

## BOOK REVIEWS

Benjamin Joseph Israel, *The Jews of India*, New Delhi: Mosaic Books, 1998. (New Edition)

India had three prominent Jewish communities: the Bene Israel of Maharashtra State, the Cochin Jews of Kerala, and the Baghdadis who came from Iraq and other countries to India beginning in the eighteenth century on. As Benjamin Joseph Israel notes in *The Jews of India*, the Bene Israel community, relative to its miniscule size, produced a remarkable number of educated members, who excelled themselves in government service, the armed forces, the legal and medical professions, and academic life. During the last century, a not insubstantial number of Bene Israel devoted themselves to recording the history and culture of their own community. Most of these treatises, which tended to dwell on the origins and peculiar customs of the Bene Israel of India, are useful to researchers outside the community, who can analyze these texts in order to understand "the native point's of view." The unique quality of *The Jews of India* is that the book manages to maintain a degree of objectivity, which is rare in native scholars, while providing insight into the unusual situation of Jewish communities in India which maintained their Jewishness while clearly adopting customs and mores from the surrounding environment.

B.J. Israel (1906-1987) hailed from an educated family, which originated in the Konkan villages, south of Bombay.<sup>1</sup> Like other members of the Bene Israel community, who were Indian yet marginal by virtue of their Jewishness, his great-great grandfather abandoned village life and joined the East India Company's Bombay Army. In 1837, B.J. Israel's grandfather enlisted in the Fourth Rifles Regiment and, upon premature retirement from the army, served for many years in the police in the Ahmednagar District. His father, Khan Bahadur Jacob Bapuji Israel (d. 1932), served as Deputy Collector in the Maharashtra Districts and as *Karbari* (chief administrator) of Aundh State (Satara District).<sup>2</sup> B.J. (as he was popularly known) was born in 1906 and educated at Elphinstone College, Bombay, where he was selected as a College Scholar (1923-27) and Daksbina Fellow (1927-29). He served for 30 years in the Bombay Government Secretariat (1929-1959) and for ten years as Secretary of the Bombay Public Service Commission. Between 1962-64, he acted as President of the Bombay Philosophical Society, for which he wrote several papers and reviews. On the one hand, he stood aloof from his community, describing himself as a "very marginal member" of the Bene Israel community; on the other hand, he can be considered the most important native Bene Israel researcher since

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1995, Bombay has been officially known as Mumbai. However, I am leaving Bombay in the text since this designation is better known.

<sup>2</sup> For a full biography, see B.J. Israel, *Khan Bahadur Jacob Bapuji Israel*.

Haim Samuel Kehimkar, who completed his manuscript on the history of the Bene Israel in 1897.<sup>3</sup>

*The Jews of India* published in 1998 is not a new work; neither is it exactly a re-publication of an old work. It is in fact a re-issue of two previous versions of the text with a few brief and minor additions inserted by the late B.J. Israel's brother, Samuel Israel.

The first version of the work appeared in 1982 with an original Foreword written by the late Ezra Kolet, then President of the Jewish Welfare Association in New Delhi. In 1987, after the death of B.J. Israel, the volume was reprinted and a piece entitled "The Jewish Contribution to India," which the author had drafted but not finally revised, was added. In this 1988 version of the volume, these two contributions are included with welcome updates and a Foreword by his brother, Samuel Israel, as well as two other studies ("Religious Evolution among the Bene Israel of India since 1750" and "Bene Israel Surnames and their Village Links") by B.J. Israel which appeared in *The Bene Israel of India—Some Studies*, published by Orient Longman in 1984.<sup>4</sup> The result is a fascinating insight into of the Jews of India, even if the format (with two Forewords and a different table of contents) is somewhat muddling. It is a pity that no integrating introduction or concluding chapter by the current editor attempts to wrap up the different strands, but clearly the aim is authenticity and tenacious preservation of the original works.

The first half of *The Jews of India* surveys the history and contemporary situation of India's three Jewish communities, as they were in the early 1980's. The 'Concluding Remarks' by the author reflect his belief that Indian Jewry should continue in India and that the move to Israel was not always wise. The supplementary chapter on "The Jewish Contribution to India," only serves to reinforce that belief while recounting the magnificent contributions to the development of India by foreign Jews and members of the local Jewish communities in multifold fields ranging from the Defense Forces to the medical professions to education. As the current editor hints when stating, "no claims to comprehensiveness are being made..." (p. 61) the list of outstanding Jews in India is indeed impressive. Recently, a book on Jewish exiles in India<sup>5</sup> revealed to the world the singular contributions of individual Jews who had fled the hostile shores of Germany and other Central and Eastern European countries prior to and during the Second World War and sought India as a place of exile. Among these were Rudolf von Leyden the

<sup>3</sup> Dayag Press in 1937 published H.S. Kehimkar's manuscript, "The History of the Bene Israel of India," completed in 1897, in Tel Aviv with the aid of the Sanskrit scholar Dr. I. Olswanger.

<sup>4</sup> B.J. Israel, *The Bene Israel of India—Some Studies* (Bombay/Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1984). For a review of this book, see Shalva Weil, in *Asian and African Studies* 19, 1985: 131-2.

<sup>5</sup> A. Bhatti and J.H. Voigt, eds., *Jewish Exile in India: 1933-45* (New Delhi: Manohar in association with Max Mueller Bhavan, 1999).

caricaturist,<sup>6</sup> Alex Aronson the author,<sup>7</sup> and Dr. Margarete Spiegel, who was one of Gandhi's most faithful followers,<sup>8</sup> but must have influenced him somehow.

The second half of *The Jews of India* contains a useful map of some major Bene Israel villages in the Kolaba District, today known as Raigad, and two of B.J. Israel's most famous studies. The article entitled "Religious Evolution among the Bene Israel of India since 1750" is an impressive treatise that appeared as a reaction to the burning issue of the day: the controversy concerning the status of the Bene Israel and their acceptability in the early 1960's as 'full' Jews in Israel, capable from the *halakhic* (Jewish legal) point of view of marrying other Jews.<sup>9</sup> The chapter traces the beginnings of the Bene Israel and various theories of origin, the influence of the Cochin and Iraqi Jews on the religious development of the Bene Israel, the paradoxical effect of missionary activity among the latter community, and the reinvigoration of the Jewish community through its affiliation both with Liberal Judaism (the Jewish Religious Union founded in Bombay in 1925) and Orthodox Judaism. As B.J. Israel himself points out: "It is a measure of the dearth of authentic information outside India about the Bene Israel that the pamphlet, when published in 1963, attracted more attention than its slight character merited. In particular, it served me as an introduction to a few foreign scholars who have undertaken studies about the Jews of India," (Israel, 1984: x).<sup>10</sup> Not least, it provided the 'native' yet 'not-quite native' version of the history of the Bene Israel published in Strizower's book on the Bene Israel (1971), for whom B.J. acted as key informant."<sup>11</sup> Although 'Religious Evolution' was published in 1984 and written well before that, the religious condition of the Bene Israel in India, as described by B.J. Israel, remains uncannily similar in the new millennium.<sup>12</sup> B.J. points to three problems which face the spread of orthodox Judaism: the lack of Jewish literature in Marathi, the mother tongue of most of the Bene Israel in Maharashtra; the absence of good religious instruction; and the problem of finances to run communal religious institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> K. Khanna, "To Rudolf von Leyden: A Letter out of Season," in A. Bhatti and J.H. Voigt, eds., *Jewish Exile in India: 1933-45*, pp. 186-190.

<sup>7</sup> M. Kampchen, "Alex Aronson: Refugee from Nazi Germany in Santiniketan," in A. Bhatti and J.H. Voigt, eds., *Jewish Exile in India: 1933-45*, pp. 127-149.

<sup>8</sup> J.H. Voigt, "Under the Spell of the Mahatma: Dr. Margarete Spiegel," in A. Bhatti and J.H. Voigt, eds., *Jewish Exile in India, 1933-45*, pp. 150-160.

<sup>9</sup> This problem was resolved in 1964 after objections and a strike by members of the community and a rabbinical commission of enquiry, which finally declared the Bene Israel "full Jews in every respect."

<sup>10</sup> I thank Samuel Israel (in private correspondence 24 April 2000) for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>11</sup> Schifra Strizower, *The Children of Israel; the Bene Israel of Bombay* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> In April 2000 I returned from a trip to India sponsored by Marg Publications during which I visited several Jewish communities in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Cochin, Pune and the Konkan villages.

While world Jewish organizations, such as AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) and the Jewish Agency attempt to boost Jewish awareness in Bombay and other contemporary Jewish centers in India, objectively, the level of Jewish knowledge remains extremely limited. The Jewish communities in India never sported a Rabbi and the religious leadership among the Bene Israel derived from secular authority.<sup>13</sup>

The final study in the volume on "Bene Israel Surnames and Village Links," is a classic, based upon scientific research. It gives a comprehensive list of Konkan villages in which the Bene Israel once lived and the surnames which they retain linking them to those villages of origin. The fascinating appendices derive from 1961 and 1971 census data and provide a rich source of material for future research. B.J. Israel concludes his chapter with the remark that "With the migration of the majority of the Bene Israel to Israel it remains to be seen how long the traditional village-derived surnames will remain in use." (p. 121) In practice, in Israel, where the majority of the Bene Israel today lives, members of the community still use those names. Some call themselves by their —*kar* names on a day-to-day basis, while others only apply them in ethnic-religious situations. The affirmation of —*kar* names is reasserted in all synagogue matters such as membership registers, accounts and so on.<sup>14</sup>

Although B.J. Israel passed away in 1987, meanwhile, no member of the Bene Israel community either in India or in Israel has taken his place as objective researcher and incisive thinker. New novels have appeared, such as Esther David's *The Walled City*,<sup>15</sup> but there is no recent equivalent of *The Jews of India*. This is a shame because the Jews of India represent a fascinating case study of Jewish communities who withstood the test of time in a non-hostile and unique environment.

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**Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, pp. ix+205; 20 illustrations.**

American scholarship in humanities has created a special niche for both Indic and Judaic studies. While the contributions of American academicians to Indic and Judaic studies as two distinct disciplines are well known, the inter-relatedness

<sup>13</sup> Weil, "Religious Leadership vs. Secular Authority—The Case of the Bene Israel," in *Eastern Anthropologist* 49 (3-4), 1996: 301-9.

<sup>14</sup> Weil, "Names and Identity Among the Bene Israel," in *Ethnic Groups* 1 (1), 1977.

<sup>15</sup> E. David, *The Walled City* (Madras: Manas, an Imprint of East-West Books, 1997).