

While world Jewish organizations, such as AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) and the Jewish Agency attempt to boost Jewish awareness in Bombay and other contemporary Jewish centers in India, objectively, the level of Jewish knowledge remains extremely limited. The Jewish communities in India never sported a Rabbi and the religious leadership among the Bene Israel derived from secular authority.¹³

The final study in the volume on "Bene Israel Surnames and Village Links," is a classic, based upon scientific research. It gives a comprehensive list of Konkan villages in which the Bene Israel once lived and the surnames which they retain linking them to those villages of origin. The fascinating appendices derive from 1961 and 1971 census data and provide a rich source of material for future research. B.J. Israel concludes his chapter with the remark that "With the migration of the majority of the Bene Israel to Israel it remains to be seen how long the traditional village-derived surnames will remain in use." (p. 121) In practice, in Israel, where the majority of the Bene Israel today lives, members of the community still use those names. Some call themselves by their —*kar* names on a day-to-day basis, while others only apply them in ethnic-religious situations. The affirmation of —*kar* names is reasserted in all synagogue matters such as membership registers, accounts and so on.¹⁴

Although B.J. Israel passed away in 1987, meanwhile, no member of the Bene Israel community either in India or in Israel has taken his place as objective researcher and incisive thinker. New novels have appeared, such as Esther David's *The Walled City*,¹⁵ but there is no recent equivalent of *The Jews of India*. This is a shame because the Jews of India represent a fascinating case study of Jewish communities who withstood the test of time in a non-hostile and unique environment.

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Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, pp. ix+205; 20 illustrations.

American scholarship in humanities has created a special niche for both Indic and Judaic studies. While the contributions of American academicians to Indic and Judaic studies as two distinct disciplines are well known, the inter-relatedness

¹³ Weil, "Religious Leadership vs. Secular Authority—The Case of the Bene Israel," in *Eastern Anthropologist* 49 (3-4), 1996: 301-9.

¹⁴ Weil, "Names and Identity Among the Bene Israel," in *Ethnic Groups* 1 (1), 1977.

¹⁵ E. David, *The Walled City* (Madras: Manas, an Imprint of East-West Books, 1997).

between the two has been recognized of late. This has taken shape in the emergence and burgeoning of Indo-Judaic studies as a special field of inquiry in the last decade and a half. The launching of *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* has provided the ideal platform for highlighting the various facets of the interactions between the Indian and Jewish communities. Current research shows that at the center stage of Indo-Judaic studies stand the readings in the *Jews of India*, which is the present volume under review. A relatively new theme, the Jews of India have attracted scholarly attention and Professor Nathan Katz has been contributing to this in a very significant measure. In this enthralling book Katz, explores the problems related to understanding the identity of the Jews of India, certainly a tiny minority in the vast and variegated population of India. At the root of his examination of the marginality of the Jews in India lies the reality that the Jews are the smallest minority group in India and simultaneously, in India resides the smallest Jewish Diaspora in the world. Katz is credited with bringing this tiny minority group into the limelight, and situating it in the perspective of pluralistic Indian society. The significant point is that the book not only presents many unknown facets of the socio-cultural life of the Jews in India, but that the story of their accommodation into Indian society offers a refreshing understanding of the host society itself, i.e. India. By illuminating the little known Indian chapter of the Jewish diasporic history, the author ably demonstrates that Jewish history is not merely European, but richly Asian, too.

Consisting of three main chapters and an Introduction and Conclusion, the book presents for the first time a comprehensive study of three distinct Jewish communities in three disparate regions of India, vis-à-vis the Jews of Cochin, the Bene Israel of the Konkan Coast and the Baghdadi Jews of Mumbai (Bombay), of Rangoon in Burma, but now mainly of Calcutta. The long existence of Jewish communities in three principal port towns of India implies that they can be located in the overall context of trade and cultural contacts among diverse human societies across the Indian Ocean. Sifting through an impressive range of evidence—epigraphic, ethnographic, literary, mythic and, of course, religious observances of these Jewish communities—Katz underlines that the three communities did not represent an undifferentiated cultural baggage with a generic 'Jewish' label, but had their respective distinctions. The individual traits and contours of the three communities, although falling under the overarching Jewish identity, can be seen in their origin myths and in their borrowing of 'status-generating motifs' from both Indic and Judaic civilizations. Katz presents an in-depth study of how the three Jewish groups attempted to seek and establish their identities with reference to high-ranking *jatis* and social groups in the three regions. Thus, the Jewish diasporic communities in three separate areas looked for identities in relation to the norms of social ranking in the host (Indian) society. This led the author to ask a vital question: whether members of these three communities were either Jewish or Indian, or simply Jews living in India. An unmistakable demographic fact is that the Jews constitute the tiniest minority in India, their number in India having considerably shrunk since the advent of an independent Israel (1948) where many Jews of India returned.

The chapter on the Cochini Jews informs us that the Jewish settlers in Cochin, a premier port in Malabar, have the longest tradition of linkages with India, the most

telling testimony of which is offered by the Cochin Synagogue. Emphasizing the immense cognitive power of myths and legends, Katz suggests on the basis of Jewish myths that first Jewish Diaspora in India was established in Shingly in Malabar in ca. 72 CE, following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans. Shingly was a celebrated port, variously called Muciripattanam in the earliest Tamil Sangam literature, Muziris in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* and Ptolemy's *Geography* and identified with modern Cranganore in Kerala, for being the principal point of shipping of the Malabari pepper, 'black gold,' to the West. There is a strong likelihood that the Jews participated in India's trade with the Roman Empire, though not much direct evidence is available. The masterly editing and translation of a mid-second century CE maritime loan contract document by Lionel Casson ("New Lights on Maritiem Loans: P. Vindob G 40822," in *Zeitschrift fu Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Band 84, (1990), pp. 195-206), leaves little room for doubt about the importance of Muziris—a document which could have been used by the author to further strengthen his position. There is little evidence of the presence of the Jews in Kerala from the fourth to the tenth centuries. The growth of Indian Ocean maritime trade after 1000 CE once again brought the Malabar Coast into great prominence. Along with various Arab Muslim groups, the Jewish merchants came to Kerala. Katz has rightly argued for the active role of Jewish merchants in Kerala by drawing upon the evidence of an inscription of ca. 1001 CE of the local ruler Bhaskara Ravivarman I who granted many favors and concessions to Joseph Rabban, leader of the Jewish community. The continuity of the Jews' flourishing activities is also suggested by the thirteenth century accounts of Benjamin of Tudela. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many Jewish merchants with very strong linkages with al Fustat (Old Cairo), al Mahdiyya (Tunisia) and Aden did frequent Malabar and at least some of them must have settled down in Malabar port towns. The author has briefly touched upon this issue, but one expects a more elaborate treatment of the subject on the basis of the 'documentary Geniza.' The monumental study by S.D. Goitein of the geniza papers in general and of the letters of 'India traders' in particular offers irrefutable evidence of Jewish presence in Malabar and along the Kanara coasts. The letters of 'India traders' are probably the most significant non-Indian archive of primary sources dealing with the role of the Jewish merchants in the western Indian Ocean (including the west coast of India) during the first two centuries of the second millennium. More significantly, they are replete with extremely valuable data on cultural exchanges and coexistence among Arab Muslims, and Hindus of India and Jewish merchants on the Malabar Coast and the Konkan. The author has also ably dealt with the position of the Jews in Kerala during the 1500's to 1800's. While the Portuguese attitude toward the Jews in Kerala was certainly hostile, the Jews at Cochin flourished there from the sixteenth century onwards. The building of the beautiful Synagogue in 1568, the patronage of the Cochin royal family on behalf of the Jewish settlement, the role of the *Mudaliar* (headman) of the Jewish community and the position of the pre-eminent Syrian Jewish Rahabi family (e.g. Yechezkel I, David, Yechezkel II and Naphtali—seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), and the quarter centenary celebration of the Cochin Synagogue (1968) are major landmarks of the history of this minority community in Kerala. Their interactions with both Indian society and

European Jewry generated increasing complexities within the community, obviously to claim social exclusivity following the *jati* norms in the Hindu society. The 'superior group' consequently denied the 'inferior group' a role in synagogue life and the social organization became colored by racial considerations (the infamous separation between the white and the black Jews).

From Cochin, Katz takes the reader to the Konkan coast, sandwiched as it were between the Malabar and Gujarat littorals, for his excellent presentation of the changing image of the social position the Bene Israel. This is, in the opinion of the reviewer, the most complex and fascinating chapter of the book. The first definite occurrence of the expression "Bene Israel" as a Jewish community dates back to a letter from Yechezkel Rahabi in 1768. Katz convincingly argues that perhaps an even earlier mention about them was made by Maimonides in a letter from around 1199-1200, which informs us that the Jews of India have "nothing of religion except that they rest on Sabbath and perform circumcision on the eighth day." Their arrival to India from their supposed home in northern Israel cannot be precisely dated, though a legend associates their landing on the Indian shore with a shipwreck. The author must be credited for making known to the readers a very recent breakthrough in genetic research: the "genetic kinship among the Jews from Yemen, Lemba tribes people of southern Africa and Bene Israel" has been revealed, giving some concrete credibility to the legend of Bene Israelis' arrival mentioned above. "What for years has been assumed to be merely a *myth* (italics author's), this DNA research suggests, has a scientific basis" (p. 2). Their Jewish identity began to be sought as they began contact with other Jewish groups in India. The Bene Israelis were best known as Shaniwar Telis, because as oil pressers they abstained from work on Saturdays, which was the chief marker for their Jewish identity. Generally looked down upon by Cochini and Baghdadi Jews of India because of their low profession and lack of observance of orthodox Jewish rituals, attempts were made (e.g. by David Yechezekel Rahabi) to train selected young Bene Israelis in the rudiments of Judaism with the purpose that they would subsequently take up communal and religious leadership among these Konkan Jews. This Jewish community, too, was influenced by the Indian *jati* system and divided into two hierarchic sub-groups of Gora (white i.e. the offspring of the seven shipwrecked couples and hence purer) and Kala (black, i.e. children of a concubine between a Gora Bene Israel and a low caste gentile woman and therefore lower and less pure). As long as they used upper caste Hindus as their reference groups, the Bene Israelis took recourse to Sanskritization for gaining status in the *jati*-based Indian society. But their transformation from an oil pressing caste into an urbanized, Mumbai-oriented, modernized entity also witnessed increasing Hebrewization, which enhanced their social status. With the advent of independent Israel in 1948, many Bene Israelis left for Israel with a view to signifying an end to their portrayal as an 'Indian sub caste.' But their transfer to and accommodation in Israel were not free from difficulties. Despite their proliferation (50,000 as compared to the Indian Jewish population of 5,000) and prosperity, the Bene Israelis in their new home were branded till recently as Indians in Israel, i.e. they were viewed as outsiders in Israel.

The last Jewish group to reach India was the Baghdadi Jews, appearing more or less simultaneously in Mumbai and Calcutta in the 1790s. The founder of the

Baghdadi community in Calcutta was Shalom Obadiah Hakohen, who moved to this city from Surat (1798). Jacob Semah moved from the same place to Mumbai to start the Jewish Baghdadi community. The marriage between the Hakohen and Dwek families resulted in the emergence of the Hakohen-Dwek trading empire, especially in the opium trade to China. In Mumbai, the towering figure of Sheikh David Sassoon (1794-1862) dominated the Jewish community. The Baghdadis in Mumbai found a close business partner in the Parsi community (especially the Tatas), another tiny minority, to invest in huge textile mills. The Calcutta scenario is marked by their lively interaction with the Armenians, also noted for their business ventures. The Calcutta Jewish community preferred to build up their residential quarter in the 'brown town' of the city, distinguishable at once from the white town of the Europeans and the black town of the native Indians. After 1857, there was a distinct urge on the part of Jews to become more and more Anglicized, with much greater emphasis on Western/English education. Conscious efforts to distance themselves from the Bene Israelis soon followed. Coupled with this was an ardent desire and endeavor to be looked at and classified as Europeans by the British; emulation of the British way of life, including dress, by the Baghdadis became the order of the day starting in the late nineteenth century. The Baghdadis of Mumbai felt amply rewarded in that they were recognized as Europeans as early as 1885. They have been rightly considered as Jews of the Raj. After 1947, many of the Baghdadis either moved to Israel, or Britain and other English speaking countries. Those who remained in India, like David Nahoun, the head of the Baghdadi community in Calcutta and the owner of a famous pastry shop in the city (the reviewer being as fond of their pastries as the author!), "embraced India as none of their community ever did before."

The excellence of the book lies in its rich details of the rites and rituals of three Jewish communities, the lively accounts of the Synagogues in Cochin, Bombay, Pune and Calcutta, and the lovely black and white photographs, many of them being taken by Ellen S. Goldberg, Professor Katz's wife. The outstanding feature of the book is the author's fine tuning of empirical presentation with a flowing readability; Professor Katz has never lost sight of the human face of his subject. For an Indian the book conveys a vital message: there has been a remarkable tradition of tolerance to and coexistence of various minority communities, like the Jewish ones, in India for millennia. In the recent past, there have been concerted efforts by a brand of religious leaders and political leaders to belittle and destroy this age-old tradition of India in the name of bolstering the identity of the majority population, i.e. the Hindus. This despicable design has systematically taken recourse to the distortion and abuse of history and tradition. Nathan Katz's book drives home the point that the process of acculturation and not assimilation of minority communities is the crucial factor in the maintenance of the essential fabric of the pluralistic socio-cultural milieu of India and any attempt at reversing this process will only be calamitous for India and its hallowed civilization.

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