"A View from the Margin"

Indo-Judaic Studies Conference Held at Oxford

Conference report by Nathan Katz

An innovative research seminar, "A View from the Margin: The State of the Art of Indo-Judaic Studies," was held at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (OCHJS), in Oxford, England, from July 1 to 4, 2002.

Yarnton Manor, home to OCHJS, was an ideal, tranquil setting for serious academic work. Located a few miles outside of Oxford town, Yarnton Manor dates from 1285, and the structure itself was rebuilt in 1610. Conferees thoroughly enjoyed its paneled halls and lovely gardens.

All conference papers were posted on a restricted-access web site, so conference time was spent summarizing and discussing the participants' current research, rather than reading papers. Conference participants were prepared for animated discussions and cordial criticisms, and the time spent was used to advance the frontiers of the field.

A major consideration in organizing the conference was that it should reflect the remarkable diversity of approaches which are used in Indo-Judaic studies. Participants commented about the benefit to their own research that they derived from sustained discussion with scholars from other disciplines. The conference itself was structured so as to highlight the disciplinary questions: historical studies, comparative religions, sociological and anthropological studies of Indian Jewish communities, international relations and political science approaches to contemporary interactions, and finally comparative literature.

Several major themes emerged at the conference.

The first theme was the interdisciplinary breadth of the field. Scholars from the fields of religious studies, comparative literature, folklore, anthropology, international relations, history, and political science participated, and panels were organized according to disciplinary approaches. Conferees commented on the enlivening effects that multiple disciplinary perspectives brought to similar subject matter — the interactions between Indic and Judaic civilizations. No single participant had known all the other participants prior to the seminar, so the exchanges of ideas were echoed in social interactions at Yarnton's friendly nearby pub.

Another significant theme, present in many but not all of the papers, was the richness afforded by the very marginality of the field of Indo-Judaic studies. While

Conference participants, here standing on the steps of Yarnton Manor, home of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Judaic Studies, are (left to right): Dr. Tudor Parfitt, SOAS-University of London; Prof. Brian Weinstein, Howard University; Prof. Barbara C. Johnson, Ithaca College, New York; Prof. Scaria Zacharia, Shree Shankaracharya Sanskrit University, Kochi, India; Prof. Nathan Katz, Florida International University; Prof. M. G. S. Narayanan, Indian Council for Historical Research; Prof. Gulio Busi (back row), Frie Universitat-Berlin; Prof. Margaret Chatterjee, Delhi University; Prof. Braj M. Sinha (top row), University of Saskatchewan; Prof. L. N. Sharma, Benares Hindu University; Mrs. Busi (seated); Prof. D. Venkateswarlu, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India; Dr. Dinesh Kumar (seated), Hebrew University, Jerusalem; Prof. Barbara Holdrege, University of California-Santa Barbara; Prof. Richard Marks, Washington and Lee University; Dr. Shalva Weil, Hebrew University; Prof. Joan G. Roland, Pace University, New York; Prof. Ranabir Chakravarti, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and Ms. Yulia Egorova, SOAS-University of London.

not exactly a hybrid of Jewish Studies and South Asian Studies, Indo-Judaic Studies borrows heavily from each, yet demands its own perspective. The data of the world constellate quite differently when they are drawn from Indian and Jewish experience. One of the unique features of Indo-Judaic studies is that it is not rooted in European (that is, Christian) conceptual categories and, in this sense, Indo-Judaic studies can be located at the cutting edge of cultural studies that do not define themselves in European terms.

The conference convened with a welcome dinner on July 1, 2002. Nathan Katz gave remarks of welcome and commented generally on this nascent field. He then elaborated on the impact of Indo-Judaic studies on academic life in America, saying that the old "area studies" model is being called into question, with contemporary scholarship focusing more on the interactions between and among "areas" (Middle East, South Asia, etc.) rather than on the areas in themselves. Thus, Indo-Judaic studies locates itself on similarly interstitial ground as, for example, Levantine studies, which examines the interactions between European, Asian, and African cultures; or Indian Ocean studies, which explores the interactions among West Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia; and Silk Route studies, which considers the multicultural commercial and cultural caravanserais on the roads between Europe, China, and India. Katz argued that "areas" are essentially colonial constructs, and those interactive models that focus on the margins between "areas" allow scholars to discover and explore new dimensions of culture.

On the more popular level, he indicated two areas of influence. The first is the emerging relationship between India and Israel, which is strategic, cultural, economic, and diplomatic. The strategic dimension has recently been brought to popular awareness in newspapers and opinion journals. The second popular issue is the so-called "JuBu phenomenon," that is, the internal Jewish issue of Jewish spiritual seekers practicing Buddhism or Hinduism. Much of the contemporary popular Jewish interest in India is a consequence of this phenomenon.

Shalva Weil discussed the impact of Indo-Judaic studies in Israel. She lamented that, so far, there has been little academic work in this area. While academic organizations such as the Ben Zvi Institute in Jerusalem have long been interested in Indian Jewish communities, there is no parallel in Israel to the fecundity of Indo-Judaic scholarship in America. The two popular reflections of Indo-Judaic studies found in America are also significant in contemporary Israel. Of course, relations between Israel and India, whether economic, diplomatic, or strategic, are of great importance in Israel. The "JuBu phenomenon" of America is paralleled by the "Boombamela phenomenon" of Israel, in which many young Israelis, upon completing military service, head off for a low-budget world tour. Most spend time in India and Nepal, simultaneously seeking hedonistic and spiri-

tual refreshment. Returning to Israel, they convene at an occasional festival named to mimic a Hindu festival (*mela*).

Ranabir Chakravarti and Dinesh Kumar spoke about Indo-Judaic studies in India. Chakravarti's talk followed two lines. First, he outlined the importance of commercial history in understanding the construction of civilization, and he indicated the pivotal role of ancient through medieval commerce between West Asian and Mediterranean Jews and merchants in India. Culture followed commerce, in this case and in others. Second, he talked about the more general fascination with which most Indians view Jews and Israel, a fascination colored by a lack of real knowledge. Kumar spoke about strategic and diplomatic relations between India and Israel, emphasizing that a convergence of interests drives the rapprochement between these two Asian democracies as they confront similarly perceived threats.

The evening concluded with a report by Tudor Parfitt about his recent DNA research on Bene Israel and "Black" Kochi Jews, among other groups. His findings tend to support the Bene Israel historical self-understanding, indicating an Israelite origin in antiquity. Similarly, his analysis of "Black" Kochi Jews also indicates an ancient Israelite origin, followed by a period during which intermarriage was practiced, in turn followed by endogamy. His report received wide newspaper coverage, especially in India.

July 2, 2002

The morning session was devoted to historical studies. Braj M. Sinha served as chair as Ranabir Chakravarti, M. G. S. Narayanan, and Brian Weinstein discussed their research.

Chakravarti's paper, "Reaching Out to Distant Shores: Indo-Judaic Trade Contacts (up to 1300 CE)," traced commerce between West Asia and the Mediterranean on the one hand, and India on the other, from the second century BCE through medieval trade in the hands of Jewish merchants, especially based on such documentary evidence as was found in the Cairo genizah. Chakravarti explored two thousand years of Indian and Jewish interactions from an Indian historian's standpoint, using archaeological, epigraphic, and documentary materials.

Narayanan's paper, "Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin," re-examined the famous charter of hereditary privileges granted to the Jews by a Chera king at the beginning of the eleventh century. Narayanan built upon his earlier work and translation done some 30 years ago, adding more contextual depth based upon more recent studies of early medieval Kerala. He tried to show how the Jews under the leadership of Joseph Rabban had the titles and privileges of aristocracy at Kodungallur (Cranganore, Shingly), the Chera capital and harbor city where they lived. They had a guild called *anjuman* or *ancuvannam* which worked in close collaboration with the Christian guild of *manigramam*. Joseph Rabban became so much of a legend in later times that he is remembered in the Malayalam ritual songs of the Jews in Kerala.

Weinstein wrote on "The Intellectual Confluence between Jews and India: Astrology, Science, Mysticism." His paper surveyed Jewish knowledge of scientific and mystical exchanges with India during the ninth through twelfth centuries, especially in the writings of Saadia Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra. These two towering figures were among the rabbinic authorities most open to Indian influences.

The afternoon of July 2 saw two panels. The first, chaired by Shalva Weil, included two papers on comparative religions, one by Barbara A. Holdrege and one by Giulio Busi.

In "The Comparative Study of Hinduisms and Judaisms: Dismantling Dominant Discourses," Holdrege situated the comparative historian of religion's approach to Indo-Judaic studies in the context of postmodern scholarship. Such scholarship envisions a polycentric world, rather than one simplistically bifurcated into "east" and "west." The comparative study of Hinduism and Judaism, then, seeks to undermine those mutually reinforcing stereotypes that have been used to reify a Eurocentric approach to culture.

Busi's paper, "Common Symbolic Patterns in Hebrew and Sanskrit Literature," adopted a philological approach that seeks to establish common patterns in literature and culture across time and across geography. He identified a number of symbolic structures shared by Sanskrit, Hebrew and, at times, Persian, sacred literatures.

The second session on comparative religions, chaired by Joan G. Roland, featured papers by L. N. Sharma and Braj M. Sinha.

Sharma's paper, "Silence, Shunya and Shiva," gave a response in the Kashmir Shaiva tradition to Judaic criticisms of idolatry. By raising the discourse from practical or moral criticism to philosophic inquiry, he explored India's diverse absolutist and theistic traditions for cogent responses to the Judaic critique. The paper ranged from exegesis of Mahabharata myths to explication of Buddhist Shunyavada philosophy, resting finally in the mystical silence of the absolute of Kabbalah and Tantra.

Sinha's paper, "Divine Anthropos and Cosmic Tree: Hindu and Jewish Mysticism in Comparative Perspective," viewed the symbolism of the Tree of Sefiroth and the notion of Adam Kadmon in Zoharistic writings as a powerful attestation to the fact that the world of divinity and the cosmos are not two disconnected realities; rather they are thought to be intimately connected, not through some kind of external relationship, but rather by a relationship of inner organic unity. Similarly, the powerful symbolism of Purusa, the Primal Man or Divine Anthropos, and the Aswathha tree as conceived in the Hindu cosmogonic universe, constitute the ontological basis of all cosmic unfoldment of the divinity, making it possible for microcosmic human reality to experience the macrocosmic. Sinha articulated the structural affinity between the two modes of conceptualizing divine-cosmic continuity as the core notion within the mystical writings of the two traditions.

July 3, 2002

The morning session, chaired by Barbara C. Johnson, was devoted to Jewish-Hindu interactions in the modern period. It included papers by Margaret Chatterjee, Nathan Katz, and Dinesh Kumar.

Chatterjee, in her paper, "The Multicultural Issue in India and Israel — Some Reflections," considered how an ethnically/religiously diverse population is viewed in contemporary India and Israel. India's diversity has been well known for centuries, but in Israel, multiculturalism became obvious only fairly recently as Jews from Europe, Africa, and Asia have struggled to form a cohesive society. Having the luxury of scale, India traditionally has been able to offer its minorities either assimilation or compartmentalization (the caste system). Tiny Israel developed uniquely with wave after wave of *aliyah* (immigration). With no group privileged by priority, Israel was able to impose a new/old language on all immigrants, whereas in India the issue of language continues to be fractious. Based on such data, Chatterjee speculated on the future of minority cultures in the context of secular states.

Katz began his paper, "The State of the Art of Hindu-Jewish Dialogue," with an overview of Indo-Jewish cultural interactions from as early as the first century CE through the 1990 Tibetan-Jewish dialogue in Dharamsala. He argued that Hindu-Jewish dialogue has always been characterized by an emphasis on praxis over doctrine, as well as symmetry between the dialogue partners. After raising but not solving the pitfall issue of idolatry, Katz offered an agenda for such dialogues, from theology and mysticism, to practical issues such as diet, to the position of Jews and Hindus as "others" in America, to the issues of diasporization modernization, to literary images of one another, to political and strategic relations between India and Israel on one hand, and between the United States and the two homelands on the other. He also touched upon the "JuBu phenomenon."

The contemporary strategic relationship between India and Israel was the topic of Kumar's paper, "India and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Shifting Strategic Focus." After tracing the history of India's pro-Arab foreign policy, he zeroed in on the shift in India's strategic equation following the end of the Cold War. A number of factors, including the Muslim world's partiality toward Pakistan, as well as the Middle East Peace Process, led India to reassess her policy toward the region, first moving toward balance, and now making a slow but detectable shift in Israel's favor.

In the afternoon two panels were held on Indian Jewish communities. The first was chaired by Narayanan and consisted of papers by Johnson and Weil.

Johnson surveyed a wide range of recent scholarship in her paper. "New Research, Discoveries, and Paradigms: A Report on the Current Study of Kerala Jews." She described significant new work on ancient and medieval Jewish contacts with Kerala, particularly Bar Ilan's on Yemen and Lesley's discovery of three Hebrew texts from Cranganore. She noted ground-breaking studies on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Tavim, using Portuguese archives, and by Schorsch, who includes the Kerala Jews in his analysis of Jews, "race," and colonialism in the early modern world. Johnson mentioned current studies of nineteenth-to-twentieth century community history, memory, and the transition to Israel (e.g., Koder, Hacco, Neumann, Shachar); and detailed the wealth of new work on Kerala Jewish material culture (e.g., Slapak, Sabar, Eliyahu-Oron, Waronker); and then focused on her own work (with Zacharia, Seroussi, and others) on Malayalam Jewish women's folk songs. In conclusion, she suggested the use of new models for analyzing social divisions among Kerala Jews and for understanding their situation in Israel.

In "The Case of the Bene Israel and Some Others," Weil began with recent work on Ashkenazim in India, especially Holocaust refugees. She then described work by herself and Roland on Bene Israel institutions in India, as well as works by Isenberg and Katz that focus on the issue of Bene Israel identity. Another avenue of research has been the Bene Israel's unique rites, as well as their fine arts and music. She then speculated about indigenous Bene Israel scholarship, such as B. J. Israel's and Haeem Kehimkar's, which she hopes might be able to mediate between "native perceptions" and western "scientific attitudes."

The second afternoon panel had papers by Joan G. Roland and Tudor Parfitt and was chaired by Margaret Chatterjee.

After providing an overview of published research, in "The Baghdadi Jews of India: Perspectives on the Study and Portrayal of a Community," Roland addressed the needs for current and future work. She remarked that there has been much more literary activity about the Kalikota (Calcutta) community (Ezra, Musleah, Solomon, Elias and Cooper, Hyman) than Mumbai (Bombay). She then suggested that a primary question is the motivation behind the creation of the Baghdadi community, followed by the role of families in maintaining it, the relationships between Baghdadis and their servants, the literary productivity of India's Baghdadis, analyses of community organization, and the like. Scholars ought also view the general distancing of Baghdadis from political life, whether during the British raj or during the Independence movement. Finally, the fluidity of Baghdadi identity begs scholarly examination.

Parfitt, in "Tribal Jews," provided background for the study of tribals in the northeast of India and Burma who recently have "discovered" themselves to be of the lost Tribe of Menase. He first surveyed the myth of the Ten Lost Tribes and demonstrated how this category has been imposed upon almost every people newly

encountered by European explorers, and nearly as often proclaimed as an identity by distant groups of people. He offered the perspective of someone who has studied a number of "Judaizing movements," whether in southern Africa or among African-Americans or Afro-Caribbeans. He accepts Weil's view that these northeastern Indian tribals were animists who made a double conversion to Judaism via missionary Christianity. Yet, many of them have undergone Orthodox conversions, and a number now live in Israel and are accepted as Jews.

Following the individual papers, a roundtable of Johnson, Weil, and Roland discussed current research into Indian Jewish communities in Israel today. One feature of contemporary research that differs from what has already been done is the involvement of Israelis who are second generation Indians. The general sense is that despite scattered difficulties in the beginning, Indian Jews have adjusted to Israeli society remarkably well. Indian Baghdadis have merged into Baghdadi or Iraqi communities in Israel and elsewhere. Kochini Jews, though scattered, remain a distinct community whose members maintain their connections through celebrating holidays and life cycle rituals in their traditional style. Bene Israel Jews also hold firmly to a distinct identity, marked by the performance of the Eliyahu Hanabi, or *malida*, rite.

July 4, 2002

The final panel, held in the morning, focused on literature. Chaired by Ranabir Chakravarti, it included papers by Richard Marks, Scaria Zacharia, D. Venkateswarlu, and Yulia Egorova.

Marks surveyed accounts of Hinduism in medieval Jewish literature in his paper, "Hindus and Hinduism in Medieval Jewish Literature." Not surprisingly, he found a variety of opinions, ranging from Yehuda Halevi's contempt to Jacob ben Eleazar's admiration. Except for Jacob al-Qirqisani's direct observations of Indian customs, the Hinduism found in medieval Jewish literature derives mainly from Arabic and Latin texts. Among other medieval Jewish writings that reflect India are books of fables, a travelogue, the Alexander romances, and assorted magical, scientific, and alchemical books.

Zacharia's "Jewish Malayalam Folksongs" focused on the oral literature of Kochi Jewish women. Zacharia has been working with Johnson and others in collecting, translating, and making sound recordings of some 250 songs in this genre, which often interweave biblical tales with Malayali folk motifs, or recount a glorious history of the Jews of the region. Zacharia's thorough grounding in Malayali culture and literature enabled him to contextualize these Jewish folk songs to an extent not before attained. Zacharia proposed a typology of songs that reflect the very being of this "hyphenated community" of Indian Jews.

Venkateswarlu's study of Esther David's novel, "Jewish Experience in India, or the Making of an Indian Jewish Novel: A Reading of Esther David's *The Walled City*," not only constructed a new pattern for interpreting the experience of Bene Israel Jews, but also set this as an example of Indian Jewish fiction against the background of American Jewish fiction, about which Venkateswarlu has written profusely. General Jewish themes, such as assimilation and "otherness," as well as specifically Indian Jewish themes, such as spirituality and idolatry, intermarriage and identity, were juxtaposed.

Finally, Egorova surveyed images of Jews and Judaism in the literature of the "Hindu Renaissance" of nineteenth century Bengal, in her paper, "Describing the 'Other', Describing the 'Self': Jews, Hindu Reformers, and Indian Nationalists." Egorova indicated the markedly polar images of Jews that appear in Bengali nationalist discourse. Jews are hailed as a fellow Asian people, ancient like the Hindus. Often, this motif was used to proclaim the Asianness (= Jewishness) of Jesus, contrasted with the Europeanness of Christians. Jews, like Hindus, were said to possess a spiritual force that accounts for their tenacity. Also like Hindus, Jews did not seek converts, and based their religion on revealed authority (Veda and Torah). On the other hand, the priestly Temple cult was likened to Brahmanism, the reformer's archetypal obstacle to progress and enlightenment. Occasion-

ally, European anti-Semitic canards, such as the claim that Jews practiced human sacrifice, found their way into the Bengali discourse.

Nathan Katz, Shalva Weil, and P. R. Kumaraswamy organized the conference. As Kumaraswamy could not attend at the last moment, Ranabir Chakravarti replaced him on the organizing committee. The conference was sponsored by the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies, Nathan Katz and Braj M. Sinha, co-founders and co-chairs. It was funded by the Stephen and Dorothea Green Family Foundation, the Kashi Church Foundation, the Potamkin Family Foundation, and Florida International University (Department of Religious Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, Institute of Judaic/Near Eastern Studies,President Navon Program for the Study of Sephardic and Oriental Jewry, and Division of Sponsored Research).