

Book Review

India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art and Life-Cycle

Reviewed by Ruth F. Cernea

Shalva Weil, editor, *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual Art and Life-Cycle* (Mumbai: Marg. 2002), 124 pages, ISBN 81-85026-58-0.

The splendid photograph of the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin that spans two pages in the beginning of *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual Art and Life-Cycle* by Shalva Weil is also a splendid metaphor for the goals — and considerable successes — of this book. The photograph places the reader inside the building, as though stepping onto the blue willow tiles in an approach to the podium, the heart of the community. So the book places the reader “inside” the world of Indian Jewry, a world well-known to scholars of the subject but still remote, obscure to the majority of Jews and others throughout the world. Indeed, five of the contributors are “insiders,” native Indian Jews, while the other five contributors are scholars with long experience in India.

It is a delicate task, to present a book that looks like a “coffee table” book with its large size and interesting, often beautiful photographs and watercolors, and yet provide a text that is just detailed enough, just long enough, just varied enough to entice the owner actually to read it, as well as to provide the variety of information necessary for an accurate, well-rounded introduction to the subject. This anthropologist and editor Shalva Weil does admirably, in her own essays, through the perspectives of architects and historians, as well as in the memoirs of Bene Israel, Cochini and Baghdadi Jews. We are presented with the landscapes and landmarks of Jewish India, the structure of the synagogues themselves, and then with the rites, rituals, and colorful costumes that filled the buildings and the communities with meaning, joy and memory.

The peaceful experience of Jews within India is the underlying theme of this book, and is celebrated in all the essays. Jewish tradition guided and maintained each of the groups, as it has for other Jews throughout the world, but unlike in many other countries, Jews were also free to partake, enjoy and contribute — while remaining identified Jews — to Indian life. Joan Roland's essay on notable Jewish Indian personalities documents this happy fact. More marginal Jewish groups, such as the Shinlung, the Teluga Jews, and the transient European Jews, who have not accommodated or contributed to the dominant Indian culture, are mentioned but not included in the discussions.

Weil's introductory essay locates the three communities within Jewish

and Indian history, and describes their differences. The next chapter, "The Jewish Presence in Bombay," by Sifra Samuel Lentin of Mumbai, opens with a wonderful photo showing the bust of David Sassoon before the statue of Prince Albert in the Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Byculla. As with the photograph of the Paradesi synagogue, this image serves a thematic purpose by encapsulating the close relationship of the Sassoons and the British Empire. It also serves as a visual background for the description of the Sassoons' prosperity and their legacy to Bombay. Bene Israel landmarks are also discussed, but Bene Israel history and culture are more fully treated later in the book.

Two chapters detail the architecture of India's synagogues. The first, by Jay A. Waronker, is also a guide to the Jewish presence in India, for many of the buildings mentioned are long abandoned and decaying. In addition to details about construction, Waronker provides useful information about the social and financial organization of the synagogue, which had an impact on the dynamics within the community itself. The practice of deriving income from the rental of outside or attached buildings, which is also true in Burma, is often misunderstood by visitors today, and yet it has kept the synagogues viable as the communities declined. Ilana Weil discusses the architecture of the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin with schematics and insights about its spacial placement: "The Paradesi synagogue ... (is) first and foremost ... a sacred meeting place for Jews. Its location next to the maharaja's palace is indicative of the excellent relationship that the Jews enjoyed with the local Hindus. Furthermore, its location at the end of Synagogue Lane indicates the end of the commercial, materialist, and secular world and the beginning of a religio-spiritual experience." She thus sums up the inner world of the Jews in India. Both chapters are illustrated by beautiful watercolors by Jay Waronker and by additional photographs.

In contrast to the more formal chapters by scholars, the four chapters on customs and costumes by members of the native Jewish communities are full of personal asides as well as interesting facts. My favorite is in the chapter on Bene Israel costumes by Esther David, who wonders why the Bene Israel woman feels compelled to wear shoes on her wedding day, given that she may never have worn shoes before. "I am sure by the end of the evening, the bride must have had shoe-bites!" because she is usually barefoot or in sandals or chappals.

Many of the rituals and customs, also described by Samuel H. Hallegua in "The Marriage Customs of the Jewish Community of Cochin," by Galia Hacco in "The Ritual Cycle of the Cochin Jewish Holidays," by Shalva Weil in "Bene Israel Rites and Routines," and by John and Judy Cooper in "The Life-Cycle of the Baghdadi Jews of India," are the same as those of Jews worldwide. But also, like Jews everywhere, Indian Jews adopted local practices that were compatible with Jewish meanings, such as bedecking the Torah with jasmine flowers during Simchat Torah in Cochin, and walking the Torah on procession around the Cochin

synagogues, similar to Hindu deity processions. The symbolic meaning of many of the local customs is apparent, such as the egg yolk and sugar frosting on the Bene Israel wedding cake, or the seemingly pragmatic role of children — who are pure by nature in Jewish thought — in cleaning the home before Pesach, thus also helping to purify it. Other meanings are less apparent. Although perhaps too much for the purposes of this book, these fascinating customs cry out for analysis, as another avenue into the understanding of Indian Jewish experience. A glossary of terms specific to Indian Jewry also might have been useful.

The very useful bibliographies at the end of each chapter suggest the limited circle of scholars and others intimately involved with documenting the Indian Jewish experience. As that population ages, emigrates, assimilates, and forgets, a book such as this becomes even more important. With few exceptions, the books and articles Weil recommends are not readily available to the general reader. This fact alone makes *India's Jewish Heritage* all the more valuable as a presentation of the fading Jewish experience, especially for the Baghdadi and Cochini populations.