

The First Ever Holocaust Films Retrospective in South Asia

By Navras Jaat Aafreedi¹

As aware as I was of how ignorant my fellow Indians were about the Holocaust and how a portion of Muslims among them denied its scale and magnitude, I had long wanted to do something to create awareness on the subject. Also, the fact that although Western history was taught at my alma mater, the University of Lucknow, the students were never told about the Holocaust, saddened me. The Open Space fellowship from the Centre for Communication and Development Studies, Pune, emerged as the means to that end and enabled me to organize, with the help and support from all corners of the world, largely in the form of film contributions, THE FIRST EVER HOLOCAUST FILMS RETROSPECTIVE IN SOUTH ASIA, during which forty-six film screenings took place in fourteen days in three phases at five venues—two universities, two offices of nonprofit organizations, and the world's largest school—over a period of two months (September and October 2009).

The films screened during the retrospective were absolutely free of charge and were seen by four thousand people. It was an event driven completely by philanthropy. All the films at the retrospective had either been lent free of charge or donated. Almost all the films screened at the retrospective had never been seen in South Asia before. The retrospective was accompanied by an exhibition of twenty posters, donated by Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. During the event a trilingual brochure containing the synopses of the films in English, Hindi (India's national language), and Urdu (the lingua franca of almost all South Asian Muslims), and a poem written exclusively for the event by the great Urdu poet, Anwar Nadeem, was distributed among the audiences, which consisted of noted intellectuals as well as academics and students. All film screenings were followed by discussions that were attended by celebrities such as the acclaimed filmmaker, M. S. Sathyu; theatre personalities, Dr. Surya Mohan Kulshreshtha, Jugal Kishor, Salim Arif and Professor Thontadarya; Urdu litterateurs, Professor Malikzada Manzoor Ahmad, Dr. Ayesha Siddiqui and Anwar Nadeem; educationists and social activists, Professor Roop Rekha Verma and Dr. Jagdish Gandhi; religious leaders of almost all communities and a number of academics and university students. It was also perhaps the first event dedicated to the Holocaust to have been attended by Muslims in such large numbers.

While the event was in progress, the two largest circulated Urdu newspapers of Lucknow, *Rashtriya Sahara*² and *Aag*,³ carried a story each denying the Holocaust and calling it "The Biggest Hoax of the Twentieth Century," which only goes to testify of the event's importance. It is highly significant that it took place in Lucknow, which is not just a major Muslim cultural center but also the center of the Muslim heartland of South Asia, home to the world's largest Muslim population. Muslim processions against Israel are common in Lucknow. During the American invasion of Iraq, flags of Israel and the United States were drawn on the floor at the entrance to Lucknow's most famous landmark, the Shia Muslim monument, the Bara Imambara, so that whosoever visited the monument trampled the flags. And Americans and Israelis were barred from entering it. Even India's response to the Holocaust was largely determined by Muslim attitudes toward Jews, as "the opposition to the Jews came from the Muslim leaders in India who were pro-Arabs. For them the bonds of religion were stronger than the sufferings of Jews under Hitler. Keeping in view the sentiments of the Muslims towards this question, the government imposed many restrictions on the settlement of Jews in India. How far the policy of the Indian National Congress to appease the Muslims was also responsible for this stand of the government needs further study. But there is no doubt that INC's pro-Palestinian policy encouraged the British to insist that each Jewish refugee have a guaranteed job before allowed entry into India."⁴

The Holocaust Films Retrospective was inaugurated by the mayor of Lucknow, Dr. Dinesh Sharma, and during the first phase films were screened at the Babasaheb Bhimrao

Ambedkar University from September 14-18. The second phase took place at the University of Lucknow from October 12-15, with a one day gap on October 14. During the third phase films were screened at the Open Space—Lucknow office from October 22-26, while the concluding day's screenings took place at the office of the nonprofit organization, Saajhi Duniya, on October 27. On October 2, Gandhi's birth anniversary, observed as the International Day of Non-Violence as per a UN resolution, a Holocaust film was screened before an audience of 3,500, at the World Convention Centre of the City Montessori School, which holds the Guinness record for the largest number of students and is also a recipient of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education 2002.

I am glad that I did not succumb to the pressure from various quarters to include films also on other genocides, conscious as I was that doing so would be comparing the Jewish Holocaust in Europe to similar acts of genocide in the twentieth century, which could result in the obfuscation and dwarfing of the Jewish trauma.

Jewish/Israelite history had always fascinated me, but I fell in love with Israel and the Jewish culture during the one academic year (2006-2007) I spent in Israel, supported by a scholarship from the Israeli government, and now I look for opportunities to introduce my fellow countrymen to Israel and the Jewish culture through various media. Also, my coming from a Muslim background and being a Secular Humanist, gives me the privileged position of being at once an insider and an outsider in the Muslim community. It makes me well aware of Muslim anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial among them. These efforts of mine are also aimed at positively changing the South Asian Muslim attitudes toward Jews and Israel. The work is significant in many respects. The field of Jewish-Muslim Relations Activism has largely been focused on Arab-Israeli relations, concerned with the Arab enemy right there at the doorstep of Israel. But 80 percent of the Muslim population is non-Arab, largely resident in South Asia; they have emerged as the epicenter of Muslim anti-Semitism and of Jihad. They have declared a war against the Judeo-Christian West and certain aspects of the composite Indic civilization. The Taliban and Al Qaida have their bases in South Asia. The strongest influence the extremist and fanatic Wahabis have anywhere outside of Saudi Arabia is in South Asia, among the Muslims there.

I am of the view that ignorance gives birth to stereotypes, which ultimately lead to feelings of hatred and hostility, so evident in the South Asian Muslim attitudes toward Jews. Most of the South Asian Muslims know Jews only through secondary sources, viz.:

- the Qur'an, whose references to Jews are generally misinterpreted to give negative connotations, and
- the Muslim press, which can be considered guilty of yellow journalism by being selective in presenting the truth and refusing to present it in its entirety.
- the biggest manifestations of Muslim anti-Semitism in the twenty-first century have all emerged in South Asia
- the 9/11 attack perpetrated by members of Al Qaida, which has its base in South Asia—in Afghanistan and the tribal region of Pakistan.
- the assassination of Daniel Pearl, and
- the 26/11 attack on Chabad in Mumbai.

I have touched upon each of the above mentioned unfortunate events by organizing programs focused on them, viz.:

- Preview screening of the documentary *New Muslim Cool* at the University of Lucknow, a day before its world premiere on the American channel PBS
- An evening dedicated to Jewish-Muslim Relations among Muslim youth at the Academy of Mass Communication, Lucknow, where the celluloid adaptation of Daniel Pearl's widow Mariane's memoir, *A Mighty Heart*, was screened and a bilingual (Urdu and English) booklet on interfaith relations, published by the Centre for Interfaith Studies, Pakistan, was distributed (The event's photos, press coverage, report and a link to the OPEN SPACE—LUCKNOW blog is now there at the Daniel Pearl Foundation website.)

- Prof. Deepika Marya's (University of Southern Maine, U.S.) lecture on "26/11 Mumbai and the Radical Project of Secularism" in memory of Rabbi & Mrs. Holtzberg of Mumbai Chabad, at the Giri Institute of Development Studies, Lucknow.

Besides this, I got eminent Muslim scholars, such as the anthropology Prof. N. Hasnain, Urdu poet Prof. Malikzada M. Ahmad, and the Secretary General of the Italian Muslim Assembly, Sheikh Professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi, who is the world's only Zionist Muslim cleric, to speak against Muslim anti-Semitism, and Jewish speakers from the United States, such as the Human Rights Activist Dr. Richard L. Benkin and the filmmaker and writer Sadia Shepard, and from Israel, Sharon Rappaport, Political Secretary, Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, to give messages of Jewish-Muslim reconciliation. And now I intend to invite the famous duo, Prof. Judea Pearl and Prof. Akbar S. Ahmad, for a Jewish-Muslim Dialogue in Lucknow, the first ever outside of the Judeo-Christian West.

I also tried to introduce Indian youth, particularly Muslims to:

- Jewish literature from India, Israel, the United States, and Europe, by organizing the readings of the works of Padmashri Nissim Ezekiel, Esther David, Meera Mahadevan (nee Miriam Jacob Mendrekar), Robin David, Yehuda Amichai, Sadia Shepard (Jewish, according to Halacha), Etgar Keret, and Tadeusz Borowski
- Jewish music by organizing "An Evening of Jewish Music" dedicated to World Peace in memory of Daniel Pearl on his birthday, as part of the Daniel Pearl World Music Days peace movement, and
- Jewish cinema by organizing a retrospective of the Israeli filmmaker Professor Yael Katzir's award-winning documentaries.

One can read about my efforts for the betterment of Jewish-Muslim relations on the following sites:

<http://aafreedi.googlepages.com/dr.navrasjaataaafreedi%27seffortsforthebett2>

<http://openspacelucknow.blogspot.com/search/label/Jewish-Muslim%20Relations>

It is my hope, going forward from this point, that others will be inspired to further elucidate the ties and commonalities between Muslims and Jews, and thereby increase understanding between these ancient peoples and faiths.

Photographs of THE FIRST EVER HOLOCAUST FILMS RETROSPECTIVE IN SOUTH ASIA can be seen on <http://openspacelucknow.blogspot.com/2009/09/first-ever-holocaust-films.html>

Notes

¹ <http://aafreedi.googlepages.com>

² Qutubullah, "Holocaust: Beesveen Sadee ka Sabse Badaa Jhoota Afsana," *Rashtriya Sahara*, Lucknow, September 16, 2009.

³ "Sadee ka Sabse Badaa Jhoot? Holocaust," *Aag*, Lucknow, October 18, 2009.

⁴ Tilak Raj Sareen, "Indian Responses to the Holocaust," in Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voigt, eds., *Jewish Exile in India: 1933-1945*, 59. Manohar in association with Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi: 2005.

Parur Synagogue to Be Restored

Recently the Association of Kerala Jews has come to an agreement with the Kerala Departments of Tourism and Archeology in India to turn over operating control of the early 17th-century synagogue in Jew Town, within the small city of Parur, India. As a result, the closed and derelict synagogue as well as a neighboring former Jewish residence will be fully restored as part of the Muziris Heritage Site project, a major conservation and preservation effort to link several historical natural and built sites located in the central region of Kerala. The first phase of the work, which includes these Jewish sites, is to begin during the fall of 2009 and is expected to be completed by the end of 2010. The project also calls for the building of a Kerala history museum, and the government has invited an international team of Indo-Judaic scholars to help plan it.