

## Book Review: Two Books about and by Bombay Baghdadis

**Rachel Manasseh, *Baghdadian Jews of Bombay, Their Life & Achievements: A Personal and Historical Account*** (Great Neck, NY: Midrash Ben Ish Hai, 2013). xlii + 442 pages. Illustrated with maps and photographs.

**Shaul Sapir, *Bombay: Exploring the Jewish Urban Heritage*** (Mumbai: Bene Israel Heritage Museum and Research Centre, 2013). 290 pages. Illustrated with maps, sketches, color, and B&W photos.

*Reviewed by Nathan Katz*

Two recent books fill a gap in the literature on Indian Jews. While Jews from Kolkata, Kochi, and the Bene Israel have been prolific, there has been a perplexing literary silence from the Baghdadis of Mumbai.

Not so in other Indian Jews communities. Kochi Jews began writing about themselves in 1791 when Ezekiel Rahabi wrote a letter describing the history and customs of Kochi.<sup>1</sup> He was followed by Naphtali Roby (1911), A.B. Salem's diaries (1913-1959), A.I. Simon (1947), I.S. Hallegua's manuscripts from the 1980s mostly, and Ruby Daniel's memoir (1995).

The Bene Israel have been the most prolific. Their best-known writer was the lauded poet and playwright, Nissim Ezekiel, who built upon a literary tradition that began with Solomon Daniel Nandgoankar's Marathi-language book about the Bene Israel (1880) and was followed by Samuel Shalome Kurulkar's Marathi novel (1878), Rebecca Reuben (1913), Ezekiel Solomon Divekar in Marathi (1923). Hayeem Samuel Kehimkar wrote a definitive study of the community in 1897, eventually published in Tel Aviv in 1937. Benjamin J. Israel wrote a number of significant works on the Bene Israel, all in English (1960, 1962, 1963, 1982 and 1984), as did Shellim Samuel (1963) and D.B. Reubens (1990). Esther David's novels (1997, 1999, 2002) have attracted critical attention. Other novelists include B.B. Dandekar (1991, 1993) and Meera Mahadevan (in Marathi, 1961 and 1975). There are also memoirs by Flora Samuel (1996) and Carmit Delma's acclaimed work (2002).

Kolkata's Jews, too, have written prodigiously. The most substantial histories are by Rabbi Ezekiel N. Musleah (1960, 1975, 1983, 2003) and Esmond D. Ezra (1984, 1986). Both Musleah and Ezra are writing about their communities, but in truth theirs are more family histories. More on this below. Kolkata Jews began writing about themselves early in the twentieth century, starting with I.A. Isaac (1917), C.S. Abraham (1925), Abraham S. Abraham (1969), Elias Flower and Judith Elias Cooper (1974), Rahel Musleah (1991), Mavis Hyman (1995), Solly Solomon (1998), and Yohanan ben David (2002). Jael Silliman's 2001 book is in a separate category, as the author wrote about her family as a trained anthropologist and professor of women's studies at the University of Iowa.

But what about Mumbai's Baghdadis? Their literary output until now has been limited to some rather well-done synagogue commemoration books, especially the one edited by Sophy Kelly (1985). Baghdadi Jews in Burma, incidentally, also published some valuable commemoration volumes. Even the elite Sassoon family produced very little beyond an important catalogue (1932) and an article (1933) by David Sassoon.

Two 2013 books will inspire others from the Baghdadi community of Mumbai, one hopes. The first, *Baghdadian Jews of Bombay, Their Life and Achievements* by Rachel Manasseh, is subtitled "A Personal and Historical Account." Manasseh views the large sweeps of history and culture through the prism of her family. It is an intimate view, to be sure, a "micro" take on the "macro." As essentially a family history, this work is in a genre well established by Kolkata Baghdadis.

Manasseh's book starts with a chapter called "Family Recollections," and it clearly is researched very thoroughly, culling stories from friends and relatives and richly illustrated with photographs from as early as 1919. Looking back to the history of the community, Manasseh pays considerable attention to the towering figure of David Sassoon, his family, and his mercantile empire. It is through the Sassoon family that Manasseh tells the community's story from its inception to World War I, at the zenith of both the British Empire and the Baghdadi of India. She provides valuable studies of the many community organizations that flourish during the interwar period: the many trusts and charities, schools and libraries, hospitals and research institutions. She describes the Bombay Zionist Association, the Bombay Jewish Women's League, the Bombay Jewish Association, the Central Jewish Board, and the Indo-Israel Friendship League.

Highly interesting is her chapter on women in the community. Rather than rely on generalities, she discusses the life and contributions of such luminaries as Flora Sassoon, Lady Rachel Ezra, Lady Rachel Sassoon, Hannah Gourgey, Georgette Reuben Ani, Sophie Ellis Judah, and Sophy Kelly. Each made significant contributions not only to the Jewish community, but also to civil society as well.

The focus then shifts to Albert Manasseh, the author's late husband and community leader during the middle of the last century. He is described as pious and learned, a pillar of Keneseth Elyahoo Synagogue, deeply immersed in charitable trusts and educational institutions. Due to her extensive access, this chapter is a detailed and nuanced description of an elite Mumbai Baghdadi's many activities, travels, concerns, and faith.

Subsequent chapters discuss the Jewish educational institutions of Mumbai and the many youth organizations: Habonim (India), 'Aliyah, Bnei Akiva, and the sports club, Maccabi. Of keen interest is a chapter on the huge role the community played in the development of Bollywood, stars, technicians, and moghuls alike.

The book is profusely illustrated with black-and-white photographs. It fills an important gap as the first "family history" of the community. While the bibliography is extensive, there are important works of which the author is apparently unaware (including mine!) that would have added depth and context. Nevertheless, this book is entirely welcome.

Like Manasseh, Shaul Sapir is native to the Mumbai Baghdadi community. He made aliyah and studied geography, archaeology, and education at Hebrew University, where he earned his Ph.D. He has written widely on Jerusalem, employing the same methodology of historical geography that he skillfully uses in this outstanding book, *Bombay: Exploring the Jewish Urban Heritage*.

Sapir's book starts with the macrocosm that is Mumbai history, situating Jewish architectural contributions within the history of Mumbai. His meticulous research and archival acumen survey Mumbai's development, starting even before the beginning with rare etchings from 1757. Profusely illustrated, the architecture of the city comes alive. Leafing through its pages, it reveals Mumbai to be an organism: its topography gradually becomes overlaid with buildings and parks as the frontier town of British India becomes the staggering megalopolis that she is today. Gradually, Jews are introduced into his narrative: the Sassoons and his own family as well. There is a touch of "family history" in Sapir's work, but only fleetingly. Sapir's writing is more interested in Mumbai than in his family, which adds a personal touch to his expansive tale.

Like Manasseh, Sapir devoted chapters to Jewish roles in education, where they established Hebrew-, English-, and Marathi medium schools. Some were religious, some secular, some occupational, some technical, and one was a reformatory. Jews were also major benefactors of the elite government school, Elphinstone College.

The role of Jews in the city's banking focuses on Sheikh David Sassoon, founder of the Bank of India, who played a key role in the city's commerce, industry hotels, and real estate. And the Jewish community also built hospitals, clinics, and a medical research institute that remains a center of excellence.

Monuments proliferated, most notably the Gateway to India (constructed by Sassoon and Parsi leader Jamsetji Jheejheebhoy), the Victoria and Albert Museum and its famous clock tower, and much of the statuary of the city. They built beautiful homes for themselves (notably Sassoon's Sans Souci) and for their congregations: Maghen Abraham in Byculla (1861) and Keneseth Elyahoo in Fort (1884). Sapir does not neglect the Bene Israel synagogues, which predate the Baghdadis' houses of worship.

All of the communal buildings were once bustling with activity, and Sapir tells the story of youth clubs, sporting groups, Zionist organizations, and social clubs.

The book is in a large format and is richly illustrated with color as well as black-and-white photographs, maps, and etchings. It serves well as a coffee table book for casual perusal, and at the same time makes its mark as an important academic contribution to the history of India (Mumbai in particular of course), to Jewish history, to architecture, and to urban historical anthropology. It is very highly recommended for all: armchair travelers, academicians, as well as Mumbaikars and Mumbaikar-wannabees.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Full references for all of the works mentioned may be found in Nathan Katz, *Indian Jews: An Annotated Bibliography 1665-2005* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013).