

OBITUARIES

Ashin Das Gupta-In Memoriam

One of the world's leading scholars of maritime trade during the early modern period, Ashin Das Gupta, passed away in Calcutta on June 5, 1998.

Das Gupta will long be remembered for his pioneering work on the role of Indian merchants in world commerce, for his theoretical formulation of a narrative approach to history, and for his trenchant critique of the application of social science methods to the study of history. Readers of this journal, however, will know him best for his immense contributions to our knowledge of the Cochin Jewish community. His *Malabar in Asian Trade, 1740-1800* (Cambridge, 1967) introduced two of Cochin's leading commercial families, the houses of Rahabi and Sargun, to the academic world. His meticulous use of archival sources resulted in lively and elegant portraits of the commercial activities and social life of Jewish Cochin in the Dutch era.

His other books include: *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, 1700-1750* (Wiesbaden, 1979), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800* (co-edited with M. N. Pearson, Calcutta, 1987), and *Merchants of Maritime India, 1500-1800* (UK, 1994). His Festschrift, *Trade and Politics in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honour of Ashin Das Gupta*, has just been released by Oxford University Press.

After graduating from Presidency College, Calcutta, in 1952, Das Gupta earned an M.A. in 1954 and a Ph.D. in 1961 at Cambridge. He went on to a distinguished career as a scholar and administrator. He was Professor of History at Presidency College, Calcutta, from 1961-65 and 1969-1971, after an appointment as the Agatha Harrison Fellow at Oxford from 1965-68. He was Visiting Professor for three consecutive years between 1971-73, at Heidelberg University in Germany, St. Anthony's College in Oxford, and the University of Virginia. He became Professor of History at Vishva Bharati University from 1973-83, and then became Director of the National Library in Calcutta from 1984-90. He returned to Vishva Bharati as Vice-Chancellor from 1990-91, after which he was a National Fellow of the Indian Council of Historical Research. He then spent two years as an Emeritus Fellow at the University of Calcutta until illness forced his retirement.

Das Gupta was a valued resource to scholars around the world. His elegant prose, retiring demeanor, and encyclopedic knowledge made him an esteemed teacher, colleague and friend.

Frank Conlon of the University of Washington wrote in an obituary on H-ASIA (June 6, 1998): "He was a man of extraordinary intellect, independence of mind and generosity of spirit. His studies of the world commercial and cultural exchange were marked by insight and a clarity of writing rarely encountered in our field."

Das Gupta is survived by his wife, Uma, and his son, Amil. Uma is known to many American scholars as the ever-helpful, charming director of the United States Educational Foundation in India office in Calcutta.

Nathan Katz
Florida International University

Flora Samuel-In Memoriam

Flora Samuel, the authentic, charismatic and deeply committed leader of the Bene Israel Indian Jewish community, passed away during Passover, 1998.

Flora Samuel was born in the village of Ashtame on the Konkan coast of India, and studied in Bombay. In 1995, as an educated woman with exceptional organizational abilities, she was invited to become the headmistress of the Sir Elie Kedourie School in Bombay, where many Bene Israel pupils studied. In 1964, she came to live in Israel with her husband Benson (who passed away in 1989) and their children, and paved the way for many in her community to follow suit.

Mrs. Samuel, or "Manik Bai," as she was popularly known, chose at first to settle in the town of Azur, where she taught English. Here, she was away from the hub of the Bene Israel community, though close enough to visit it regularly. In 1969, she established the Indian Women's Organization in Lod, in which she was active to her last days. I was welcomed warmly by this organization when I came to carry out doctoral fieldwork among the Bene Israel community in Lod from 1972-75. Through this organization, Mrs. Samuel arranged cultural meetings and scholarships for Bene Israel students. In addition, she revived the *khirtan*, an ancient genre of unique Indian musical plays. The Women's Organization in Marathi performed *khirtans* based on the stories of Joseph, Ruth, and Hannah and her seven sons. In 1997, she published an article on the subject in the Hebrew journal *Pe'amim*, which is devoted to the study of Jewish ethnic groups.

When Dileep Padgaonkar, then editor of the *Times of India*, visited Israel in 1994, he met Flora Samuel and her friends. Back in India, he wrote that the Marathi spoken by the Bene Israel in Israel is purer than that heard on the streets of Bombay! Indeed, Mrs. Samuel was considered an international expert on the Marathi language. She founded the "Mai Bolli" organization in Israel for the pursuit of the study of Marathi, edited a Marathi newsletter, attended conferences in Mauritius and other countries, and while already battling illness, organized a magnificent international conference in Jerusalem attended by more than 300 speakers of Marathi.

Flora acted as a true bridge maker. Throughout her years in Israel, she succeeded in representing her community while at the same time forging links

with people and organizations outside of it. She taught Sanskrit for a short time in the Indian Studies Department at the Hebrew University; she cooperated with the Israel Museum on a permanent exhibition on Indian Jewry; and she organized meetings and gatherings to explain to other Israelis who the Bene Israel were and what their contribution to world Jewry had been. In this capacity, she became the Vice-Chairperson of the Israel-India Cultural Association, established in 1992 as the official friendship association between the two countries.

Our loss of the foremost female leader of the Bene Israel community in Israel is tremendous. She is survived by her three children: Abigail, Isaac and Aaron, and her grandchildren.

Shalva Weil
The Hebrew University

David I. Sargon-In Memoriam

David I. Sargon, active in Jewish and Masonic affairs, died in his Brookline, MA, home on Saturday, August 22nd, 1998. He was 90 years old. Sargon was born in Bombay, India, of Sephardic Jewish heritage. His mother's family came from Baghdad and his father came from Cochin. Sargon's family played an important role in bringing together the Jewish communities of the Far East and in promoting Zionism. His father was a *hazzan* who advocated for the rights of the Bene Israel. His uncle, N. E. B. Ezra, edited Shanghai's "Israel ës Messenger." In India, Sargon and his brothers edited Jewish periodicals including the "Jewish Tribune." In addition, they ran a business which imported printing supplies.

In 1942, Sargon and members of his family left India and settled in the Boston area. He became co-owner of a home improvement business, his occupation until his retirement in the late 1980's. Sargon was active in religious and community affairs, and was a founding member of Temple Beth Zion in Brookline.

Masonry played an important role in his life from his days in India. In Boston he was raised to the position of Master of his Masonic Lodge and, in 1998, he was awarded a medal for distinguished service. For him, Masonry helped to focus a way of life, personal and professional, in which people treat each other with respect and with a reverence for life and God.

He leaves his wife Jeanette; two daughters, Linda Bentley and Nancy Sargon-Zarsky; a son, Eliot Sargon; seven grandchildren; and many adoring nieces, nephews, grandnieces, and grandnephews.

Nancy M. Sargon-Zarsky