

European Association for South Asian Studies: Panel on Jews at Its 23rd Conference for the First Time in Its History

By Navras Jaat Aafreedi

The European Association for South Asian Studies (EASAS) is "a charitable, academic association engaged in the support of research and teaching concerning South Asia with regard to all periods and fields of study" as it describes itself on its website.¹ It holds a conference every two years. Its twenty-third conference took place at the University of Zurich from July 22-26, 2014, during which 460 from 33 countries discussed their work through its 51 panels and 400 presentations. What made this conference particularly memorable is the fact that for the first time in the history of the EASAS there was a panel on Jews and Judaism in South Asia. The panel, jointly convened by Heinz Werner Wessler of the Department of Linguistics and Philology, University of Uppsala, Sweden; Boaz Huss of Ben Gurion University; and Shimon Lev of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, focused on cultural encounters and social transformations. The panel examined the diverse transformations of Jewish identities in South Asia and the cultural dynamics of the encounters between Judaism and South Asian cultures in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

The theme of the panel was described on the conference website in the following words:

The migration of Jews into South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth century, as well as the mass migration of Jews to Israel in the mid-twentieth century had a significant impact on the identity of the Jewish South Asian communities. Old forms of Jewish identity were redefined and new forms constructed. At the same period, various forms of cultural interactions occurred between Jewish and South Asian cultures. In this context, the interactions between prominent Indian leaders and intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru with Martin Buber, Hugo Bergman and others play an important role in the intellectual history of the twentieth century.

The panel tried to investigate diverse aspects of Jewish identities in South Asia, since the nineteenth century to our days and to explore their political, literary and religious expressions. The panelists also discussed the dynamics of the cultural exchanges between Jews and non-Jews that took place in the colonial and postcolonial eras in the context of the parallel growth of their respective national movements.²

At the panel, Boaz Huss of Ben Gurion University presented a paper titled, "A Jew Living in an Ashram: Theosophy, Advaita, and Jewish Nationalism in the Life and Writings of S.S. Cohen." He presented his paper through Skype as he could not make it to the venue because of the ongoing Gaza conflict. The paper described S.S. Cohen and traced his spiritual journey from the Theosophical Society to Ramanashram. It also examined Cohen's integration of Theosophical ideas, the teaching of Ramana, and Zionism, and analyzed the significance of the encounters between the Theosophical Society, modern Hindu spirituality, and Jewish nationalism. In the abstract of the paper, Huss wrote:

In 1952, S.S. Cohen, who described himself as "A Jew Living in an Ashram", wrote a letter to the editor of the journal "India and Israel", concerning the question of dignity of labor in Judaism and Hinduism. Cohen, who resided at the time in Ramanashram in Tiruvannamalai, included in his letter an enthusiastic description of the recently established Jewish state and its accomplishments.

The author of the letter, S.S. Cohen was born in Iraq in 1895. He arrived as a young man in India, became active in the Theosophical Society and was one of the founders of the Association of Hebrew Theosophists, in Adyar in 1925. In 1936, Cohen visited Tiruvannamalai, and became a close disciple of Sri Ramana. Cohen, who died in 1980, and was buried in Ramana's Ashram, published several books on Sri Ramana and on Advaitic Sadhana.

Notwithstanding his Theosophical convictions, and later, his adherence to Sri Ramana, Cohen was very much involved in Jewish matters, and an enthusiastic sympathizer of Zionism and the state of Israel. Cohen wrote on the persecution of the Jews in Germany, on the plights of the Jews in Poland, and on what he described as "unprecedented and unparalleled" heroism of the Jews in Israel.³

Joachim Oesterheld of Humboldt Universitaet zu Berlin in his paper titled, "Encounters in Alien Surrounding: German Jewish Refugees in Late Colonial India," examined the scope and content of cultural, intellectual, and social interactions of Jewish refugees in India between 1933 and 1945-47.

The first half of the paper dealt:

...with the problems German Jews faced while trying to find refuge in India. After briefly reconstructing the Government of India's role in permitting entry of Germans and in particular of German Jews to the country, the paper looks at Indian reactions towards the asylum seekers. While it seems obvious that the colonial power and the freedom movement as major actors defined to a certain extent the possibilities and quality of interaction taking place between German Jews and Indian communities before and after arrival, individual support by Indians of different faith and social standing played a certain role as well.⁴

The second half of the paper focused:

...on the daily life of the German Jewish refugees. Regarded as enemy aliens they could not escape internment during the first years after the outbreak of World War II. Due to efforts by Jewish organizations and prominent individuals in India and a less strict internment policy by the colonial power, the majority of Jewish refugees remained at large during the war. An attempt [was] made to specify the different professions and the living conditions of German Jewish refugee families, couples and individuals. In their interactions with Indian society what role played Indian Jewish communities? To what extent German Jews familiarized themselves with other Indian cultures and what have been the repercussions on their Jewish identity? Is there some kind of legacy German Jews left in India?⁵

Heinz Werner Wessler of Uppsala University presented on Sheela Rohekar's Hindi novel *Miss Saimyuel: Ek Yahudi Gatha* (2013) and reflected whether it could be considered a swansong on Jewish identity in India. In the abstract of his paper, Wessler wrote:

In her third novel in Hindi, Sheela Rohekar (born 1942) for the first time goes into her own identity as a Bnai Israel Jew. Miss Samuel finds herself in an isolated situation between a father who dreams of emigration to Israel, but never realizes it, and a brother who overstates his Indian identity, downplaying or even negating his Bnai Israel identity. The family members remain isolated from each other as well as from their surrounding society, which puts them either together with Muslims, Parsis or with Christians, but fails to recognize her "difference". However, she sticks to her

belief that "one day this difference will bring the change into the story". Completely isolated at the age of 70, Miss Samuel in her rest home lives off from her memories, trying to put the different strings of her life together, ending up in a dreamless and lonely presence.⁶

Navras Jaat Aafreedi of the School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, India, explored how Jews and non-Jews are portrayed in each other's fiction in India in his paper titled, "Reciprocal (mis-)apprehensions: Jews on Non-Jews, and Non-Jews on Jews in Indian Fiction."

Independent scholar Anton Zykov presented his study of a new phenomenon of Judaization among Indian untouchables in the context of its relations with social hierarchy and state politics of caste. Focused on the Bnei Ephraim community in Andhra Pradesh, Zykov used the data and information collected by him through personal interviews during his fieldwork in his paper titled, "The Bnei Ephraim Community: Judaisation, Social Hierarchy and Caste Reservation."

The paper discusses two aspects of the Judaizing movements in India with regard to the Bnei Ephraim community of Telugu untouchables in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. Based on the existing research (primarily Egorova and Shahid studies) and the author's field work in the village of Kothareddypalem conducted in November-December 2012, his essay considered "the impact that 'Judaisation' of the concerned Madiga untouchable group has made on its social and hierarchical status in their native village and beyond."⁷

Further, the paper also researched the legal aspect of the issue with potential circumstances that Judaization movements among India's socially backward communities have created for the state and its caste policies, with a special view on the reservation issue. The work approached the history of Bnei Ephraim as an untouchable community claiming the status and rights that characterize other Jewish communities of India, but at the same time being a subject of reservation.

Among the work's major themes was "the emergence of India's Judaizing movements" and their "self-identification in the framework of social hierarchies and politics of caste on the local and union levels."⁸ Particular attention was drawn to the social change caused by the development of these movements as well as both local and international reaction on their activities.

Shimon Lev, one of the three conveners of the panel, was expected to present as part the panel but could not make it to the conference because of the Gaza conflict. But it is hoped that he will contribute his paper to the edited volume that all the panelists have agreed to publish. It will "discuss and demonstrate how through the connections and encounters of Gandhi and especially Tagore with the Jewish world, and their different approaches of Judaism, it is possible to examine the reciprocal understanding of the Indian and Jewish cultures at the time."

The discussion that ensued after the presentation of papers greatly benefited from the intervention of Yulia Egorova, author of *Jews and India: Image and Perceptions* (Routledge, 2006) and co-author of *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Notes

¹ <http://www.easas.org/>

² <http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easas/ecsas2014/panels.php5?PanelID=2502>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

