

The Land of Hard Bondage: The Lost Tribes in India

by Tudor Parfitt

Today the population of India is around a billion people, making it the second most populous nation on earth, after China. The Jewish population of India reached perhaps 30,000 after the Second World War¹ but today is much less. In other words, Jews count for a minuscule fraction of Indians. Why then in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a novel set mainly in Bombay, should Salman Rushdie use a Jew from Kerala as a figure of baroque, incarnate evil? Why should the equally gifted Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *In an Antique Land*, be fascinated by a twelfth century Jewish merchant, Abraham ben Yiju of Mangalore? Why does a surprising number of Indian literary works deal with Jews?

India has a dazzling array of problems, of problematic situations, real and imagined. It is difficult to imagine that the Jews figure prominently among them. And yet they seem to do so.¹

Did Westerners impose a Judaic identity on Indians as a feature of colonial intervention, as they did so frequently almost everywhere else in the world?² To the majority of western travellers, the multitudes of India do not immediately suggest a monolithic Judaic ancestry. However, historically, comparisons between Indians and Jews have been made with astonishing regularity.

As early as the seventeenth century, publisher and traveller Melchisedec Thevenot (1620-1692) asked François Bernier, a scholar who was in India from 1656-1668, to discover if Jews had lived in Kashmir for a long time. Bernier reported that Jews had once lived there, but that they had converted to Islam. Nonetheless, as he put it:

“There are many signs of Judaism to be found in this country. On entering the kingdom after crossing the Pire-penjale Mountains, the inhabitants in the frontier villages struck me as resembling Jews. Their countenance and manner and that indescribable peculiarity which enables a traveller to distinguish the inhabitants of different nations all seemed to belong to that ancient people. You are not to ascribe what I say to mere fancy, the Jewish appearance of these villagers having been remarked by our Jesuit Fathers, and by several other Europeans, long before I visited Kachemire. A second sign is the prevalence of the name of Mousa, which means Moses, among the inhabitants of

this city, notwithstanding that they are Mahometans. A third is the tradition that Solomon visited this country and that it was he who opened a passage for the waters by cutting the mountain of Baramoulé. A fourth is the belief that Moses died in the city of Kachemire, and that his tomb is within a league of it. A fifth may be found in the generally received opinion that the small and extremely ancient edifice seen on one of the high hills was built by Solomon; it is therefore called the 'throne of Solomon' to this day."⁴

M. de la Créquiniere's "Conformity of the Customs of the Indians with the Jews and Other Peoples of Antiquity" (*Conformité des coutumes des Indiens orientaux, avec des Juifs et des autres Peuples de l'Antiquité*), one of the most striking of the early works devoted to comparisons between Jews and Indians, was published in Brussels in 1704. The following year, the translation by John Toland, a well-known historian of philosophy and religion, appeared in London.⁵ De la Créquiniere spent a number of years in India and paid particular attention to inland peoples whose traditions had not been overtly affected by contact with outsiders. His intention was not to throw any particular light on Indian society, but rather to "clarify antiquity" and especially to cast light on the Bible.⁶ In other words, he wanted to hold Europe's own religious legacy up to the mirror of India to see what it reflected.

At the time, intellectual circles in France often discussed various Jewish customs, including circumcision, which de la Créquiniere wrote about at length in the context of India.⁷ He enumerated many other similarities between the Israelites and the Indians: their 'enchancements,' funerals and public buildings, as well as their way of eating locusts, their esteem for the arts, their aversion to wine, their similar behaviour, their ointments, their sweet-scented waters, their way of fighting, their shared love of washing and their extreme cleanliness. In this later point, Indians "may dispute with the most scrupulous Pharisees with whom they agree in many things beside."⁸ He concluded:

"The Indians agreed with the Ancients and particularly with the Jews; but one that would Reason like a Pagan would find a far greater Resemblance between these two Nations...the people of Judea and those who dwell in the remotest Countries of the Indies agree very well in their Temper, their Customs and Manner of Governing. First, both of them Lived in Hard Bondage, to which they were so much the more subject, because they lov'd it and even ador'd their Captivity; I mean that of the Law which was the hardest slavery...the learning of both consists

only in getting by heart what they say the Gods have done for them; besides, the Books of Morality whose precepts they take care to learn...The Jews and Indians have preserved at least in a great measure the Simplicity of the Primitive Ages of the World; which they make appear in the food, their Cloaths; and their Pleasures; wherein they always seek after that which is most Natural; for they love that most which most readily offers itself to their thoughts and most Naturally gratifies their Fancy...They practise very punctually all the Rules which the Religion they profess prescribes; and considering that no Man can live independently, but is in a manner born for Subjection, they love rather to serve their Gods and submit blindly to their Law than to be Slaves to Caprice and Ambition....they never trouble their heads about Novelties but follow their Traffick or exercise themselves in that Trade which they have learn'd from their Fathers."⁹

This passage suggests that the Indians' passivity, their closeness to nature, their learning by rote, their lack of ambition, their "Simplicity of the Primitive Ages of the World" were similar to what the writer perceived in Jews and that both possessed something close to a natural religion.

The Abbé Dubois, a scholarly Catholic missionary, also made such comparisons. He arrived in India in 1792 and was attached to the Pondicherry mission at first. Then he went to work in the Dekhan and the Madras Presidency until 1823, when he returned to France. The bearded Abbé, who travelled around in native dress, knew classical and colloquial Tamil and spent his years in India studying the lives and customs of the Hindus. His research was written up and his manuscript was handed to an English officer in 1806. It remained unpublished until 1816, when it appeared in London under the title: *Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India and of their Institutions Religious and Civil*. The Abbé did not believe that Hinduism derived from Judaism, but — like de la Créquiniere — he noted, "Many passages in the Hindu sacred writings recall the rules which the law of Moses laid down for the children of Israel concerning the various kinds of defilements, real and technical...It is, in fact, impossible to deny that there are many striking points of resemblance between Jewish and Hindu customs."¹⁰

Such comparisons continued. For instance, C.T.E. Rhenius, who was sent to South India in 1913 by the English Church Missionary Society, noted that, "The Vishnu and Siva sects and religious worship exhibit a strong likeness to the Jewish dispensation."¹¹ Similarly, many perceived the Brahmin caste as having specifically Jewish attributes. As R. Lovett wrote of the Brahmins in his *History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895*: "Each is an infallible pope in his own

sphere. The Brahman is the exclusive and Pharisaic Jew of India."¹²

Explanations of the Brahmins' origin often followed this path. Some said that high-caste Hindus were actually Scythians and, as such, were probable descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. English writer G. Moore, the author of a book about the Lost Tribes published in 1861, "transcribed" Indian inscriptions into Hebrew to prove his contention about the Lost Tribes. According to Moore, the Lost Tribes had brought Judaism to India intact and Buddhism was a fraudulent development of it.¹³ Like others before him, Claudius Buchanan — one-time vice-provost of the college of Fort William in Bengal and a member of the Asiatic Society — was inclined to the fairly popular view that Hinduism had borrowed substantially from Judaism in ancient times. He furiously dismissed suggestions that the opposite might be the case.¹⁴ He held fairly sober views on the issue of the Lost Tribes. For instance, he maintained that "the greater part of the Ten Tribes that now exist are to be found in the countries of their first captivity." Nonetheless, he, too, believed that many of the populations in Afghanistan, Bokhara and Kashmir were of Jewish descent.¹⁵

Godfrey Higgins (1772-1833) was a key thinker in the evolution of the discourse that linked Jews and India. His chief works were *Horae Sabbaticae* (London, 1826), which examined the origins of the Sabbath; *An Apology for the Life and Character of Mahommed*, London, 1829; *The Celtic Druids or An Attempt to show that The Druids were the Priests of Oriental Colonies Who Emigrated from India; and were the Introducers of the First or Cadmean System of Letters, and the Builders of Stonehenge, of Carnac, and of Other Cyclopean Works, in Asia and Europe* (London, 1827), and *Anacalypsis — An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions* (London, 1833-36).¹⁶ Higgins was quite a remarkable man and is still evoked regularly by Theosophists, seekers of the Holy Grail, Lost Tribes enthusiasts, Afro-centrists, Hebrew Israelites and various esoteric sects. He studied law at Cambridge before joining the Volunteer Corps when it seemed that Napoleon would invade England and was promoted to major in the Third West York Militia in 1808. Subsequently appointed Justice of the Peace in the West Riding of Yorkshire, he used his position to expose the appalling treatment of "pauper lunatics." He campaigned for the reform of Parliament, and opposed excessive taxation, the Corn Laws and the exploitation of child labor. But Higgins made his mark as a religious thinker and student of comparative religion. He became a member of the Society of Arts, the British Association for the Advancement of Science and other learned bodies, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the origin of religious phenomena.

In the preface to the 1829 edition of his book on the Druids, he stated that he was preparing a new work which would review "all the ancient Mythologies of the world, which, however varied and corrupted in recent times, were originally

one, and that one founded on principles sublime, beautiful and true." He posited that there were ancient civilizations that acquired superior religious knowledge, much of which has since been lost, and that all religions have a universal origin. He was struck by the "absolute ignorance displayed in the writings of the ancients, of the true nature of their history, their religious mythology and, in short, of everything relating to their antiquities." By contrast, he was convinced that "there was a secret science possessed somewhere, which must have been guarded by the most solemn oaths. And though I may be laughed at by those who inquire not deeply into the origin of things for saying it, yet I cannot help suspecting that there is still a secret doctrine known only in the deep recesses, the crypts, of Thibet, St. Peter's and the Kremlin."¹⁷

Convinced that Hebrew place names were to be found all over India, Higgins ridiculed the idea "that the old Jewish names of places have been given by the modern Saracens or Turks."¹⁸ To prove this, he observed that when the first Muslim conquerors arrived at Lahore they already found that the name of the Hindu prince defending the city was "Daood or David."¹⁹ However the great cities of India, "Agra, Delhi, Oude, Mundore, etc., which have many of them been much larger than London, can hardly have been built, all of them, by 'the little Jewish mountain tribe (the "Lost Tribes")'." The only way of accounting for them and other features of India was "the supposition that there was in very ancient times one universal superstition, which was carried all over the world by emigrating tribes, and that they were originally from Upper India."²⁰ The Jews, specifically the Tribe of Judah, thus originated in India: "...the natives of Cashmere as well as those of Afghanistan, pretending to be descended from the Jews, give pedigrees of their kings reigning in their present country up to the sun and the moon, and along with this, they shew you the Temples still standing, built by Solomon, (the) statues of Noah and other Jewish Patriarchs...the traditions of the Afghans tell them that they are descended from the tribe of Joudi or Yuda, and in this they are right, for it is the tribe of Joudi noticed by Eusebius to have existed before the Son of Jacob in Western Syria was born, the Joudi of Oude, and from which tribe the Western Jews with the Brahmin (Abraham) descended and migrated..."²¹ Similarly, "in the valley of Cashmere, on a hill close to the lake, are the ruins of a temple of Solomon. The history states that Solomon, finding the valley all covered with water except this hill, which was an island, opened the passage in the mountains and let most of it out, thus giving to Cashmere its beautiful plains. The temple which is built on the hill is called Tucht Suliman...Forster says, 'Previously to the Mahometan conquest of India, Kashmere was celebrated for the learning of the Brahmins and the magnificent construction of its temple.' Now what am I to make of this? Were these Brahmins Jews, or the Jews Brahmins?"²²

India and the surrounding countries thus became a rich hunting ground for remote Jewish communities and continue to be so. Behind most speculation on

the subject lurks the old idea that the Lost Tribes may have reached India in remote times. This discourse is clearly rooted in medieval thought on the subject. Sir Mandeville, for one, claimed that the Lost Tribes were to be found in mountain valleys in a distant land beyond Cathay "toward the high Ind and toward Bacharia." Specific Lost Tribes were supposed to have spread throughout the surrounding area as well. The American Biblical scholar A. H. Godbey mentions the Kerala tradition that the tribe of Menasseh was sent East by Nebuchadnezzar and that many of them spread through India and the surrounding countries.²³

Afghanistan was one of the favoured supposed homes of the Lost Tribes. According to Afghani belief, the Afghan people were banished by Nebuchadnezzar into the mountains of Ghur where they maintained a relationship with the Jews of Arabia. When some of the Arabian Jews converted to Islam one of their number — a certain Khaled — wrote to the Afghans and invited them to convert to Islam. A number of Afghan notables arrived in Arabia under a leader who traced his descent back forty-six generations to King Saul. Muhammad greeted him with the deferential title *malik* or 'king.' At the end of the nineteenth century, the leading families of Afghanistan still claimed descent from the man so honoured by the prophet and the Afghans' claim to be of Israelite descent is accepted by the majority of Muslim writers as well as by many others.²⁴ Buchanan noted, "The tribes of the Affghan race are very numerous, and of different castes; and it is probable, that the proportion which is of Jewish descent is not great. The Affghan nations extend on both sides of the India... some tribes have the countenance of the Persian, and some of the Hindoo; and some tribes are evidently of Jewish extraction..." In the case of Bokhara, Buchanan seemed to think there was firmer ground for speculation. With Giles Fletcher's well-known book *The Tartars Or, Ten Tribes* (1609-11) in mind, he observed, "This is the country which Dr. Giles Fletcher who was Envoy of Queen Elizabeth at the Court of Muscovy assigned as the principal residence of the descendants of the Ten Tribes. He argues from their place, from the name of their cities, from their language, which contains Hebrew and Chaldaic words, and from their peculiar rites which are Jewish. Their principal city, Samarkand, is pronounced Samarchian, which Dr. Fletcher thinks, might be a name given by the Israelites after their own Samaria in Palestine." It is worth noting that this is apparently what the Bukharan Jews thought, too: Joseph Wolff, the missionary, Lost Tribes hunter and Jewish convert to Christianity reported, "The Jews in Bokhara are 10,000 in number. The Chief Rabbi assured me that Bokhara is the Habor and Balkh the Halah of II Kings:17:6." Wolff was also told that the tribes of Naphtali, Dan, Zebulun and Asher were still to be found in the heights of the Hindu Kush and that they still knew the *Shma Yisrael*.²⁵ Wolff also found traces of the Lost Tribes in Afghanistan. "Some Affghans," he wrote, "claim a descent from Israel. According to them, Affghaun was the nephew of Asaph, the son of Berachia, who built the Temple of Solomon. The descendants of this

Affghaun, being Jews, were carried into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, from whence they were removed to the mountains of Ghoree in Affghanistan, but in the time of Mohammed turned Mohammedan."²⁶ Local experts supported him: a certain Captain Riley, who was, according to Wolff, "the best Arabic scholar in India," looked on the Affghauns as of Jewish descent.²⁷ Wolff found traces of Israelite descent in Peshawar among the "Kaffre Seeah Poosh" and, as he noted, "Some of the learned Jews of Samarkand are of my opinion"²⁸ on this point.

By the end of the eighteenth century, this view was widespread. In 1799, Charles Crawford located some of the lost tribes in Afghanistan. Citing "the best Persian historians," he said that some lived among the Tartars, "who boast of their descent from the Jews." He noted that "The Tartars have a town called Jericho" and he understood the name of the town of "Samarkand" to be a corruption of Samaria. In the vicinity of Samarkand, he also found a Mount Zion and a River Jordan. Missionaries had reported back that not only were the inhabitants of these areas Jews but that they had found people in Tartary who spoke a language similar to that of some American Indians — who are, of course, also Lost Tribes.²⁹

John Chamberlain, a Baptist missionary in India in the second decade of the nineteenth century, was quite convinced that the Ten Tribes were to be found in the vicinity of Afghanistan. He noted, "I find there are many of the Ten Tribes toward Candahar. Many of the Afghans are undoubtedly of the race of Abraham. One person I saw at Delhi had all the appearance of an Israelite, and on asking him whether he was not a son of Israel, he confessed, 'I am.' They are now become Musulmans; but have not forgotten that their progenitors were the sons of Israel..."³⁰ In fact, the idea that the Afghans were of Jewish descent was commonplace in Christian circles throughout the nineteenth century. Sir William Jones, who was a Sanskrit scholar and member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Sir Alexander Barnes and the missionaries Carey and Marshman are all mentioned as espousing this view,³¹ which, in turn, gave further credence to the idea.³²

Some of these Indian and Central Asian "Lost Tribes" were spotted in Europe. In 1833, the *Anglo-Germanic Advertiser* reported, "The Lost Ten Tribes of the Jews have been found in Li Bucharia, some of them attending the last Leipsic fair as shawl manufacturers. They speak in Thibet, the Hebrew language, (and) are Idolaters, but believe in the Messiah and their restoration to Jerusalem; they are supposed to consist of ten millions, keep the Kipour, and do not like white Jews, and call out like the other tribes, 'Hear, O God of Israel, there is but one God,' are circumcised, and have a Reader and Elders."

In 1840, J. Samuel — a Christian missionary who had converted from Judaism — announced in a long pamphlet entitled *An Appeal on Behalf of the Jews Scattered in India, Persia and Arabia*, that a "population of many hundred thousand Jews, descendants of the Twelve Tribes" are just "waiting to be converted"³³ in the area of Afghanistan.

The notion that the Afghans were of Jewish extraction became even more widespread and popular in 1928, when the *Boston Herald* (27 April 1928) noted a controversy caused by "the visit of the King and Queen of Afghanistan to England, over the so-called Jewish origin of the Afghan people...as to the Afghans, quite a number of British officers well acquainted with them are said to be strong believers in the Hebrew theory. And what of the evidence its favour? One thing, which travellers sometimes tell us after investigation on the spot, is that nearly all the Afghan women and many of the men are 'of a distinctly Jewish cast of countenance' and that a large number of them have Jewish-Christian names, such as Ibrahim for Abraham, Ayub for Job, Daoud for David, Ismail for Ishmael, Ishak for Isaac, Yohia for John, Yakub for Jacob and Suleiman for Solomon. The Afghans, moreover, are known to recognise a common code of unwritten law which appears to resemble the old Hebraic law, though it has been modified by Moham-medan ordinances...And eager as are the subjects of the King of Afghanistan to claim Hebrew descent, there is little likelihood of them joining the Zionist movement or swelling the twentieth century migration to the Holy Land."³⁴ Isaac Ben Zvi, the second president of the State of Israel, also supported identification of the Pathans in Afghanistan and elsewhere as Israelites. Among other things, he noted that all Pathans acknowledge an oral constitution known as *Pushtun-Wally*, which he claimed closely resembles Hebrew law.³⁵

Today the Pathans of Western Pakistan and Afghanistan are widely believed to be of Israelite extraction. This belief became even more widespread after a TV documentary by the Emmy award-winning film maker Simcha Jacobovici was shown in the United States in the spring of 2000. *The Jerusalem Report*, a relatively sober Israeli periodical, noted in 1993 that the Pathans are, in many respects, among the more serious Lost Tribes claimants: "Numbering at least 15 million, the Sunni Muslim Pathans live on both sides of the Afghani-Pakastani border (and as far east as Indian Kashmir) where part of the ten tribes are believed to have settled. Indeed, the names of Pathan sub-tribes seem to echo those of the Israelite tribes: Rabani (Reuben), Shinwari (Shimon), Daftani (Naftali), Ashuri (Asher) and Yusuf-sai (sons of Yosef). The mostly illiterate Pathans have a centuries-old tradition of Israelite ancestry, and some still call themselves "Bani Israel," the children of Israel. A retired Pathan diplomat living in the U.S. is translating a book on basic Judaism into Pashtu, the Pathan language. The Amishav group, an Israeli organization dedicated to the finding and rehabilitation of the lost tribes, plans to distribute the book among educated Pathans.

With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, interest in the Pathans increased overnight.³⁶ The *Kulanu* list-server carried many communications on the Pathans, most of them sympathetic. In the charged climate after the attacks, many feared for the safety of the Pathans and expressed a kind of fraternal solidarity with them. Jack Zeller, the President of *Kulanu*, observed, "I would hope that a

Kulanu inclination would be to greet every Pathan with sincere warmth, if only to make up for neglect and denial that is not without pain." Another contributor observed, "In spite of the fact that the Pathans are not Jewish in the modern sense of the term, we are still their brothers, and it hurts me deeply that they have joined our most bitter and implacable enemies."

In 1982, Amishav organized an expedition to visit the Pathans and the Kashmiris. One of the delegates was Henry Noach, a young rabbinical student and a descendant of the illustrious Manuel Noah (1785-1851) who had been such a strong supporter of the Israelites in America theory. According to *The Jerusalem Report*, "While visiting the Kashmiri national museum, Noach met its director, Prof. F.M. Hassnain, who asked the young tourist where he was from. Noach...replied that he'd come from Jerusalem looking for traces of the ten tribes. Hassnain became visibly excited. 'I've waited for you for 30 years!' he said, explaining that he'd written a book tracing the Israelite origins of the five million Kashmiri Sunni Muslims." Indeed, the claim to be of Israelite extraction is widespread among Kashmiris, who point to the similarity of place names which appear to reflect Biblical names like Mamre, Pisgah and Mt. Nevo.

The Internet is not deficient in web pages which purport to show historical connections between India and the Jews; India and Jesus, who is alleged to have gone there; the identical nature of Hebrew and Sanskrit, and so forth. On one such website, a certain Gene D. Matlock unwittingly follows in the path of Daniel Defoe who claimed a connection between Hebrew and the languages of the "Subjects of the Great Mogul, that is to say, in that Part of the World we call more properly India."³⁷ Matlock more specifically believes that Sanskrit is Hebrew and quotes "part of his complete manuscript showing the global influence of ancient India's culture and language." He shows that Judaism started in India and points to the presence of a vast number of Hebrew and Biblical place names scattered throughout India," including "ancient Scuna-Desa (Zion Land) in what is now Maharashtra...the city of Paithan, on the banks of the river Godivari...The Indo-Hebrews named the part of the river passing through Paithan's territory Paithan (Pison, Phison), the city of Satana...According to the legends of the Yadavas (Indo-Hebrews), Satana would have made the folks in Sodom and Gomorah envious." Matlock concludes, "The truth about the origins of the Hebrews has been screaming in our faces for thousands of years, but our benumbed minds have chosen not to hear it."

Jews were not immune to Lost Tribes enthusiasms in the sub-continent. In 1883, Isaac Hayyim Barukh, a young Sephardi Jew armed with a letter to the Sons of Moses, like so many of his predecessors, set off from Tiberias and in 1886 arrived in Calcutta. In an article in a Jewish Judeo-Arabic paper called *Ha-Perah* — a publication of the Indian Baghdadi community — he explained that he was an emissary from the Holy Land and that he was seeking the Sons of

Moses who live beyond the Sambatyon. The same year, he published a further announcement in the paper that in Tibet and on the way to Tibet he had discovered traces of the Sons of Moses. In 1885, he founded an organization, 'the Society of the Founders of the Flag of Israel,' and a couple of short-lived journals in Bombay. The society helped to fund a further mission to find the Sons of Moses but, unfortunately, the British stopped the Jew from Tiberias on the borders of India and forced him to return to Bombay. In a farewell article in *Ha-Perah*, he denounced the British authorities, saying that they had deliberately aborted his mission because for their own inscrutable reasons they wanted "to put off the Redemption of Israel."³⁸

Tibet continued to offer scope for speculation. *Israel's Messenger* noted a further theory in 1904, an idea first put forward by American J. D. Eisenstein, that the Luz of the Book of Judges was none other than the Tibetan capital Lhasa. The newspaper commented, "Mr Einstein quotes the Talmud to the following effect: It is the same Luz where Sennacherib ascended but could not disturb it nor could Nebuchadnezzar destroy it. It is the same Luz where the Angel of Death never predominated. 'What did they do with aged? They took them outside of the city walls, where they died.' The city was therefore distinguished for its impregnability and for the longevity, or, rather immortality, of its inhabitants. The former qualification is undoubtedly descriptive of the city of the Dalai Lama."³⁹

The Benei Israel community of Western India shared many of these ideas. In 1898, a Bombay Jewish journal noted that the discoveries of a Hungarian Jew, a certain Dr. Stein — an Orientalist who for some time occupied the chair in Sanskrit at the University of Budapest — would, "finally settle the descent of the Afghans from the Ten Tribes. The Afghans themselves believe in the Israelite descent and call themselves Been Israel. Circumcision is said to have existed among the Afghans before their conversion to Mahomedanism in the first century of the Mahomedan era, and they still maintain the old customs prevalent in Israel of yore, such as the punishment of stoning and the obligation to marry a deceased brother's widow. There are many inscriptions in Afghanistan and the surrounding country in the so-called Arian or Bactrian language, which make good sense when transliterated into the Hebrew language and defy interpretation otherwise...."⁴⁰ By 1926, this notion had become sufficiently anchored in Jewish thought that Jacques Faitlovitch, the activist for the so-called Black Jews of Ethiopia, the Falashas, tried to persuade the American Pro-Falasha Committee to send a mission to Afghanistan to study the Jewish element in its population.⁴¹

One of the most obvious candidates for membership in the Lost Tribes was the community of Bene Israel itself. Israel ben Joseph Benjamin (1818-1864) — the Rumanian Jewish traveller, otherwise known as Benjamin the Second (a somewhat self-serving nod in the direction of Benjamin of Tudela, the great twelfth century Jewish traveller) — left a somewhat confused account of the Lost Tribes

in India in his well-known book *Eight Years in Asia and Africa from 1846-1855*. The Bene Israel, according to him, otherwise known as the White Jews, lived in the "East Indies since the remotest ages. I have the firm belief and do not consider it difficult to prove, that the Bene-Israel are not only real Jews, but are likewise lineal descendants of the Ten Tribes, who in the time of Hoshea, the last king of Israel, were carried into exile by the Assyrians to Halah, Nabor, the shores of the Ganges, and the cities of the Medes....The river Gozen, mentioned in the Bible, is according to the assertion of the Bene-Israel, no other than the Ganges which flows through India, on the shores of which this tribe dwells in great numbers. The Indian word 'Ganges' contains all the letters of the Hebrew word 'Goshen'...it is known that the Ganges has its rise in Upper Thibet, a country bordering on the kingdom of Cabul....The Jews, who travelled through the desert, have, as it were, left a trace of their passage behind them, for several brethren remained there whose descendants exist to the present day."

According to Benjamin II, the Bene Israel once owned a chronicle that covered their history until the time of their arrival in India. However, on account of, "the many wars they had with Europeans, with regard to their occupation of the country, this chronicle was lost, the Bene Israel being forced always to flee from one province to another." Benjamin also brings the famous Cochin Jewish community into his record of Lost Tribes in India, although he gives no evidence for their origin. He also cites the Malabar Coast community of the Canarinz, who, says Benjamin, "appropriated to themselves a great many Jewish practices." In the same vein, an 1899 article from the *Jewish Chronicle* quoted in *The Bene Israelite* (a Bene Israel Bombay newspaper) noted that in general the Bene Israel indignantly reject the title of 'Jew.' The article observed that the German Jewish orientalist, Dr. Gustav Oppert (1836-1906), who held the chair in Sanskrit at the University of Madras before taking up a teaching post in Berlin in 1894, is of the "opinion that they are survivors of the Lost Ten Tribes, that were made Assyrian captives. Other reasons in support of this belief are the absence till recently of the Torah from their ritual, and that they did not possess the later books of the Hebrew canon."⁴² In recent years, the Bene Israel are no longer the focus of international interest as likely claimants to the mantle of the Lost Tribes of Israel. That has passed to another, much larger group known as the Bene Menasheh on the other side of India in the states on the Burma frontier. However, one of the rather unsuspected legacies of colonial intervention in the Indian sub-continent is the continued presence today of a colonial invention — the invention for very specific purposes of a Judaic identity or a Judaic past for a variety of indigenous peoples in the sub-continent. This myth — which has already produced discourses surrounding issues of origin and identity — shows every sign of maintaining its grip on the imagination of Indians.

Notes

1. See A. A. Bhende and R. E. Jhirad, *Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Jews in India*, (Mumbai, 1997), p. 3.
2. Yulia Egorova is currently writing a doctoral thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, devoted to the subject of Indian perceptions of Jews.
3. See T. Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: the History of a Myth*, (London, 2002) passim; T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan-Semi, *Judaizing Movements Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, (London, 2001) passim.
4. F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD*.
5. The English translation: *The Agreement of the Customs of the East Indians with those of the Jews and other Ancient Peoples*, London, 1705; See: *The Agreement of the Customs of the East Indians with those of the Jews and other Ancient Peoples* (1705) John Toland and de la Créquiniere together with *An Essay upon Literatures* (1726) Daniel Defoe, introduction by J. Reed, The Augustan Reprints Series, (New York, 1999).
6. See M. T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 346.
7. One idea was that all the circumcision in the world had started with the Jews. A counter-argument then current had it that the Jews could not have passed the habit of circumcision to Negroes since it was absolutely necessary for the latter to circumcise in order to have children, but de la Créquiniere observed that he himself had seen Negroes in Guinea, America and Asia, and "they are not otherwise made as to these Parts than we are." Others had argued that the Jews, too, needed to circumcise to have children but if so how did they manage for 40 years in the wilderness when they did not circumcise and how about those converts from Judaism who did not circumcise and who had children?
8. *The Agreement*, pp.132,136-140.
9. *The Agreement*, p.19.
10. Abbé J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, ed. Henry Beauchamp (Oxford, 3rd ed., 1906), pp.198-199. This is an edition of a later improved version carried out by the Abbé.
11. J. Rhenius, *Memoir of the Rev. C.T.E. Rhenius*, (London, 1841), p. 71. I am indebted to Yulia Egorova for bringing this reference to my attention.
12. R. Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895*, (London, 1902), ii, p. 24; J. Adam, *Memoir of John Adam, Late Missionary of Calcutta*, (London, 1833), p. 225.
13. G. Moore, *Lost Tribes*, (London, 1861), pp.143-60.
14. C. Buchanan, *Memoir of the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establish-*

ment for British India, (London, 1812), pp.150-151. I am indebted to Yulia Egorova for bringing this reference to my attention.

15. C. Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia: with notices of the translation of the Scriptures into the Oriental Languages*, (London, 1811).

16. G. Higgins, *Anacalypsis—An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions*. (London, 1833-36), Vol. 1, p. 50.

17. *Anacalypsis* was first published in an edition of 200 copies; it was partially reprinted in 1878, and in full in an edition of 350 copies in 1927. In 1965, it was reprinted in full in an edition of 1,000 copies by University Books, New York.

18. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 438.

19. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 432.

20. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 432.

21. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 740.

22. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 771. On Higgins and his influence on theosophy see L. Shepard "The "Anacalypsis" of Godfrey Higgins, precursor of H.P.B.," in *Theosophical History* (July, 1985), Vol. 1 No. 3 pp. 46 ff.

23. A. H. Godbey, *The Lost Tribes a Myth—Suggestions toward Rewriting Hebrew History*, (Durham, 1930), p. 372.

24. J. Wolff, *Narrative of a mission to Bokhara in the years 1843-1845 to ascertain the Fate of Colonel Stoddart and Capt. Conolly*. (London, 1845), i. p. 283.

25. G. Moore, *Lost Tribes*, (London, 1861), pp.143-160.

26. *Narrative*, i, p.14.

27. *Narrative*, i, p.16.

28. *Narrative*, i, p.19.

29. *Narrative*, i, p. 17.

30. C. Crawford, *An Essay upon the Propagation of the Gospel*, (Philadelphia, 1799), pp.18-19.

31. William Yates, *Memoirs of Mr. John Chamberlain late Missionary in India*, (Calcutta, 1824), p. 395.

32. W. T. Gidney, *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews 1809-1908*, (London, 1908), p. 198.

33. E. Boudinot, *A Star in the West or A Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Tribes of Israel Preparatory to their Return to their Beloved City, Jerusalem* (Trenton, New Jersey, 1816) pp. 30-31.

34. J. Samuel, *An Appeal on Behalf of the Jews Scattered in India, Persia and Arabia*, (London, 1840), p. 8.

35. See J. Reit and M. Weis to the Afghan Minister Fluja-ud-Daula 2. ii.1928 Fait. Coll. file 117.

36. I. Ben Zvi, *The Exiled and the Redeemed*, (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 216.

37. The suggestion has been made that the Taliban, conscious of their 'Israelite' origins, do not engage in anti-Israeli rhetoric to the same extent as other Islamist groups. See <http://www.tbwt.com/content/article.asp?articleid=1824>.

38. Daniel Defoe, *Essay upon Literature or an Inquiry into the Antiquity and Originality of Letters Proving that the Two Tablets written by the Finger of God in Mount Sinai was the first Writing in the World and that all other Alphabets derive from the Hebrew*, (London 1726), p. 77.

39. *Israel's Messenger*, vol. 1, no. 16, 18 November, 1904. I am grateful to Yulia Egorova for bringing this reference to my attention

40. *The Bene Israelite*, vol. 5, Monday, 31 January, 1898.

41. See J. Reit and M. Weis to the Afghan Minister Fhuja-ud-Daula 2.ii.1928 Fait. Coll. file 117.

42. J. J. Benjamin II, *Eight Years in Asia and Africa from 1846-1855*, Hanover, 1863, pp.176ff

43. *The Bene Israelite* vol.6 Bombay, 7 June, 1899, no.2-3.