewith. Meeting each other and sharing ideas and approaches to our common subject was intellectually stimulating and emotionally uplifting. This issue comes with the confidence that fascinating and serious research about Indo-Judaic Studies is being done around the globe, and with the hope that others will find encouragement to pursue new avenues and address new questions.

This issue contains seven articles, an installment in our ongoing bibliography, three book reviews, and an obituary, as well as the conference report.

Recently, Indo-Judaic Studies made the front page of newspapers from India to America. For example, the *Times of India* reported that DNA research had confirmed the Israelite origin of India's Bene Israel community. Our journal is pleased to go on record with the original research in an article by Tudor Parfitt of the University of London.

We then return to the old question of the dating and interpretation of the famous Kochi copper plates, which are reverently stored in the Holy Ark of the Kochi Synagogue. Eminent historian M. G. S. Narayanan, director of the Indian Commission of Historical Research, New Delhi, revisits these plates, about which he published a seminal article in 1971.

Scaria Zacharia, professor of Malayalam at Shree Shankaracharya Sanskrit University in Kochi, presents an analysis of the Malayalam-language Jewish women's folk songs of Kerala. Zacharia has been part of a team of scholars from India, Israel, Germany, and the United States who have been collecting, translating, and analyzing these songs.

Philosopher L. N. Sharma, professor and head of the department of philosophy at Benares Hindu University, emeritus, then offers a Hindu response to a Judaic critique of "idolatry," from the perspective of the Kashmir Shaiva tradition.

A comparative study of mythic symbolism in classical Hebrew and Sanskrit literatures by Giulio Busi of the Frie Universitat in Berlin follows.

Yulia Egorova then offers a study of *The Home of Ones Own*, the first Bene Israel novel, written by Meera Mahadevan and first published in Hindi as *Apna Ghar* and later in English as *Shulamith*. Egorova explores how Mahadevan handles the issue of Bene Israel identity.

After presenting our bibliography about Indian Jewish communities for 2000,

we have three book reviews, a report on the Oxford conference, and an obituary of Ruby Daniel.

As we embark on issue number seven, we again welcome new research articles and reviews. We would especially relish submissions from younger scholars and from senior researchers who are making their first foray into this new and exciting field.

Nathan Katz
Florida International University

Braj Mohan Sinha
University of Saskatchewan

Descended from Jewish Seed

Genetics and Jewish History in India: the Bene Israel and the Black Jews of Cochin

*By Tudor Parfitt**

Of all the Jewish communities in the world, the history of the Bene Israel of western India is perhaps the most totally obscure. After the Bene Israel, the Black Jews of Cochin might come second in obscurity. A distant joint third might be the Ethiopian Jews —the Falashas — and the Jews of Kaifeng, about whom written documentation dates back many centuries.[1]

The earliest sources that offer a more or less detailed account of the Bene Israel are much later than the earliest texts we have on the Falashas and Chinese Jews, and consist of the writings of Christian missionaries and Jewish travelers who visited the community in the early nineteenth century. Hitherto a lack of data has in fact prevented us from saying anything objective about the actual origin or early history of the Bene Israel.[2] According to the most widespread Bene Israel tradition, which was recorded by the historian of the community and one of its members, Haim Samuel Kehimkar, their ancestors were shipwrecked near the village of Navgaon on the Konkan coast of Western India in 175 BCE after they fled Palestine during the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes.[3] Only seven men and seven women survived, and they became the ancestors of the community. There is no evidence for this of any kind. This legend of origin has much in common with many other legends of origin both in India and elsewhere in the world — even down to the numbers involved — and must be taken as mythic.

Interestingly enough, the legend of origin of the Bene Israel resembles that of the Chitpavans, a group of Maharashtra Brahmans. The legend told on the Konkan coast states that the Chitpavans are descended from fourteen foreigners who perished in a shipwreck but then were restored to life by Parashurama, one of Vishnu's incarnations, who taught them Brahman rites.[4] According to this theory, then, the Bene Israel settled in the area in remote times and stayed. What we do know is that by the early nineteenth century they existed as a community, and by this time were known as Shanwar Teli (Marathi 'Saturday oilmen'), because they constituted a sort of caste — a rather bizarre one — of oil pressers who apparently abstained from work on Saturdays.[5] Already, by the time they were first encoun-

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**The author expresses tremendous gratitude to Yulia Egorova for her invaluable help as Research Assistant in the AHRB-funded Innovations in Research Project.*

tered, their caste integrity was dissolving and they appear to have started moving from the Konkan villages to the towns of Pen, Panvel, Thana, and Bombay, and were becoming artisans of all kinds. Nonetheless — and this is significant for our present purposes — they remained endogamous. At the present time, the Bene Israel community is principally to be found in Israel where some of them still wear Indian dress and play cricket, but there are still about 4,000 members of the community in India. The majority live in Mumbai (Bombay), but there are also Bene Israel communities and functioning synagogues in Pune, Thane, and Ahmedabad.

No doubt the particular obscurity of the Bene Israel community's origins contributed substantially to the difficulties they encountered as they endeavored to gain recognition as Jews both in the Jewish world at large and, particularly, in Israel. Rabbinical courts in Baghdad and Jerusalem ruled in 1914 that intermarriage between Jews and the Bene Israel was forbidden[6] and until fairly recently the dominant view among the Baghdadi Jews of India was that the Bene Israel were not really Jewish.

In 1944, however, one of the two Chief Rabbis of Palestine, Rabbi Meir Hai Uzziel, declared in a responsum that the Bene Israel were, "descended from Jewish seed, and I have found support in a responsum by Hai Gaon[7]...in a letter by Maimonides to the scholars of Lunel." [8] In a 1951 responsum, Rabbi Uzziel noted that, whereas there was perhaps reason to believe that the Bene Israel had at some time intermarried with gentiles, this should not be allowed to affect their status as Jews on the grounds, "that we have never rejected any Jew because of his gentile appearance or the color of his skin." [9] In 1964, the conflict between the Bene Israel community and the rabbinate reached its zenith following a refusal by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yitzhak Nissim, to allow Bene Israel individuals to marry other Jews, unless they were able to provide proof of Jewishness and no intermarriage over several generations. The main argument of the Chief Rabbi and of those who supported his point of view was that in the past the Bene Israel had been ignorant of Jewish laws relating to divorce and levirate marriage, and their failure in the past to follow such laws would have led to *mamzerut* (more or less the same argument was used later against the Falashas). A number of Bene Israel organizations led a campaign, which included a sit-down strike in front of the Jewish Agency and the burning of an effigy of Yitzhak Nissim. The campaign received the general support of the Knesset and other secular bodies and, as a result, the problem was resolved to the satisfaction of the Bene Israel. As Prime Minister Eshkol put it, the rabbinate could not be allowed to be an obstacle in the way of the principle of the ingathering of the exiles.[10] However, despite the support they received, the scars of this encounter remained.[11] This confrontation was repeated in 1997 when the Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikvah again raised doubts about

the Jewishness of the Bene Israel and ordered his employees not to validate new marriages for them.[12]

Given that, to all appearances, the Bene Israel traditionally were Indians, spoke Marathi, worshipped in something they called a *masjid*, and had no historic contact with Jews that we knew of, it was tempting to believe that the Bene Israel were Muslims, perhaps Muslim sectarians, who had for some unknown reason lost contact with Islam. Perhaps, indeed, they had something to do with the Indian Muslim communities calling themselves Banu Israil who live in a number of loci in India notably Aligarh and Sambal on the Ganges and who variously claim descent from the Lost Ten Tribes or from Abdullah bin Salam — a Jew mentioned in the Quran.[13] The chief difference, it might be argued, was that the Bene Israel of Bombay for some reason had more or less lost touch with Islam while the others maintained a strong but odd Islamic identity. In 1998, I visited Aligarh. In a separate quarter of the city,[14] there is a community of Banu Israil who traditionally did not intermarry with other Muslim communities. This community preserves, probably fancifully, a memory of having migrated as Jews from Medina in the Hijaz following a very specific route which included a sojourn in Amman. I collected DNA from the small group, but the results were neutral: there was nothing in this group to connect them to any group other than the general family of mankind.

At the same time, we initiated DNA research on the Bene Israel. That research has finally given us some data on the basis of which it might be possible to make some substantive comments on the origins of the community. What has been shown is that, genetically, the Bene Israel can be differentiated from the other Indian groups from which we have samples including neighboring populations in Maharashtra, Goa, and Gujarat.

First, a few words about the background of the tests. We studied the Y chromosome. All human cells, other than mature red blood cells, possess a nucleus containing genetic material (DNA) arranged into 46 chromosomes, grouped into 23 pairs. In 22 pairs, both members are identical, one deriving from the individual's mother, the other from the father. The 23rd pair, which determines gender, is different in the sense that, while in females this pair has two like chromosomes called X, in the male it has one X and one Y, two dissimilar chromosomes. During the production of sperm and egg, the paired chromosomes separate. However, before the separation occurs, they swap pieces of their DNA. In men, unmatched X and Y chromosomes, practically, do not exchange DNA, hence a man's Y chromosome represents a unique record of his paternal inheritance, since the Y chromosome that a father passes to his son is a more or less unchanged copy of his own. However, small changes (polymorphisms) do occur, and studies recording the frequency of different combinations of polymorphisms in the Y chromosome

(haplotypes) when passed down from generation to generation can contribute to our understanding of human history.

Dr. Neil Bradman, Dr. Mark Thomas (UCL), Professor Carl Skorecki (the Rambam Medical Centre in Haifa), and myself conducted a previous study, which attracted a good deal of international attention. We looked at the Y chromosomes of Jewish priests (Cohanim) from all over the world, since their position is inherited through the male line.[15]

Somewhere between thirteen and fifteen centuries BCE, the Israelites left Egypt and spent years languishing in the desert areas of the Sinai, Negev, and Trans-Jordan. The Bible tells us that during this period the tribe of Levi was selected for certain religious duties that included carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Both Moses and his brother Aaron were members of this tribe and descendants of Aaron in the male line were designated as Cohanim or Priests. In 587 BC, the temple of the Israelites in Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and many of its inhabitants were taken into captivity 'by the waters of Babylon.' Until this cataclysmic national event, the sources paint a confused picture of the relationship between Levites and Cohanim. In some sources, the term 'son of Levi' is synonymous with priest and the impression is given that any Levite may officiate as priest. In others, a sharp distinction is drawn between Levites and 'sons of Aaron.' There are also indications that foreigners such as Gibeonites were given some of the Levites' Temple functions and perhaps even became Levites. Other non-Levitic temple servants — 'the sons of Solomon's servants' — may also have assimilated to Levites. After the return of the captives from Babylon, a very much clearer distinction was made between priestly Cohanim and non-priestly Levites and every effort was made to keep non-Levites out of Temple service.

Levitical status like priestly status has been passed from father to son to this very day. It is true that a Jew is partly defined as being someone born of a Jewish mother, but priestly status and Levitical status pass down the male line. Priestly status is thus transmitted exactly like the Y-chromosome. Our study showed that while Levite Y-chromosomes are diverse, the Cohen Y-chromosomes are remarkably homogeneous. Specifically, among the Cohanim, it was found that more than 50% of the sample had one specific haplotype (the specific set of markers in each cell that are passed on from the sperm which became known as the Cohen modal haplotype). The Cohen Modal haplotype is, then, that combination of genetic markers on the Y chromosome in the sperm of Cohanim that distinguishes them, more or less, from other sperm producers.

The DNA material of the Bene Israel collected by Neil Bradman and myself was compared with DNA collected from throughout India by myself and others, including two SOAS doctoral students, Sarah Stewart and Yulia Egorova. The conclusion about the 'genetic difference' of the Bene Israel in comparison with other Indians was drawn most sharply on the basis of the fact that a particular combination

of polymorphisms haplogroup (hg) 28, which is very wide-spread in India, is hardly found among the Bene Israel. In fact, we only found one singleton with hg28 among the Bene Israel. In addition, the tests demonstrated that the Bene Israel have affinities with Ethiopian and Yemeni datasets. Furthermore, the gene diversity is significantly lower in the Bene Israel than in the other Indian groups examined.

Of the Indian datasets, only the Bene Israel have the Cohen Modal haplotype (CMH) chromosomes. Haplogroup 9, which comprises the CMH, is present at high frequency among the Bene Israel, as well as among the Ethiopian and Yemeni groups, but at much lower frequency among the Indian groups. Finally, haplogroup 21, which may be viewed as a North African and Mediterranean haplogroup, was absent among the Bene Israel, although it is present in Jewish populations. This might have suggested an Arabian origin for the community since the haplogroup is absent in Arabia. However, the presence among the Bene Israel of the CMH — which is absent in Arabian populations — prevents this conclusion. It suggests rather that the Bene Israel were an ancient Jewish population dating to a period before haplogroup 21 entered the gene pool. This clearly suggests that the Bene Israel are a very ancient, probably Jewish, group.

The radical difference of the Bene Israel from other Indian communities and the presence of a haplotype which may be viewed as a marker for Jewish communities when found in fairly high concentrations suggests strongly, in the first place, that the Bene Israel are indeed what they say: a group founded by people who originally migrated from the Middle East. In addition, the presence of the Cohen Modal Haplotype among the community strongly suggests that there were Jews among the founding group.

A further piece of research, which involved myself and Yulia Egorova in collaboration with a team of geneticists headed by Professor Karl Skorecki at the Technion in Haifa, has just revealed the following results about the mysterious Black Jewish community of Cochin.

The Jews of Cochin are considered the oldest Jewish community of India and are certainly the best known to the outside world. They are perhaps the most famous of the far-flung Jewish communities and their splendid synagogue in Cochin's Jew Town enjoys deserved international renown. One of the unique features of the Cochin Jewish community was that it was divided into a number of apparently discrete groups: the so-called White Jews, the Black Jews, and the *Meshuhrarim* (Heb., freed or manumitted slaves).

A considerable body of literature exists on the stratification of Cochin Jewry.[16] My former colleague, Professor Ben Segal FBA, observes that the conflict between the Black and the White Jews is deeply rooted in Indian tradition and was aggravated by the arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century. White Jews considered Black Jews the descendants of slaves and converts, and denied that they were really Jews — notwithstanding that they observed Jewish

law — and refused to intermarry with them.[17] They received high level support for their view when, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the famous Egyptian authority, the Radbaz (Rabbi David ben Solomon ibn Zimra) declared the Black Jews to be gentiles from the point of view of Jewish law (who could nonetheless become full Jews by immersion and conversion).[18] According to the tradition of the Black Jews of Cochin, their ancestors came to India in ancient times from Palestine (some members of the community argue that it was after the destruction of the First Temple, while others suggest that it was after the destruction of the Second Temple).[19] The community of White Jews comprised those who had come to India from Europe and the Middle East, though it is not clear when exactly the community was formed or when it received its name.

The issue of the stratification of Cochin Jewry has been studied by a number of scholars.[20] One of the earliest sources reflecting the confrontation between the two groups were letters sent in the sixteenth century from Cochin to the Radbaz in Cairo (this particular letter may be dated around 1540) and later to his disciple the Mahariqash (Rabbi Jacob de Castro, died in 1610) also in Egypt. The authors of these letters explained that their community was divided into *meyuhhasim* (Hebrew noblemen) on the one hand, and on the other, descendents of slaves who had converted into Judaism and were nonetheless very pious. The meyuhhasim denied that the second group were, in fact, Jewish, even though they recognized that they followed the Jewish Law. They steadfastly refused to intermarry with them. The Mahariqash suggested that the group in question should undergo *tevilah* and after that should be permitted to join the Jewish community.[21]

The terms 'white' and 'black' were not used in this correspondence. Throughout history, the White Jews were also referred to as Paradesi, which is also the name of the synagogue they built in 1568 near the rajah's palace in Cochin.[22] The Black Jews were considerably more numerous than the White, and had seven synagogues on the Malabar coast, two each in Cochin and Ernakulam, and one each in Mala, Parur, and Chennamangalam.

It is not clear when the two communities started being called 'white' and 'black.' The latter are referred to by this name in a 1678 Yemenite manuscript, which informs us that, "on the night of 21st Elul, Master Mordechai said that he was about to send to the men of Cochin, who are the Black Jews, six or seven scrolls of the Law, *tephillin*, *mezuzot*, and other books of Law." Segal suggests that the Black Jews felt more at ease with Arabian Jews than with the Jews of Europe, with whom the White Jews had maintained contact.[23]

Jewish travelers who visited Malabar in the nineteenth century noted that the local Jewish congregation was quite religiously orthodox and was in touch with Western Jews. I.J. Benjamin, a Jewish traveler from Moldavia who visited Cochin in the middle of the nineteenth century, observed that the White Jews

maintained a correspondence in Hebrew with the Portuguese Jewish congregation of New York as early as the end of the eighteenth century.[24] Benjamin and another Jewish traveler, David DeBeth Hillel, who visited Cochin earlier in the nineteenth century, appear to have sympathized with the Black Jews and criticized the attitude of the White Jews toward them. They both characterized the former as very observant Jews. According to DeBeth Hillel, they were well acquainted with Hebrew scriptures. Benjamin noted that they followed Talmudic law and that their ceremonies were the same as those of the oriental Jews, but that they sang *piyyutim* in the Indian manner.[25]

In the nineteenth century the problem of the stratification of the Jews of Cochin became even more complicated, when the *meshuhrarim*, broke away from the community of their former masters and formed a group of their own. Though the meshuhrarim had converted to Judaism according to the Jewish laws regulating conversion, they were still not considered to be 'full' Jews and did not enjoy all the rights of community members. They were allowed to attend services in the synagogue, but they were supposed to sit on the floor by the entrance, and not on the benches in the hall, and they were called to read from the Torah only on the day of Simhat Torah.[26]

In 1848, the meshuhrarim made an attempt to found a synagogue of their own in Jew Town (the district of Cochin around the Paradesi synagogue) but they came up against the opposition of the White Jews. The White Jews appealed to the Dewan of Cochin and he sided with them. After that, the meshuhrarim, left Jew Town, which was situated in territory belonging to the Rajah of Cochin, for the British part of the city and set up a synagogue there. However, the existence of the meshuhrarim as a separate congregation did not last long. After a few years, the community was stricken with cholera and many of them died. The survivors, who could not maintain a full community life any more, had to return to Jew Town.[27]

It is interesting to consider the response of Jews from the outside world to the existence of the meshuhrarim and their position among Cochin Jewry. They were visited in 1860 by Jacob Saphir, a Jewish emissary from Jerusalem, who reckoned that the members of their community strictly observed all the customs and traditions of Judaism and even that there were scholars of Jewish law among them.[28] Solomon Reinemann, a Jewish traveler from Galicia, who lived with the White Jews of Cochin for a while, had an opportunity to observe the confrontation between his hosts and the meshuhrarim. In *Massa'ot Shelomo*, he described the plight of the meshuhrarim after the outbreak of the epidemic and argued that while the cause of the meshuhrarim was just, the Pardesi apparently benefited from divine favor.[29]

At the end of the nineteenth century, the position of the meshuhrarim of Cochin was brought to the attention of the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Meir Panigel in Jerusa-

lem. He was asked to examine the situation from the point of view of *halakhah*. The Rabbi stated that any meshuhrarim who had undergone a ritual immersion should be considered a full member of the Jewish community and should be permitted to marry a Jew. This ruling was transmitted by Rabbi Asher Abraham Halevi, who came to India in the 1880s as an emissary from Jerusalem.[30]

In the first half of the twentieth century, the relations between the three groups of the Jews of Cochin remained tense. The White Jews continued to discriminate against the Black Jews and the meshuhrarim. On their side, the meshuhrarim considered themselves superior to the Black Jews of Cochin. Moris Laserson, the ORT-OZE[31] delegate, noted that the meshuhrarim refused to intermarry with the Black Jews.[32] The meshuhrarim were certain of their Jewish identity and status as they had been converted in conformity with the laws of Judaism regulating conversion and were thus full Jews, according to halakhah. As far as the Black Jews were concerned, they were alleged by the tradition of the White Jews, which was presumably also the tradition of the meshuhrarim, to be the descendants of slaves who had observed the Jewish law. However, unlike the meshuhrarim, it was not clear whether they had undergone proper ceremonies of conversion or not.

The position of the meshuhrarim improved by the middle of the twentieth century. In 1942, one of their most educated members, Abraham Barak Salem, a university graduate and a lawyer, led a campaign for equal rights for the meshuhrarim. As a result, the meshuhrarim were allowed to sit on benches in the Paradesi synagogue, read from the Torah during Sabbath services, and bury their dead in the cemetery of the White Jews. However, according to Louis Rabinowitz, the chief Rabbi of Johannesburg, Transvaal, and the Orange State, who visited Cochin in 1951, the meshuhrarim were still at a disadvantage in Jew Town. They were the last to be called to read from the Torah on Sabbath and were allowed to use only a special site against the wall of the cemetery.[33]

Though there were so many disputes among the members of the three groups relating to their origin and status as Jews, it appears that their religious observances were uniform. David Mandelbaum, who carried out field work among the Jews of Cochin in 1937, noted that in the major aspects of Jewish practices and belief all three groups were equally observant. All members of the community followed the dietary rules, observed the Sabbath and the holy days, and paid great attention to the religious education of their children.[34]

At the moment, the division into White and Black is still characteristic of the small remnant of the community in Cochin, though all Jews pray in the Paradesi, the only synagogue of the Malabar coast which still functions.[35] The majority of the community now resides in Israel, where the old divisions between White, Black and meshuhrarim are still maintained.[36] To this day we have no clear idea of the historical origins of the three communities.[37]

How does genetics help us cast light on this murky picture? Very briefly (and here I am quoting Professor Karl Skorecki), "a pattern is emerging, in which there appears to be evidence for a substantial contribution of middle eastern ancestry to the male lineage [of the Black Jews] together with admixture coming from the local non-Jewish Cochini population. This Middle Eastern influx seems to be quite old (likely more than 1000 years — but this remains to be sorted out more carefully), and is not evident in the Y-chromosome based population structure of the non-Jewish Cochini. In contrast, preliminary analysis of mitochondrial DNA samples to learn about the female population structure, does not provide corresponding evidence for a middle east contribution. Analysis of diversity for both Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA markers, reveals much lower diversity for the Jewish community. This is consistent with a so-called 'founder effect,' and also suggests that there was relatively little admixture with the surrounding non-Jewish population after the community was established. It should be emphasized that these remarks are very tentative, until the analysis has been completed."

Nonetheless, in both cases we now have evidence (or likely evidence in the case of the Black Jews) of an early migration of what were probably Jews from the Near East to India in ancient times. This, when linked with other papers we have produced — notably on the Lemba of southern Africa — begins to hint at a much wider dispersion of the Jewish people in ancient times than had hitherto been imagined.

NOTES

1. See e.g. *The Jews of China, i,* ed. J. Goldstein, (Armonk, NY, London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999). For a recent bibliography on the Jews of China, see F.D. Shulman, "The Chinese Jews and the Jewish Diasporas in China from the Tang Period (A.D. 618-906) through the Mid-1990s: A Selected Bibliography," in *The Jews of China, ii (A Sourcebook and Research Guide)*, ed. J. Goldstein, (Armonk, NY, London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp.157-183. See also M. Pollack, *Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980). On Chinese attitudes toward Jews, see Zhou Xun, *Chinese Perceptions of the 'Jews' and Judaism: A History of the Youtai*, (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 2000). On the Ethiopian Jews, see: *Ethiopian Jewry: An Annotated Bibliography*, ed. S. Kaplan and S. Ben-Dor, (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1988); *Ethiopian Jewry: An Annotated Bibliography 1988-1997*, ed. H. Salamon and S. Kaplan, (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1998). J. Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992);

S. Kaplan, "The Beta Israel (Falasha) Encounter with Protestant Missionaries: 1860-1905" in *Jewish Social Studies*, xlix, no.1 (winter 1987); S. Kaplan, "The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia," (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992); D. Kessler, *The Falashas*, (London: Frank Cass, 1996); Tudor Parfitt and E. Trevisan-Semi, *Judaising Movements: Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002). Tudor Parfitt and E. Trevisan-Semi (eds.) *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews*, (London: SOAS Near and Middle East Publications, 2000).

2. For a comprehensive discussion of the existing theories of the Bene Israels' origin, see Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel, An Inquiry and Source Book*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1988), pp. 3-19.

3. Haeem S. Kehimkar, *The History of the Bene Israel of India*, (Tel Aviv: Dayag Press, 1937). For a recent detailed discussion of Kehimkar's version of the Bene Israel legend of origin, see M. Numark, "Constructing a Jewish Nation in Colonial India: History, Narratives of Descent, and the Vocabularly of Modernity" *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (winter 2001), pp. 89-114.

4. Enthoven, *Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1920), vol.1, p. 242.

5. *India's Bene Israel*, p. 3.

6. *Bene Israel: Halakha Verdicts about their Status and Origin* (Heb.), (Jerusalem: Israel Chief Rabbinate, 1967), pp. 20-22.

7. Hai Gaon (939-1038) last Gaon of Pumbedita and son of Sherira Gaon.

8. Misphpetei Uzziel, "Even ha-Ezer: 32" quoted in M. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1998), p. 24. The problem with the passage from Maimonides, like other medieval passages, is that it is unclear which Indian Jewish community is being referred to.

9. *Bene Israel: Halakha Verdicts*, p. 25.

10. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Israeli Society*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 314.

11. Joan G. Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India*, pp. 249-51. For an excellent study of the life of the Bene Israel in Israel, see Shalva Weil, "Bene Israel Indian Jews in Lod, Israel: A Study in the Persistence of Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity," Doctoral dissertation, (England: University of Sussex, 1977).

12. "Indian Jews Face Identity Crisis in Israel," in *Hindu*, 20 November 1997.

13. Apparently some of the Banu Israil migrated north-east where they were called "Barabunki 'Kidawae."

14. Called "Banu Israiliyya."

15. N. Bradman, M. Thomas, "Genetics: The Pursuit of Jewish History by Other Means" in *Judaism Today*, (autumn 1998), pp. 4-6; N. Bradman, M. Thomas, "Why Y? Chromosome in the Study of Human Evolution, Migration and Prehistory" in *Science Spectra*, no.14, 1998, M. Hammer, K. Skorecki, Tudor

Parfitt et al., "Y Chromosomes of Jewish Priests" in *Nature*, vol. 385, 2 January 1997.

16. David G. Mandelbaum, "Caste and Community among the Jews of Cochin in India and Israel," in *Caste Among Non-Hindus in India*, ed. H. Singh, (Delhi: National, 1977), pp.107-11; Naphtali Bar-Giora, "Meqorot leToldot haYehasim Bein haYehudim haLevanim vehaShehorim beQochin" ("Sources for the History of Relations Between the White and the Black Jews of Cochin"), *Sefunot*, vol. 1, (Heb.) 1956, pp. 243-78.

17. J.B. Segal, *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993), pp. 22-25.

18. M. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998) p. 23.

19. Interviews with Cochin Jews in August 2001.

20. "Caste and Community," pp.107-11; "Meqorot leToldot," pp. 243-78.

21. "Meqorot leToldot," pp. 245-246.

22. *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, p. 21. Paradesi can be translated as "foreign." The synagogue of the White Jews must have received its name from the large accession of Jews from Europe and Western Asia.

23. *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, pp. 44-45.

24. I.J. Benjamin, *Eight Years in Asia and Africa, From 1846 to 1855*, Second edition, (Hanover: self-published, 1863), pp. 185-92.

25. David DeBeth Hillel, "The Travels of Rabbi David DeBeth Hillel: From Jerusalem, Through Arabia, Koordistan, Part of Persia, and India, to Madras," (Madras: self-published, 1832), p. 122; *Eight Years in Asia and Africa*, p. 185.

26. "Meqorot leToldot," p. 252.

27. *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, pp. 77-80.

28. *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, p. 78.

29. S. Reinemann, W. Schur, (eds.), *Masa 'ot Shelomo BiEretz Hodu, Burman veSinim* (Heb.) (Travels of Solomon in India, Burma and China), (Vienna: The Georg Breg Press, 1884), p.162.

30. "Meqorot leToldot," pp. 260-61.

31. ORT (initials of Rus. Obshchestvo Rasprostraneniya Truda sredi Yevreyev, meaning Society for Spreading Labor among the Jews), organization for the promotion and development of vocational training among the Jews, initiated in Russia in 1880; OZE (initials of Rus. Obshchestvo Zdravookhraneniya Yevreyev, meaning Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jews), launched in Russia in 1912, (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 12, pp. 1481, 1537).

32. *The Jewish Tribune*, November 1937, p.7.

33. L. Rabinowitz, Far East Mission, Johannesburg, 1952, p. 117.

34. *Caste Among Non-Hindus in India*, p. 91.

35. Interviews in Cochin in August 2001.

36. This observation was made by Shalva Weil at the conference "A View from the Margin: The State of the Art of Indo-Judaic Studies," Oxford, 1-4 July 2002.

37. As far as the meshuhrarim are concerned, a hypothesis about their origin challenging the standard view has recently been offered in the book by Ruby Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*, (Philadephia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995).

Further Studies in The Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin

By M.G.S. Narayanan

Background and Objectives

This paper is a sequel to my study on the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin, included in *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, published more than a quarter of a century ago.[1] Not much work has been done about these copper plates in recent years by myself or other scholars in Kerala to the best of my knowledge. However, the political and social context of the copper plates in Kerala in the eleventh century has been clarified and discussed elaborately in my doctoral dissertation on the Cera Perumals of Kerala and other occasional papers.[2]

My earlier paper on the subject was prepared with the idea of correcting misunderstandings about the date and meaning of the copper plates. It was my endeavor to bring out all evidence regarding the date of their issue by undertaking a survey of the findings in research by Indian scholars such as T. A. Gopinatha Rao, K. V. Subrahmania Ayyar, K.V. Ramanatha Ayyar, and Professor Elamkulam, and to add to that an account of the little bit of my own work that confirms the results of others and provides new insights. In this connection, I had suggested that the background of the ongoing Cera-Cola conflict throws fresh light on the motivation behind the grant of titles and privileges to Joseph Rabban, the foreign merchant prince, by Bhaskara Ravi Varman, king of Kerala.[3] This grant, issued at the capital, was approved by the war council of six feudatories of the king and the Commander of the Eastern forces.[4]

In the present study, some other related questions are taken up for discussion. We may probe further into the mechanism of sea trade and settlement in Kerala by following the clues found in the text of the plates' inscriptions and other inscriptions to highlight the various aspects of the process of integration that resulted in the Jews' continuation as part of the native society in Kerala.

Language, Names and Laws

The language itself makes it evident that these Jews were not newcomers to the land in the period of the Cera (Kerala) kingdom over the destiny of which Bhaskara Ravi Varman presided. Nor were the Jews of Muyirikkode mere birds of prey and passage.

The language of the grant is the same as that of the other inscriptions on copper and stone made by the king. For example, the number of the regnal year has been split into two, according to the practice of the Cera inscriptions. Some-

times they break up the regnal years into two or three, but only rarely do they mention it as a single unit — a practice for which it is not easy to find a rationale. Perhaps there was a superstition that if the years are mentioned straight away, it is detrimental to the life of the person concerned. The pattern of the breakup is quite arbitrary, but very often it is expressed as 'two plus the other' as in the present case.

The donee's name is written as *Issuppu Irappan* in a Malayalamized fashion. Perhaps they were familiar with the form Yusuf Rabban or Ouseph Rabban rather than the Anglicized form of Joseph Rabban which we use today.[5] In Vattezhuttu script, there was no *fa* or *pha* so that *pa* was written, and the gemination of *pa* at the end is typical of the Malayalam practice. Similarly, there is no sign for *ba* so the *pa* is written here also. For instance, Bhaskaran is written in the same record as *Pakkaran*. Similarly the vowel "i" is prefixed to the other part of the name *Rappan* to make it *Irappan*, since it is the general practice in Tamil-Malayalam to start a word with a vowel instead of a consonant, even when it is a personal name.[6] For instance, Ravi in Bhaskara Ravi is written as *Iravi* in the same record. All Hindu Sanskrit names are Malayalamized and the same liberty is taken with this Hebrew name. Apart from convenience, this may indicate that the officials and scribes had familiarity with Hebrew names. The early practice in the beginning of the ninth century shows that a Hindu Sanskrit name like Rajasekhara was written in the original form using *Grantha* script, but subsequently it becomes *Irayiran*.[7] Similarly, all Sanskrit names are transformed and written in the local style.

If the Jews had not been well versed in the local language, they would have taken the trouble to obtain and preserve a Hebrew or Syrian translation of the charter for their own reference. The fact that they were satisfied with the original itself shows that they had a fairly good knowledge of the language.

These circumstances do not permit us to assert that the Jews came to the Malabar Coast as early as the first century in the wake of the Jewish diaspora of that period, but they certainly prove that they were present in the midst of the local people for at least several generations if not centuries.[8]

I am intrigued by one of the clauses of the Jewish charter that states that the grant shall endure as long as the world, the moon, and the sun, and that the *Ancuvannam* rights shall be enjoyed by the sons, nephews, and nephews who married the daughters of Joseph Rabban. This would suggest that the Jews were free to adopt the *marumakkattayam* or matrilineal system, popular in Kerala.[9] Was this just a routine formulaic sentence lifted from the usual grants, or did it carry a special meaning here? This question cannot be answered with the present level of our knowledge or our ignorance about the details of inheritance laws followed by the Jews at the time.

Aristocratic Privileges

This will take us back to the hypothesis that the king's pleasure with Rabban was linked to the threat of the Cola invasion, an ever present danger dating from 974 A.D. when Raja Raja came to occupy the Cola throne.[10] The Jews who engaged in sea trade must have possessed a number of ships equipped with sailors and also warriors to defend the ships against the pirates. This was important for the Cera king since it was known that their Cola opponents possessed a powerful fleet that was deployed effectively and successfully in their moves against Sri Lanka and parts of South East Asia.[11] They had already launched the fleet with devastating effect at Kandalur Salai near Vizhinjam in the early years of Raja Raja's rule.[12] In the event of a naval conflict, the ships and warriors of Joseph Rabban could be of crucial significance. Therefore the Cera king must have decided to make sure of their loyalty and readiness to help by binding them to his kingdom through the gift of titles and privileges. The long domicile of the Jews in the country and their close rapport with the rulers and people might have been responsible for generating confidence on both sides.

A Cola invasion against Kerala occurred in 998-99 AD, immediately before the grant of this charter.[13] Therefore it is quite possible that the Jewish leader had already rendered military assistance to the Cera king on the occasion of this war, and this award was made in the form of a reward for services rendered. The contents of the document show that it was something more than a mere trade charter given to a guild captain who met the king and offered some presents in the routine fashion. There were the usual tax exemptions and trade privileges, but much more. By bestowing the seventy-two aristocratic privileges, the king and his feudatories were admitting this foreigner with a different ethnicity and religious culture into the ranks of the native aristocracy at the highest level.[14] This must be reckoned as the final phase of integration for this exotic group of adventurers. At the same time, the permission to continue their Jewish faith and practices also must be assumed, since we find them retaining their identity in every respect even in the twentieth century.

The Jews also seem to have enjoyed the patronage of the local kings long after the Perumals of Kerala disappeared from the political arena. The Jews became the loyal subjects of the successor states, even fighting against the foreign European forces when the occasion arose. When the Portuguese captured the port city of Kodungallur in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese massacred Jewish settlers who obviously supported the Hindu king.[15] Those who survived left the ruined city with an oath never again to spend another night there. They seem to have taken refuge in a number of scattered settlements such as Mattanchery in Cochin and Mala, Paravur, and others in the Cochin state. The Raja of Cochin gave protection to these victims of Portuguese imperialism in the new harbor city along with other refugees like the Saraswat Brahmins from Goa in Konkan. The

Jews established their small town in Mattanchery, and built a synagogue in the traditional style. They also preserved the casket containing the famous copper plates there.[16]

In the sixteenth century, the advent of the Spanish Jews, of fair complexion and European manners, known as the White Jews, transformed the character of the settlement completely.[17] This event introduced a new element of rivalry between the old settlers and the newcomers. Both the Black Jews and the White Jews had been claiming to be the true inheritors of the old Jewish culture. The White Jews gained authority and recognition on account of their wealth and European connections. They argued that they were the offspring of the marriage between the old settlers and the new European immigrants, while the Black Jews were the illegitimate children of the old settlers coming from the ranks of servants and slaves, and as such were not entitled to inherit their cultural legacy. According to this version, they were not Jews in the full sense. On the other hand, the Black Jews believe that they are the true descendants of the old settlers and the custodians of their culture.

They claim that the brownish tinge in their complexion is the result of centuries of exposure to the Indian climate. They accuse the White Jews of having fraudulently appropriated the old tradition and the synagogue. This problem cannot be settled unless we get fresh documents or new scientific, genetic data.

Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam

Historically speaking, there is another problem of some significance. The term *Ancuvannam* is referred to in the text as a gift from the ruler to Joseph Rabban.[18] This has been the subject of a controversy. Some early scholars conceived *Ancuvannam* as a Malayalam compound word (*Ancu* meaning five and *Vannam* or *Varnam* meaning caste) denoting a group of five types of skilled workers. These were *Asari* (carpenter), *Musari* (bronze smith), *Tattan* (goldsmith), *Kollan* (blacksmith) and *Kallasari* (stone mason), all of whom were set apart for the service of the Jewish corporation. The use of the word *ainkammalar* (five types of *Karmakaras*, that is *Kammalas*, or skilled workers) to denote the retainers of the chief, in the case a later inscription gave credibility to this interpretation.[19]

However, the appearance of the variants of the term *Ancuvannam* in other inscriptions compels us to revise this opinion. In several medieval inscriptions from the West Coast of India, the term *Anjuman* or *Hanjamana* is used to denote a trade guild.[20] This is now understood by scholars as a Hebrew/Persian/Arabic word for group or guild in West Asia. Therefore, it is more appropriate to assume that the term *Ancuvannam* is used in this context to denote the trade guild of the Jewish merchants under the leadership of Joseph Rabban.

This conclusion leads us to another interesting situation. The term

Ancuvannam is mentioned earlier in another Cera copper plate. In a parallel situation, Ayyan Adikal, Governor of Venad, bestowed titles and privileges of an almost similar nature on Mar Sapir Iso, the founder of the Church of Tarsa, at Kollam, the headquarters of the district. The inscription known as the Syrian Copper Plates or Tarsappalli is dated in the fifth regnal year of the Cera Perumal Sthanu Ravi, corresponding to 849 AD.[21] We have to state here for the information of those who are not familiar with the history of Kerala that much of the history of the Cera or Kerala kingdom that existed from 800 AD to 1124 AD has been recovered by this time with dates of successive rulers and important events and details of economic, social, and cultural life. Kollam, an important harbor city of the kingdom, next in importance only to Kodungallur, was the capital city. Sthanu Ravi Kulasekhara was the second known king of this dynasty, the first being Rama Rajasekhara.[22]

The legendary Christian leader Mar Sapir Iso — who also received seventy-two aristocratic privileges — figures in Syrian Christian chronicles of an uncertain date.[23] When the church was founded on land donated by the ruler, some arrangements were made regarding the protection and maintenance of the service personnel, such as agricultural laborers, carpenters, toddy tappers, and other skilled workers.[24] The *Arunorruvar* — the Six Hundred militiamen attached to the Governor — and the Ancuvannam and *Manikkiramam* were jointly entrusted with the judicial, commercial, and revenue administration of the city and were also ordered to look after the church of Tarsa.[25]

Previously, I summarized the prescription in this regard found in the Syrian copper plates:[26]

> The Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam shall enjoy all these privileges and act according to the copper plates as long as the sun and moon endure. If they have any grievance they are authorized to redress the grievance even by obstructing the payment of duty and the weighing fee. The Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam who took up the tenancy of the Nagaram with libation of water shall themselves enquire into offenses committed by their people. That which is jointly done by these two heads alone shall be valid.

These words testify not only to the implicit faith that the rulers bestowed on the two foreign guilds, but also to the loyalty and sense of unity that they represented.

Interestingly, the Syrian Christians and Jews of Kollam were chosen for special treatment at a time when the kingdom was threatened by a Pandyan invasion, and the Pandyans had snatched control of Vizhinjam in the South from the Ceras.[27]

It would appear that the establishment of the new Nagaram in Kollam was undertaken to attract the Western sea traders away from the old harbor of Vizhinjam that had fallen into the hands of the enemy.[28]

The Friendship of the Jews and Syrian Christians

Scholars have advanced different views regarding the nature of the group called *Manigramam* or Manikkiramam.[29] According to some, the term Manigramam was a compound Sanskrit word meaning the *gramam* or village of *mani*, that is, diamond. In that case, it could refer to a guild of diamond merchants. However, it is not easy to answer the questions that arise out of this assumption. Were there so many diamond merchants as to have the branches of their guild in several places including obscure villages? Why is it that the diamond merchant's guild is found mostly in places where you have old Christian churches and settlements? How did it happen that the Syrian merchants traded primarily in diamonds, while the most lucrative trading commodities in Kerala were pepper, spices, and perfumes? In view of these problems, a few scholars have suggested another derivation for Manigramam, that it was the guild belonging to a group of heretics among the Syrian Christians known as *Manicheans*, who were probably the most influential lot among the Syrian merchants who came to Kerala. This is as speculative as the previous answer, and the debate remains inconclusive.

In spite of the ambiguity of the meaning of the term Manigramam, one thing is clear, that it was a guild of Syrian Christian traders who had several settlements in different parts of South India. The argument that the Manigramam and the Ancuvannam were guilds of Syrian Christians and Jews respectively is further strengthened, at least in the case of Kerala, by the fact that they both figure in their charters. The list of witnesses whose signatures are attached to the Syrian Christian plates add more concrete evidence.[30] There are ten names of Christians written in *Pahlavi* script bearing witness to Syriac influence, eleven names of Muslims written in Arabic (*Kufic*) script, and four names of Jews written in Hebrew script at the end of the plates. The first set of ten might belong to the Manigramam who were the immediate beneficiaries of the grant, and the last set of four might represent the Ancuvannam guild, while the Arabs might be the associates of one or the other, or just another group of merchants present at the ceremony.

This conclusion brings us face to face with another fact — that the Syrian Christians and Jews who were at loggerheads in Europe were not exhibiting any hostility toward each other on the shores of Kerala. Moreover, they co-operated with each other in the service of the native rulers and people, and received their appreciation and confidence in an equal measure. The chief of a Jewish guild was to be the member of a trust to which was assigned the duty of ensuring the proper

maintenance of a Christian church in India!

This picture of religious harmony also is confirmed by other sources. The *Mushakavamsa Kavya*, a historical *mahakavya* composed by Atula in the court of the Mushaka king Srikanta of North Malabar during the early part of the eleventh century, speaks of the foundation of the city of Marahi or Madayi and Valabhapattana.[31] The poet says that merchants from different far off islands congregated with their ships there. They all mingled in friendship and harmony.[32] This would naturally include the Syrian Christians, the Muslims, and the Jews, too. There is a live tradition to the effect that Madayi had a Jewish settlement in medieval times.

While the court poet can attribute this achievement to the dynasty of his patron, the historian is bound to search for reasons and causes to explain the general trend of religious tolerance and active friendship among normally hostile religious communities found in the history of Kerala. The book, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, was the product of such an enquiry. The geographical location of Kerala in the path of the monsoon, the role of the Western Ghats in obstructing the monsoon and ensuring plenty of rains and plenty of river water in Kerala, the natural monopoly that the land enjoyed in pepper and spices for which there was great demand in Europe, and more, have been pointed out as factors that were conducive to the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance and friendship.[33] Kerala was largely dependant on sea trade for its prosperity and therefore charity began at the market place.[34] The kings and chieftains of Kerala developed the habit of looking toward the West for the signs of prosperity, and welcomed those trading groups who brought the most commerce, irrespective of their caste and creed and language.[35]

The Political Factor: Weak State

This chain of arguments has been able to stand the test of time for a quarter of a century without serious challenge. However, apart from the climate and market conditions that almost dictated their own social climate, a political factor also promoted policies leading to the integration of communities, although in a symbiotic manner without producing a synthesis, in spite of their exotic creeds and practices. This political factor may be identified as the inherent weakness of the state throughout history, until the modern period, and can be described as a byproduct of all the circumstances noticed above.[36]

This had not been clearly recognized previously. Even in my doctoral dissertation, the Cera Perumals of Kerala were treated almost as regular monarchs, like their Cola and Pandya counterparts. There are sufficient indications to suggest that the polity in Kerala was different from that of other regions in India. The special traits of the polity, like a permanent Brahmin council of ministers, the absence of a big home territory, army, and administrative staff under the *perumal*

or sovereign, the omission of dynastic *prasasti* in the royal copper plates, the relative independence of the district governors in conferring titles alienating property, and so on, had been recognized.

The Brahmin oligarchy was designated as the power behind monarchy, and the polity was called an oligarchy in disguise, but even then the natural inference about the inherent weakness of the state was not stated in so many words. The weakness of the political authority gave freedom to all economic forces. Even those in the orthodox Brahmin priesthood, who were bent on making the Perumal offer *prayaschita* for offending them, were not interested in preventing other creeds from taking root in Kerala.

Perhaps the Perumal, and the *Naduvazhis* under him, did not consider these alien religions as potential threats to their own belief system or social balance. The foreign merchants were sea traders and their interests were confined to the sea, except that they needed a foothold on the land for storing their merchandise and procuring other commodities for sale. The political masters and trade agents in the countryside who brought commodities to the harbor must have made large profits from the continuous trade. Moreover, the rigid, caste-oriented structure of society must have made any chance of the foreigners' penetrating into the countryside unnecessary and untenable.

The Jews were not interested in conversion, and even the Christians might have tried to convert only the low castes and outcastes whom the orthodox Hindus were inclined to treat as being outside the pale of humanity, and therefore of no consequence. Therefore the economic interests of the ruling class had a free and uninhibited role. For a pretty long period of five or six centuries until the advent of the Portuguese, who were armed with cannons, the foreigners were largely confined to harbor towns in Kerala. Thus the over-dependence of the native rulers on revenue from sea trade and the inherent weakness of the state on account of natural causes made them swallow their pride and prejudice in welcoming and promoting the Jews, Syrian Christians, Arab Muslims, and modern European adventurers from West Asia and Europe.

NOTES

1. M.G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), See: Historiographical Study, pp. 23-30; Notes and References, pp. 51-53; Malayalam transliteration and English translation of the text and certain Jesuit folk songs, pp. 79-85.

2. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, (Calicut: University of Calicut, 1996),

See: relevant sections of Chronology, pp. 28-30; on Cola Invasions, pp. 53-55 and on Monarchy, pp. 86-87.

3. Joseph Rabban was the chief of the Jewish settlement in *Kodungallur*, the capital of the Cera kingdom (800 AD–1124 AD). This fort city was now called Mahodayapuram and located in the ancient harbor site of *Muciri* (*Muziris* of the Greeks) mentioned as *Muyirikkode* in the copper plates.

4. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 82.

5. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 79, lines 6, 16.

6. Even today Christian Biblical names are used in the Malayalam form. Jacob is Chakkappa; Joseph is Ousepp; Mary becomes Mariya in Kerala.

7. Vazhappalli Copper Plates of Rajasekhara, 12th year. *Perumals*, pp. 24-25; The Jewish tradition traces their settlement back to the first century after the Christian Era. *Perumals*, p. 161. See Achutha Menon, *Cochin State Manual*, (Cochin, 1911), pp. 129-30; *Annual Report of Archaeological Department*, (Cochin,1927-28), p.13. The author has no means of checking the correctness of the information.

8. K.P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, 1924, Vol. I. p. 298, (Delhi: Asian Educational Services),Vol. II., pp. 504-06.

9. Jewish Copper Plates, lines 15-20. The matrilineal system of inheritance was already found in the Cera period among Nayars, and probably among the rulers. *Perumals*, pp. 82-85.

10. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas*, (Madras: Madras University,1935), p.169; See also: *Perumals*, pp. 28-30.

11. *Colas*, pp. 169, 200, 223, 248-49; Narayanan, "Kantalur Salai-New light on Aryan Expansion in South India," *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 1970; and *Perumals*, p. 53.

12. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. I, No.146; *Travancore Archaeological Series*, Vol. II, pp. 1-6; Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom*, (Madras: Swati Publications, 1929), pp. 57, 94, 110. *Colas*, pp. 170, 313, 459; *Perumals*, p. 53.

13. *Colas*, pp. 169, 170, 173; *Perumals*, pp. 53-55.

14. *Perumals*, pp. 158-160.

15. *History of Kerala*, Vol. II, p. 518; Sardar K.M. Panikkar, *History of Kerala*, (Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu: Annamalai University: 1959), pp. 57-58.

16. *History of Kerala*, Vol. I, p. 196; Vol. II, pp. 444, 519.

17. *Commemoration Volume*, The Cochin Synagogue 400th Anniversary Celebrations, (Cochin, 1968); *History of Kerala*, Vol. II, pp. 523-31.

18. *Cultural Symbiosis*, Jewish Copper Plates, lines 6-7, 15-16.

19. *Perumals*, pp. 155-158.

20. *Perumals*, pp. 155-158.

21. *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 31-37, 54-59, 86-94.

22. *Perumals*, pp. 24-26.

23. *Cultural Symbiosis*, Syrian Copper Plates, No. 2, lines 38-45.º
24. *Cultural Symbiosis*, Syrian Copper Plates, No. 1, lines 6-24.
25. *Cultural Symbiosis*, lines 14-20.
26. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 37.
27. *Pandyan Kingdom*, pp. 57, 94, 110; *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 30-32.
28. *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 31-33.
29. For different views and arguments about the nature of *Ancuvannam* and *Manigramam*, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XVIII. No. 90. pp. 59-73; *Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy*, 1926-27, Vol. II, p. 93; *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. XXV, III. pp. 269-80; *Pandyan Kingdom*, p. 179; T.V. Mahalingam, *South Indian Polity*, pp. 382-84.
30. Text of the Plates running into 53 lines is followed by 18 lines of Pahlavi script, 10 lines of Arabic (Kufic) script, and 3 lines of Hebrew script – all of them used for signature. See *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 56–57, 91.
31. *M.V.K. Sargam* 14, *Slokam* 66.
32. The different creeds co-existed in peace like wild beasts in the vicinity of holy hermitage", *Kritaspadah kanana satwajatayah/ Tapobhritam siddhimatam ivasrame/ Jagatpratitati viruddhavrittayah/ sahakhila yatra vasanti devatah" Sargam* 12, *Slokam* 112, *T.A.S.* II.I.
33. *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 1-8.
34. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 5.
35. Narayanan, 'Gods and Ancestors in Development' (A Study of Kerala), M.A. Oommen, ed., *Kerala's Development Experience I*, (New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 1999), pp. 9–10.
36. *Kerala's Development*; *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. vii–xii.

Possibilities of Understanding Jewish Malayalam Folksongs

By Scaria Zacharia

Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs (JMFS), a repertoire of about 250 songs available in notebooks and audio recordings, have been under serious interdisciplinary investigation during the last three decades. An international project with theoretical and methodological inputs from anthropology, folklore, linguistics, ethnomusicology, performance studies, women studies, and translation studies has been in progress. Scholars with specialization in Indology, Malayalam studies, and Jewish studies are actively involved in this project headed by Dr. Barbara Johnson (Ithaca College) and sponsored by the Ben Zvi Institute of Hebrew University, Jerusalem.[1] A pioneering volume of 50 songs is planned for publication. An anthology of about 50 songs of the same repertoire was published in German translation in May 2002. The Hebrew translations also includes 50 songs. A larger volume with English translations is under preparation.[2] The Jewish music Research Centre of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, is also producing a CD of Jewish Malayalam folk songs.

Folk Process

This repertoire of Malayalam songs is the possession of Malayalam-speaking Jewish women. At the time of the formation of the modern state of Israel and the subsequent migration of Kerala Jews to Israel, the Malayalam-speaking Jews numbered about 2,500. American and Israeli researchers, especially anthropologists, who conducted research studies in Kerala Jewish settlements in Israel, collected several notebooks containing JMFS. They also recorded some of the songs as sung by elder women of the community. These recordings are available in the music archives of Jerusalem. The notebooks give textual status to JMFS, but the primary form of transmission remains oral. Jewish women who perform these songs have the difficult task of reconciling different textual and oral traditions at every performance. The process involves consultations, decision making, evolution of leadership, phonation of songs, and harmonization of tunes. Among groups of Jewish women, this process is marked by a sense of equality, dynamism of dialogue, and motivation for aesthetic excellence. The folk process of group singing is facilitated in spite of different textual traditions and singing practices supported by different notebooks and different synagogue communities. This corpus of songs, as David Shulman observes, "has a unique status in both the history of Jewish literature and in that of South Indian oral traditions."[3]

Kerala Experience

This paper is a modest attempt to contextualize JMFS by examining the language use in these songs with a view of relating them to illocutionary intent. In doing this, we are looking for the archeology of knowledge and its contemporary performance in these songs. Archeology as an interpretative system gives information, discernment, and wisdom by examining the remnants of the past with a heightened sense of its multi-layered structure. As part of the investigation, we wish to clarify the religious identification of Kerala as a dialogic community with particular reference to its performance of identity and subjectification. In other words, performance of JMFS is interpreted as a communicative action. This is prompted by theoretical and methodological developments in humanities and social sciences. The theoretical contributions of Michael Foucault, Michael Bakhtin, Allen Dundes, Richard Bauman, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Asa Berg have been the main sources of inspiration, though they are seldom mentioned by name. The historical and cultural investigations of Kerala scholars such as M.G.S. Narayanan and the state-of-the art of cultural studies and Malayalam linguistics in modern Kerala also support this type of an inquiry. The explicit theme of this paper is that the JMFS, like many other cultural artifacts of Kerala, represent the hyphenated society of Kerala, which is constantly engaged in dialogic communication. The illocutionary effect of JMFS is Kerala experience. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen recently interpreted this experience in the following words:

> However, there is further need for causal discrimination in interpreting Kerala's experience. There are other special features of Kerala which may also be relevant, such as female ownership of property for an influential part of the Hindu population (Nairs), openness to and interaction with the outside world (with the presence of Christians — about a fifth of the population — who have been much longer in Kerala — since around fourth century — than they have been in say, Britain, not to mention Jews who came to Kerala shortly after the fall of Jerusalem), and activist left-wing politics with a particularly egalitarian commitment, which has tended to focus strongly on issues of equity (not only between classes , but also between women and men).

Genres and Versions

JMFS include songs belonging to different genres. They can be classified according to themes or forms of performance styles. Some of the songs have different versions in different notebooks and they are sung with different tunes. Most of the versions can be identified with different synagogue communities. About thirty notebooks now available belong to six different synagogue commu-

nities: Paradesi (Kochi), Thekkumbagam (Kochi), Kadavumbagam (Kochi), Thekkumbagam (Ernakulam), Chennamangalam, and Parur. The oral traditions of Mala and Kadavumbagam (Ernakulam) are also attested, but no notebook belonging to them has been identified. Many variations as attested by the notebooks are community-specific. This is most interesting for students of cultural studies and critical linguistics. Cultural Studies looks for the performance of identity in cultural forms. There is performance of identity in JMFS at two levels. At the bottom level, songs can be identified as belonging to a particular synagogue community. One can speak of versions of Paradesi, Parur, or Kadavumbagam. At a different level, these songs perform Jewish and Kerala identities. The present investigator's primary concern is the circuit of culture in JMFS involving production, consumption, regulation, representation, and identity. Examining these songs in the circuit of culture permits a better understanding of the value of the JMFS. After the migration of the Kerala Jews to Israel during the last 50 years, the significance of these songs has changed dramatically. A contemporary study of JMFS must take into account this break in the tradition. For reasons that are quite evident, we are theorizing on JMFS from a typical Kerala point of view. The linguistic and literary system of Malayalam also helps illuminate the signification of JMFS.

Origin Songs

One of the major categories of JMFS is historical songs. Some of the songs in this category are treated as origin songs — they trace the origin and development of Kerala Jews through divergent narratives and discourses. One must clarify that the idea of history as a collection of facts is not relevant here. One cannot treat any of these songs as reflections of past events. In fact, there is a group of songs in this category maintained only by the Paradesi community that makes deliberate attempts to give the appearance of factuality. These songs reassert their historicity by including citations from Jewish copper plates. Considering their pedantic nature, we are not including these songs in the anthology of Jewish Malayalam songs. One cannot rule out their folk nature, but we have postponed them for careful analysis. There are other songs with historical themes shared by different synagogue communities and available in different versions in different notebooks. They are valuable as folk songs and can be subjected to folkloristic, literary, and cultural methodologies for scientific investigation. They do not contain historical statements and cannot be validated by traditional historical methods. At best, these songs may be treated as representations of a past, the imagined past. But they are very important, since they are the representations of folk consciousness. They represent the *We* of the songs and that is the authenticity of the statements. They provide a path to Kerala Jewish subjectivity as determined by local specificities. As we can see today in the JMFS, the key element of this

subjectivity is the play of the *We* and the *other* in these songs. These songs semiotically and semantically represent the social dynamics and social formations of Kerala society.

Hyphenated Society

We would like to call this a hyphenated society. A hyphenated society like a hyphenated compound has components with clearly marked boundaries, but it works like a single unit in bigger formations. So is the working of Kerala society, which has distinct local communities and distinct religious groups. Religious groups such as the Jews, Christians, and Muslims had several subgroups that were and are networking to form larger religious groups. The regional groups that cut across religious differences also network with distinct identity. Subsequently, several *Jatis* (castes) that cut across religious and political divisions maintained their distinctiveness. Buddhism and Jainism lost their distinctiveness in the mainstream of Kerala Hinduism, but Semitic religions were accepted as distinct groups — not as a necessary evil but as a blessing. Dr. M.G.S. Narayanan labels this as cultural symbiosis to emphasize the distinctiveness and networking of these religious groups. We prefer the term hyphenation. So the hyphenated society of Kerala is represented in JMFS, especially in historical songs.

Parrot Songs

Now let us examine two versions of a popular song in JMFS called *Kilipatt* (parrot song). Nine versions of this song are available — five versions from Paradesi notebooks and two from Kadavumbagam (Kochi). Considering internal and external evidences, these seven versions can be grouped together as Kochi versions. Two notebooks collected from the Parur community, a prominent Jewish community with long and rich traditions on the mainland, have a distinct version of parrot song. Let us call this Parur version. Now we shall examine these two versions:

Parrot Song — Kochi

Milk with fruit shall be given — Ayyayya
To you lovely bird — Ayyayya
The fruit from the branch — Ayyayya
I shall pluck, and I shall give to you — Ayyayya
For telling some good news — Ayyayya

I shall pluck and give to you, parrot — Ayyayya
Like this at one time — Ayyayya

The bird had just started flying — Ayyayya
Seeing the bird as it was coming — Ayyayya
A hunter came and interfered — Ayyayya
The bird turned pale — Ayyayye
Struck by the arrow of the hunter — Ayyayya
It fell down trembling — Ayyayya
See the affliction of the bird — Ayyayya
For the sake of the fruit from the branch — Ayyayya
Near the seashore of Palur — Ayyayya
It saw (type of?) trees — Ayyayya
The bird went and bathed — Ayyayyaa
Another high place — Ayyayya
Was found in which to perch. — Ayyayya
A splendid green mansion, — Ayyayya
An umbrella of fine stones, — Ayyayya

There the bird flew and perched — Ayyayya

Parrot Song — Parur

Here is milk and fruit — Ayyayya

Oh, parrot, I shall give them to you — Ayyayya

I shall pluck and give to you, — Ayyayya
Oh parrot, I shall give to you — Ayyayya
Listen, there was a forest flowing with milk, — Ayyayya
There birds were sitting high in a row — Ayyayya
There they dwelt, the five colored parrots, — Ayyayya
Birds in a golden cage — Ayyayya
Those who saw them (their beauty?) rejoiced — Ayyayya
They dwelt (to see them dwelling?) in a golden forest — Ayyayya

Then the coming of the hunter was sighted — Ayyayya

Then they were caught in a mighty net — Ayyayya
They fell down struggling, flapping in anguish (?) — Ayyayya
The netted fell down. The freed flew away — Ayyayya
Remembering, can one bear this thought? — Ayyayya
Remembering, can one suffer this suffering? — Ayyayya
Leaving the forest, they divided (separated) — Ayyayya

According to their different types (groups?) — Ayyayya
Ten parrots came together — Ayyayya
Those who suffered the quarrel — Ayyayya
Lost their feathers in the mutual pecking — Ayyayya
The Palur sea knew it — Ayyayya
The short palm trees saw it — Ayyayya
All the birds sat in a row — Ayyayya
They saw the hunter coming — Ayyayya
Fluttering they flew away — Ayyayya

The shrubs in the forest saw it — Ayyayya

All the parrots flew, carrying what they had plucked — Ayyayya
Leaving the forest, they ended up at the sea — Ayyayya
Those parrots were sitting high — Ayyayya
Hearing this, one loses control — Ayyaya

Performance of Identity

At the very outset, the chronotop (time + space) makes these versions distinct. In the Kochi version and Parur version, birds are moving. And they are moving from one place to another. In the Kochi version, they are moving from difficulties to difficulties and finally settle down in a "splendid green mansion." But in the Parur version, birds begin their journey from "a forest flowing with milk" where "the birds were sitting high in a row."

There they dwelt — the five colored parrots
Birds in a golden cage
Those who saw them rejoiced
They dwelt in a golden forest

So according to the Parur version, birds were in a state of glory at the beginning. This version continues to narrate the subsequent stories as a fall. The poem ends with the sad note that "hearing this, one loses control." This ending opens up several possibilities of interpretation. But the Kochi version of this song, which is found in seven notebooks, ends in a romantic Jewish dream. At the end, they are in a high place. It's a splendid green mansion. There is an umbrella of fine stones where the birds come together. The thematic reversals found in the Kochi and Parur versions illustrate the folklore process. Folklore is not stagnant. It changes with the times and the needs. Folk communities, in fact, domesticate narratives for the performance of identity. The folklore process has to be interpreted by contextualizing the changes in the social process. Jews in Kochi and Parur, living

in different socioeconomic conditions and different political units, develop the same folk memory as different narratives to express their similar but distinct identities. Both groups imagined themselves as birds moving from one place to another. Both groups have memories of the hunter, but the meaning of the journey and the present life are defined in terms of their life worlds. They do not share the same universe.

Jews in Kochi as privileged citizens of the land saw themselves as well settled in a "splendid green mansion." The enterprising families of Kochi developed foreign trade and internal commerce during the colonial period. They could easily relate to the colonial authorities and local rulers. Those who were not in business could work in the establishments of their co-religionists. This created a sense of well being in the Jewish communities of Kochi. The situation in Parur was different. They had a longer story to narrate. It started with dispersion in distant past and marked subsequent levels of migration with a variety of contexts. In spite of their privileged positions and good relations with other communities, the deeper sense of the sojourn disturbs them. The mood of the sojourners troubled with complex memory makes the Parur version distinct. This type of folklore analysis focusing on identity performance is very relevant. But this type of interpretation has to be validated by the local knowledge of the folk.

Local Knowledge

Ruby Daniel has a few pertinent remarks about the Kochi version of this song:

> One (song) is sung by the women of Kadavumbhavam synagogue in Cochin, who sing it as they clap their hands and dance in a circle. It tells the story of a bird who flew away to escape the hunter and it is said that the bird refers to Jews who fled from Palur to some place of safety. This song does not appear in the books of white Jews. (1995: 124)

Ruby, who lived in Kochi as a member of the Paradesi community and who had a very sensitive mind, makes sharp distinctions based on the pragmatics of the song. Pragmatics deals with the use of a song. Here she makes distinctions between the communities on the basis of the use of this parrot song. White Jews, the prominent section of the Paradesi community, do not include this origin song in their notebooks. We may naturally presume that the white Jews do not share the imagination of past embodied in this song. However, as evidenced by five notebooks collected from the Paradesi community containing these songs, the nonwhite Jews of the Paradesi community share this dream of the origin of the community in Kerala. The repertoire of the Paradesi community includes parallel

narratives about the origin and development of the community. They refer to Joseph Raban, the leader of the Jewish community, his arrival in Kodungallur, and the royal privileges granted to Jews through the copper plate grants. These parallel narratives of Paradesi community emphasize trade rights, social privileges, and business interaction. In general, these Paradesi narratives express the urban business-oriented subjectivity of the folk.

Another sharp distinction of the folk is made on the basis of the performance of the song. As Ruby reports, women of Kadavumbagam (Kochi) community would sing this song, "as they clap their hands and dance in a circle." Here the song is used for the delimitation of ethnic *we*. That ethnic *we* and *they* are formed through different discursive practices. Those who dance/those who do not dance, those who sing/those who do not sing, those who clap/those who do not clap are categories that determine *we* and *they*. One has to be very careful not to jump into the instinctive conclusion that this is a racial distinction. It is interesting that one of the beautiful recorded versions of this song now available in Jewish music archives is sung by Sarah Cohen, a white Jew now living in Kochi. This shows the networking of different groups within the larger Jewish community. Those who do not consider it to be their song still have no objection to singing it. And those who do not dance have no objection to watching it. This type of networking with well-defined internal borders is a characteristic feature of hyphenated society. Here, hyphenation expresses itself in social structures as cultural pluralism.

Genre and Performance

In folklore, modern literary historiography, and communication studies, genre analysis is very important. Any native scholar will identify the above-mentioned song as Kaikottikkalippattu / Kummi / VattakKali. This is the genric division based on performance. These are clapping songs popular in Kerala. The Ayyayya element marks it as clapping song. But clapping songs have ethnic specificities. Different castes, such as Namboothiris, Nairs, Ezhavas, and Pulayas, have different clapping songs. Different religious groups, such as Christians and Muslims, also have specific varieties of clapping songs. They are generally performed by women. But Christians, Muslims, and Jews have some reservations about women dancing in public.

The fictive ethnicity (i.e. ethnic solidarity based upon an imagined relationship with members of the same nation/area) of modern Kerala or any region of the state is propelled by secularism, multiculturalism, and democracy, with elements such as Kaikkottikalipattu as hyphens in the foreground of Kerala's traditional society. So Christians and Muslims who are now well settled in Kerala celebrate these hyphens as markers of multiculturalism. The transnational communities of Christians, Muslims, and Jews may have different signification for this performance by women. The Kerala Jews who now live in Israel also may

have different perceptions about this performance.

The narrative model of the bird's song, especially its Kochi version, may be assigned to a Malayalam literary genre called Kilippattu. The religious epics of Malayalam, such as Mahabharata and Ramayana, are part of this Kilippattu genre. In this genre, a bird — in many cases a parrot — is invited as a medium to sing a poem. As we see in the Kochi version, the poem begins with the verses addressed to the parrot, which is persuaded to recite the rest of the poem. In longer poems such as Mahabaratha and Ramayana, the dialogue with the parrot marks boundaries of different sections of the poem. The bird song of the Jews, through its genric classification as Killipattu, gets associated with the religious epic mode in Malayalam. But the linguistic substance of the song comes from the everyday speech of the people. This is justified by its association with Kaikottkkalippattu, a typical folk dance. The Parur version of the bird's song is noteworthy for its narrative techniques. The design of the poem puts the bird in the foreground as the master signifier. Expressions such as "a forest flowing with milk" make the song foreign. But, at the same time, the parrot keeps the song within the domain of everyday life. JMFS always maintain this polarity between Jewishness and Malayalamness. The Parur version can be read in relation to Jewish or Kerala folklore. Such folklore and oral history can enrich the understanding of JMFS. As Ruby Daniel testifies, the Kerala Jews have a rich repertoire of folktales. Many of them represent the hyphenated society and folk religion of Kerala. Students of Jewish studies and Kerala studies can collaborate in collecting this data from Kerala Jews living in Israel and in Kerala.

Tamil Poetics

Let me very briefly mention another channel of enquiry. Birds in the parrot songs are moving across lands, forests, and seashore. The journey of birds punctuated by terrain and ecosystem reminds us of the poetic conventions of classical Tamil Sangam poetry. The poetics of JMFS can be better understood in terms of Tamil poetics as found in the treaties *Tholkappyaum.* This type of poetry is characterized by lyricism combined with vivid references to human geography. References to historical places, personalities, and oral-literacy polarity are characteristics shared by JMFS and Sangam Tamil poetry.

Synagogue Songs

Synagogue songs form a special category in JMFS. In general, they describe the construction of different synagogues in Kerala. As we can see from oral traditions, archeological monuments, remembered practices, and suggestive references in the songs, the synagogue community was the basic unit of Kerala Jewish consciousness. Labels and categories, such as Kochi Jews, Kerala Jews, Malabar Jews, Black Jews, and White Jews, are imposed from

outside. Jews of Kerala designate themselves as Jews of Parur, Mala, Chennamangalam, Thekkumbagam, Kadavumbagam, or of Paradesi palli. JMFS include songs about most of the synagogues. Certain synagogues have more than one song. In all these songs, by their very mature as literature, there is the fine blend of fact and imagination. The structure, design, and semantics of these songs support the suggestion that they were sung to express the individual identity of each synagogue and its community within the larger network of the Kerala Jewish community and Kerala society.

Religious *Other*

Most of the synagogue songs have the design of a prayer song. They begin and end with expressions of a Jewish desire to have a place of prayer. Very often formulaic blessings mark the closure. Generally, the songs have a section where the people make the demand that they should have a synagogue. The local ruler is a major figure in some of the songs. The Jews are invited to stay in his country. Why? Here is the vivid explanation in the Mala synagogue song:

> The Kodungallur ruler said:
> "All the different peoples are in my country except for the Jews.
> So ten of you should remain."
> "If ten of us remain here, first we must be helped with a synagogue."
> "Go and choose a place you like."

The conversationalization of the narration without the explicit mention of the speakers indicates the oral transmission. Such gaps are common in folksongs and they are filled up with non-segmental phonemes like tune, pitch, and body language. The performative nature of the song is evident. Another possibility for facilitating the flow of information is the genric communication. The genre of synagogue songs maintains information flow through '*commonsense.*' The demand of the Jews and the reaction of the local ruler are predictable in this genre. Jews insist on maintaining their religious identity. The local community represented by the local ruler accepts it as a privilege to have a religious *other* in the country. This commonsense, as represented by folklore, is part of local knowledge. As a region, Kerala has a rich tradition of multi religious life. Christianity and Islam in Kerala trace their beginnings in this part of the world from the period of their origin. The folklore of Muslims and Christians has parallel references expressing the same *commonsens*e. The church songs of Thomas Christians have similar structure and themes. Each church song invokes memories of the donations of local rulers. This memory also is maintained through several folk practices. So each locality has folk stories and folk customs that reinforce this memory. In many cases, in spite of disciplinary institutions of Semitic religions, folk prac-

tices developed to such an extent that one can speak of the folk Christianity, folk Islam, and folk Judaism of Kerala. In Kerala folklore, there is a tendency to create genealogies involving gods and goddess of different religions. Many folk practices also have developed in different parts of Kerala reconfirming the genealogical relationships of different deities.

Architecture

Some synagogue songs make vivid reference to the architectural practices of Kerala. For example, consider the relevant portion in the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue Song:

> Saying the blessings the foundation was laid
> Gold and Pearls were put in the middle.
> And they raised the synagogue over the pearls.
>
> The heykhal was established like pure silver
> There were two beautiful doors and two pillars
> The pillars were bent and made into an arch with two chambers
> When these two were made
> The light of the father of the world was there for a fact
> Surely there was brilliance there
> Like the sunset at the time of the rising moon
> Under the tiled roof it was all very fine
> They made 10 + 5 frames
> And they brought 15 panels
> They raised it to a height of 5 and a quarter coals
> They made a balcony
> They constructed a staircase to climb up to it.
> That was for the noble women to go and sit.
>
> They made exceedingly red crests and elegant carving
> And delicately embellished lotus flowers
> In the center a beautiful Tebah was made, with feet of wood.

Details of woodwork, masonry, and furniture are given in the songs. Hebrew words, such as *ehal* and *sefer,* are used to indicate unique items of synagogue furniture. But for the rest of the furniture, normal Malayalam words are used. A Hindu carpenter, who is sometimes mentioned by name, is an important character in the synagogue song. However, the name of the mason is never mentioned. The importance of the carpenter in traditional Kerala society is that he is the Architect, the master planner. *Vastuvidya* or Carpenter integrates both the great traditions

and the little traditions of the land. The Kerala architectural style, marked by its simplicity and nature friendliness, is best expressed in Kerala temples. Synagogues, Jewish institutions, also found a Kerala style by association with Kerala architectural practices.

Organization

Another interesting element of the synagogue songs is the reference to the organization of the Jewish community. Each community had a *Yogam* or 'assembly,' comprised of the heads of the families, and a council of elders. They were the oldest people in the assembly. The eldest represented the community in the general meeting of the Jewish communities. Sometimes these assemblies were called Elu Yogams. In the Mala synagogue song, there is a reference to Elu Yogam:

Then Yosef Raban said
"The seven yogams must be informed"
the seven yogams were informed
the eldest Mudaliyar of the Cochin Port
came riding on the neck of an elephant
with drums and trumpets. It was beautiful.
With songs and *Kurava* by women they brought him
To the middle of the synagogue
He walked the length and breadth of the synagogue
"There is not a better synagogue
There is not a better Haychal
There is not a better carpenter"
Then said the eldest Mudaliyar
"I shall present a Safer Torah."
Then said the Kodacheri ruler
"On my part, lamp and oil and wick will be given for the synagogue"
Silk and bangles were presented to the Carpenter.

Religion and Civil Society

Any offense against a place of worship is considered as the most indecent act and an offense to the divine presence. There is a very relevant reference to this in the Mala synagogue song. With the permission of the king of Kodungallur, Jews under the leadership of Yosef Raban collected the choicest wood from the forest for the construction of synagogue:

They went to the mountain and fell the trees
Returning with the wood, the Attangad Tampuran seized the wood
Seizing the wood he built a temple
Then the temple caught fire.

According to the folk belief system of Kerala, this fire at the place of worship is a sign of divine displeasure. It is not a punishment inflicted on the temple from the outside by others. The divinity of the temple itself does not tolerate such an act. The moral anger comes from inside. This belief system finds expression in several folk tales associated with places of worship in Kerala. There is an interesting reference of a related nature in the Parur synagogue song. The Parur synagogue was very beautiful and the community cherished it. Then comes the *other*, the Portuguese colonialists:

The Portuguese came and landed
"Should the Jews have such a beautiful Synagogue?"
Asking this they fired a shot
One of the bright lamps was broken off
While they were running and entering the boat
The justice-loving boatman asked
"Do you realize what you have done?"
The members of the community,
How much did they work for such a synagogue,
And how they brought together
All the things required for it?

Here the country boat man, a representative of ordinary Kerala folk, points out to the Portuguese the impropriety and the offense they committed in attacking a place of worship. This imaginary scene in the Parur synagogue song represents the civil society of Kerala, which gets offended at the politicization of religion. Today, the political parties, media, and intellectuals are under heavy pressure from national and global forces to move out of the local wisdom and practices. Still Kerala society resists such forces of religious nationalism and global religious fundamentalism with its traditional folk wisdom. One can discern tendencies to sanitize local religious communities from localisms and connect them to the global or national grid. In the name of religious purity, local religious identities are purged. The classical example is the Synod of Diamper (1599), which was organized by the Portuguese to 'purify' the local Christians from 'heresies.' In the postcolonial world, similar forces are at work in different guises. Cultural and religious nationalism also plays a role in destabilizing local communal relations and social practices. A student of the history of religions in Kerala can identify the folk religious practices of the

region that contribute to its socio-religious dynamics. A student of postcolonial studies can examine the interrelationship of world, nation, and region in narratives like the synagogue songs. In JMFS, the basic tendency is to maintain the religious space without erasing the boundary lines of the region. These points can be further illustrated by quoting examples from wedding songs, an important genre in JMFS. The biblical songs in JMFS also express localism, but it is not possible for practical reasons to go into these genres in this paper.

Jewishness and Malayalamness

According to tradition and available records Jews were in Kerala at the beginning of Christian era. Malayalam, a member of Dravidian family, developed as a distinct dialect of Tamil in 8-10 CE by the increased use of Sanskrit derivatives and disuse of person-number-gender markers in the finite verbs. So the Malayalamness of Jews goes back to the very beginning of the language. Jews maintain Hebrew for liturgical purposes, as evidenced by typical living synagogue practices. But the language of religion was and is not the language of daily life in Kerala. The same could be observed in the case of Kerala's traditional Thomas Christians and Mappila Muslims. They used Syriac and Arabic as their religious language. This distinction is a typical feature of ancient Jewish and Christian communities in Kerala. Even in linguistic performance, they maintained their Jewishness and Christianness but worked as part of the larger Malayalam speaking community. Again we would identify this as a characteristic of hyphenated society with well-maintained internal borders and the cohesion of a single unit. This was typical of traditional secularism in Kerala. Its identification markers were religiosity, with all its possible diversities, and civil society within the larger public sphere. The western concept of secularism born out of religious negativism and the logic of modernism and economic determinism came to Kerala through westernization. The clash of these two concepts of secularism still continues in Kerala society. Sree Narayana Guru, the great twentieth century reformer of Kerala, accelerated the process of secularization and modernization in Kerala without abandoning religiosity.

The Muslims of Kerala also use Malayalam in their daily lives. They maintain Arabic as their religious language. But, in contrast to Hebrew and Syriac, many Arabic words have come into the everyday vocabulary of Malayalam. This may be explained by the historical fact that Arabic was the language of commerce on the Kerala coast. Even the Portuguese made use of Arabic-speaking interpreters for their trade in Kerala. So Arabic has entered different spheres of Kerala life including literature. Mappila Malayalam — a mixed-language of Arabic and Malayalam — has the status of a literary dialect. It must be noted the some of the most celebrated writers of modern Malayalam, such as Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, write in modern Malayalam incorporating the Muslim dialect of Malayalam.

Linguistic Substance

The linguistic substance of JMFS reminds us of archeological sites where remnants of different periods are found scattered. There are three types of lexical elements in JMFS — Dravidian (Malayalam and Tamil), Sanskrit and Hebrew — as well as a sprinkling of Jewish languages, such as Ladino. The core of the linguistic substance is Dravidian and a part of it belongs to the pre-Malayalam layer. They remain in the songs as fossilized elements. Many people would label them as Tamilisms. We shall examine an interesting semantic example.

One of the wedding songs contains a vivid reference to the bride's floral decoration. The bride covers her head with three types of flowers and, according to the song, these flowers have *NaRRam*. Hermann Gundert's celebrated Malayalam dictionary (1872) confirms the distinction between NaRRom and *Manam*. NaRRom is "bad smell" and Manam is "good smell." This is true of Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Tulu. But old usages of Tamil inform us that during the pre-Malayalam period, the word NaRRom had the meaning "good smell." Several such fossilized elements at the levels of morphology and sandhi prompt a casual reader to label them as Tamilisms. Another significant Dravidian feature is the abundance of typical Dravidian derivatives used to denote typical Jewish concepts. The best examples are loan translations of the Jewish names of God. In a country like India where *sahasranamavali*, "one thousand names of God," is available in a string, JMFS makes use of unique Dravidian derivatives as loan translations to denote God. Jews, Muslims, and Christians share the most popular form, Thampuran or 'Lord.' *Padachavan*, meaning 'creator,' is shared by Jews and Muslims. But *Mulamudayon, Oruvanayavan, Sadakan, Adimulamvayavan*, and *Adiperiyon* are special words used by Jews. According to well-accepted morphological rules, the typical Jewish concept of redemption is expressed by a special word coined from Dravidian root. *Milcha* meaning 'redemption' and *mirchakaran* for 'redeemer' are frequently found in JMFS. But this word is not attested to in any of the dictionaries of Malayalam language. JMFS are full of variants of these words and sometimes they are corrupted beyond identification. For example, in one of the versions of the story of Ruth, Boaz is identified as *misakaran*, 'the moustache man.' This corruption and folk process show the strangeness of the word for the singers who are moving with the trends of everyday Malayalam. But they retain this typical Jewish expression as a marker of definitive religiosity.

Contextual Learning

Without digressing to larger questions concerning folklore and communication, let me make the following observation. Jewish communities in Kerala, which organized around different synagogues in the midst of a multi-religious community, imparted religious education to their members through JMFS. This was fa-

cilitated by connecting different songs to different socio-religious events such as *brit mila*, weddings, openings of the synagogues, and other community festivals. Women had a major role in this educational activity. The wedding songs very often turn out to be prayer songs or didactic songs. The connection between the event and song gave it an illocutionary effect.

Most of the JMFS have Jewish religious signifiers in the form of biblical allusions, formulate blessings, and formulaic prayers. Many verses in the blessing songs do not yield any meaning to the singers at the semantic level. But they perform a task. The temptation to categorize such songs as nonsense songs has to be resisted. The problem has to be discussed in the wider context of poetics of oral-religious literature.

The musical elements of the JMFS have an important role in facilitating communication over and above linguistic meaning. These songs are not composed in any standard meter. But a musicologist finds clear patterns in their sound sequence. Music like verbal language has a signifying system. Musicology like linguistics may go into this process of signification. The development of ethnomusicology has widened the scope of this methodology. At the very outset, a casual observer can see the elements of Jewish music and Kerala music in JMFS.

Orality and Literacy

The alliteration found in many songs is useful in identifying units of the songs like lines and verses. But it is puzzling that the folk poetry maintains sound patterns like consciously composed written poetry. This question could be combined with the problem of the notebook tradition of folksongs. It may be remembered that Tamil Sangam poetry, too, was preserved in writing in spite of its folkloristic characteristics. The connection between oral tradition and the notebook tradition of JMFS as found in practice deserves special attention. The shift from orality to literacy is more intimately connected with social development. It shows both the psychological and physical social mobility of the Kerala Jews. It has to be interpreted in terms of social process. But one has to resist the natural temptation of the literary learner to imagine that oral tradition is a kind of a text waiting to be perfected in writing. The communication process of primary orality has to be described in detail, illuminating the oral wisdom. While moving from orality to literacy every community rooted in primary orality leaves behind much that is exciting. This has to be explored in JMFS. But the transition of morality to literacy is part of the development process and it helps the explicatory understanding.

Opaqueness

Today, the Jewish women who sing JMFS may not be able to explain these artifacts semantically. An ordinary Malayalam speaker also will be bewildered by the opaqueness of JMFS. The major reason for the opaqueness of JMFS is an

unstable set of spelling-pronunciation rules as found in different notebooks. There is general confusion in grapheme to phoneme equivalences and allophonic distributions. Each notebook coming from a particular community may have distinctive graphemic and phonemic patterns. This becomes all the more confusing in the case of borrowed words from Sanskrit and Hebrew. In certain cases, the same Hebrew word is written in JMFS in three of four forms. The best example is the spelling variations of the biblical name Boaz, where different bilabial plosives are used to begin the word. Another typical sound change may be labeled as vocalization. This is the tendency to avoid consonant clusters by inserting vowels. JMFS share this feature with popular speech and it is a marker of oral literature.

Another feature at the graphemic and phonemic levels is the hiatus between vowels. In Malayalam, according to the general tendency of Dravidian languages, vowel continuum is prevented. This morphophonemic tendency is disturbed in JMFS. In many cases, typical Dravidian compounds appear with hiatus causing linguistic anxiety. This feature defamilarizes the language of JMFS. The tendency of Sanskritization has interfered with the linguistic substance of JMFS. New Sanskrit words introduced by modern innovative composers or singers are mutilated through the folk process. For example, a word such as *Ishwaran*, the term for absolute god in Brahmanical terminology, appears like a black hole in the horizon of JMFS. Again this is an instance where Jewish folk maintain its religious borders without blurring into the multi-religious background. There are a few Hebrew words and idioms in JMFS. Words like *Tora, Shalom, Shir,* and *Aliya* are good examples. In a few instances, such as *Alam padacavan* — 'the world-created-he' — and *shalom ayi* — 'died' — Hebrew words appear as part of Malayalam compounds. In the second example, the Hebrew sense relations are transferred to the Malayalam compound. Jews of Kerala who are familiar with the sense relation of Hebrew have coined an expression which is grammatically Malayalam but semantically Jewish.

Structure

The structure of Jewish Malayalam folk songs is very simple. Students of narratology, stylistists, and folklore may explain the design differently. For a student of Malayalam syntax, JMFS are often composed of simple sentences. The frequency of vocative case and imperative verb may tempt the researcher to describe the general structure of these songs as follows:

JMFS < Vocative + Imperative

The beginning and closure of many songs are marked with typical sentences. It may be noted that the imperative form of the verb in Malayalam can express request, order, or permission. The verbs stem itself can be imperative or it can be formed with an auxiliary verb. The formulaic expressions of JMFS are composed of many declarative and imperative sentences. There are only very few examples

of interrogative sentences. This is typical of folk literature. These songs perform certain functions involving request, order, or permission. They express the consent and common sense of the folk. They do not generally interrogate and problematize by asking 'what?' This is the general mood of JMFS.

We have been trying to explain the strange situation in which Jewish women who sing these songs cannot give their meanings. We cannot say that they do not make any sense for the folk. For them, it has a performative value. They are doing something with these songs. Let us call it the performance value and illocutionary effect. As modern pragmatists insist, the performance value of linguistic artifacts is crucial in communication process. The correlation between ethnicity and communication also has to be probed as part of the study of JMFS. In short, JMFS provide ample scope for interdisciplinary studies.

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NOTES

1. For a brief but succinct introduction to JMFS and the project see Barbara Johnson, "Till the Women Finish Singing: Historical Overview of Cochin Jewish Women's Malayalam Songs," *The Journal of Indo Judaic Studies* (Saskatoon, Sask. and Miami, FL) 4 (2001): 7-22.

2. The English translations of JMFS used in this paper are products of this project headed by Dr. Barbara Johnson (Ithaca College) and sponsored by the Ben Zvi Institute of Hebrew University, Jerusalem. English translators: Barbara C Johnson and Scaria Zacharia; German translators: Albrecht Frenz and Scaria Zacharia; Hebrew translators: Ophira Gamliel and Scaria Zacharia.

3. David Shulman, "Foreword," *Anthology of German Translations,* (May 2002).

Silence, Shunya and Shiva

A Kashmir Shaiva Perspective

By L. N. Sharma

The significance of a field such as Indo Judaic Studies hardly needs reiteration in the contemporary world in which religious hatred and violence have become normal. A dialogue between these two ancient religions would be of great help in removing misunderstanding at a time when forces of fundamentalism and fanaticism have let loose a reign of terror and bloodbath never before seen or heard. A free and fair exchange of views would certainly lead to mutual tolerance and understanding.

Jews and Hindus can learn much from each other. They have much in common between them. They represent the religious traditions which have produced most of the major religions of the world. They may be called the mother religions, which have conceived, nurtured, and nourished world religions. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam grew out of the fertile culture of Judea and India. Hinduism and Judaism have also contributed immensely to the growth and development of human civilization. They have led to the flowering of the sciences, arts, music, language, and literature. They are not only the builders of the past, but they also represent the future of mankind.

These two religious traditions did not grow in isolation. They seem to have known and influenced each other since ancient times. They had contacts through maritime trade and influenced each other in the realm of culture. Moses ben Maimonides was involved in his family's trading business with India. Many Jews migrated to India and lived in peace and harmony with their Hindu neighbors. Some of the lost tribes of Jews were supposed to have settled in the remote corners of the Himalayas. Some form of contact and mutual influence cannot be ruled out in these circumstances. There is also speculation regarding the relationship between Abraham and Brahma. This shows the possibility of some form of interaction. It is well known that both the Hindus and the Jews have suffered throughout their long histories. They have been hunted and haunted by invaders and oppressors. While the Jews have suffered mostly because of their homelessness, Hindus have been victimized in their own land. Anti-Semitism is alleged to be an incurable socio-pathological disease, which springs from the homelessness of the Jews.[1]

It is equally difficult to define a Jew or a Hindu. Due to constant oppression and domination by the invaders, they were compelled to conceal their religious

identities. Consoling the Jews who had been forced to convert to Islam, Maimonides' father held that in order to remain a Jew it was enough to pray, however briefly, and to do good acts. Some hold that a Jew is someone whose mother is a Jew, and so that person remains a Jew whatever he or she does.[2] Similarly a Hindu remains a Hindu till he voluntarily converts himself to a different religion.

There is much in common between them in the sphere of religiosity. Both discourage dogmatism in matters of faith and provide an environment for open and free discussion, debate, and dissent. They have encouraged intellectual discussion under the patronage of the state. This has created conditions for openness and development in the fields of religion and philosophy.

The Jews claim that they are the "Chosen People," who have a unique and special relation with God. Thinkers such as Rosenzweig hold that the star of Judea dispels the darkness of paganism.[3] Judah Halevi highlights the superiority of Judaism and regards all other religions as inferior.[4] Revealing Himself in history, God chose the Jews, the Hebrew language, and the Holy Land. The spiritual lineage of the Jews thus continues through heredity, land, and environment. Liberal Jews, however, deny any specific and unique possession of the exclusive revelation of Truth. For them, Judaism is only revealed legislation.[5] Abraham Issac Kook, the Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, claimed that the Jews were endowed with the peculiar gift of holiness or Godliness.[6] Some Jews assert that a Jew is one who suffers for the sake of others. Israel bears the sins of mankind. According to Moses Mendelssohn, though Judaism is meant only for the Jews, its teachings are consistent with universal religion.[7] The Jewish belief that the suffering of the Jews has Divine purpose for Israel and, through her, for the entirety of mankind, will prove to be highly significant for humanity.[8] The existence of Israel is influential for holiness.[9] God demands that there should be no alien for the Jews. In this, the Jews have accepted suffering as a necessary price to be God's chosen people.[10] In support of their claim, Jews such as Judah Halevi of Toledo hold that in the case of revelation at Sinai, the whole nation of Israel was involved. This open and public revelation is the unassailable foundation of all religious knowledge as well as the guarantee and supremacy of the truth of Judaism. Every Jew possesses the divine faculty, the prophetic spirit, through heredity.[11]

Such claims have created misunderstanding and mistrust among non-Jews. They lead to serious problems in the context of religious pluralism. Followers of every religion believe that their path alone is true and should be accepted by all mankind. Such claims and counter claims have given rise to prejudice, hatred, and violence in different parts of the world. History tells us that all such attempts to establish the superiority of one faith over others are bound to fail. Any claim of exclusive possession of truth disturbs the peace and stability of society and the world at large.

The Vedic approach in which reality is conceived as unity in diversity is quite relevant here. It provides the basis for religious understanding and tolerance. Hindu tradition makes a distinction between Religion and religiosity, between the universal Dharma and the particular path or *panth, marga, sampradaya*. Dharma is universal and common to all religions. It is the ultimate goal of all paths. This approach and understanding of faith has given India a spirit of tolerance and respect for other beliefs.

The Vedic seers and sages arrived at the conclusion that the one Real is understood and described differently by the learned (*Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti*). This view has led to the growth and development of a pluralistic trend in Indian thought and has enriched Indian culture with variety.

- 2 -

Unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Indian tradition has placed great emphasis on the internal aspect of experience. In their search for the ultimate, the sages realized the significance of the inner reality. The knowing subject is more important and basic to all knowing. The knower, or the *atman*, must be known. Indian thought has been characterized as *adhyatma vidya*, in that it lays greater emphasis on the knowledge of self. The Upanisads hold that the individual tends to be extroverted and looks only outside, because the Lord has created senses which make him outward looking. It is only an extraordinary man who becomes inward looking. Saints such as Kabir emphasize this truth by drawing our attention to the predicament of the musk deer who looks outside for the fragrance which actually originates from the inside of its own navel (*kasturi nabhi base mriga dunrhe van manhi*).

The Self or *atman* is not only the innermost reality. It is all that exists or appears either outside or inside. Accordingly, it was identified with the Absolute Brahman. The sages declared that this *atman* is verily the Brahman (*ayam atma Brahman*). It is the integral unity of the subject and object. It is the knower and the known — that which is inside, the same is outside.

The Sankhya thinkers found this integral unity rationally inexplicable. How can we attribute contradictory attributes to an entity without introducing division in it? Reality cannot be characterized both as being and becoming at the same time. In their attempt at systemization, the Sankhya, therefore, divided the simple monism of the Upanisads into the duality of *purusa* and *prakrati*, being and becoming. The two are absolutely different from each other. Later Indian thought unfortunately succumbed to this divisive logic of the Sankhya. Most of the systems later on fell into the trap of dualism of subject and object, being and becoming. Even the absolutist systems like Madhyamika Buddhists and Advaita Vedantins could not really recover from the dualism of the Sankhya.

The Buddhists initially rejected the being aspect of reality (*purusa*) and pro-

pounded the reality of pure becoming (*prakriti*). But finally they have to negate even change or becoming and formulate the notion of Shunya or nothingness. The Shunyavada Buddhist rightly concluded that if we reject one of the duality as unreal, the other also must be rejected as unreal in the end. Hence the Madhyamika rejected all phenomena as unreal and postulated the doctrine of Shunyavada. The Advaita Vedantins adopted the opposite line and started with the reality of Purusa, the pure changeless being. While the Buddhist found nothing unchanging or permanent, except eternal and universal flux, the Vedantins denied the reality of change and becoming. Reality for them is absolute Being.

Both these absolutist systems fail to bridge the gulf of dualism of Purusa and Prakriti. Reality somehow contains both the unmodified and unchanging spirit and the changing appearances. It is the integral unity of both the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. Whenever we deny the one, we must also reject the other. That is why these absolutist systems fail and finally lead us to nihilism or illusionism (*mayavada*).[12] Both fail to grasp the true nature of integral reality.

In the proper course, we should be able to identify the two aspects of experience as the dual manifestation of the absolute reality, which is the supreme Self. The highest Self is wholly transcendent. It is beyond all description. In itself, it is neither being, nor becoming. Realizing the utter inscrutability and indescribability of the Self, the sages declared "*neti, neti*" and recommended "silence." The wise should become "silent" (*muni*). The silence of the Muni, however, is not empty. It is vocal, and aims at communicating the incommunicable. The silence of the Buddha and the silence of Shiva in the form of Daksinamurti, aim at conveying the absolute mystery and otherness of Reality. While Buddha's silence gives rise to Shunyavada, Shiva's silence leads to integral absolutism (*purna advaita*). The philosophy of *Sivatva* was revealed through the first *Siva Sutra*, according to which the knowing Self (*chaitanya atma*) is the supreme reality. The Buddhist went on the wrong track when he denied the reality of the knowing subject. The Vedantin committed the mistake of rejecting the object as illusory. The former failed to see the self in the not-self and the latter could not realize unity of the self and not-self. The true reality represents an integral union of 'I' and 'It,' *aham* and *idam*. The real first manifests itself as "I-it" and then as "it-I" (*aham-idam, idam-aham*). The Journey of Indian thought begins with negation and ends with *Sivatva*. It is a process starting from silence and shunya, and culminating in the realization of supreme self-hood, or *svatmamahesvaratva*.

The so-called Shunya is, in fact, the door to the divine. It is the "Gate" through which the seeker must pass. The disciples of the Shiva *marga* also encounter shunya in their journey toward self-realization. Initially it is an obstacle in progress. But the faithful initiate realizes the ultimate oneness of Shunya and Siva. The highest reality appears as Shunya or nothing, when it is free from finite determinations. The realm of duality and difference must be sublated, or burnt to ashes,

in order that the non-dual absolute may become manifest. The Lord of the universe, Viswanatha, is revealed only in the mystic light (*kashi*). It is the great cremation ground, *maha smasana*, wherein all finitude is burnt completely. Death is the starting point of all wisdom and revelation.

With the affirmation of Supreme Self, the initial negation, the *neti, neti*, gives way to *iti, iti*. Historically, it is the culmination of entire Indian thought. It was revealed on the Mountain called Mahadeva Giri, in Kashmir, where both the Buddhists and the Advaita Vedantins had great influence. The votaries of Self are not afraid of embracing duality and difference. They accept the world of appearances as real. Change or becoming is an integral aspect of the Divine. In this view, the Divine first gives rise to difference out of unity, and then assimilates the difference within its unity (*abhede bhedanam, bhede cha abhedanam*). Those who deny non-difference are in ignorance. But those who reject difference are in greater ignorance. The final rest of the individual seeker is neither in difference nor in non-difference, but in the Supreme Self (*Atma Visranti*).

- 3 -

The practice of idol worship has been subjected to severe criticism. Judaism and other religions have condemned and ridiculed it. Some consider it their sacred duty to demolish idolatry and punish the idol-worshippers. Idol-breaking has continued for centuries. The wrath and fury of these warriors of 'monotheism' has been witnessed even recently in the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The inspiration and impetus for this zeal originally came from Judaism, which had condemned idolatry not only as false religion, but also as false morality.[13] During the days of Roman tyranny, it was decided that one could violate any of the commandments except those forbidding idolatry, incest, and murder.[14] The Jews would not demand even belief in monotheism from others, provided they refrain from idolatry. They also devised a different set of rules for dealing with idol worshippers. Judah Halevi held that the Hindus were the abandoned people, who distressed the believers by their false speech, idols, talismans, and devices.[15]

It is unfortunate that there is so much misunderstanding about idol worship. Hinduism lays equal emphasis on the unity and transcendence of God. The idol breaker perhaps chose to remain ignorant about the real meaning and motive behind the practice. The pagan form of worship was demolished in India much before the "Warriors of God" arrived there. The announcement of '*neti, neti*,' not this, not this, closed all avenues for idolatry. The highest reality transcends all thought and reasoning. Even the ascription of lordship and creatorship to it is false.

Hinduism does not regard idol worship as the ideal form of worship. It is also not practiced by all Hindus. Some sects, such as Aryasamaja, do not practice idol worship. They are, in fact, opposed to it. Even those who believe in idol

worship regard it primarily as a symbolic form of worship. The deity alone is worshipped through the idol. The idol is the residence of God, just as the body is of the soul. The concept of unity of being provides the ideological basis for idol worship. God is all and all is God. Existence is a manifestation of the Divine. The world of objects reflects the face of God. It is the mirror which reveals the Divine presence. The devotee may invoke the Divine presence in a form of his choice (*ista*). The divine also responds accordingly. The Vedic myth of creation (*pursue sukta*) is recited by the priest during the invocation ceremony.

Idol worship presupposes identity between word and meaning, idea and form, mantra and the deity. The idol is not just an inert object. It is first made alive through the performance of rituals (*sajivakarana*). The priest invokes the deity, who pervades all the elements, and invites it to be seated in his own heart. Finally, he transfers it to the idol through the rituals of *avahan* and *prana pratistha*.[16] The idol should be worshipped only after it is established through prescribed rituals. Otherwise, it would be the worship of inert matter.

Two other opinions discuss the role of rituals invoking a Divine presence. Some hold that the rituals really infuse life in the idol and make it the living presence of God. Others, however, believe that they do not introduce any change in the idol, but instead only change the attitude of the devotee. They enrich and deepen the faith and help with concentration and purification of the mind.

Even enlightened and accomplished saints such as Shankaracharya indulged in idol worship to guide and establish people on the path of Dharma or righteousness (*loka sangraha*). Ordinary people who follow the leaders will turn away from Dharma in the absence of proper guidance. These teachers attract the public, which is unable to follow the intricacies of logic, toward religion. It is similar to teaching children numbers and alphabets through gross matter. The enchanting scenes and sight and sounds in the temple easily attract the simple child-like devotees. The dialogue between Uddhava, the great Advaitin, and the Gopis, the devotees of personal God, Khrishna, highlights this fact. God is not affected by idol worship. It is only a device to help the devotees. The idol serves a function similar to a battery, which is charged through electricity. The idol is charged with spiritual energy through constant prayer, worship, and chanting in the temple. It is first impregnated with cosmic energy through the rituals. Afterward, millions of devotees infuse it with the vibrations of spiritual energy through long periods of devotion. It thus becomes a store-house of concentrated energy.[17] For thousands of years India has been nourished by the energy drawn from the temples. It has sustained India during critical hours of her existence.

However, if the idol is not established properly, or not worshipped regularly, or if it is neglected for a period of time, it becomes lifeless and useless and must be discarded. When established properly and worshipped regularly, the idol attracts the magnetism of the earth and heavenly bodies, the vibrations of the

unmanifest Divinity and the spiritual energy from innumerable devotees. This way it becomes charged with infinite power.

Even those who do not believe in a personal God admit the significance of idol worship. The followers of Shankara, Buddha, and Jaina Tirthankaras established idol worship in their temples. Shankara insists that there is no alternative to it. All forms of worship and prayer are truly speaking forms of idolatry. All approaches to the indeterminate and indescribable Absolute involve idolatry. The anthropomorphic expressions in different religions are supposed to be mere concessions to human weakness. They are adapted to the mental capacity of mankind who have clear perception of the physical body only. Even the Torah has to speak the language of man.[18] We need adjectives because men need images in order to understand. Verbal prayer is, in fact, a concession to man's weakness.[19] The womb of idolatry is in the mind of men. Even idol-breakers can be idolaters.

- 4 -

Indian thought has been criticized as being pantheistic, nihilistic, and escapist. But such charges are baseless. None of the Indian systems regard God and world as co-equal. The Vedantic declaration that "All is God" only implies the omnipresence and absoluteness of God. It actually rejects the separate and independent existence of all. The two great utterances — "All this verily is Brahman" and "There is no plurality here" — should not be read separately. They convey their meaning jointly. "All is God" because there is nothing but God. As the ornaments made out of gold are not different from God, or as the sun's rays are identical with the sun, so also the plurality of world is non-different from God. Further, Advaitism is not accepted by many sects in Hinduism, which are opposed to the rigorous monism of Shankara. Some are even closer to the Judaic form of monotheism.

The individual soul is not equated with God in any school of Hinduism. The soul is said to be one with God only in the sense that God alone is its support and substance. The individual soul, when it is free from finite limitations, is nothing but the infinite. Accordingly, it is not proper to hold either that the individual looses its identity in the absolute or that it is equated with the divine. The individual and the infinite are non-different because the later is the highest self (*paramatma*) of the former. The charge that Hinduism denies the identity of the individual is baseless, for Hinduism really affirms its majesty and absoluteness. The individual is not lost — it only recognizes its absolute and infinite nature, and discards the illusion of being finite and limited.

It has been alleged that Indian thought is essentially negative, escapist, and pessimistic. Thinkers such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig argue that the Indian tradition encourages the attitude of withdrawal. Unlike Hinduism, Judaism does not support abstention from worldly pleasures. If a person abstains from

any permissible pleasure, he has to account for it in the life hereafter.[20] Judaism repudiates fasting and does not condemn wealth and riches. These are the blessings promised to the faithful by God. The Jewish faith about God is determined primarily by their positive attitude toward the world and their emphasis on the meaningfulness of human history and life.[21] The world is full of worth and must be enjoyed, not rejected. It would enable the individual to be united with God and help in transforming the material into the spiritual.

It is, however, quite wrong to hold that all of Indian thought is otherworldly. On the contrary, it encourages full participation in life. There is no difference between the worldly life and freedom. The two (*sansara* and *nirvana*) are one. The individual need not run away from the world to attain liberation, which is possible in the world itself. Buddha and Shankara both continued to live active lives till the end. The ideal of renunciation or *sanyasa* should not be misinterpreted as escapism. It is not withdrawal from the world. Buddha refused *nirvana* for himself and showed the path of service and piety (*maha karuna*). Similarly, Shankara, the champion of *sanyasa*, walked on foot throughout the length and breadth of India guiding people till his last breath. The institution of *sanyasa* has continued to serve Indian society for centuries. It has illumined the hearts and minds of people and provided spiritual solace to them. Hinduism accepts *sanyasa* only as the last stage in a man's life, when he has fulfilled all his duties toward family, society, and the gods. None is allowed to take up *sanyasa* till he has repaid all his debts.

It is also wrong to attribute pessimism to Indian thought. Although it starts with the recognition of suffering, its goal is the realization of absolute freedom. It is rooted in the awareness of the limitation and finitude of worldly life, and draws our attention toward the ultimate state of release. It does not recommend withdrawal from the world, but encourages enjoyment and involvement in the pleasures of life. The calender of India is filled with year-long celebrations of festivities. These festivals bring joy and happiness in the life of the individual and society. The marvelous creations like Konark, Khajuraho, and Kamasutra could not be the products of a negativistic and pessimistic culture. Indian culture has shown great interest in the joys and pleasures of life since Vedic times.

However, Jewish thinkers such as Rosenzweig hold that the Indian civilization represents an area of darkness which needs the redemptive light of the star of Judaism for it posits a deity who reduces what is to what is not. The world is a movement from a source in nothing toward an end in something, but Asian religions reverse the direction of thought back to original nothing, a regression.[22] It escapes, rather than discovers, the reality of the world, because it lacks courage.[23] Being or Brahman, the reigning God of India, is unable to face difference. It is no coincidence that revelation took the road to the West, not to the East, which lacks the monotheistic reading of history.[24]

In this context, it is relevant to state the opinion of late Prof. Bibhuti Yadav. He says:

> Philosophers, the supposed agents of rational discourse, chase phantoms simply because of desire (*vasana*)...Conceived in desire, the self is chronically erotic. It finds comfort in false consciousness, in altering imagination into perception, wishes into reality. It finds truth in a category mistake, turning the world into an epistemic field where 'I perceive x' is actually a cover for 'I wish x.' There is no point in dreaming or gazing at a transcenent God. The point is to turn the world into an ethical neighborhood.[25]

Moreover every religion makes similar claims. How is one to decide the validity of varying truth claims?

- 5 -

The uniqueness of the Jewish religion consists in its emphasis on holiness and morality. The God of Israel is a holy God who cannot tolerate unethical speech.[26] Judaism is essentially a way of right living.[27] There is no separation of ethics from religion in it. Ethics has its source in Judaism. While non-Jews treat ethics only as a subtopic of philosophy, it is fundamental to Jewish philosophy.[28] Kaufmann Kohler asserts that Judaism cannot compromise in any sense and in any situation its mission to teach monotheism to the world. Everything else may change or evolve according to time and place except the commitment to ethics.[29] The ethical message of the Commandments is divinely inspired and cannot change. Judaism is not revealed religion, but revealed legislation. Some Jewish-Christian thinkers are critical of the Indian unconcern for ethics. The idolatrous cults are the real enemies of godliness and holiness. Idolatry is condemned in Judaism primarily because of its being false morality.[30]

It is, however, a wrong interpretation of Indian culture to say that it has no commitment to ethical principles. Unlike other religions for which ethics consists of revealed commandments, in India it is supposed to be the very foundation of the cosmic existence. Ethics, translated as Dharma, is not prescribed by external authority. It constitutes the very nature of being. The creator establishes Dharma by first applying it to himself. It is the observance of Dharma which sustains creation and keeps it going.

Hinduism regards Dharma as supreme. The governing of Karma is autonomous. The sovereignty of Karma has been accepted by all systems in India. It can not be violated under any situation. Even gods are governed by its laws. The

trinity of the highest gods, the king of gods, sages, and saints, all are under the sovereignty of the law of Karma. Every being must suffer the result of karma. There can be no exception to it. Even the *sanyasi*, who is supposed to have broken out of the chain of worldly existence (*sansara*), has to undergo the effects of his previous actions.

Mahabharata, the great epic which revolves around the problem of Dharma, highlights the mysterious nature of ethics. It is the battlefield on which the working of Dharma is being enfolded. Here the Supreme God fulfills His promise to defend Dharma when it is in danger. The epic brings out the truth that none can escape the law of karma. Yudhisthir, the great upholder and an incarnate of Dharma, also suffers the consequence of his karma when he indirectly supports untruth. Bhisma, the patriarch of the fighting forces, laments that the mystery of Dharma is beyond human comprehension. Different sources of its knowledge, such as scriptures, tradition, authority, reason, and so on, are unreliable and lack unanimity. The source of Dharma is 'within' the individual, the manifestation of a little of which activates the Dharma. When it is manifested, dharma gives rise to attitudes of compassion, concern, sympathy, and understanding.

To establish holiness, greater emphasis should be laid on changing the individual. Those who try to establish dharma through coercion and violence forget that it is revealed only within the hearts of men.

Whatever be the nature of Dharma, it can not be limited to a particular group of people, sect, or society. It must be applicable to all mankind, irrespective of color, creed, community, or race. Those who apply different laws to different people, such as believers and non-believers, are really ignorant of the true nature of holiness. One is not really following Dharma if he applies one code for the faithful and another to the *kafirs*. The sovereignty of Dharma demands that no one should leave its path on any account. It can not be conditioned by fear, temptation, greed, etc. For pleasure and pain are transitory, only Dharma is eternal.

- 6 -

It is in the sphere of mysticism that there is much in common between Judaism and Hinduism. Mysticism lies at the heart of these traditions. The Kabbalah and the Tantra both derive their names from tradition (*agama*). They have evolved out of the teachings which were handed down orally from generation to generation, as received and recorded in the remote times.[31]

Scriptures are regarded as the blue-print of creation in both. The holy word represents the body of God, as embodied in the scriptures. Infinite mysteries are hidden in the letters and words of the sacred texts. Both systems recognize the cosmic importance of letters. The creation was brought into existence through the Divine utterances.

The mysteries were carefully kept secret. The mystic beliefs and practices

were hidden from the public. It was strictly forbidden to reveal them to those who were not initiated into the system. Hidden mysteries are the soul of Judaism. God is the hidden of all hidden. He is called 'All' as all things are in Him and He is in all. He is both manifest and unmanifest (*vyakta* as well as *Avyakta*); manifest in order to uphold the whole, and concealed, for he is found nowhere.[32] This view is similar to the Tantric concept of *sarva* and *anuttara*.

Maimonides' assertion that 'Truth' must be communicated only orally from master to disciple, as only a few men are capable of comprehension, would find full support from the Tantric. It is neither necessary nor good to reveal the secret truths. Men differ greatly, as regards their capacity, inclination and temperament.[33] Both the systems hold that if the 'secrets' are revealed to the vulgar, society would be endangered. The mystic, therefore, uses the language of allegories and metaphors. At the training stage, the disciple undergoes some terrifying experiences, such as fear of death, drowning, and darkness. The Tantric initiate voluntarily chooses death and prefers to live and meditate in the cremation ground. The beginner experiences a frightening loss of self. Abulafia regards anguish, fear of death, and the threat of madness as characteristic of progression through lower stages.[34] Only the Divine grace can protect the initiate at this stage. He should voluntarily surrender himself and choose death in order to realize the higher self. The Tantric initiate should willingly give up the finite ego. Kabir warns the seeker that only those who are ready to surrender their egos may enter the house of the Lord.

The concept of metaphysical knots (*aporia* or *granthi*) is found in both mystical schools. It is necessary to untie or cut the knots which prevent the free flow of divine light. The disciple will be unable to have the ecstatic experience of unity with the Divine unless the knots are untied.[35]

The concept of creation through contraction is common in both mystical traditions (It is called *zimzum* in Kabbalah and *tirodhana* or *sankocana* in the Tantra). As the Infinite Light of the Divine can not be received directly by the finite, the Divine makes it appear in a limited form. According to the Kabbalah theory of *zimzum*, the divine withdrawal makes it possible for the universe to exist. He becomes the world by first withdrawing himself. Like the Tantric, Isaac Luria also holds that the absolute contracts itself in order to give rise to the world of finitude. Creation is thus preceded by the voluntary self-contraction and self-limitation of the Divine.[36] Contraction or self-concealment is the first act of creation according to the Tantra. In a sense the Divine adapts the power of His light to the capacity of the creatures. It is similar to the activity of a teacher or a father who uses words which are suitable to the level of understanding of the children. The Divine creation does not involve complete darkness but merely a diminution in the intensity of light.[37] Similarly evil is also not a complete negation of good, but represents a lower grade of good.[38]

The view that the Divine Couple is the exemplar of all coupling of male and female in the universe is accepted in both systems. God and His Schekhina, Shiva and Shakti, are the primal couple. Although the Absolute in-itself is wholly transcendent (*anuttara*), we can know it through its Shakti or power. Shakti is the face of the Lord. The principle of dualism, of male and female, runs throughout the universe. The male occupies the right side, the female the left side. The human body is a microscopic representation of entire creation. It is a sacred vessel containing the Divine spark. The prescribed coupling of the male and female culminates in a kind of metamorphosis. God himself realizes his own unity through the act of human coupling.

In spite of these similarities, there are some fundamental differences in the aims and attitudes of the two mystical traditions. The union of the couples is never allowed to transgress the Laws in the Kabbalah. It is strictly confined to legitimate couples. There is, however, no such restriction for those who follow the Tantra. It is sometimes recommended that the union of the couple should preferably violate the social norms. Again the Tantric ideal is to retain the semen and not allow it to fall. For the fall of the drop is death, and retention is life.[39] But there is no such restriction in the Kabbalah. Further the aim of the Tantric is to ascend to the higher level of reality and transcend the limitation of time and space. For the Kabbalah, however, it is a kind of descent from the higher to the lower. The goal of the Tantric is individual salvation or perfection. The aim of the Kabbalah, on the other hand, is collective redemption, the restoration of the unity between Israel and God. For it, the union is meaningful only in the context of the history of the people of Israel. The aim of the Tantric is the absorption of the individuality in the Divine. The Tantric realization of union takes place within the heart. In the Kabbalah, it is outside, in the nation of Israel. It is an ongoing process in which the whole community of Israel participates.

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33. Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 2.40.
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Common Symbolic Patterns in Hebrew and in Sanskrit Literature

By Giulio Busi

The philological comparison between Hebrew texts and Sanskrit works has been a rather neglected field in recent years. After a short blossoming of such studies at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a widespread silence fell on Hebrew-Sanskrit philology. This lack of continuity was probably caused mainly by a shift in scholarly fashion. In fact, the late 19th-century positivistic attitude of comparing different cultural areas in order to establish a common pattern of thought has been replaced, during the 20th century, by a more selective look at the different traditions.

The turn of the 19th century was marked by the efforts of pioneers such as Max Müller and Isidor Scheftelowitz, who were deeply interested in understanding both the Indian (and the old Persian) tradition and the Jewish one in their mutual textures. While Max Müller limited himself mainly to general statements about the relationship of some symbolical motifs, Scheftelowitz, a German-born Jew, was probably the scholar who made the greatest contribution to a documented analysis of Hebrew-Sanskrit parallels. Following the method of German philology of his day, Scheftelowitz devoted most of his efforts to collecting textual references in Hebrew and Sanskrit corpora, even if he did not pay much attention to rhetorical data, that is to say, to the actual way in which similar ideas were expressed in Hebrew and in Sanskrit poetical or prose texts.

Notwithstanding such limitations, Scheftelowitz' books on *Arisches im Alten Testament* (1901-3), *Die Altpersische Religion und das Judentum* (1920) and *Alt-Palästinensischer Bauernglaube* (1925)[1] offer quite a large collection of comparative commentaries and can be seen as the first step in a hitherto unexplored domain. When the Nazis seized power, Scheftelowitz was forced to leave Germany. He emigrated to England and died shortly thereafter, in 1934. After him, hardly anyone continued this line of study. Only very recently has Barbara A. Holdrege's seminal book, *Veda and Torah*, offered a comprehensive comparison of some fundamental ideas in Jewish and Hindu religion.[2] Holdrege's analysis, however, is aimed basically at understanding the similarities between Indian and Jewish thought from a religious-anthropological point of view.

In my work, I purposely abstain from discussing any anthropological questions, nor is my starting point historical. It could be said that I am trying to follow the path taken by the scholars of the last century. Nevertheless, while in many

instances using the results attained by Scheftelowitz, I am conscious of having shifted the emphasis from his phenomenological studies of religions to a more strictly philological and rhetorical analysis. The kind of comparison I have tried to work out could be termed a symbolical one. In other words, I am interested in juxtaposing some basic metaphors from Hebrew literature with similar images occurring in Sanskrit literary works. My starting points are not general ideas or broad religious conceptions, but short linguistic strings, usually only a sentence or a couple of sentences both in Hebrew and in Sanskrit that show striking similarities. The parallels that I collect are intended to clarify the symbolical way of thought and the literary strategy expressed in the texts with which I am dealing. I am aware that such a method could give, at first sight, the impression of being arbitrary. However, I am convinced that literary comparison is probably the soundest way to clarify symbolical images only rarely attested within the borders of one particular culture.

The identification of a literary intersection between these two cultures makes it possible to evaluate different symbolical images according to their original standards and to fill the gaps left by often fragmentary traditions. The symbolical formulas can be compared in works from quite diverse cultures and languages. In fact, it can happen that a formal parallel not found within a particular literary tradition appears unexpectedly in a more remote milieu, in this way confirming the meaning of the expression in its first encounter or, even better, precluding false deductions that might have arisen from the symbolical isolation. "Symbolical philology" therefore legitimizes cross-cultural comparisons, but only if they are kept within written traditions, since it is then easier to verify the identity of a particular symbolical syntagma even when it pertains to milieus whose historical links cannot be proven.

A few years ago, in 1999, I published a book on Jewish symbolism (*Simboli del pensiero ebraico*).[3] The goal of my research was to establish a kind of map of Jewish symbolical thinking based on the evidence of Hebrew literature from the Bible to the end of the 18th century. This work led me to appreciate the importance of Hebrew-Sanskrit studies for the correct understanding of some major symbolical issues. Here, I will give a few examples in detail.

Among the many significant cases, it is worth considering Psalm 19, where the morning sun is described "like a bridegroom coming from his wedding canopy." Behind this image is the glimpse of a mythological layer in which the day-planet has the dawn as his consort. This motif, which is not attested to in any other biblical passage, has been analyzed by scholars, who have pointed out a parallel with the Mesopotamian myth of the union between the sun and his bride Aya. Since no Mesopotamian text introduces this image with a comparison formula such as the biblical one, scholars have concluded that the expression "like a bridegroom" voices a deliberate attempt on the part of Jewish culture to distance itself

from pagan anthropomorphism, here retained as a mere rhetorical device. However, this deduction is disproved by the occurrence of an identical phrase in a hymn of the *Rig-Veda*, where the sun follows Ushas, the deity of the dawn, "(just) as the bridegroom follows the bride." In the Vedic verse, the image of the bridegroom is accompanied by the Sanskrit particle *ná* (like), which is the equivalent of the Hebrew prefix *ke-* (like). Thus it is evident that the attenuation expressed by the psalmist in his simile is not ideologically motivated, but belongs to the deep substratum of the solar hierogamy. In this case, an objective evaluation of the biblical passage can be achieved only by expanding the area of inquiry to include the Vedic tradition, which seems to be ignored by biblical scholars more because of the requirements of their specialized field than on the basis of a serious pondering of its contents.

The comparison with Sanskrit literature also sometimes can clarify an occurrence in Hebrew of a particularly rare motif. This is the case of an idea expressed in a single biblical passage, in the book of the prophet Nachum. In this verse, the word "*afar*" (dust), is used to qualify the God of Israel, YHWH, as the storm God, who comes among clouds: "The way of the Lord is in the tempest and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet" (Nachum 1:3).

The image of God who walks in the sky and raises the storm, as if he were traveling along a dusty road, evokes a mythic substratum. Although it is only alluded to in the Bible, the idea of storm gods who proceed amidst thunderbolts and dust is attested to in various oriental traditions. So, for instance, in the Mesopotamic creation epic *Enuma elish* ("When on high...", 109-110) it is said that: "[The god] Marduk created the dust and let the storm carry it."

The hymns of the *Rig-Veda* offer a further particularly detailed example of a similar theophanic use of the word "dust." In a composition addressed to Vata (X.168.1), the wind-god, the divine chariot is praised with the following words: "It moves touching the sky, and creating red sheens, or it goes scattering the dust of the earth." According to the archaic epic, which joined driver and chariot in a single symbolic unit, the god is merged with his vehicle, which arouses storm-clouds in heaven and dusty whirlwinds on earth.

Here, the Sanskrit metaphor completes the assumption of the Hebrew text, where dust is seen as an important attribute of the dynamism of the storm-god. One could say that both the verse of Nachum and the one of the *Rig-Veda* — as well as the more straightforward qualification of the Mesopotamian Marduk as the dust-maker — are fragmentary results of a single symbolical process, starting from the basic pattern of "(divine) storm-dust."

In fact, such theophanic qualifications usually offer a secure field for comparison. This is probably due to the intrinsic cross-cultural quality of poetical theophanies, the constitutive elements of which go back to earliest antiquity. So, the laughing of God represents an element of the divine manifestation widespread

in different cultures, from the Greek to the Latin and to the Persian and Indian. Generally speaking, YHWH's laugh is used in the Bible as an announcement of imminent punishment for human evil behavior. So, in Psalm 37:13, "The Lord shall laugh at him [i.e., at the wicked]; for he sees that his day is coming." In another text, God scoffs at his enemies, venting His wrath at them: "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then he shall speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury" (Psalm 2:4-5). In fact, such a divine fury, here heralded by a sinister laughing, seems to allude to the ominous appearance of a supernatural storm, as is often the case in Biblical poetry. In Psalm 83:15-16, for instance, God's punishment is clearly described as a violent tempest that annihilates the evil doers: "As the fire burns a wood, and as the flame sets the mountains on fire; so pursue them with your tempest, and terrify them with your storm." If we keep in mind that in archaic symbolism the sudden thundering was assimilated to a laughing, we could infer, in the pattern YHWH-laugh/stormy punishment, the surfacing of an almost forgotten metaphor that the Hebrew Bible seems to keep purposely vague and undertoned. Sanskrit literature attests to the theophanic laugh in a much clearer way. For instance, the syntagma laugh/lightning occurs in *Rig-Veda* I.168.8: "The [bolts of] lightning laugh upon the earth beneath them, when the Maruts scatter forth their fatness [i.e., the refreshing rain]." In this case, the comparison with Sanskrit brings us to the very source of symbolic development and provides us with an illuminating foundation for the insecure semantics of the biblical laughing of God. In other words, we can use the eloquent Sanskrit pair lightning/laugh as a cultural palimpsest: the laughing God was at the beginning, in fact, a thundering and lightning God; that is to say also that the biblical divine laugh must be read as a fossilized recollection of an original theophany of the storm-god. However, in the Vedic source the lightning laugh has a clearly positive value — being a propitious showing of light and a promise of rain — while in Hebrew it is tainted with the dark halo of divine wrath.

A further and often rewarding field of comparison is represented by cosmological passages. This domain, too, was characterized in ancient cultures by pronounced cross-cultural tendencies. In fact, Hebrew and Sanskrit traditions seem to share a few common ideas about the structure of the world. What is even more important for us, both the Bible and the Vedas express these cosmological views through rhetorical patterns which are clearly cognate.

The Hebrew Bible describes, for instance, how God laid the foundations of the world, basing it on strong pillars which grant stability to nature: "When the earth and all its inhabitants are dissolved, I bear up its pillars. Selah" (Psalm 75:4). Being the establisher of this cosmic firmness, the Lord is the only one who can decide to alter it, and then for the purpose of punishing evil-doers: "Who shakes the earth from its place, and its pillars tremble" (Job 9:6). Such a cosmic architecture seems to have represented a deep secret of wisdom. In fact, accord-

ing to the biblical lore, God was the only one who knew the inner structure of the world-building. He was the one who built the palace of creation and therefore was aware of every single constructive detail. In the book of Job, the Lord asks a question the protagonist could clearly never answer: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?. . .Upon what are its foundations fastened? Or who laid its corner stone?" (Job 38:4-6). With these words, God intends to state his own incommensurable superiority, since only He, as supernal architect, has seen and arranged the foundation of the world.

The defiant question is echoed also in the Persian Avesta, but with a clear inversion of subject. Here is the man who questions God, in order to be reassured about the secret static of creation (*Yasna* XLIV.4): "This I ask Thee, O Ahura! Tell me aright, who from beneath hath sustained the earth and the clouds above that they do not fall?"

In Vedic literature, the mysterious cosmic support merges in the Godhead, who bears the whole reality within his mystical body: "On whom is firmly founded earth and sky and the air in between; so, too, the fire, moon, sun, and wind, each knowing his own place – Tell me of that Support – who may he be? In whose one limb all the Gods, three and thirty in number, are affixed. Tell me of that Support – who may he be?" (*Atharva-Veda* X.7.12-13). In this text, one of the most intense of the Atharva-Veda, the idea of the cosmic pillar has a strong metaphoric connotation: the column is not an inert element of the world-palace but has personal, almost anthropomorphic features ("In whose one limb..."), and functions as an animated support of the cosmos.

A comparison between the Hebrew, Persian, and Sanskrit texts makes it clear that the question about the pillars of the world belonged to a widespread cosmological lore and represented a common pattern of ancient theology. In this case, the Hebrew tradition seems to reflect an older symbolic stratum that expresses the mythological scheme of the dialogical superiority of God. A shift toward an inner dimension already can be detected in the Avesta, where the question becomes an implicit statement of faith. The move to a mystical dimension has been completed in the Atharva Veda, where the polemic tension evident in Job has been transformed into a reassuring contemplative motive.

A further set of common cosmological features is represented by the description of primordial light as an unformed body. This pattern can be detected in a rabbinical text about the creation of Adam, in which the primordial man is related to the idea of unformed substance or mass: "Rabbi Tanhuma in the name of Rabbi Banayyah and Rabbi Berekyah, in the name of Rabbi Eliezer, said: When the Holy One blessed be He created the first man, He created him unformed [*golem*] and he extended from one side of the world to the other."

The "first man" here is therefore an indistinct shape, a macro-*anthropos*

who extends across the whole sky until he loses human bodily traits, merging with the cosmos. The rabbis did not give an explanation in the *Haggadah* for this immense size of primordial man. This, however, seems to evoke the idea of an intense brilliance dominated by a human figure lacking limbs and thus resembling a fetus.

The combination of these huge dimensions with the idea of light harks back to a very ancient mythological heritage which attributed anthropic features to sources of light, although confining them to entangled figures of pure energy lacking feet and heads. In Sanskrit tradition, the primordial nucleus of light was considered to resemble a fetus in the mother's womb; it was still hidden and barely discernible, but nevertheless full of power and ready to irradiate it with relentless energy. In its hidden aspect Agni, or Fire made divine, is celebrated in the *Rig-Veda* as, "the first born in water, in the depths of the great space, in its bosom without feet, without a head; hiding his two extremities in the bull's nest, he withdrew with strength." Agni is often named *garbha*, Sanskrit for "embryo," a term which also refers to the morning sun, while the dawn is called *apad* in the Vedic hymns, meaning "without feet." Also in ancient Indian culture, incompleteness seems to be the attribute of the maximum concentration of vital energy and to denote the time that precedes the manifestation of existence and the unfolding of light.

The comparison with Sanskrit can therefore bring the rabbinical ideas about the primordial man into a wider phenomenological frame, in which the maximum of potential energy corresponds to a minimum of formal definition. In this case, the Sanskrit *garbha* and the Hebrew *golem* (the word used by the rabbis for unformed matter) seem to be parallel expressions of the same cross-cultural pattern.

Enigmas, riddles, and fabulous stories are a traditional area for comparative studies. It is well known how basic narratives can be traced among quite different cultures, a phenomenon partly due to autonomous literary developments. In some instances, however, the similarities are not restricted to common themes but consist in almost identical rhetorical formulas and in recurring symbols, thus suggesting some more profound relationship. Also in this field, the quest for texts that parallel biblical stories can be extended successfully to reach the Vedic literature. The best such example is offered by the biblical tales concerning Samson. In fact, the book of Judges includes a narrative cycle focused on the image of the lion. Samson, the protagonist, is a solar hero, praised for his strength, sagacity, and cheerful behavior. During the first episode, a young lion comes toward the hero, who, inflamed by "the spirit of the Lord ... tore him as he would have torn a kid, and he had nothing in his hand" (Judges 14:5-6). In the course of the story, the carcass of the animal is wondrously filled with honey. Samson transforms this event into a riddle for the Philistines: "Out of the eater came food, and out of the strong came sweetness" (Judges14:14). Samson's exploits are sung in an epic

tone, which is quite uncommon in the Bible. Similar tales can be traced in various Oriental traditions, and especially in Vedas. Notwithstanding a few different details, an analogous narrative about heroic deeds, where a lion plays a major symbolic role, also can be found in *Rig-Veda*. Here (VII.18.17) the god Indra, according to a curious semantic reversal, kills a lion "with a goat," or, as the text adds, "with the weak work a matchless exploit." In another place, Indra propounds, in an ironical defying tone, a riddle where a lion is trapped by a fox, with an overturning of the customary roles reminiscent of Samson's puzzle. Like the biblical hero, Indra wants to show that his deeds are matchless and no human being can even begin to imitate them.

Here, the Sanskrit tradition keeps the narrative in the realm of the divine, while the Bible lowers the boastful God to the level of a human hero who plays the role of a wonder-working swaggerer. In both the Sanskrit and the Hebrew versions, note the use of the lion as an element in challenging sphinx-like riddles, thus indicating that its function harked back to a most ancient deposit of folk wisdom.

Looking for Sanskrit parallels can also help to clarify symbolic patterns that are marginal or even isolated in Hebrew literature. Rare symbolic patterns are more easily misunderstood than widespread images. These misunderstandings can often lead to errors in the textual tradition so that uncommon ideas are also usually transmitted corruptly. On the other hand, a rarity is also an obstacle to proper critical understanding, because of the greater danger of overlooking the occasional surfacing of a virtually lost metaphor. Here, examine the case of the symbolical meaning of the dove. In Jewish tradition, generally speaking, the dove has a clear positive significance, being used to represent the community of Israel. In a few instances, however, it is possible to uncover a negative evaluation of the dove, on the fringe of the main symbolical stream. Here, a comparison with the Sanskrit tradition is particularly illuminating, since in Hindu lore the dove plays an almost consistently negative role.

In the Bible, the call of the dove seems to have been sometimes understood as a sad lamentation, recalling the cry of mourners at a funeral. Hezekiah, king of Judah, mourns over his sickness in a verse which recalls the name and the sound of the bird: "*Ehgeh ka-yonah*, I moan like a dove" (Isaiah 38:14). In Nachum, the sad note of the doves is used to qualify the lamentations of a group of young female mourners: "Her maidens moan like doves, beating on their breasts" (Nachum 2:8).

A much wider negative development is traceable in the *Vedas*, where the dove is clearly described as the messenger of the death-god. A hymn of the *Rig-Veda*, expanded in the Atharva Veda, preserves a ritual invocation against the ill-omen brought by the bird: "Seeking what, O gods, the sent dove, messenger of perdition, hath come hither, to it will we sing praises, make removal; weal be [it]

to our bipeds, weal to our quadrupeds...May the winged missile not harm us; it maketh its track on the hearth, in the fire-holder; propitious be it into our kine and men; let not the dove, O gods, injure us here" (*Atharva-Veda* VI.27 and VI.29).

The symbolical link of the dove and death, which is only vaguely alluded to in the Bible, dominates in Sanskrit, where — as far as I can judge — no positive attribute of this bird can be traced.

While the dove provides us with an example of a symbolic meaning marginal in Judaism but widespread in Indian lore, the magical and the religious conceptions of the rainbow seem to be mutually interwoven. In post-biblical tradition, it is prohibited to look at the rainbow (e.g., in b*Chagigah* 16a). The biblical idea of the rainbow being the symbol of the pact between God and Israel does not sufficiently explain such a taboo. A deeper reason surfaces in rabbinical literature and is based on a widely diffused symbolic connection between rainbow and penis. In fact, the rainbow merged with the circumcised male organ, which constitutes a further sign of the pact between God and Israel, *ot berit qodesh*. In late antiquity Hebrew, the word *qeshet* was used as a metaphor for penis, as is evident in many talmudic and midrashic texts. *Tractate Sotah* (36b) of the Babylonian Talmud includes, for instance, a version of the biblical romance of Putifar's wife and Joseph, where the expression "his bow abode in strength" (Gen. 49:24) is interpreted as an allusion to the virility of the Patriarch: "R. Jochanan said in the name of R. Meir: [This means] that he had an erection and spread his seed in his hands." Another Talmudic text says that, "Whoever gazes upon one's shame, his virility shall be emptied, for it is written: Shame shall empty thy bow" (*Hab.* 3.) (b*Sanhedrin* 92a), thus making clear the symbolic link between the prohibition to look at the rainbow in the sky and to gaze upon the genitals.

In Sanskrit tradition, the symbolic development of the rainbow seems to be more limited than that in Judaism. Nevertheless, in Sanskrit, too, many details point to a similar link between the bow and the penis. For instance, this link is clearly stated in Atharva-Veda IV.4.6-7: "O Brahmanaspati, do thou stiffen his penis as a bow. I stiffen thy penis as a bowstring upon the bow." Such a link is the most probable basis for the tabooing of the rainbow, which appears at least once in *Apastambiya-Dharmasutra*, where it is stated that one should avoid pronouncing the word *indradhanuh*, (rainbow) literally "Indra's bow." In this case, the comparison between Hebrew and Sanskrit sheds light on the Indian tradition, which, for once, is rarer and vaguer.

The analysis of the symbolical meaning of the rainbow introduces the broad domain of folk beliefs. A large number of magic practices, both in Jewish and in Hindu lore, show common features to such an extent that casual coincidences must be ruled out. In fact, the magic way to understand reality represents a universal form of thought that gave origin to similar developments in the remotest cultural areas. Both Jewish and Sanskrit traditions are characterized by a high

number of literary texts dealing with magic, thus enabling direct philological comparisons in this field as well.

To give an example of these common features, I will discuss briefly a magic ritual centering on the shadow. Already amply documented in the Jewish literature of late antiquity, magic practices using the shadow to foretell the future were destined to have a wide following throughout the Middle Ages and to continue, at least sporadically, until the eighteenth century. The idea that it was possible to read in one's shadow the events hidden in his or her fate has had a very long cross-cultural history whose echo still resonates in various European languages. For instance, the English verbs "to foreshadow" and "to adumbrate" recall the tenacious heritage of an omen which is thought to have originated in the seminal uncertainty of appearances or in the scrutiny of the dark outline of persons or things.

The ritual through which the adept scrutinizes his own reflection in the darkness appears for the first time in a Hebrew text, the treatise *Horayot* of the Babylonian Talmud. It is among the prognosticating practices that must be carried out in the symbolic period between the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement: "R. Ammi said:...He who desires to set out on a journey and wishes to ascertain whether he will return home again or not, let him station himself in a dark house; if he sees the reflection of his shadow he may know that he will return home again" (b*Horayot* 12a). Nonetheless, the Talmud adds a note that advises against this practice: "This, however, is not a proper thing to do, lest his courage fail him and he meet with misfortune in consequence."

In spite of the cautions of the talmudic masters, the examination of one's shadow must have been quite frequent among the Jews of the Mesopotamian area, at least in the exoteric circles. In fact, a text that probably dates back to the seventh or eighth century contains the description of a very complicated ritual through which the adept gets ready for a mystical ascent. The final goal is to "wear" the name of God in order to attain a complete dominion over nature. Before facing the dangers connected with the magical operation, the adept is expected to check his own inner energy and, after having fasted for seven days, to go at night to the vicinity of a source of water. After having invoked a sacred name, he has to stare at his shadow, silhouetted in the air. If it is green, the adept is still impure and must fast for seven more days, but if it appears red and brilliant, he knows he is pure and ready to wear the Name.[4]

This practice represents the Jewish application of a magical pattern known also in the Indian tradition, where it takes the name of *chayapurusha*, literally "man of the shadows." The *Shiva Purana* — a work that probably dates back to the first centuries of the Common Era — prescribes that whoever performs the rite must wear a white garment and some garlands, perfume himself with incense and then turn his back to the sun or the moon, observing the color of his own

shadow in the air: if it is white, he is virtuous; if dark, he is impure; if red, he is bound by restrictions; if yellow, he is menaced by enemies (*Shiva Purana, Umasamhita* 28:3-11). Apart from the differences in the evaluation of colors, the Sanskrit text looks strikingly close to the Jewish one, including in the significant switch of the gestures from a simply foretelling context to a mystical one. In fact, in the Hebrew source, the shadow not only predicts the future but also measures the degree of one's spiritual level. Likewise, in the *chayapurusha* rite, the man who can see his full white shadow gains access to all knowledge, as a yogi. Moreover, in the *Shiva Purana*, the omen appears not only in the guise of colors, but also by occasionally noting the adept's shadow: if he sees his shadow without the head, he will lose his faculties in six months; if without the breast, his wife will die; if without legs, he will lose his possessions. Perhaps the absence of feet will portend travel or exile in a distant land, and the lack of arms, the loss of relatives.

It is now clear that, in this common magic lore, the shadow represents a kind of "alter ego" of the physical body. Any variation of the shadow or defect in its shape anticipates the future of its owner, according to codified patterns which are at the basis both of Jewish and Hindu tradition.

The Hebrew magic ritual about the shadow was investigated by no less a scholar than Gershom Scholem in 1953.[5] On the other side, the Hindu text was summed up by the Sanskritist Sadashiv Ambadas Dange in 1989.[6] Nevertheless, neither Scholem nor Dange was aware of the cross-cultural parallel and therefore failed to see the texts they examined in the broader context of ancient magic. This is exactly the point I want to make with this short analysis: to show that symbolical comparison is not just an erudite exercise but often represents the only way to achieve a better perspective on complex cultural phenomena.

NOTES

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2. Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)

3. Giulio Busi, *Simboli del pensiero ebraico*, (Bologna: Università di Bologna, 1999).

4. *Sefer ha-Malbush*, (London, British Library, MS Add. 15.299, fol. 92b).

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The Home of One's Own

Indian Jewish Fiction and the Problem of Bene Israel Identity

By Yulia Egorova

Apna Ghar (Hindi, *The Home of One's Own*) by Meera Mahadevan is the first and, so far, probably the only novel centered on the Bene Israel. Its author was a member of this community herself. Meera Mahadevan (nee Meera Aaron Jacob Mendrekar) was born in Karachi in 1930. After the Partition of the subcontinent, her family moved to Bombay, where she met and married T. K. Mahadevan, a journalist and writer, who later became the editor of *Gandhi Marg*. Meera graduated from Delhi University and wrote two novels and a number of short stories in Hindi. In 1969, she founded *Mobile Creches* and *Mobile School*, volunteer organizations that provide care and education for the children of mothers who are working on building sites. She also served on several committees concerned with childcare and education.[1]

Apna Ghar was published in two Hindi editions in 1961 and in 1973. In 1975, it was published in English under the title *Shulamith*.[2]

The novel narrates the story of a Bene Israel family who migrated from Karachi to Bombay after Partition. One of its protagonists, Michael, emigrates to Israel and leaves behind his wife, Shulamith, his son, Uriel, his mother, and his younger sister, Mezuzah (Maizie). Not being prepared to leave India, Shulamith, the key character of the novel, refuses to join her husband and stays in Bombay to look after her mother-in-law, son, and young sister-in-law. This family is soon joined by Michael's brother, Daniel, who returns to India from England, where he lost his wife.

Maizie dominates one of the central lines of the novel. She starts a relationship with a Hindu, which makes her family indignant since they cannot entertain the thought of having non-Jewish relatives. She is forced to split up with him and to marry a Bene Israel, who turns out to be an underworld criminal. Shulamith's mother-in-law dies; Uriel, like his father, emigrates to Israel. Shulamith is constantly depressed, her health starts to deteriorate. Michael eventually comes back to Bombay only to see his wife dying.

Apna Ghar treats a number of themes relating to Bene Israel identity in independent India and to Jewish relations with non-Jews in the context of India. The novel addresses an issue that is critical to the community's life: the choice between staying in India or moving to Israel. Both sides offer arguments in support

of their position. Michael thinks that each Bene Israel has a duty to move to Israel. He hopes his entire family would be happy in the Jewish State: his mother would enjoy living in the holy city of Jerusalem, his son could continue his education and his young sister could get married[3] (p. 20). Michael's son Uriel is impressed by Israel's economic progress and the attention the country gives to repatriates (p. 91). Issac, Maizie's future husband, who also wishes to go to Israel, stresses its equal opportunities policy and compares Israel to India, an argument which does not come out in favor of his native land (p. 47).

Shulamith, on the contrary, argues that India is their home, so they should not betray it:

> ...what India had done for her Bene Israel, no nation could do for its Jewish population. India has nourished us. We continue to be so well looked after that we are now thoroughly Indianized. There have been no restrictions of any kind on our religion. We have always had land for our temples. And now that the state of Israel has come into being is it fair on our part to turn our back on all this? (p. 40).

Thus Shulamith's main argument is that the Bene Israel were safe in India and that they should be grateful. In addition, they were "thoroughly Indianized." Though Shulamith confronts a tragic fate, she does not appear to be a victim of circumstance. She made the conscious choice to stay in India. She seems to be proud of her Indian heritage and to have a deep feeling of belonging to India. Shulamith's friend Ruth articulates another possible argument against Bene Israel going to Israel. She is surprised to learn that Uriel is going to emigrate and points out that some of the members of the community had decided to come back from Israel (p. 172).

In the end, this happens to Michael himself. In Israel, he starts missing his home, falls ill, and regrets his decision to emigrate. Uriel finds him in the hospital and urges him to return to Shulamith. Eventually, Michael goes back to Bombay and reunites with his family. Apparently, the very sense of belonging to India which Shulamith stressed in her arguments with him and which he formerly underestimated, accounts for his failure to adjust to his new life in Israel. This theme dominates his conversation with Shulamith upon his return:

> The moment I left this country I realized how Indian I was. I may be Jewish but I cannot think or live like an American or Baghdadi Jew. I am Indian, and my culture is an Indian culture. India is my country...One thing I have learnt is that one's country is as important as one's religion. (p. 205).

This introduces the theme of the religion/nation dichotomy. It appears that Michael distinguishes very clearly between the religious and ethnic dimensions of Jewish identity. In his perception, his religion is what unites him with other Israelis who all retain the cultural heritage of their countries of their origin. When he describes India to his friend in Israel, he asserts that India was the only country where the Jews were able to live peacefully (p. 206).

One could interpret Michael's rejection of Israel as a victory for the arguments of those who insisted on staying in India. However, Michael points out that, in general, the members of his community were adjusting to Israel successfully. They tended to live together and maintain their old style of life. Michael argues that many of them benefited from migrating and he denounces those who returned: 'Those of our community who came back are lazy people. They are only used to betting and gambling. They find it hard to put in honest work" (p. 206). Yet, Michael remains external to Israeli life. He praises Israel's progress and admires the achievements of other repatriates who, unlike him, were content in their new home: "They were all happy and each one worked with great enthusiasm. I alone felt out of place... I was already regretting my decision. It may be the Holy Land, still, it is not my home. My home is in India..." (p. 205).

Thus Michael's perceptions of Israel appear to be manifold. His discussion of the Jewish State does not include a word of criticism but he, himself, finds it impossible to stay there any longer. His compatriots adapt to the new circumstances quite well. But how? By creating a 'mini-India' where the Bene Israel live together, speak Indian languages, play Indian music, and wear Indian clothes (p. 206). In the end, Michael admits that in Israel he felt that Shulamith was right when she tried to discourage him from leaving India. "Now, within the period of three months of my stay I realized that what you had grasped through intuition," he says, "I had to learn through experience" (p. 205).

This could imply perhaps that Shulamith won in the argument with her husband about where the Bene Israel belonged. However, her sense of belonging to India and her inability to leave it lead to Shulamith's death. Her depression causes a disease and, by the time Michael arrives, it is already impossible for Shulamith to recover. Sometimes she blames herself for not following her husband. Michael also feels guilty for not having returned earlier. Thus, the question of what would have been the best solution in this situation — emigration of the entire family or continuation of their life in India — remains unanswered.

Shulamith's attitude toward emigration is determined by factors beyond the attachment that she feels to India. One of her arguments against emigration is that the birth of Israel created an on-going conflict in the Middle East. In reply to Uriel, who tries to convince her at least to visit Israel, she refers to the fate of the Arabs: "...the birth of Israel has spelt misery to some thousands of people. It has robbed them of their home. Thousands of Arabs have been forced into becoming

refugees. I feel that it is not right" (p. 92). Interestingly, Shulamith puts forward this argument against emigrating in the context of her more personal motives. She tells her son that the migration of her family from Karachi to Bombay was a disruption she failed to overcome. According to Shulamith, the older generation of Karachi Bene Israel found it very difficult to get accustomed to Bombay (p. 52). After eight years there, she herself felt unsettled (p. 93), and she could not bear the thought of moving again: "... I can't imagine having to leave this house and this country. I don't want to be a refugee again. I am very proud of being Jewish...The name of Jerusalem is as holy to me as my religion itself. Yet I do not want to go there" (p. 92). Thus, the novel treats not only the issue of Jewish emigration to Israel, but also makes a statement on migration as a modern phenomenon in general.

The contacts between the Bene Israel and non-Jews represented in the novel are mostly peaceful. However, the author also depicts some unfriendly encounters between Bene Israel and the members of other communities of the sub-continent. Shulamith recalls her childhood quarrel with a classmate at a Christian Mission School, where she was the only Jewish student in her class. A Christian girl argued that Shulamith should stop attending the school because she belonged to the people who killed the Christ. Shulamith replied that Jesus was a Jew. This argument was brought to the attention of the principal, Shulamith was punished, and her parents withdrew her from the school (pp. 55-56).

Another time that her community — if not her personally — faced the hostility of non-Jews was after the Partition. Reflecting on the life of her family in Karachi, Shulamith remembers that before the Partition both Muslims and Hindus were friendly with the Bene Israel. One day after the Partition, their synagogue in Karachi was looted by a group of Muslim refugees. Their Muslim neighbors disassociated themselves from this and denounced the thugs, but to their dismay, except for a few families, the whole Bene Israel community decided to leave for Bombay (pp. 56-58).

The most painful issue in the novel's depiction of Jewish/non-Jewish relations is intermarriage. Mahadevan's Bene Israel are on good terms with their non-Jewish neighbors but they are not prepared to let their children marry out. Fear of the possibility of intermarriage sometimes even forces them to limit their interactions with non-Jews. When Maizie's Jewish sports club decides to play a non-Jewish club, it turns out that parents of most of the girls will not let their daughters participate in the match (p. 14). Daniel, who had been married to a non-Jew, questions the way girls are brought up in the community and the attitude toward intermarriage.

Replying to her brother-in-law, Shulamith maintains that intermarriages between Bene Israel and non-Jews are bound to be unhappy, because "Jewish girls are brought up with such orthodoxy that they cannot survive outside their com-

munity" (p. 36). Thus orthodoxy serves both as a means of controlling the Bene Israel and as a means of punishing them should they try to opt out. *Apna Ghar* narrates a number of cases when a Bene Israel protagonist would marry out or have an affair with a non-Jew and none of them proved to be happy.

Shulamith's brother Shalom falls in love with a young Brahman woman. His mother Sheba likes her and would accept her as a daughter-in-law if she were a Bene Israel. As a result, Sheba encourages the young woman to leave her son. In a conversation with Shulamith, Sheba admits that this was a difficult decision for her: "Believe me, I hated myself for all this. I did not want to think of my own hard-heartedness, nor why fanaticism should make me act the way I did." Interestingly, when Shulamith asked why Sheba had not thought about the possibility of the girl's conversion to Judaism, Sheba replied that she did not want her grandchildren to be labelled as black Bene Israel (pp. 85-86).[4]

When Shulamith suggests that this division is of no relevance in contemporary society, Sheba disagrees, "We still keep such children away from our families. Otherwise how do you think we could survive in this country? Religion is old-fashioned. You cannot modernize it; you cannot compromise with it!" (p. 85). Thus Sheba blames the orthodoxy of her community, which would not tolerate a marriage even with a convert, but she does not dare to go against its rules. As a result, the Hindu girl leaves Shalom, which triggers his mental illness.

The issue of conversion also comes up in the novel in relation to Daniel, Michael's brother. Daniel lived in England and was married to a Christian, who converted to Judaism in an effort to please her husband's family. After her premature death, Daniel returns to Bombay and reunites with his family. On hearing about his prospective arrival, his mother — who does not know yet about her daughter's-in-law death — states that she would not receive either him or her in her house: "This house belongs to me, and only those children have a right to it who have not discarded their religion." The fact that Daniel's wife converted does not seem to matter to her at all (p. 23).

The novel makes a statement about the attitude of the community toward intermarriage. In each case, the community's orthodoxy ruined its members' relationships. The case in the foreground of the novel is Maizie. She is supposed to marry Baruch, a young man from her community, but falls in love with his Hindu friend Shyam and gets pregnant. Shyam's family is happy to accept Maizie and promises that she will be free to practice her religion, but her mother and Shulamith cannot bear the thought of her marrying out. Shulamith first hopes that Baruch will still marry Maizie, but he rejects her and, under the pressure from his family, marries a Bene Israel girl. As a result, Shulamith arranges for Maizie's abortion and eventually marries her to Issac, the brother of her housemaid. Daniel challenges Shulamith's decision; he is far from being an Orthodox Jew and would much rather prefer to see his sister married into Shyam's well-educated, liberal

family. He first tries to convince his mother and sister-in-law to change their minds but then gives up under their pressure. He meets Shyam and explains to him that though Maizie's community is orthodox and narrow-minded, she is part and parcel of it and that the excommunication which would be inevitable if she married a Hindu would ruin her (p. 127).

The social gap between Maizie and Issac is great. Maizie's family is well-off and respected in the community, while Issac is the unemployed son of a carpenter involved in criminal activities. After her wedding, Maizie has to leave Bombay, where she had hoped to get a degree, and move to her husband's native town, Panvel. Issac fails to find a job, his family is starving, and he chooses to join a gang that harasses local shopkeepers. His relationship with Maizie deteriorates, she falls ill, and her family, under pressure from Uriel, agrees to take her back. Having lost all hope of achieving personal happiness, Maizie takes up training to become a nurse and directs all her energy into it.

Seeing Maizie unhappy, Shulamith also suffers and often reflects on her decision to prevent her sister-in-law from marrying the partner of her choice. More often than not, she comes to the conclusion that she was right and that Maizie would not have been happy without her family and the opportunity to practice her religion (p. 199).

What is the author's solution to the problem of intermarriage? There seems to be none. Meera Mahadevan probably reveals her own attitude toward this issue through the character of a doctor at the hospital where Maizie trains to be a nurse. The doctor herself turns out to be a Bene Israel who married a Hindu, a fate similar to the author's. The doctor is never mentioned in the novel by name. We just learn that she has a Hindu name because Maizie observes that it is not possible to guess that the doctor is a Jew from her name. Having learned Maizie's story, the doctor definitely sympathizes with Maizie, but argues that intermarriage would not have made her happy either:

> If you had married outside our community you would nevertheless have suffered in a different way...In fact there is no complete solution anywhere...You find a husband of your choice outside the community but for this you must renounce your family, your religion and the whole tradition within which you have grown up... Your name is mercilessly removed from the list of family members. And even if one could return, one would have changed oneself. There would be strain, tension, a lack of communication. This is the sum of your punishment (pp. 180-81).

The doctor disapproves of the community's position on intermarriage: "Of one thing I am sure. If my daughter were to marry a husband of her own choosing I would never make her suffer the misery I have gone through." However, at the same time, she asserts that a Jew cannot live without her community. No matter how happy one is in one's new life outside the community, one is bound to have an urge to return to the old way of life. Thus a Bene Israel is caught in a dilemma of identity. She either stays with the Bene Israel and suffers from all the limitations that the community imposes or she leaves them and suffers the loss of opportunity to practice her religion. The doctor suggests that the only way out of the situation is to invest one's energy in work. She admits that soon after her marriage she became depressed because her family cut her off. The solution to her psychological problems was found by her husband, who encouraged her to continue her education. She qualified as a doctor, started working, and found satisfaction in her work (pp. 181-82).

Mahadevan appears to be quite critical of her community's fear of getting dissolved into the non-Jewish population, as this fear makes them treat those who marry out like pariahs, even if they maintain their Jewish identity. We would suggest that by introducing the character of the Bene Israel woman doctor, the author discloses her position on the question of what attitude the Bene Israel should adopt toward their life in India. She encourages her co-religionists to work and to make themselves useful to Indian society.

Practically every hero of the novel has a strong awareness of his or her identity. They project themselves in terms of being both Indian and Jewish and seem to be very strong in their feeling of belonging to both communities. Sometimes others project their constructed versions of Indian Jewish identity, like when their Hindu friends and neighbors reveal what they know about the Jews and how they perceive them. Thus, Shyam finds it strange that the Bene Israel who share the same tongue and even customs with other inhabitants of Bombay have different dietary laws, or that their greeting, *Shalom Alechem*, sounds very similar to the Muslim one (p. 110). Maizie's neighbor did not even know who the Bene Israel were and first suggested that they were Christians (p. 137).

The only protagonist who seems to be characterized by a lack of a self-defined identity is Daniel. He does not yield to ascriptions forced upon him. He appears to be the only member of the family who was not a practicing Jew and, perhaps, not a believing one either. As we already know, he had migrated to England and married a Christian. Daniel opposed his wife's conversion to Judaism, although she did it to please his relatives. After her demise, he admits that he came back to India only because his wife had made him promise that he would do so in case of her death (p. 33).

Thus, Meera Mahadevan's novel portrays a community torn between two dimensions of its identity. The author traces her protagonists' individual experi-

ences of coming into contact with Indian culture of which they are part and parcel, and which they reject. At the same time, she documents their relationship with the new Israeli milieu, which some of them are willing to enter though they remain estranged from it. She demonstrates how members of her community interpret themselves and others, thus constructing a model of cultural relativity and otherness. The personal dramas of a family seeking a way to organize its future are at the center of Mahadevan's narrative, but the novel expands beyond its discussion of their intercultural contacts and draws a more abstract picture of colliding values.

NOTES

1. Shirley Berry Isenberg, "Meera Mahadevan," *Kidma*, Vol. 8, no. 4, (1988) pp.35-39.

2. "Meera Mahadevan," *Kidma*, p.35.

3. Hereinafter quotations are according to Meera Mahadevan, *Shulamith*, (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1980).

4. The Bene Israel community was divided into two groups of Gora (Marathi 'White') and Kala ('Black') Israel. It is noted in the *Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency* that, according to the Bene Israel tradition, the White were the descendants of the original immigrants, while the Black, whose group was numerically smaller, were the descendants of converts or the offspring of mixed marriages. The members of the two groups neither dined together nor intermarried. The touch of a Kala was considered to be defiling for the Gora. Gora and Kala worshipped in the same synagogues, but Kala were not permitted to wear the ritual garment of the Jews (*tallith*). However, at the end of the nineteenth century certain Gora Bene Israel admitted in their publications that this attitude toward the Kala was not fair because some of the latter were even more pious than the Gora. As economic and educational activities became more differentiated among the Bene Israel, occupational distinctions gradually started replacing the Gora and Kala groupings. For a more detailed discussion of the division of the Bene Israel community into Gora (White) and Kala (Black), see Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel, A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1988), pp.104-07.

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"A View from the Margin"

Indo-Judaic Studies Conference Held at Oxford

Conference report by Nathan Katz

An innovative research seminar, "A View from the Margin: The State of the Art of Indo-Judaic Studies," was held at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (OCHJS), in Oxford, England, from July 1 to 4, 2002.

Yarnton Manor, home to OCHJS, was an ideal, tranquil setting for serious academic work. Located a few miles outside of Oxford town, Yarnton Manor dates from 1285, and the structure itself was rebuilt in 1610. Conferees thoroughly enjoyed its paneled halls and lovely gardens.

All conference papers were posted on a restricted-access web site, so conference time was spent summarizing and discussing the participants' current research, rather than reading papers. Conference participants were prepared for animated discussions and cordial criticisms, and the time spent was used to advance the frontiers of the field.

A major consideration in organizing the conference was that it should reflect the remarkable diversity of approaches which are used in Indo-Judaic studies. Participants commented about the benefit to their own research that they derived from sustained discussion with scholars from other disciplines. The conference itself was structured so as to highlight the disciplinary questions: historical studies, comparative religions, sociological and anthropological studies of Indian Jewish communities, international relations and political science approaches to contemporary interactions, and finally comparative literature.

Several major themes emerged at the conference.

The first theme was the interdisciplinary breadth of the field. Scholars from the fields of religious studies, comparative literature, folklore, anthropology, international relations, history, and political science participated, and panels were organized according to disciplinary approaches. Conferees commented on the enlivening effects that multiple disciplinary perspectives brought to similar subject matter — the interactions between Indic and Judaic civilizations. No single participant had known all the other participants prior to the seminar, so the exchanges of ideas were echoed in social interactions at Yarnton's friendly nearby pub.

Another significant theme, present in many but not all of the papers, was the richness afforded by the very marginality of the field of Indo-Judaic studies. While

Conference participants, here standing on the steps of Yarnton Manor, home of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Judaic Studies, are (left to right): Dr. Tudor Parfitt, SOAS-University of London; Prof. Brian Weinstein, Howard University; Prof. Barbara C. Johnson, Ithaca College, New York; Prof. Scaria Zacharia, Shree Shankaracharya Sanskrit University, Kochi, India; Prof. Nathan Katz, Florida International University; Prof. M. G. S. Narayanan, Indian Council for Historical Research; Prof. Gulio Busi (back row), Frie Universitat-Berlin; Prof. Margaret Chatterjee, Delhi University; Prof. Braj M. Sinha (top row), University of Saskatchewan; Prof. L. N. Sharma, Benares Hindu University; Mrs. Busi (seated); Prof. D. Venkateswarlu, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India; Dr. Dinesh Kumar (seated), Hebrew University, Jerusalem; Prof. Barbara Holdrege, University of California-Santa Barbara; Prof. Richard Marks, Washington and Lee University; Dr. Shalva Weil, Hebrew University; Prof. Joan G. Roland, Pace University, New York; Prof. Ranabir Chakravarti, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and Ms. Yulia Egorova, SOAS-University of London.

not exactly a hybrid of Jewish Studies and South Asian Studies, Indo-Judaic Studies borrows heavily from each, yet demands its own perspective. The data of the world constellate quite differently when they are drawn from Indian and Jewish experience. One of the unique features of Indo-Judaic studies is that it is not rooted in European (that is, Christian) conceptual categories and, in this sense, Indo-Judaic studies can be located at the cutting edge of cultural studies that do not define themselves in European terms.

The conference convened with a welcome dinner on July 1, 2002. Nathan Katz gave remarks of welcome and commented generally on this nascent field. He then elaborated on the impact of Indo-Judaic studies on academic life in America, saying that the old "area studies" model is being called into question, with contemporary scholarship focusing more on the interactions between and among "areas" (Middle East, South Asia, etc.) rather than on the areas in themselves. Thus, Indo-Judaic studies locates itself on similarly interstitial ground as, for example, Levantine studies, which examines the interactions between European, Asian, and African cultures; or Indian Ocean studies, which explores the interactions among West Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia; and Silk Route studies, which considers the multicultural commercial and cultural caravanserais on the roads between Europe, China, and India. Katz argued that "areas" are essentially colonial constructs, and those interactive models that focus on the margins between "areas" allow scholars to discover and explore new dimensions of culture.

On the more popular level, he indicated two areas of influence. The first is the emerging relationship between India and Israel, which is strategic, cultural, economic, and diplomatic. The strategic dimension has recently been brought to popular awareness in newspapers and opinion journals. The second popular issue is the so-called "JuBu phenomenon," that is, the internal Jewish issue of Jewish spiritual seekers practicing Buddhism or Hinduism. Much of the contemporary popular Jewish interest in India is a consequence of this phenomenon.

Shalva Weil discussed the impact of Indo-Judaic studies in Israel. She lamented that, so far, there has been little academic work in this area. While academic organizations such as the Ben Zvi Institute in Jerusalem have long been interested in Indian Jewish communities, there is no parallel in Israel to the fecundity of Indo-Judaic scholarship in America. The two popular reflections of Indo-Judaic studies found in America are also significant in contemporary Israel. Of course, relations between Israel and India, whether economic, diplomatic, or strategic, are of great importance in Israel. The "JuBu phenomenon" of America is paralleled by the "Boombamela phenomenon" of Israel, in which many young Israelis, upon completing military service, head off for a low-budget world tour. Most spend time in India and Nepal, simultaneously seeking hedonistic and spiri-

tual refreshment. Returning to Israel, they convene at an occasional festival named to mimic a Hindu festival (*mela*).

Ranabir Chakravarti and Dinesh Kumar spoke about Indo-Judaic studies in India. Chakravarti's talk followed two lines. First, he outlined the importance of commercial history in understanding the construction of civilization, and he indicated the pivotal role of ancient through medieval commerce between West Asian and Mediterranean Jews and merchants in India. Culture followed commerce, in this case and in others. Second, he talked about the more general fascination with which most Indians view Jews and Israel, a fascination colored by a lack of real knowledge. Kumar spoke about strategic and diplomatic relations between India and Israel, emphasizing that a convergence of interests drives the rapprochement between these two Asian democracies as they confront similarly perceived threats.

The evening concluded with a report by Tudor Parfitt about his recent DNA research on Bene Israel and "Black" Kochi Jews, among other groups. His findings tend to support the Bene Israel historical self-understanding, indicating an Israelite origin in antiquity. Similarly, his analysis of "Black" Kochi Jews also indicates an ancient Israelite origin, followed by a period during which intermarriage was practiced, in turn followed by endogamy. His report received wide newspaper coverage, especially in India.

July 2, 2002

The morning session was devoted to historical studies. Braj M. Sinha served as chair as Ranabir Chakravarti, M. G. S. Narayanan, and Brian Weinstein discussed their research.

Chakravarti's paper, "Reaching Out to Distant Shores: Indo-Judaic Trade Contacts (up to 1300 CE)," traced commerce between West Asia and the Mediterranean on the one hand, and India on the other, from the second century BCE through medieval trade in the hands of Jewish merchants, especially based on such documentary evidence as was found in the Cairo genizah. Chakravarti explored two thousand years of Indian and Jewish interactions from an Indian historian's standpoint, using archaeological, epigraphic, and documentary materials.

Narayanan's paper, "Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin," re-examined the famous charter of hereditary privileges granted to the Jews by a Chera king at the beginning of the eleventh century. Narayanan built upon his earlier work and translation done some 30 years ago, adding more contextual depth based upon more recent studies of early medieval Kerala. He tried to show how the Jews under the leadership of Joseph Rabban had the titles and privileges of aristocracy at Kodungallur (Cranganore, Shingly), the Chera capital and harbor city where they lived. They had a guild called *anjuman* or *ancuvannam* which worked in close collaboration with the Christian guild of *manigramam*. Joseph Rabban became so much of a legend in later times that he is remembered in the Malayalam ritual songs of the Jews in Kerala.

Weinstein wrote on "The Intellectual Confluence between Jews and India: Astrology, Science, Mysticism." His paper surveyed Jewish knowledge of scientific and mystical exchanges with India during the ninth through twelfth centuries, especially in the writings of Saadia Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra. These two towering figures were among the rabbinic authorities most open to Indian influences.

The afternoon of July 2 saw two panels. The first, chaired by Shalva Weil, included two papers on comparative religions, one by Barbara A. Holdrege and one by Giulio Busi.

In "The Comparative Study of Hinduisms and Judaisms: Dismantling Dominant Discourses," Holdrege situated the comparative historian of religion's approach to Indo-Judaic studies in the context of postmodern scholarship. Such scholarship envisions a polycentric world, rather than one simplistically bifurcated into "east" and "west." The comparative study of Hinduism and Judaism, then, seeks to undermine those mutually reinforcing stereotypes that have been used to reify a Eurocentric approach to culture.

Busi's paper, "Common Symbolic Patterns in Hebrew and Sanskrit Literature," adopted a philological approach that seeks to establish common patterns in literature and culture across time and across geography. He identified a number of symbolic structures shared by Sanskrit, Hebrew and, at times, Persian, sacred literatures.

The second session on comparative religions, chaired by Joan G. Roland, featured papers by L. N. Sharma and Braj M. Sinha.

Sharma's paper, "Silence, Shunya and Shiva," gave a response in the Kashmir Shaiva tradition to Judaic criticisms of idolatry. By raising the discourse from practical or moral criticism to philosophic inquiry, he explored India's diverse absolutist and theistic traditions for cogent responses to the Judaic critique. The paper ranged from exegesis of Mahabharata myths to explication of Buddhist Shunyavada philosophy, resting finally in the mystical silence of the absolute of Kabbalah and Tantra.

Sinha's paper, "Divine Anthropos and Cosmic Tree: Hindu and Jewish Mysticism in Comparative Perspective," viewed the symbolism of the Tree of Sefiroth and the notion of Adam Kadmon in Zoharistic writings as a powerful attestation to the fact that the world of divinity and the cosmos are not two disconnected realities; rather they are thought to be intimately connected, not through some kind of external relationship, but rather by a relationship of inner organic unity. Similarly, the powerful symbolism of Purusa, the Primal Man or Divine Anthropos, and the Aswathha tree as conceived in the Hindu cosmogonic universe, constitute the ontological basis of all cosmic unfoldment of the divinity, making it possible for microcosmic human reality to experience the macrocosmic. Sinha articulated the structural affinity between the two modes of conceptualizing divine-cosmic continuity as the core notion within the mystical writings of the two traditions.

July 3, 2002

The morning session, chaired by Barbara C. Johnson, was devoted to Jewish-Hindu interactions in the modern period. It included papers by Margaret Chatterjee, Nathan Katz, and Dinesh Kumar.

Chatterjee, in her paper, "The Multicultural Issue in India and Israel — Some Reflections," considered how an ethnically/religiously diverse population is viewed in contemporary India and Israel. India's diversity has been well known for centuries, but in Israel, multiculturalism became obvious only fairly recently as Jews from Europe, Africa, and Asia have struggled to form a cohesive society. Having the luxury of scale, India traditionally has been able to offer its minorities either assimilation or compartmentalization (the caste system). Tiny Israel developed uniquely with wave after wave of *aliyah* (immigration). With no group privileged by priority, Israel was able to impose a new/old language on all immigrants, whereas in India the issue of language continues to be fractious. Based on such data, Chatterjee speculated on the future of minority cultures in the context of secular states.

Katz began his paper, "The State of the Art of Hindu-Jewish Dialogue," with an overview of Indo-Jewish cultural interactions from as early as the first century CE through the 1990 Tibetan-Jewish dialogue in Dharamsala. He argued that Hindu-Jewish dialogue has always been characterized by an emphasis on praxis over doctrine, as well as symmetry between the dialogue partners. After raising but not solving the pitfall issue of idolatry, Katz offered an agenda for such dialogues, from theology and mysticism, to practical issues such as diet, to the position of Jews and Hindus as "others" in America, to the issues of diasporization modernization, to literary images of one another, to political and strategic relations between India and Israel on one hand, and between the United States and the two homelands on the other. He also touched upon the "JuBu phenomenon."

The contemporary strategic relationship between India and Israel was the topic of Kumar's paper, "India and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Shifting Strategic Focus." After tracing the history of India's pro-Arab foreign policy, he zeroed in on the shift in India's strategic equation following the end of the Cold War. A number of factors, including the Muslim world's partiality toward Pakistan, as well as the Middle East Peace Process, led India to reassess her policy toward the region, first moving toward balance, and now making a slow but detectable shift in Israel's favor.

In the afternoon two panels were held on Indian Jewish communities. The first was chaired by Narayanan and consisted of papers by Johnson and Weil.

Johnson surveyed a wide range of recent scholarship in her paper. "New Research, Discoveries, and Paradigms: A Report on the Current Study of Kerala Jews." She described significant new work on ancient and medieval Jewish contacts with Kerala, particularly Bar Ilan's on Yemen and Lesley's discovery of three Hebrew texts from Cranganore. She noted ground-breaking studies on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Tavim, using Portuguese archives, and by Schorsch, who includes the Kerala Jews in his analysis of Jews, "race," and colonialism in the early modern world. Johnson mentioned current studies of nineteenth-to-twentieth century community history, memory, and the transition to Israel (e.g., Koder, Hacco, Neumann, Shachar); and detailed the wealth of new work on Kerala Jewish material culture (e.g., Slapak, Sabar, Eliyahu-Oron, Waronker); and then focused on her own work (with Zacharia, Seroussi, and others) on Malayalam Jewish women's folk songs. In conclusion, she suggested the use of new models for analyzing social divisions among Kerala Jews and for understanding their situation in Israel.

In "The Case of the Bene Israel and Some Others," Weil began with recent work on Ashkenazim in India, especially Holocaust refugees. She then described work by herself and Roland on Bene Israel institutions in India, as well as works by Isenberg and Katz that focus on the issue of Bene Israel identity. Another avenue of research has been the Bene Israel's unique rites, as well as their fine arts and music. She then speculated about indigenous Bene Israel scholarship, such as B. J. Israel's and Haeem Kehimkar's, which she hopes might be able to mediate between "native perceptions" and western "scientific attitudes."

The second afternoon panel had papers by Joan G. Roland and Tudor Parfitt and was chaired by Margaret Chatterjee.

After providing an overview of published research, in "The Baghdadi Jews of India: Perspectives on the Study and Portrayal of a Community," Roland addressed the needs for current and future work. She remarked that there has been much more literary activity about the Kalikota (Calcutta) community (Ezra, Musleah, Solomon, Elias and Cooper, Hyman) than Mumbai (Bombay). She then suggested that a primary question is the motivation behind the creation of the Baghdadi community, followed by the role of families in maintaining it, the relationships between Baghdadis and their servants, the literary productivity of India's Baghdadis, analyses of community organization, and the like. Scholars ought also view the general distancing of Baghdadis from political life, whether during the British raj or during the Independence movement. Finally, the fluidity of Baghdadi identity begs scholarly examination.

Parfitt, in "Tribal Jews," provided background for the study of tribals in the northeast of India and Burma who recently have "discovered" themselves to be of the lost Tribe of Menase. He first surveyed the myth of the Ten Lost Tribes and demonstrated how this category has been imposed upon almost every people newly

encountered by European explorers, and nearly as often proclaimed as an identity by distant groups of people. He offered the perspective of someone who has studied a number of "Judaizing movements," whether in southern Africa or among African-Americans or Afro-Caribbeans. He accepts Weil's view that these northeastern Indian tribals were animists who made a double conversion to Judaism via missionary Christianity. Yet, many of them have undergone Orthodox conversions, and a number now live in Israel and are accepted as Jews.

Following the individual papers, a roundtable of Johnson, Weil, and Roland discussed current research into Indian Jewish communities in Israel today. One feature of contemporary research that differs from what has already been done is the involvement of Israelis who are second generation Indians. The general sense is that despite scattered difficulties in the beginning, Indian Jews have adjusted to Israeli society remarkably well. Indian Baghdadis have merged into Baghdadi or Iraqi communities in Israel and elsewhere. Kochini Jews, though scattered, remain a distinct community whose members maintain their connections through celebrating holidays and life cycle rituals in their traditional style. Bene Israel Jews also hold firmly to a distinct identity, marked by the performance of the Eliyahu Hanabi, or *malida*, rite.

July 4, 2002

The final panel, held in the morning, focused on literature. Chaired by Ranabir Chakravarti, it included papers by Richard Marks, Scaria Zacharia, D. Venkateswarlu, and Yulia Egorova.

Marks surveyed accounts of Hinduism in medieval Jewish literature in his paper, "Hindus and Hinduism in Medieval Jewish Literature." Not surprisingly, he found a variety of opinions, ranging from Yehuda Halevi's contempt to Jacob ben Eleazar's admiration. Except for Jacob al-Qirqisani's direct observations of Indian customs, the Hinduism found in medieval Jewish literature derives mainly from Arabic and Latin texts. Among other medieval Jewish writings that reflect India are books of fables, a travelogue, the Alexander romances, and assorted magical, scientific, and alchemical books.

Zacharia's "Jewish Malayalam Folksongs" focused on the oral literature of Kochi Jewish women. Zacharia has been working with Johnson and others in collecting, translating, and making sound recordings of some 250 songs in this genre, which often interweave biblical tales with Malayali folk motifs, or recount a glorious history of the Jews of the region. Zacharia's thorough grounding in Malayali culture and literature enabled him to contextualize these Jewish folk songs to an extent not before attained. Zacharia proposed a typology of songs that reflect the very being of this "hyphenated community" of Indian Jews.

Venkateswarlu's study of Esther David's novel, "Jewish Experience in India, or the Making of an Indian Jewish Novel: A Reading of Esther David's *The Walled City*," not only constructed a new pattern for interpreting the experience of Bene Israel Jews, but also set this as an example of Indian Jewish fiction against the background of American Jewish fiction, about which Venkateswarlu has written profusely. General Jewish themes, such as assimilation and "otherness," as well as specifically Indian Jewish themes, such as spirituality and idolatry, intermarriage and identity, were juxtaposed.

Finally, Egorova surveyed images of Jews and Judaism in the literature of the "Hindu Renaissance" of nineteenth century Bengal, in her paper, "Describing the 'Other', Describing the 'Self': Jews, Hindu Reformers, and Indian Nationalists." Egorova indicated the markedly polar images of Jews that appear in Bengali nationalist discourse. Jews are hailed as a fellow Asian people, ancient like the Hindus. Often, this motif was used to proclaim the Asianness (= Jewishness) of Jesus, contrasted with the Europeanness of Christians. Jews, like Hindus, were said to possess a spiritual force that accounts for their tenacity. Also like Hindus, Jews did not seek converts, and based their religion on revealed authority (Veda and Torah). On the other hand, the priestly Temple cult was likened to Brahmanism, the reformer's archetypal obstacle to progress and enlightenment. Occasion-

ally, European anti-Semitic canards, such as the claim that Jews practiced human sacrifice, found their way into the Bengali discourse.

Nathan Katz, Shalva Weil, and P. R. Kumaraswamy organized the conference. As Kumaraswamy could not attend at the last moment, Ranabir Chakravarti replaced him on the organizing committee. The conference was sponsored by the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies, Nathan Katz and Braj M. Sinha, co-founders and co-chairs. It was funded by the Stephen and Dorothea Green Family Foundation, the Kashi Church Foundation, the Potamkin Family Foundation, and Florida International University (Department of Religious Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, Institute of Judaic/Near Eastern Studies,President Navon Program for the Study of Sephardic and Oriental Jewry, and Division of Sponsored Research).

"She Taught from the Heart"

The Life and Legacy of a Bene Israel Educator

By Joan G. Roland

Nina Haeems, ed., *Rebecca Reuben: Scholar, Educationist, Community Leader, 1889-1957*, (Mumbai: Vacha Trust, 2000), 305 pages.

Indian Jewish women up front! In the last few years, our knowledge of Indian Jews has been enriched by the appearance of several books by and about women. These include Barbara Johnson and Ruby Daniel's *Ruby of Cochin*; Flora Samuel's memoir in Marathi, *Sanskrutisangam*; Esther David's *The Walled City* and *By the Sabarmati;* Mavis Hyman's presentation and analysis of the recollections of Calcutta Jews, *Jews of the Raj*; Sally Solomon's *Hooghly Tales*, a memoir about the same community; and Jael Silliman's *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* about four generations of women in her Calcutta Baghdadi family. Beloved Bene Israel educator Rebecca Reuben, who gave up a promising career in the broader educational arena to serve her own community, never wrote her memoirs.

However, Nina Haeems, a recently retired professor of sociology and women's studies from Wilson College in Bombay, has now filled this gap by compiling and editing a book of essays, stories, interviews, recollections, government documents, and photos relating to Reuben, who was her aunt. She includes Reuben's own published and unpublished writings. Haeems, a founder of the Vacha group (a women's resource center) and the editor of an occasional publication about Indian Jewish women, had access to family collections of her aunt's papers and, thus, was uniquely positioned to take up this task. She has accomplished her goal of capturing not only the public life and achievements of this remarkable woman, but also the sense of what she was like as a person.

The result is a comprehensive book divided into six sections: Portraits, Family Album, Years at the Israelite School and Working with the Community, A Teacher's Views on Education, India in Israel, and A Gifted Story Teller. These are preceded by a long introduction in which Haeems offers a biography of Reuben set in the context of Bene Israel history. She argues that Reuben, the principal of the Sir Elly Kadoorie School for almost thirty years, was not only a sensitive and resourceful teacher whose sense of Jewishness enriched Bene Israel education and community activities during the first half of the twentieth century, but also an innovator who made important contributions in the field of education in western India. Oddly, except for the frequent mention of Reuben's being the first woman to earn the highest score in the Matriculation Examination of Bombay University

(in 1905) since the institution of the examination in 1859, there is no reference to her in the written history of education in Maharashtra. Haeems finds this unfortunate since Reuben was a pioneer in her field and, as she exemplifies, some of the earliest women educators in Bombay were Bene Israel (pp. xvii-xviii).

Rebecca Reuben came from a highly educated, upper middle-class family. Her relatives included the first Bene Israel male and female graduates of Bombay University. Her father, Ezra Reuben, was the Chief Judicial Officer in Junagadh under the British and her brother, David, was the only Bene Israel ever to enter the Indian Civil Service.

Memories of Rebecca Reuben, or Daisy as she was known and is often called in this book, enliven Part I. There is some repetition of the facts of her life in this section, but the selections give a good indication of her personality and character. Sarah Israel's "My Amazing Aunt Dija" describes her generosity to family, friends, teachers, students past and present, and people from all communities. Her students still remember her forty-five years after her death. Reuben comes across as a "fun" aunt who wrote amusing poetry to her nieces, some of which is reproduced here. Haeems herself writes a moving portrait of her aunt in this section. I.A. Ezekiel, a Bene Israel journalist, makes the point that although she was intensely religious and moral, she did not preach.

Part II presents some interesting portraits of her family, including essays and short stories for children drawing upon the experience of family members, written by Rebecca Reuben herself. A sketch she wrote about her paternal grandfather whose main interest was *lavni* singing contests is particularly appealing. *Lavnis* were folk poetry about everyday life and the book includes Reuben's translations of two songs her grandfather composed.

Reuben studied at Huzurpaga, the well-known "High School for Native Girls" in Poona, where she took up not only Marathi and Sanskrit, but also Hebrew, the latter mainly with the help of her father. She walked off with all the prizes. Then, after graduating from Deccan College, where she studied history and continued with Hebrew, she went to England where she earned a Teacher's Training Diploma in London and pursued her Hebrew studies with Dr. Israel Abrahams at Cambridge University. The book includes Abrahams' certificate attesting to Reuben's thorough knowledge of Hebrew and his letter to her father telling of the great impression she made in England. She returned to India to teach at Huzurpaga for three years and was then appointed Headmistress of the Teacher Training College for Women in Poona. This was followed by three years as Lady Superintendent of the Government Teachers' Training College at Baroda. During these years, she taught Hebrew classes for Bene Israel children and adults, and also participated in the social and intellectual life of Bombay, giving talks on women and education.

In 1922, however, acting upon her strong ambition to serve her own community, Reuben gave up this promising, more lucrative career in teacher education to become principal of the Bene Israel school, then known as the Israelite School. Haeems sees this as a turning point not only in Reuben's life but in that of the community. Soon after, Reuben began to wear only white, which is how she is remembered today. As Sarah Israel points out, "This was the first generation of Indian women making choices to remain single, to live lives of simplicity, and to commit themselves to social and national causes." (p. 7).

Part III of the book is devoted to Reuben's years at the Israelite School and her activism in the community. "First Impressions? Or Depressions!!" a piece Reuben wrote about her first visit to the school after she had accepted the principalship, shows her dissatisfaction with everything: the teaching, the spiritless staff and children, and the physical state of the premises.

Haeems discusses how Reuben's life work was dedicated to changing the cycle of poverty, lack of education, and poor employment opportunities that were the reality of a large section of the Bene Israel community at the time. During the period of her leadership, the Israelite school improved in terms of enrollment and standards and began to accept non-Jewish pupils. In 1928, she succeeded in persuading Sir Elly Kadoorie, a wealthy Iraqi Jew from Shanghai, to make a generous donation to construct a new school building. When it opened in 1934, the building was named after him, over the objections, apparently, of some Bene Israel. The Indian poet and nationalist, Sarojini Naidu, with whom Reuben had had contact in 1916, was present at the opening. Haeems wonders if Reuben and Naidu worked together or kept in touch all those years, but there is no documentation. (p. xxvii). During this period of Reuben's leadership, the Maccabbeans alumni organization was founded. This important innovation inspired young men and women to support the school and work for the greater good of the community.

Reuben was active in other community endeavors. She and her cousin, the noted gynecologist, Dr. Jerusha Jhirad, organized activities for two important institutions which the latter had founded: the Bene Israel Stree Mandal (Woman's Association) and the Jewish Religious Union, which was affiliated with the World Union of Progressive Judaism. While still in her 20s, Reuben edited and published the *Bene Israel Annual and Year Book* from 1917 to 1920. Some of the items in Part III relate to this effort. Reuben wrote in Marathi, English, and Hebrew. Her translations of Panchatantra stories into Hebrew helped bridge cultures. From 1927-1937, she edited *Nofeth*, a monthly magazine in Marathi especially for Bene Israel children. Excerpts from this magazine, which contained stories from the Old Testament and Jewish history, fables, folktales, and puzzles, are included in the book, translated from Marathi by Haeems. They show the breadth of Reuben's interest and knowledge.

In Part VII readers will find some charming stories that she wrote.

Although two generations of Bene Israel remember Rebecca Reuben with love and admiration, and there is little critical of her in this book, Haeems has found evidence in Bene Israel journals and other publications that the educator's work with the community did not go unchallenged. A debate ensued over whether the principal of an "orthodox" Jewish school should be a member of the Jewish Religious Union. Haeems mentions this and quotes from some of the criticism in her introduction, but she does not include more of this material in other parts of the book. The existence of conflict (although over what issue is unclear) between Reuben and the fractious managing committee of the school comes out in the piece by Flora Samuel, translated from her Marathi memoir by Haeems, who succeeded her as principal in 1955. Although these problems and insults hurt Reuben, Ezekiel claims that she harbored no ill-will against her critics. But Sarah Israel points out that her aunt suffered, especially as a younger woman, from severe headaches which may well have been related to stress. Israel notes that Reuben partly relieved this tension by writing. At times, only her belief that the community and, particularly, the children, needed her kept Reuben going.

Indeed, she was principal of the school during a period of great factionalism and conflict in the Bene Israel community. She tried to remain apart from the intrigue but her frustration with this situation is reflected in a brilliant, stinging allegory, "The Donkey on the Common," included in Part III. In it she shows how the donkey (representing the welfare of the community) suffers and eventually dies while the factions engage in abstract theoretical disputes over how to help it. The communal factions, with their conventions, journals, and publications are satirized in this previously unpublished piece. I.A.. Ezekiel is the only author represented in the book who talks even briefly about Reuben's political views, saying that she was in favor of India's democratic freedom and the Congress Program and was not afraid of change. One would like to know a bit more about her positions on these subjects, particularly as many Bene Israel were nervous about the possibility of the British leaving India.

It was Rebecca Reuben who spoke to Dr. Immanuel Olsvanger — the Sanskrit scholar sent to India in 1936 on a mission for the Jewish Agency — about the existence of an unpublished manuscript on the origin and history of the Bene Israel. Olsvanger arranged to have the book, written by Haeem Samuel Kehimkar at the turn of the century, printed in Tel Aviv in 1937 and it has remained an important primary source for future scholars.

Haeems acknowledges that the Bene Israel school and community were the core of Reuben's life work, but she also focuses on her role in society at large. Her greatest contribution to education in India, it seems, was her creation of the Ashok readers, a series of English readers for students in non-English speaking schools. Prescribed by the government , they became very popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

Reuben gave the entire royalty to charity. The book includes an amusing sketch of a Burma Shave advertisement featuring one of the Ashok readers in the hands of a schoolmaster. Reuben also published English-Marathi and English-Gujarati grammars. Additionally, she was a member of various important government education boards in the state of Maharashtra, where she helped shape educational policy. Unfortunately, there are hardly any records of her contributions on these government boards. After 1948, there was some controversy over when the teaching of English should begin in the vernacular schools. The government wanted to delay the introduction of English until high school so that more time could be devoted in middle school to teaching Hindi and crafts. Reuben felt that this de-emphasis of English would basically hurt poorer children, as wealthier families would find other ways to provide English lessons for their children, and proposed that the language at least be made optional from grade five on. This was not adopted at the time, although Haeems notes that in 1999, Maharashtra introduced English in the first grade throughout the state, even in the vernacular schools. (p. xxxv)

Part IV contains some documents pertaining to these activities and also includes some of Reuben's writings on education in the form of articles, radio talks, and notes that were found in her papers. They include material about women's education, reading English poetry aloud, teaching English spelling, and school tests, and on Hebrew and religious instruction for young children. From this last selection, one gets a good idea of the Jewish education received by Bene Israel students in the school. Reuben comes across as a very clear, analytical thinker, with modern views. Some of her views, especially on the role of examinations, still seem relevant today.

Rebecca Reuben was appointed Justice of the Peace in 1947 and an Honorary Magistrate in 1953, in which capacity she served at the Umarkhadi Juvenile Court. Here too, there are no records of her activities. Haeems laments the fact that so little material is available of the work that Reuben did outside of the community. Indeed, the book contains only one published article from a non-Jewish source and that one is based on material that appeared in a Bene Israel journal.

Section VII, "India and Israel," is particularly valuable. In 1947, Rebecca Reuben was invited to represent Indian Jewry at the First World Congress for Jewish Education in Jerusalem, where she was asked to speak at the opening convocation. She remained in Palestine for two months that summer, shortly before the civil war broke out there. She comments very little on the political situation, although she does note that the Indian papers gave no idea of the current situation in Palestine. Her letters to her father about her experiences are full of excitement about her visit to the Holy Land. They reveal her sense of Jewish identity and the Biblical associations she was able to make as she traveled throughout the country. Reuben did not seem to have much sympathy for the ultra-orthodox Jews she met and implies that the prayers at and kissing of the western wall

of the ancient temple were superstitious. She visited many institutions and found kibbutz life interesting, wondering if there could be a joint Jewish-Arab kibbutzim. Olsvanger, whom she met again there (and whose letter about the excellent impression that Reuben made in Palestine is included in the book) explained why this would not be possible. She was extremely well received during her trip and managed to give some speeches in Hebrew, although she found it difficult to express herself in and understand the modern vernacular. Everywhere she went, apparently, people asked her, "When are your people coming? We want them!"

In fact, many Bene Israel did begin to emigrate to Israel and by 1952, although most were integrating themselves well, a group of 150 who were unhappy chose to return to India. Some of them claimed there was color prejudice in India and this was picked up angrily by the Indian press and parliament. Reuben wrote a beautiful "Open Letter to Prime Minister, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru," which was published in *India and Israel* and reproduced here. She explains how Indian the Bene Israel are and expresses their love and loyalty for the country. Then she writes,"

> We are Indians, Sir, but we are Jews as well and, as Jews, we have an equally deep-rooted love and loyalty for the spiritual heritage of our people and for the land of Israel, which is the fountainhead of that heritage....We are thus a people of two loyalties, Sir, but not divided loyalties. We have been sustained and nourished by India and Israel, and to both we owe a deep debt of gratitude. (pp.273-74)

She strongly refutes the charge made by the Indian parliament that there was a color bar in Israel, even though, "some disgruntled emigrants who found conditions difficult in a raw pioneering country," may have made such statements. She is particularly concerned about the attention given to accusations in the Indian press and legislatures because relations between Israel and India were deteriorating at that time and she feared, "the evil spirit of prejudice against Israel that is trying to raise its head in India." She wanted Nehru to do something to reverse this situation. The returnees eventually wished to go back to Israel and their letter to the Jewish Agency begging it to pay their return passage is printed here.

Rebecca Reuben died in 1957. The book ends with a poem, "World I must Leave Thee," written by Sarah Israel shortly before her aunt died. At the condolence meeting held at the Sir Elly Kadoorie School, the speeches of the students were particularly moving. "Plain living, high thinking," was the theme. It seems to have summed up her life.

Haeems says, "Rebecca Reuben's work was mainly concerned with one field – education, with one region—Western India, and with one community—

the Bene Israel, which might explain why many people are not aware of her work, her inspiring qualities and deep sense of values, and the beauty of her life." (p.xxxix) Thus, although the Bene Israel remember her great legacy, her contributions in the broader society may remain overlooked. Hopefully, this book will serve the purpose of making Rebecca Reuben's achievements better known among a wider readership. It will be appreciated not only by those who study Indian Jews, but also by readers who are interested in Indian and/or Jewish women, and in education in Maharasthra.

Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames
The Life and Legacy of a Bene Israel Educator

By Barbara C. Johnson

Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, Brandeis Series on Jewish Women, 2001) and (Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2001).

With these lively, readable narrative "portraits" of four generations of women in her Baghdadi Jewish family, Jael Silliman makes a significant contribution to contemporary theoretical discourse in anthropology, history, and cultural studies, challenging old categories of identity construction, diaspora, colonialism, and travel. She brings a fresh and articulate "Third World Feminist" perspective both to these very large issues and to the small but ever-fascinating world of the Calcutta Jews.

Silliman's book is not just another memoir of Jewish life in Calcutta — that small and most transitory of Indian Jewish communities, which has already produced a surprising number of published recollections by "insiders."[1] Neither is her book set in the framework of Indian Jewry in general, though it will be valuable for scholars researching any or all of the Indian Jewish communities.[2] Instead, Silliman situates her narrative and analysis first within the context of the Baghdadi trading diaspora, which she explores in some depth, then within the Anglicized cultural world of colonial Calcutta, then in the context of India's transition from colonialism to decolonization, and finally within the contemporary South Asian diaspora. The entire book is framed by a set of theoretical concerns, named at the beginning and the end, and referred to throughout the narratives.

The author characterizes each of the four women portrayed in her book as "dwelling in traveling," a concept she borrows from anthropologist James Clifford. Her great grandmother and grandmother remained all their lives within the "mobile" Baghdadi Jewish diaspora, wherever they lived. To "dwell in traveling" involved "sustaining communities over large spaces," maintaining invisible community boundaries that preserved a sense of home wherever one was located (p. 185). Both belonged to the middle class of this community, in contrast to the elite families portrayed in many accounts of the Baghdadi Jewish life.

The author's maternal great grandmother, Farha[3] (1870-1958), was sent from Baghdad to Calcutta as a 15-year-old bride to marry a man 35 years her senior. She and her children traveled with him on his commercial journeys as far as Rangoon, Penang, and Singapore, without ever leaving the world of Baghdadi Jews, where Judeo-Arabic was the primary language and Jewish law was the

basis of family life. Through Farha's story, the author explores women's role in preserving this "multi-centered" community.

Farha's daughter-in-law Mary (Miriam, 1901-1980) was born in Calcutta, and her generation of Baghdadi Jews was profoundly influenced by British colonial culture while remaining thoroughly Jewish. A religiously devout woman with a British-oriented education, she earned a living by teaching. She shared a passion for western cinema with her female relatives and friends, but she did not form close relationships outside the Jewish community. After Independence, most of the Calcutta Jews chose to leave India for English-speaking countries, blending into other branches of the transnational Baghdadi Jewish community. This was Mary's path through her post-World War II migrations to Sidney, London, and, finally, Jerusalem, where she is buried on the Mount of Olives. Both Farha and Mary were devout and religiously observant Jews.

The author (Jael) and her mother (Flower) have also traveled extensively, more as individuals than as members of a community, through "worlds shaped by global mass culture," within India and in Israel and the United States. Flower, who was born in Calcutta in 1930 and grew up during the final years of colonial rule, established close connections with non-Jews. Through her education in New Delhi and her wide friendship network, she imbibed a strong devotion to Indian nationalism, in contrast to her mother Mary and most other Calcutta Jews. Through her wealthy Calcutta Jewish husband, she was then swept into the post-Independence world of elite secular Indian society, as part of a small minority of Jews who stayed on in Calcutta during this period of "decolonization," which the author discusses in theoretical as well as descriptive terms. After leaving her marriage, Flower lived for some years in Jerusalem and finally joined Jael in the United States.

The author was born in Calcutta in 1955 and grew up in a cosmopolitan post-colonial Indian world, where her Jewishness was constructed as a communal identity in a consciously secular and plural culture. She sees the story of the Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta as a testimony to, "India's plural past, where many communities flourished" — a particularly important attestation in light of increasing communal strife and ideologies of exclusion in India today. Though she left for higher education in Britain and then the U.S., she has never doubted her primary identity as an Indian. Now she lives as a self-identified member of the South Asian intellectual and professional diaspora, an assistant professor of Women's Studies, an American citizen married to a Bengali Hindu, and a "Third World Feminist" scholar and activist.

In Silliman's analysis, the multiple, interwoven, and shifting transnational identities claimed by her and her three foremothers underline "the fluidity and the political nature of identity constructions, challenging essentialist identity claims." (p. 6) The theoretical framework and analysis presented in this book, in combina-

tion with its rich ethnohistorical detail, should appeal to a wide range of students and scholars. Silliman advances the interdisciplinary field of diaspora studies by her explication and application of the concept of "dwelling in traveling," which breaks down the dichotomy between "travel" and "home." Likewise she makes creative use of Arjun Appadurai's "diaspora of hope" concept to dispel the notion that diaspora is always associated with exile, displacement, and loss. Vividly demonstrating, "that diaspora narratives are very varied and can be as much about mobility and gain" (p. 185), her book will be particularly useful in teaching Jewish studies, to show in theoretical as well as ethnographic terms that the experience of European Jews cannot be generalized to all Jewish communities.

Post-colonial scholarship, about South Asia in particular, is enriched by Silliman's discussion of the in-between community of Baghdadi Jews, neither Indian nor British, who challenged a strict dichotomy between colonizer and colonized. Likewise her close attention to the role of women in that community, through four generations of cultural and political change, supports her contention that, "distinct communities of women living in India at different periods experienced and were affected by colonialism in very particular ways." (p. 172)

Scholars and writers of ethnographic life stories will appreciate Silliman's openness and reflexivity as she explains her methodology in collecting material and writing this book. She wrote the family stories "in dialogue" with her mother, Flower, drawing extensively on their conversations and on Flower's writing about Farha, Mary, and herself. While Jael narrates the first two stories, much of her mother's story is written in Flower's own words. Jael explains, "While she presents her own story in dialogue with me, she remains at the center of the chapter. I intervene to analyze and comment on aspects of her life that enable me to elaborate on the key themes." (p. 8) While stressing this collaboration, Jael acknowledges her own influence on how the stories are understood, along with the joys and challenges of her accountability to family members of her extended family whom she visited in the U.S., London, Israel, and Calcutta, and who read and commented on what she had written.

Readers of this journal, whatever the nature of their fascination with the intersection of Indian and Jewish cultures, will certainly benefit from a careful reading of this outstanding book.

NOTES

1. Primary is Ezekiel N. Musleah's authoritative scholarly survey, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta,* (Quincy, MA: Christopher Publishing House, 1973) to which Silliman refers frequently. Other studies by community members include accounts based on interviews and/or personal recollection: Flower Elias and Judith Elias Cooper, *The Jews of Calcutta: The Autobiography of a Community, 1798-1972,* (Calcutta, India: Jewish Association of Calcutta, 1974); Esmond David Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry,* (London: Brookside Press, 1986); Mavis Hyman, *Jews of the Raj,* (London: Hyman Publishers, 1995); and Sally Luddy Solomon, *Hooghly Tales,* (London: David Ashley Publishing).

2. In contrast to Joan Roland's historical study, *Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era,* (Hanover, N.H. and London: University Press of New England, 1989), reprinted as *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era,* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), Silliman does not discuss Baghdadi relations with the long-established Bene Israel and Cochin Jewish communities, and barely mentions the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay.

3. Farha was introduced to readers in the first volume of this journal. See Jael Silliman, "Crossing Borders, Maintaining Boundaries: The Life and Times of Farha, a Woman of the Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora (1870-1958)," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* (Saskatoon, Sask. and Miami, FL) 1 (1998): 57-79.

The Jewish Heritage of Calcutta

Reviewed by Thomas A. Timberg

Dalia Roy, *The Jewish Heritage of Calcutta,* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 2001), 246 pages. ISBN 81-7715-005-7.

This volume is an interesting addition to the rather large body of English language literature on the Jews of Calcutta. The Calcutta Jewish community, one of a series of trading emporia on the way to the China, was largely Baghdadi. Though others, including European Jews, settled there, its core remained Middle Eastern. Actually, the first prominent family came from Aleppo, then more came from Baghdad and Basra. However, no firm or family had the dominating position of the Sassoons — a group of wealthy business families who were part of the city's elite. They built two "cathedral synagogues," which are still among the city's architectural treasures, and they created a range of other Jewish institutions. Perhaps because there were more elite families, and more of them stayed connected with the city for a longer period, a number of books and articles have been written about their experiences, mostly by members of this elite.

The volume's author, a lawyer and civil servant as well as a Ph.D. historian from a prominent, non-Jewish Calcutta family, clearly has much to add. The volume differs from its predecessors in at least three ways. It is oriented toward an Indian audience and tries to explain Jewish beliefs and ritual in general, as well as the Jewish relationship to the Nationalist Movement and to Bengali culture — topics that were treated lightly, if at all, by previous authors who clearly had a Jewish and sometimes foreign Jewish audience in mind. It introduces a number of new sources such as various wills and court decisions, Calcutta newspaper archives, and interviews with elderly Calcutta Jewish residents. Finally, it pays explicit attention to the gradual extinction of this once significant community. The book reports that Calcutta had a Jewish population of several thousand people at the end of the Second World War, but that now only 54, mainly elderly, Jews are registered with the Calcutta community.

Those interested in Calcutta Jewry will find this book interesting, though some of them may be disappointed. The index is somewhat partial, and some of the material seems to be repeated, perhaps for greater comprehensibility. The volume suffers from the limitations of the resources available to the researcher. Some key sources apparently did not come to her attention, such as Esmond Ezra's two volume study *Turning Back the Pages*[1] with its elaborate genealogical trees;

and Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voight's *Jewish Exile in India 1933-45*, with its treatment of Aronson.[2]

Other limitations are probably posed by time — I would imagine that property records exist that could trace the details of the Jews' commercial position. I know that the Calcutta Jews certainly have figured in a remarkable number of court records. Many of the court records are referred to in this volume — but other trials, such as the litigation over the Jewish Girls School, might have filled out some of the social detail. Some of this litigation undoubtedly involves dirty laundry, but Dr. Ray correctly does not entirely avoid this aspect. I always thought the Bogra Nawab case, about the claimant to this East Bengal title who was descended from Jews, was particularly interesting. Calcutta Jews clearly played a role among the saints and sinners of the city and, presumably, mostly resided in between the two.

The two Bengali literary notices I remember are Jibananda Das' reference, obviously to a Jewish prostitute, and the reference to Mrs. Cohen, the sales target of the protagonist in Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*. The litigation surrounding the two synagogues, Magen David and Neveh Shalom, which bounced up and down the privy council, obviously reflected the peculiar conflicts between various groups in the communities which manifest themselves elsewhere. Many things are mentioned which, given time, would have been interesting to explore, but the amount of data that Dr. Ray has unearthed is still impressive.

There is a passing reference to some of the more prominent converts, such as Mr. Guha (whose descendents included Hannah Sen, the founder of Lady Irwin College in Delhi) and the Hyderabadi aristocrats, a branch of the Paikpara raj (I think), whose descendents are now prominent Jews in the United Kingdom. On the cultural side, a number of people are noted for their particular roles: Maurice Shellim is cited as a collector of Anglo-Indian art, and Gerald Craig and Bunny Jacob are involved with Calcutta Music, as referenced in the book. What strikes one is the extent to which Jews were both part of old Calcutta and separate. A number of young Jews were involved in the English language theater of the immediate post-World War period, but as the focus of Calcutta theater turned to Bengali material, they dropped out. Actually, Dr. Ray documented this aspect quite well in interviews with Calcutta survivors.

On the other hand, in covering so much, the book does not claim to deal definitively with many of the bigger issues — though it touches on a lot of them: nationalism and Bengali culture, Calcutta business and industry, to say nothing of various scratches that Calcutta Jews and non-Jews have left on each others' minds, even if there were relatively few intimate engagements. As to the future, perhaps Dr. Ray is rightly tentative, though she does refer to the various negotiations between the state government and members of the community.

In any case, people interested in Indian Judaica should read this book

and will learn some useful things, although they may have their curiosity aroused for even more. Many of those who know much of what she speaks about will undoubtedly each have their own particular details they would wish to add or explore.

NOTES

1. Esmond Ezra's two volume study *Turning Back the Pages*, (London: Brookside Press, 1986), Vol. 1.

2. Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voight, eds., *Jewish Exile in India 1933-45*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999).

3. Satyajit Ray, *Mahanagar*, Columbia/Tristar, 1963 (VHS with English subtitles, 1997).

Ruby Daniel — In Memoriam 1912 - 2002

By Barbara C. Johnson

Ruby (Rivka) Daniel — writer, translator, captivating storyteller and treasured elder of the Kochin Jewish community — passed away September 23, 2002, a few months short of her ninetieth birthday. Her book *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*[1] lives on as a rich source of history, legends, memories and songs of Kerala Jewish life. The years of work she devoted to translating and commenting on more than 120 Malayalam Jewish women's folk songs established the essential groundwork for an ongoing international scholarly project to publish, translate and analyze these songs.

Born in December, 1912 (1 Tevet 5673), Ruby Daniel spent the first half of her life in Mattancheri, Cochin, where she pioneered as the first Jewish girl to leave the neighborhood to continue her education, and the first to complete high school and attend college. After working as a government clerk and serving in the Indian Navy, she was among the first in her community to make *aliyah* and join a kibbutz. She was also the first Cochin Jewish woman to write a book.

Ruby Daniel was the eldest child of Eliyahu Hai Daniel (d. 1934) and Leah Japheth Daniel (1892-1982). Her father sold tickets for the ferry boat linking the island of Cochin with the mainland city of Ernakulam — a job that her mother took over after his untimely death. Ruby was profoundly influenced by her maternal grandparents Eliyahu and Rivka ("Docho") Japheth, with whom she and her immediate family lived. Her book is dedicated to the memory of Grandmother Docho, an acknowledged expert in Malayalam Jewish songs. Grandfather Eliyahu Japheth was a *shohet* and a self-educated scholar of Jewish texts who worked as a commercial agent for one wealthy Jewish family and taught Hebrew to the sons of another.

From early childhood, Ruby was an excellent student in the local government school for girls and in the Jewish school where she studied Hebrew, Torah, and the synagogue liturgy each morning and afternoon. Her mother, Leah, insisted on sending her to St. Theresa's Convent School in Ernakulam for higher education, pawning a gold chain to pay the fees. Ruby completed high school there and studied one year at St. Theresa's College, where she acquired the grounding in classical Malayalam which enabled her to translate the women's folk songs so many years later. Unfortunately, she had to leave college to help support the family when her father and grandfather died.

Ruby Daniel never married. Part of an early generation of educated and lower-income working women in Kerala, she was employed in government service, as a

clerk in the High Court, District Court and Munsiff Court, and from 1944-1946 in the Women's Royal Indian Navy. In 1951, she and her sister Rahel left Cochin for Israel, becoming members of Kibbutz Neot Mordechai in the Upper Galilee. Later, she brought her mother and brother to Israel.

It was my privilege to know Ruby Daniel for more than 20 years and to work closely in collaboration with her, in the writing of her book and in the Malayalam songs project. From the time that she first showed me her writings in English — about historical events, legends, ghosts, dreams, and memories of Jewish celebrations in Kerala — I was impressed with her lyrical descriptive style, humor, and outspoken social criticism. She asked for my help in "arranging" a book from what she had written, a task that we accomplished together during my extensive visits to Israel and through the mail. Part of Ruby's motivation in writing her book was to "set the record straight" about a controversy within her own Paradesi community, where the "white" Jews had discriminated in the past against members of her extended family. Believing that they had been unjustly and inaccurately labeled as "*meshuhrarim*" (freed slaves), she was eager to correct written accounts by scholars and other outsiders who lacked information from her branch of the family. Her forthright accounts of the past have challenged scholars such as myself to reexamine prior assumptions about caste, slavery, and Jewish communities in Kerala.

Another motivation in Daniel's writing was to celebrate the beauty of Kerala and its culture, to "show how good the people of Kerala were, how they welcomed the Jews and treated them well." Though she did not originally intend to write in detail about her own life, she also came to realize: "It is important for people today to know what happened before they were born, to know about the lives of ordinary women...wildflowers who bloom in the forest. Nobody sees them and they fade" (p. xiv).

In addition, *Ruby of Cochin* includes an account of the author's *aliyah* and life in a predominately Ashkenazi secular kibbutz, where she again met with social discrimination. Maintaining her religious observance and her Indian cuisine and cultural style, she was a diligent and proud participant in the life of Neot Mordechai, working more than 40 years in the kitchen and laundry. Until publication of her book in 1995, Ruby Daniel's talents remained largely unrecognized outside the circle of her family and friends. But that year her kibbutz honored her with a reception, and she was a featured guest and panel participant at the grand opening of the exhibit "The Jews of India" at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In July 2002, she was awarded a Certificate of Honor from a new organization in Israel, the Cochin Women's Group for Reviving the Malayalam Jewish Songs.

In failing health, Ruby lived her last three years in the nursing facility of her kibbutz, minutes away from her sister Rahel. She was still able to help Rahel and her cousins remember the forgotten tunes of some Malayalam songs, which they

recorded in Jerusalem for a forthcoming CD. Her funeral was attended by family and community members from all over Israel, including a special delegation from the Cochini Women's group.

Ruby Daniel's work will endure as a significant contribution to Jewish and Indian history and ethnography, and as a legacy for the Kerala Jews. She will long be remembered as a woman of strong spirit, intelligence, loyalty, wit, and dignity, who prevailed over economic and social challenges to celebrate and preserve the culture of her community.

NOTES

1. Ruby Daniel, Barbara C. Johnson. *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995, 2002).

About the Contributors

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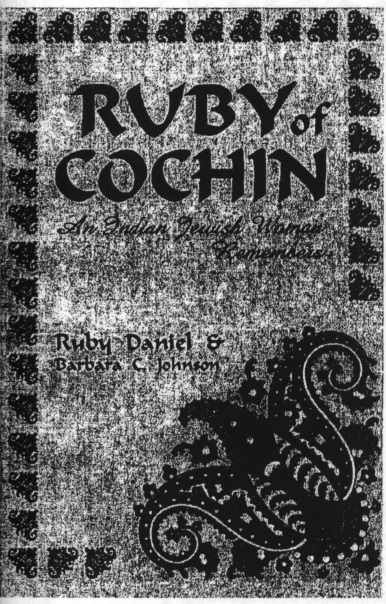
RUBY OF COCHIN

An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers

Ruby Daniel and Barbara Johnson



Ruby of Cochin is the first book written by a Jewish woman from the ancient South Indian community of Cochin, Kerala. Filled with rich descriptions of Jewish life spanning several centuries, this is both the story of the Jews of Kerala and the tale of one woman.

The book is written with a distinctive storyteller's voice and contains historical legends and folk tales, colorful renditions of Jewish celebrations in Cochin, and translations of women's songs from Malayalam, the language of the area. The book is also Ruby's own memoir of her dramatic life in India and Israel. Born in 1912, she is a woman of strong and enviable character, who chose not the traditional path of marriage, instead attending college, joining the Women's Royal Indian Navy, and in 1951 immigrating to Israel, where she lives today in Kibbutz Neot Mordecai.

Barbara Johnson is associate professor of anthropology and coordinator of Jewish Studies at Ithaca College. She has published widely on the Jews of Kerala, the focus of her research for over thirty years. In 1981, Ruby Daniel became a primary resource for Prof. Johnson's dissertation research, sharing the personal recollections and insights that became the basis for the present volume.

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Japan Studies Review 2002

Volume VI

Interdisciplinary Studies of Modern Japan

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