

## Reciprocal (Mis-) apprehensions: Jews on Non-Jews, and Non-Jews on Jews in Indian Fiction

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In 2002, anthropologist Tudor Parfitt wrote:

Today the population of India is around one billion. After China it is the second most populous nation on earth. The Jewish population of India reached perhaps thirty or forty thousand after the Second World War, but today it is much less. In other words Jews count for a miniscule fraction of Indians. Why then in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a novel set mainly in Bombay, should Salman Rushdie use as a figure of baroque, incarnate evil a Jew from Kerala? Why in *In an Antique Land* should the equally gifted Amitav Ghosh be fascinated by a twelfth-century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju of Mangalore? A surprising number of other Indian literary works deal with Jews and there is still an interest in comparing the religious systems of India with Judaism. India has a dazzling array of problems, real and imagined. It is difficult to imagine that the Jews figure prominently among them. And yet they seem to.<sup>1</sup>

Dohra Ahmad attempts to explain this idea by pointing out that, "Indian Jews represent the ultimate test of the category of 'Indianness' to absorb diverse subjects...Jews are important both in their own right, and also as symbolic of a more generalized minority existence in India".<sup>2</sup> As the famous declaration in *The Moor's Last Sigh* not only brings into sharp focus the marginality of Jews in India but also projects them as an index to the nation's acceptance of the otherness: "Before the Emergency we were Indians. After it we were Christian Jews."<sup>3</sup>

Jewishness is seen as "an ongoing interest and thematic device in Salman Rushdie's fictional oeuvre" by Anna Guttman.<sup>4</sup> Rushdie published three novels with Jewish characters, viz., *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Shalimar the Clown*. Guttman suspects that "the significance of Jewishness to *The Moor's Last Sigh* may have more to do with that novel's condition of composition and literary influences than its actual content. *The Moor's Last Sigh* was published directly after *The Satanic Verses* and was written while the fatwa was still in effect, and Rushdie's interest in Jewishness needs to be understood in that context." Guttman further points out that, "J. M. Coetzee, in his review of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, interprets Rushdie's declaration of Jewishness in that novel as an assertion of solidarity "with persecuted minorities everywhere.""<sup>5</sup> In both *The Satanic Verses* as well *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie pairs Jewish characters with South Asians. Both Gibreel and Saladin are paired with Jewish women in *The Satanic Verses*, and the relations between them are seen by Guttman as "indicative of the larger dynamics of contemporary diasporic existence", specifically the "relationship between diasporic Indians and diasporic Jews".<sup>6</sup> We get an idea of what was on Rushdie's mind when he did this South Asian-Jewish pairing from his argument in *Imaginary Homelands*:

...that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews...<sup>7</sup>

The proximity and the relationship between diasporic Jewish and South Asian Muslim identities becomes even more prominent in *Shalimar the Clown* when the American ambassador to India, a Jew, Max, has extra-marital affair with a Hindu woman, Boonyi. This brings him into a direct relationship with her Muslim terrorist, Kashmiri separatist husband, Shalimar, who increasingly resembles Max as he draws deeper into a global network of anti-state violence. He is the doppelgänger of Max. The equation of Jewishness with Western-ness not only

ignores the complex and troubled relationship between the Jews and the Christian West – which makes it impossible for the Jew to be seen as a true representative of Western modernity, but also the diversity of color and culture within Jews. Guttman finds Boonyi's declaration upon realizing that Max is not interested in their liaison any more that she "should have known better than to lie with a Jew," extremely problematic as in this text the word Jew acquires a pejorative connotation.<sup>8</sup> Boonyi goes on to say that "the Jews are our enemy".<sup>9</sup>

What is interesting to note is that most of the Jewish characters in the books published by non-Jewish Indian authors are from outside India, with the sole exception of Moraes Zogoiby of Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. There are characters with strong Indian connections, but not Indian themselves, like Alfie Judah in the title story of Calcutta-born and America-based Bharati Mukherjee's collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Judah is originally from Baghdad and has relocated to Brooklyn via Bombay. In Sarnath Banerjee's *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*<sup>10</sup>, Abravanel is a Syrian Jew who sells fancy goods to Calcutta's elite. The absence of Indian Jews in the works of these writers can perhaps be explained by the fact that all non-Jewish Indian writers who have Jewish characters in their works are either based in the West or have lived there for long periods of time. The only Jews these writers ever interacted with were those in the West and not in India. Most of the Indians never come into any direct contact with them because of their small numbers, estimated to be around three thousand<sup>11</sup> in a population that exceeds 1.2 billion.

Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* of 1992<sup>12</sup> has Jews and their history right in the centre of the narrative, much like Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*. The book is impressive in its scholarly depth and in its engagement with how present is informed by the past. In spite of being non-fiction, it is as captivating and absorbing as fiction. There are two tales intertwined with each other, though separated by no less than eight centuries. One is the author's personal account of his stay in an Egyptian village during the 1980s for his doctoral research in social anthropology. The other is the tale of a 12<sup>th</sup> century wealthy Jewish international trader and scholar who shuttled between Egypt, Yemen and India. Shalom Walds contends that it is this Jewish link to India that captured Ghosh's imagination, fascinated as he was by the confluence of these two ancient civilizations.<sup>13</sup>

Ghosh develops a fondness for Egypt which is "far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane"<sup>14</sup> than his homeland India. But his book, instead of beginning with his relocation to Egypt, begins with an enigmatic phrase: "The slave of MS H.6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942".<sup>15</sup> The "slave", which Wald considers to be "probably a misleading translation of the broader, ancient Hebrew term *eved*," is Bomma, a well-known name in certain regions of South India. Bomma is Abraham Ben Yiju's Indian business agent, his assistant and a highly respected member of his household. He undertook long voyages for his master and took care of huge sums of money. He might have embraced Judaism, though that is not clear. One finds his mention in a medieval letter first reported in 1942 in a Hebrew academic journal. The Hebrew University National Library catalogue number of the letter is MS H.6, which is one of many thousands discovered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the *Geniza* of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo which housed a massive collection of Jewish manuscripts of past centuries. The monumental work on the Mediterranean Jewish society of the Middle Ages produced by historian Shlomo Goitein was based on these very letters.<sup>16</sup> Goitein also prepared a book focused on the Jewish India traders, though he could not complete it before his death in 1985.<sup>17</sup> The stories and travels of Abraham Ben Yiju, Bomma and other Jewish traders, as discovered in Goitein's work, completely consumed Ghosh. It led him to identify with Bomma, giving him a feeling of familiarity and belonging to the thriving and open multi-cultural world of the past, which in turn led him to follow the trails of Bomma and Ben Yiju wherever they took him, to India, Egypt or Western university libraries. Already fluent in modern Arabic, he soon acquired proficiency in Medieval Judeo-Arabic which is written in Hebrew letters, so that he was able to read these letters in the original. This was a significant achievement. Conscious of the historical importance of the study of the life of Ben Yiju and others beyond their personal

adventures, he devoted himself to the task with full vigor. The Egyptian city of Fustat and the Yemenite port of Aden played a crucial role in the international commerce of the time by connecting the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, and Jews played an important role in this international trade. Son of a Tunisian rabbi, Ben Yiju was a scholar, a calligrapher, and a trader, all rolled into one, like many of his Jewish contemporaries. His trade commitments brought him to the Indian western coastal city of Mangalore, where he married an Indian girl, Ashu, after converting her to Judaism, and fathered her children, and stayed for seventeen years, earning a great fortune for himself by establishing factories. As evident from their letters, most of his main trade contacts were observant Jews, who were also part of the dominant Arab civilization.

Thus, for a number of years, Amitav Ghosh in his mental landscape, straddled different worlds – one separated by space, between Egypt and India, and the other by time – between Ben Yiju's and his own. His book *In an Antique Land* is an exploration of the link between the two. The narrative comes to an end with an unpleasant incident, symbolic of things much deeper in meaning and connotation. Ghosh had heard from his Egyptian friends of an annual pilgrimage to the nearby tomb of a "Sidi Abu-Hasira" in Damanhour. Legend had it that the said saint was a Muslim man of Jewish origin. Ghosh failed in his attempt to visit it; he was stopped by the Egyptian police, who saw little reason for an Indian to visit the shrine of Rabbi Yacov Abu-Hadzera, to whom the shrine in contention actually belonged and attracted many Jewish pilgrims. He was instead driven to the railway station and ordered to take the very next train to Cairo, thus breaking the link between the Ghosh's two worlds, the ancient and his own when he was just about to touch it. This incident made him realise that "the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago".<sup>18</sup> Egypt's indifference to the removal of all Geniza documents to other countries had left Ghosh wondering as to how genuine the often celebrated "golden ages" between Muslims and Jews were: "In some profound sense, the Islamic high culture of Masr (Egypt) had never really noticed, never found a place for the parallel history the Geniza represented (read: the history of the Jews), and the removal only confirmed a particular vision of the past".<sup>19</sup>

Here Amitav Gosh deals with an issue that Indian writers do not even like to touch, namely the issue of Muslim and Arab attitudes to Jews and Jewish history. Kumaraswamy has emphasized more than once that Indian intellectuals often refused to acknowledge the fact that Indian Muslims' hostile attitude towards Israel played a crucial role in keeping India from establishing diplomatic ties with Israel for the first four decades of its existence and also influenced her to repeatedly vote against Israel at the United Nations.<sup>20</sup> Admitting this would have punctured India's claim that as a secular state, no religious community could determine or even influence its policies. Generally, Indians fail to realise that Jews have also suffered at Arab and Muslim hands, the way they did in Christendom, though there was great variation in their position from time to time and place to place. Wald sums up the trajectory of this politics, thus, "It could be good or tolerable but often enough it was bad. Some of the facts were, or should have been known to Indians because the Indian press did report on anti-Jewish discrimination and persecution in Arab lands. But the Indian elites mostly did not see it because Muslim anti-Semitism is counter-intuitive and not part of India's intellectual baggage. What India wishes to remember is a long history of friendship between Indians and Arabs, and particularly Egyptians."<sup>21</sup> The perception Ghosh gathers from this is that Islamic high culture had no consideration for Jews and their history is an exception. Ghosh is aware of occasional massacres of Jews at the hands of Arabs and even mentions such massacres in 12<sup>th</sup> century Morocco, but only because their memory is evoked by the many anxious questions about these tragic events Abraham Ben Yiju asks in his letters that Ghosh has peruses. However, Ghosh remains absolutely silent about the expulsion of Egyptian Jewry, whose number stood at 100,000, that occurred just three decades prior to his arrival in Egypt. It is these expulsions and similar ones from other Arab countries which bring to an abrupt

end Amitav Ghosh's Judeo-Arab syncretic world, and the incident in Damanhour could only be called a minor ramification.

Amitav Ghosh gives us a peek into a long vanished colorful world, known until now only to a few specialist historians. He loves this cosmopolitanism of medieval world where a Jewish trader and scholar could comfortably make India his home and link it to other continents; and live in peace and harmony with Hindus, Muslims and Jews and trade and thrive together. Steven Bowman contends that *In An Antique Land* "reads like a diachronic travelogue that interweaves the stories of two clans of people (his 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslims and his 12<sup>th</sup> century Jews) around a Hindu double helix consisting of the author's contemporary search for the meaning of history and his painstaking recovery of a usable biography from an enigmatic series of references to a 12<sup>th</sup> century Hindu slave and to a genizah merchant. Each facet of his research becomes a comparison between the respective clans whose lives and loves appear to progress along parallel lines."<sup>22</sup>

There are two books in Indo-Anglian literature that are about the Holocaust - one non-fiction - Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*; and the other a work of fiction - Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

It was the death of an Austrian Jew who left behind a trove of letters related to the Holocaust that inspired Anita Desai - born of a German mother and an Indian father - to weave a story around him. The setting of her novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) is post-war Bombay.<sup>23</sup> Except for the stamp number on each of those letters, Desai did not find anything unusual in the letters. Desai was inspired to fill in the blank spaces in those letters sent from Nazi Germany by weaving this story. It is not the first Indian novel to raise the theme of Jewish exile and migration, for it had already been done way back in 1939 by Vishram Bedekar in his Marathi novel, *Ranangan*. Drawing from the Western stereotype of the wandering Jew, Desai depicts her eponymous protagonist Hugo Baumgartner as a wandering Jew, tired of discrimination and persecution, and caught in the midst of clash of cultures: "In Germany he has been dark - his darkness had marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair - and that marked him as *firanghi* ['Frank', meaning a European]. In both lands, the unacceptable."<sup>24</sup> "In the figure of Baumgartner," Lotz and Kamath find, "Anita Desai has created the counterpart to the post-modern cosmopolitan who celebrates his 'borderiness'. What characterizes Baumgartner is his marked indifference to all assertions of cultural identities and origins, his own included."<sup>25</sup> Son of an educated, well-to-do Jewish middle-class family in Berlin, Hugo escapes the Holocaust by finding refuge in India because of the business links his father's erstwhile company had in the timber trade, while his old parents, who refuse to emigrate, perish in the Holocaust. Although he fled Germany to escape persecution at the hands of Nazis, yet ironically in India he is mistaken for a Nazi sympathizer and imprisoned in an internment camp as an enemy alien by India's British rulers. In an absurd sequence of events, the British in India fail to make a distinction between German Jews and Nazis. When a desperate Baumgartner tries to make a British official realise the difference, he is snubbed by him: "Stop that whining and show me your passport, will you?" "German, born in Germany,"<sup>26</sup> he snaps - that is all that mattered to him. Even in prison he does not bother with the issue of identity. His indifference to cultural identity coupled by "a patient, receptive and pragmatic approach" is best reflected in his perception of his linguistic position, as pointed out by Lotz and Kamath<sup>27</sup>:

He found he had to build a new language to suit these new conditions - German no longer sufficed, and English was elusive. Languages sprouted around him like tropical foliage and he picked words from it without knowing if they were English or Hindi or Bengali - they were simply words he needed: *chai, khana, baraf, lao, jaldi, chota peg, pani, karma, soda, garee* ...what was this language he was wrestling out of the air, wrenching around to his own purposes? He suspected it was not Indian, but India's, the India he was marking out for himself.' (p. 92)

After his release at the end of the war Baumgartner tries to make a living in Calcutta but the mass violence that rocks the city in partition-fated India drives him back to Bombay,



where he degenerates into a derelict beggar in a slum. In the end he is left with only the company of his cats and another lonely expatriate Lotte. The novel ends with his murder by a blond German hippie who wants to rob him of even his meagre belongings in order to support his drug addiction. Weinhouse observes that Desai "connects two pivotal experiences: her encounters with an Austrian Jew on the streets of Bombay; and with the letters he left behind and her memory of a photograph of her non-Jewish mother leaving Germany for India to join her Bengali husband a decade before the war. Desai uses these two disparate memories, her knowledge of the history of German Jews, and the stories her mother told her about Germany and the fate of those Germans to show the ways in which Germans and Jews are inextricably linked by nationality and history and explores the postcolonial ramifications of that history for an understanding of pluralism in India's multicultural society as well as for the outsider status of the 'Jew'."<sup>28</sup>

It is a fact of history that two thousand European Jews managed to find refuge in India before the British closed the doors to them, fearing Muslim antagonism. Their excuse was that thousands of additional Jews could cause social and economic hardship to India's native population, which stood at 378 million then. This fear of a massive influx of Jews even overcame Gandhi's and Nehru's sincere desire to save some more.

Baumgartner enabled Desai to recreate the "strange lives" and "strange histories" of her German mother and her large circle of German friends, about whom it was not possible for her to write because of the emotional intimacy she had with them.

Although, both, Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* and Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* are about the Holocaust, yet what sets them apart is the fact that unlike *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Seth's *Two Lives* is based on intimate personal knowledge of the two lives it talks about, those of his grand-uncle, the dentist Dr Shanti Behari Seth from India and his Jewish wife Henny Caro from Germany. It was also a bigger success than *Baumgartner's Bombay*, reprinted several times and translated into foreign languages.

In 1933, a couple of years after his arrival in Germany for studying dentistry, Shanti Seth moved into the Caro house as a paying guest. With the entry "Race and Caste: Aryan [sic] Hindu Khatri" in his British passport, made in 1938, Shanti Seth had nothing to lose in Nazi Germany. Henny found refuge in London just a month before the war and Shanti found employment with the British army in 1940. Upon his return to London in 1951, he married Henny. Eighteen years later they welcome the author Vikram, then just seventeen years old, into their home, and treat him like their own offspring that they never had. Upon Henny's death in 1989, Shanti destroyed all documents related to her so as not to be troubled by her memories, but missed a trove of letters left by her in the attic, which Vikram decided to base his book upon when he discovered the letters, driving him to look for all traces of Henny's murdered family even as far as Israel, where at *Yad Vashem* (Israel Holocaust museum) he discovers the Gestapo records of Henny's mother Ella's and sister Lola's deportation in 1943. Ella and Lola perished in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz-Birkenau respectively. The fact that the events have been described by Vikram Seth in excruciating detail, from "the selection at the railway ramp in Auschwitz and the sadism of the SS guards to the agony in the gas chamber and the removal of gold teeth and hair from the corpses,"<sup>29</sup> makes it a very significant book in India, where there is a widespread ignorance of the Holocaust. As Rosenfeld rightly points out, "It is not primarily from the work of historians that most people gain whatever knowledge they may acquire of the Third Reich and the Nazi crimes against the Jews but rather from that of novelists, filmmakers, playwrights, poets, television program writers and producers, museum exhibits, popular newspapers and magazines, internet web sites, the speeches and ritual performances of political figures and other public personalities, and the like."<sup>30</sup>

The exercise of going through the Gestapo records left Vikram Seth incapable of reading German poetry which he had come to enjoy so much, not even Heine. "The stench of

the language in which I had read the phrases from the Gestapo letter clung to his words as well...The very verbs stank."<sup>31</sup>

After the war, Henny never spoke to her Indian husband about the death of her mother and sister and even evaded young Vikram's questions, leaving her husband Shanti ignorant of how much she had mourned for them. Had Vikram not discovered the letters from the attic he would have never come to know of his grand-aunt Henny's silent pain: "I have suffered unending torment over the fate of my loved ones, and will never get over it", she wrote to a Jewish friend. Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* is the only book from an Indian author to note the silence of holocaust survivors, their refusal to speak of the unspeakable. Wald feels "it will be difficult to find another non-Jewish author from a remote, not directly affected country who has shown such deep insight into long-term psychological consequences of the Holocaust."<sup>32</sup>

Contemporary writers of East and South Asian origin have drawn our attention to the relations between Asian diaspora and the Jewish ones in ways that have been perceived as provoking for both.

Jewish American fiction helps Bharati Mukherjee "measure the ethno-racial and religious nastiness that dark-skinned, non-Judeo-Christian immigrant communities face."<sup>33</sup> Explaining the development of the title story of her signature collection, "The Middleman", Mukherjee says: "When I was working on [an uncompleted novel], a character with a minor role, a Jew who has relocated from Baghdad to Bombay to Brooklyn, took control and wrote his own story. He attracted me because he was a cynical person and a hustler, as many immigrant survivors have to be."<sup>34</sup>

Mukherjee's protagonist Alfie Judah does not seem to be very far removed from those common to Jewish American writing, like Henry Roth's David Schearle, Saul Bellow's Herzog, Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy, etc. Split between the world of their parents in East Europe and their land of promise, America; frequently victimized, even if not triumphantly, by those less morally scrupulous than he. While this victimization places Alfie on a morally superior position, it denies his practical efficacy. Yet he is polar opposite "of this figure of Noble Schlemiel, for he is Sephardic – Iraqi born, dark complexioned, making him acceptable to the Central American revolutionaries among whom he finds himself: "at least he is not a gringo." And instead of making efforts to assimilate, he is trying to flee America because of his violation of the law there through some shady deals. He is deeply amoral and another thing that distinguishes him from the Jewish-American quasi-hero is the lack of sexual guilt. "I must confess my weakness. It's women," announces Alfie, as the reader gets to see his lust for Maria, the concubine of his American host."<sup>35</sup>

Alfie's amoral attitude pervades both his business as well as bedroom, as does Maria's, who exploits him for the delivery of some supplies to the guerillas, led by her lover Andreas, and then obliges him with sex. The story ends with Alfie plotting his next move after realizing that it was only his compassionate response to her physical needs that kept her from killing him even though she did briefly point a gun at him before fleeing from the jungle with her lover.

Jonathan Freedman argues that Mukherjee's portrayal of Alfie is not a stereotype, but rather a deliberate invocation to counter such an idea:

Alfie is not just unlike, but the polar opposite of, the sensitive Ashkenazic Jewish man: he is the embodiment of the worst nightmares of the generation that produced that figure. After all, the specter haunting assimilating American Jews of this period was not only the Holocaust, but also the anti-Semitic projections of the Jew as the horny trader standing outside national and moral borders alike. Memorialized not only by anti-Semitic pamphlets of the 1890s but by the spirited endeavor of Henry Ford—whose Dearborn Independent editorials on Jews and Jewishness were collected in a widely-circulated tome called *The International Jew* in the 1920s—and high-art literature by the likes of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the concept of the hyper-phallic, dark-complexioned Asiatic or non-European Jew as morally corrupt and corrupting cosmopolitan, frequently associated with exotically corrupt (and hence covertly

attractive) sexual practices, suffused Middle America and high-art modernism alike. If Alfie Judah seems like a literal embodiment of such a figure it is surely not because Mukherjee wants to revive the Ford- or Eliot-sponsored anti-Semitic notions of the Jewish man, but rather because she wants to invoke—if not make her own—all that the Great Tradition of Jewish-American fiction had to expel in order to make its successful march into respectability.<sup>36</sup>

We have few works of fiction with Jewish characters in India's vernacular literature and even fewer by non-Jewish writers. The only ones by non-Jewish writers that the present author is aware of are the Marathi novel *Ranangan* and the Urdu short story "Mozelle".

Vishram Bedekar's Marathi novel *Ranangan* (1939) is the first Indian novel with Jewish characters. This novel is based on the author's own experience of an ocean voyage from Europe to India in 1938, where he met a number of Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Europe. Guttman finds it "a fascinating and simultaneously troubling book that calls attention to the plight of German Jews at a moment when their progressive marginalization was known by, but of little interest to, Western governments," and "also makes extensive and often uncritical use of anti-Semitic stereotypes."<sup>37</sup> It is the story of a Maharashtrian, Chakradhar Widhwans, who falls in love with a Jewish refugee from Germany, Herta Van, whom he meets on an Italian ship en route to India, Chakradhar's destination; and Shanghai, Herta's destination. The novel is troubling because even while the novel's protagonist and narrator Chakradhar falls for a Jewish woman, he accepts unquestioningly the anti-Semitic notion that Jews generally are profiteers and arms speculators who were responsible for the military and economic defeat of Germany in the First World War. But at the same time he comes to sympathize with the Jews when he is subjected to racism by an Italian steward onboard.

Had the surprising end of Manto's Urdu story *Mozelle* – in which the eponymous Jewish protagonist makes the supreme sacrifice to save the fiancé of her Sikh lover – not been what it is, one would have thought of the famous and progressive Muslim writer Manto as being biased against Jews because of his portrayal of the only Jewish character in the story as a woman of easy virtue and loose morals, seen by her dejected lover Trilochan as "careless, self-centered Jewish girl...nothing more than wild girl with a cold heart who jumped from here and there like a bird", who "didn't like underwear because they felt tight." Manto was, perhaps, influenced in his portrayal of *Mozelle* by the encounters he might have had with the Jewish women operating as prostitutes in Bombay during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Joan G. Roland reports in her book, *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* that:

In the census of 1901, seven Baghdadi women even listed their occupation as prostitutes. ...As early as 1894, the Reverend J. Henry Lord, *Jewish Mission Field*, 19-21, claimed that some two hundred European "Jews and Jewesses" were engaged in prostitution in Bombay and that the government had deported some of them because they were "purveyors of vice." In 1916 the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (London), having heard about Jewish prostitution in India, wrote to the government of India to find out how extensive the problem was and whether or not they could undertake work in India to eradicate it. The central government wrote to the provincial governments asking for information on Jewish prostitution and discovered that the main centres were Calcutta, Rangoon and Bombay, with a total of 101 European Jews and 85 Asiatic Jews identified as prostitutes. The European Jews, mainly from central and eastern Europe, were professionals who had already been in the business for some years in Middle Eastern cities before coming to India, especially Bombay and Bengal. They would be unlikely to reform, the government thought. The Asiatic Jewish prostitutes, however, who carried on their trade with more secrecy than the Europeans, were mainly girls from low and depressed classes. They either had been recruited voluntarily in Baghdad, where they were prostitutes before being brought to India, or were the victims of parents and guardians who employed them as

commercial speculation. The government felt that the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women might well do useful work among the Asiatic Jewish prostitutes...Sir Jacob Sassoon, with whom the association had communicated about the problem in 1909, felt that the trade could best be fought at the ports of embarkation, as the law in India made it difficult to eradicate the traffic in Bombay (*The Jewish Chronicle* [London], 25 June 1909, 20).<sup>38</sup>

Although Jews never faced any persecution in India, yet their numerical insignificance makes the Indian Jewish authors very sensitive to the plight of minorities, as manifested in the fact that the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002 figures large in the works of mother-son duos, Esther David and her son Robin David; and Sheela Rohekar and her son Akash Verma.<sup>39</sup> It is also important to mention here that of the four it is only Verma who did not grow up in Gujarat.

Esther David's most recent work, *The Man with Enormous Wings* (2010), focuses on the anti-Muslim pogrom that hit Ahmedabad in 2002. In it she imagines Mahatma Gandhi as a big bird flying over the city. In other books of hers too, like *The Walled City* (1997), *Book of Esther* (2002) and *Book of Rachel* (2006) there are repeated references to the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. Akash Verma's maiden novel *It Happened That Night* (2010) is set against the backdrop of the anti-Muslim pogrom of Gujarat. In Rohekar's *Miss Samuel* (2013), one of the fellow residents of the protagonist in their old age home is Amina Iqbal Rizvi who lost her entire family to the pogrom.

In the works of those Jewish writers with no connection to Gujarat, like Nissim Ezekiel, Bunny Reuben, Meera Mahadevan, Sophie Judah, Jael Silliman, Carmit Delman, Moses Aaron and Sadia Shepard, the anti-Muslim pogrom of Gujarat does not figure but there is a strong sensitivity to minority issues in general and one even finds references to the sectarian violence that accompanied the partition of India in 1947. In Meera Mahadevan's novel *Apna Ghar* (1961) and Sophie Judah's stories, "Nathoo" and "My Son, Jude Paul" from her collection, *Dropped from Heaven* (2007), there are references to the partition.

Despite feeling connected to their Indian homeland, many Jews also faced trepidation and alienation. Rohekar in *Miss Samuel* discusses in detail the fear of Indian Jewish men about being mistaken for Muslims, as they are similarly circumcised. Esther David too writes about it in her novel *Shalom India Housing Society*:

During the riots, some of them saw an angry mob armed with spears and swords stripping a young boy to see if he was circumcised. He had been burnt alive. The Jews had been terrified, as they were also circumcised.<sup>40</sup>

Sadia Shepard in her auto-ethnographic book *The Girl from Foreign* (2008) recounts the story of David, who upon being chased by a Muslim mob in Mumbai, manages to save himself only by revealing his circumcised penis in order to convince the potential attackers that he was not a Hindu. David is conscious of the fact that the very physical mark that saved him in this case could have become the reason for his murder had he been chased by a Hindu mob instead, as happens to be the fate of the protagonist's brother in Rohekar's *Miss Samuel: Ek Yahudi Gatha*. This fear of Indian Jewish men of being mistaken for Muslims finds portrayal in Aparna Sen's film *Mr & Mrs Iyer*. Indian Jewish writer Robin David, author of *The City of Fear* (2007), wrote about it on his blog:

I was majorly offended by a scene in Aparna Sen's *Mr & Mrs Iyer*. There is this part where rioters enter a bus scouting for Muslims to kill and randomly pull down pants of passengers to check if they are circumcised. One man gives away the identity of an old Muslim couple because he was Jewish, circumcised, and there was no way in hell that he would have been able to explain to the rioters that he was not Muslim. This was his way of distracting them from him. If I was in his place, I don't think I would



have given away the identity of the old couple. ...I had been put in the same situation in 2002.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, this was just one of the several occasions that made Robin acutely conscious of the vulnerability conferred by his circumcised penis. In everyday life though, violence against Jews has been a rare thing. Instead, these feelings of separation often came in more subtle forms. Rohekar explores this exceptionally well in her novel *Miss Samuel*:

India neither ever exiled the Jews nor persecuted them. They were never discriminated against for being Jewish. They got equal rights as citizens of India. But they were always seen as different and thus deprived of the joy of full integration in the Indian society ... They were always seen as fellow human beings, but could never be included among 'our own people'. It is for this reason only that they remained rootless and could never muster enough courage to play any significant role in Indian politics and culture. And it is perhaps for this reason only that successive generations went to their graves with the unfulfilled desire of reaching the land they had set out from.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, these books also help bring nuance to this sense of Jewish separation in Indian society – it is quite possibly this careful and unhurried portrait of these communities that are their greatest strength. We see that Jewish communities did often forge strong connections and emotional bonds with other Indian communities. For example, Silliman describes how Jews would regularly form relationships with their Muslim cooks, attend Christmas parties, and celebrate the festival Simchat Torah in the same way that the Hindus celebrated Holi, by spraying water at each other using water pistols. About Passover, she writes:

Granny loved giving presents. Each year, Rachel and Jacob looked forward to the Easter eggs she brought them. If Easter and Passover coincided, the painted chocolate filled eggs from Nahoum's would come before Passover started, so they could enjoy eating them while still observing the holiday. At Christmas time, she brought each of them brightly colored boxes filled with crepe paper bonbons trimmed with silver paper.<sup>43</sup>

Interactions with other communities didn't often extend into the realm of marriage, however. Inter-marriage was frequently looked down upon, so much so that we can see the characters in these novels often avoid contact with non-Jews. In Meera Mahadevan's *Apna Ghar* (1961) the only Hindi novel on the Bene Israel other than Rohekar's *Miss Samuel*, when Maizie's Jewish sports club decides to play with a non-Jewish club, the decision of most of the Jewish parents is not to permit their daughters to play the match. Discrimination against the children of intermarriages also gets reflected in Rohekar's *Miss Samuel*. Children of intermarriages were called 'Kala Israel' (Black Israel) and considered impure by the rest of the Bene Israel community to the extent that they were not even allowed near the cooking utensils of the 'Gora Israel' (White Israel). In the novel, Miss Samuel's grandfather David Reuben (1882-1937) resents not being permitted into the Lal Deval Synagogue of Pune because of his being considered a 'Kala Israel' for his grandfather Isaji Eloji had married a Hindu. The taboo of intermarriage also figures prominently in Esther David's *Shalom India Housing Society*.

Meera Mahadeva's *Apna Ghar* (1961), was also published in English in 1971 under the name *Shulamith*. *Apna Ghar* preceded Rohekar's *Miss Samuel* by fifty-two years. In it, the eponymous heroine, Shulamith experiences a "sense of dual fidelity" between her devotion to her husband and to her way of life. She chooses her way of life and remains in India when her husband leaves for Israel; but she withers away in the agony of this separation, and eventually dies. It is significant to note how distinct the two novels are from one another, perhaps owing to a gap of more than half a century between the narratives. Unlike *Apna Ghar*, *Miss Samuel* deals with the ostensible absence of anti-Semitism in India. *Apna Ghar* presents a rosier picture of Jews in India:

"There is no such nation in the world which could equal India in what it has given to the Jews. India has nourished us with affection for two millennia. No restrictions were ever imposed on the observance of our religion. We got land for our synagogues. We received such warmth that we started considering ourselves children of India. Now returning to Jerusalem is like turning our back towards our mother."

"But is it not bad to not return to one's mother?"

"Yes, of course! But can we forget what India has done for us. Everyone will have to admit that Jews have never been able to live in peace anywhere except India. Our religion was never defiled, on the contrary every deserving member of the community has been appropriately honored."

"I accept that."

"As far as I know," Shulamith starts speaking, "We have been living here for two thousand years. Just think that in all of this long period we have never been persecuted or discriminated against and this is despite the fact that there is no commonality between our religion and Hinduism. ...It is necessary for Jews from Germany to return to Israel, for what happened there can happen again. But here? What never happened in more than two thousand years will never happen here. Is this one reason not enough for us to continue to stay in India?"<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps Rohekar was emboldened to write the way she did because of the success of Esther David, India's best known Jewish writer, and the two decades of diplomatic relations between India and Israel – during which India has emerged as the biggest purchaser of Israeli-manufactured arms, with annual civilian (non related to defense purchases) trade between the two countries worth six billion dollars. India has also become a favorite tourist destination for the Israeli youth. In contrast, Mahadevan published *Apna Ghar* in 1961, at a time when there were no relations between the two states – India had refused, despite the absence of any conflict or dispute.

In South Asia – a land of minorities, the challenge of pluralism is truly formidable. More than 800 languages are spoken in the region and only 66% of the population has access to education in their mother tongue. "The Minority like everywhere is a fluid identity in South Asia," as Tapan Bose reminds us, "Its markers are language, culture, religion and ethnicity. But the most important marker is the position of 'non-domination' or 'powerlessness'. The history of the last seven decades of state or nation making in South Asia proves the axiom – democracies create minorities. Nation and state are majoritarian concepts. These are also repositories of power. Access and control over these institutions of power and the distance from these sources of power or denial of access define the majority and the minority."<sup>45</sup>

Minorities suffer from inescapable complexes, including a persecution complex, or a discrimination complex. There may not always be a basis. We must be conscious of the fact that in a secular country like India, there are many false perceptions; and it suits certain people or parties to strengthen those tendencies. These are the distortions of reality which the press often willfully fosters.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002): 107.
- <sup>2</sup> Dohra Ahmad. "'This Fundo Stuff is Really Something New': Fundamentalism and Hybridity in *The Moor's Last Sigh*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.1 (2005): 1-20.
- <sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995): 235.
- <sup>4</sup> Anna Guttman, "'People set apart': Representations of Jewishness in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 42, no. 3-4 (2011): 103.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays in Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 20
- <sup>8</sup> Anna Guttman, *Writing Indians and Jews: Metaphorics of Jewishness in South Asian Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 40-45.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Sarnath Banerjee, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (Delhi: Penguin, 2007)
- <sup>11</sup> Robin David, "In Israel's mini-India, the rockets don't scare them," *Sunday Times of India*, July 20, 2014, 15. (The figure does not include the Judaizing communities.)
- <sup>12</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1998)
- <sup>13</sup> Wald, Shalom Salomon, "Jews, Judaism and Israel in India's English Language Fiction: A Glimpse of What India's Elites Read or Believe", *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 14 (2014): 61.
- <sup>14</sup> Ghosh, *op.cit.*, p. 210.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.
- <sup>16</sup> S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society – The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5 Vols (Los Angeles, 1967-1988)
- <sup>17</sup> The book was completed and published twenty-eight years after Goitein's death. It is a comprehensive collection of the India-related letters from the Cairo *Geniza*, in English translation:  
S.D.Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *India Traders from the Middle Ages Documents from the Cairo Geniza ("India Book")* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008) (Also published in Hebrew by the Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem).
- <sup>18</sup> Ghosh, *op.cit.*, 95
- <sup>19</sup> Ghosh, *op.cit.*, 95.
- <sup>20</sup> P.R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)
- <sup>21</sup> Wald, *Op.cit.*, 63.
- <sup>22</sup> Steven Bowman, "Review of Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*," *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* I, no. 2 (1999): 145.
- <sup>23</sup> Rainer Lotz and Rekha Kamath, "Interculturality: A View from Below – Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*", in Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voigt, *Jewish Exile in India: 1933-1945* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers in association with Max Mueller Bhavan, 1999)
- <sup>24</sup> Desai, *op.cit.*, 20
- <sup>25</sup> Lotz, *op. cit.*, 167.
- <sup>26</sup> Desai, *op.cit.*, 104 f.
- <sup>27</sup> Lotz, *op. cit.*, 167.
- <sup>28</sup> Linda Weinhouse, "Baumgartner's Bombay: Postcolonialism and Postmemory", *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* XI (2010): 37.
- <sup>29</sup> Wald, *op.cit.*, 71.
- <sup>30</sup> Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011): 15.
- <sup>31</sup> Vikram Seth, *Two Lives* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), 236-237.
- <sup>32</sup> Wald, *op. cit.*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Freedman, Jonathan, "'Who's Jewish?': Some Asian-American Writers and the Jewish American Literary Canon," *Jewish in America* (Part Two) XLII, no. 1 (Winter 2003.) Accessed April 10, 2016, url: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0042.126>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Anna Guttman, *Writing Indians and Jews: Metaphorics of Jewishness in South Asian Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 72.

<sup>38</sup> Joan G. Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, Second Edition (New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK): Transaction Publishers, 1998): 329.

<sup>39</sup> Verma is not a practicing Jew, but would be considered Jewish according to the Jewish oral law Halakha because of his Jewish mother.

<sup>40</sup> Esther David, *Shalom India Housing Society* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Robin David, "The Reading" (Blog – City of Fear, 23 April, 2007) Accessed 10 April, 2016. Url: <http://cityoffearblog.blogspot.in/2007/04/reading.html>

<sup>42</sup> Sheela Rohekar, *Miss Samuel: Ék Yahūdī Gāthā* (New Delhi: Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2013): 179.

<sup>43</sup> Jael Silliman, *The Man with Many Hats* (Kolkata: Privately Published, 2013): 72.

<sup>44</sup> Meera Mahadevan, *Apna Ghar* (Delhi: Akshar Prakashan, 1961), 44-45 (The present author's translation)

<sup>45</sup> Rita Manchanda, "Introduction: Majority-Minority Discourses in South Asia," in *Living on the Margins: Minorities in South Asia*, ed. Rita Manchanda, (Kathmandu: South Asia Forum for Human Rights, 2009): 3-4.