

Book Review

Kenneth Robbins and Marvin Tokayer, eds., *Western Jews in India: From the Fifteenth Century to the Present* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013), 310 pp.

By Jael Silliman

Kenneth Robbins and Marvin Tokayer have put together an intriguing collection of essays documenting the varied contributions of Western Jews to the subcontinent. This project stemmed from Robbins' collection of art, stamps, coins, photographs, and documents of princely India, where he often came across references to Western Jews in the service of the princes. This led him to start collecting whatever he could find on Jews in the subcontinent, both indigenous and European. The book, primarily written by Robbins, draws from his collection to illustrate the presence of European Jews in India. The book is a treasure trove of new information and, with colored photographs on almost every page, is a visual treat for both historians and collectors.

This unique book excavates the range of contributions made by Western Jews in so many spheres of life in the South Asia region. Robbins has traced the Jewish roots of many colorful personalities without tying their contributions to an agenda or thesis. Rather this book is straight forward in its effort to illustrate the many ways in which European Jews have provided spiritual leadership; contributed to art, architecture, and medicine; engaged in administrative and military service; and become involved in national-level politics of the region. To date the field of Indo-Judaic studies has documented the history of the indigenous Jews but the role that European Jews have played has not been the subject of much study. This book shows that the role of Western Jews was significant and worthy of further research. It is exciting to know that a separate volume is forthcoming from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Berlin) that will focus on the role that European Jews played in the Indian national art project that Robbins touches upon in this volume.

In the second chapter, Robbins puts together a collective timeline of the Jews in India. What is fascinating about this timeline is the way in which he weaves the European Jewish interface with the subcontinent alongside the arrival and contributions of the three major communities of Jews in India (Bene Israel, Cochini, and Baghdadi). The timeline dates back to the tenth century BCE when Solomon's kingdom traded with the Malabar Coast and ends in 2010 with Carmel Berkson, an American Jew, being awarded a Padma Shri for her sculpture and photography. It is this long and sustained interaction between Jews from Europe and the Middle East that is very striking. To date there are no other accounts that bring together these various types of interactions between Jews and South Asians in one place.

Another important feature of this volume is that it does not seek to build grand theories of why European Jews came to India. Rather the book sets out to record what roles Jews have played enabling others to take the research in new directions. The varied roles that Jews played, under various rulers, counters the stereotypical Western narrative of the Jew as financier, trader, or banker. This book shows that none of the European Jews who came to the subcontinent were engaged in these professions. In this way, the European Jews were quite different from the Baghdadi Jews who came primarily as traders and excelled in finance.

The European Jews were drawn to the subcontinent for a range of personal and professional reasons. There were those who came in search for spiritual truths. The interactions between Western Jews and all the major religions of the sub-continent—Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism—is not a twentieth-century phenomena. Rather, as this book underlines, it has occurred over the centuries. Robbins has a fascinating chapter on the transformation of Leopold Weiss into Muhammad Asad (1900–1992), who describes his

conversion to Islam in *The Road to Mecca*. Weiss came from a family of Orthodox rabbis in Ukraine and went against his father's wishes that he pursue rabbinical studies and chose to study law instead. He was widely traveled and worked as a Middle Eastern correspondent that enabled him to travel extensively in the Middle East giving him a deep understanding of the Islamic way of life. Though a European Jew, he identified with the Arabs of the past. He converted to Islam in 1926. The British exiled him to India in 1932, as they were suspicious of his political agenda. Asad wrote important studies on the nature of a democratic Islamic state, and he translated the Qur'an into English. He was attracted to the concept of Pakistan as a Muslim polity. He served Pakistan as the Director of the Middle East Division of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. There is another chapter on the Mother of Auroville, born Mirra Alfassa who worked closely with Sri Aurobindo. Her ancestors were well-known rabbinical scholars who moved from Fez to Spain in the eleventh century, though her nuclear family was secular. Alfassa became a goddess for her followers and was worshipped as Durga, Kali, and Saraswati as well as being deified as Mother India.

Robbins also has a chapter on Jean Baptiste Ventura (originally an Italian Jew who converted to Catholicism). He was among the European Jews who came to serve princely or colonial rulers and worked in numerous professions. Ventura was a commander in the army of Ranjit Singh, a patron of the arts, as well as had a keen interest in archaeology. He was the first European to excavate a Buddhist *stupa* (a mound that contains Buddhist relics). In the 1940s India was a site of refuge for many European Jews fleeing the Holocaust. While in India these refugees worked as doctors, engineers, artists, and architects and several made significant contributions to the National Art Project and the nationalist struggles.

The book is full of surprises. While it is known that Spanish Jews based in North Africa engaged with trade to India for over a thousand years, Robbins documents how Vasco de Gama was greeted by Gaspar de Gama, a Polish Jewish convert, when he landed on Andejiva island, near Goa (1498). Robbins then follows the career of Gaspar to show us the roles he played as a linguist, navigator, soldier, and agent in the Portuguese exploration of India.

Robbins also documents the role that Jews played as artists on the subcontinent. Among them was Anna Molka Ahmed who is considered Pakistan's national artist. Anna married Sheikh Ahmed, an Indian artist, and moved to India in 1939 and later converted to Islam. In 1940 she founded the Fine Arts Department of Punjab University in Lahore. Anna's own painting style drew from European prototypes but she documented daily life in Pakistan in her works. She was commissioned to paint battle scene of the Indo-Pakistan wars. In the same chapter Robbins documents the role that Jewish architects played in the subcontinent that includes Moshe Safdie (who designed the Khalsa Heritage complex in collaboration with Ashok Dhawan), the American Jews Joseph Stein and Louis Kahn.

While Robbins' essays and research on European Jews in the subcontinent is the most extensive, there are other authors in the volume whose work focuses on individuals European Jews or particular regions or periods in India's history. For example, Guy Attewell focuses on the life and contributions of Garcia de Orta, physician and author of the *Coloquios dos simples e drogas e cousas medicinais da India*, published in 1563 in Goa. This work of pharmacology is arranged into fifty-nine colloquies describing plants and medicinal substances in terms of their appearance, origin, distribution, and some therapeutic uses. Orta has become an icon of Portuguese colonial expansion and exploration. Ainslee Embree focuses on the roles that Jews played as British soldiers and takes a more in-depth look at the personalities of Sir Edwin S. Montagu and Lord Reading. Both these high-ranking administrators of the Raj, though not observant Jews, frankly acknowledged how the Jewish experience had shaped their lives. These essays too, as are those of the other contributors, rich with photo documentation.

This book, very much like Ken Robbins' collection, does not seek to offer new truths. Instead, as collectors do, the items collected are placed before the viewer to form a fascinating set of accounts of Western Jews and the ways in which they impacted the

subcontinent. Ken Robbins' tenacity, lively mind, and curiosity has enabled him, once again—as in his account of Africans in India—to open up scholarship on the ways in which unlikely and unknown outsiders have played a role in shaping India's history.