

In Search of the (happy) Jewish Story – in India

By Irene Shaland



India of our dreams: The eternal beauty of the Taj Mahal

“Growing” into India

I dreamt of India for years. As my husband Alex and I planned our trip last year, we both began to see India as the place in space and time where one comes for self-discovery and personal growth. The truth, not told to you by travel agents, is that you have to know deep down why you are coming to India.

If you do, you are bound to discover the most refined beauty and the deepest spirituality. You will start seeing India as not merely a country but a subcontinent or rather a universe. Travelling through that universe, you gradually learn - like peeling the onion, layer after layer – some very important truths about people and history and myths they create. If you don't, you will be overwhelmed by heat and smells, crowds and beggars, street dogs and cows, and noise and dirt.

We started our trip with a specific agenda. Curious about inlaid marble art of Taj Mahal and love sculptures of Khajuraho, we came to India to see the temples and palaces. But something unexpected and wonderful happened. It was the tiny Jewish community of India that turned out to be the most amazing discovery and transformed our trip into a spiritual journey instead.

When we returned, many of our friends were surprised to hear: that: “Jews – in India? How on earth did they ever get there?” But they did. And they have been living in their Indian homeland -- in freedom and prosperity -- for well over 2500 years.

Where did the Indian Jews come from?

The story about the Indian Jewish community is not widely known, and here it is. This community consists of three distinctive groups: the Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel, and the Baghdadi. Each group has their own story to tell.

The Cochin Jews are considered the oldest, continuously living Jewish community in the world. They began arriving in waves from Judea, 2500 years ago, on the Malabar Coast of India and settled as traders near the town of Cochin in what is now the southernmost India's state of Kerala. The first wave probably arrived in 562 BC following the destruction of the First Temple. The second wave likely came in 70 CE after the destruction of the Second Temple. The late 15th century saw the arrival of the third wave: Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain. Refugees escaping prosecution by the colonial Portuguese Inquisition in Goa, India, followed them.

The Cochin Jews have always enjoyed special protection by the local rulers. As early as 392 CE (though some scholars maintain that this event happened much later, in the 11th century), the Hindu Raja (king) issued his permission for Jews to live there freely. He documented his decree on ancient copper plates, which are now kept in the Holy Ark of the Cochin Synagogue.

The Cochin Jews speak Judeo-Malayalam, a hybrid of Hebrew and the language of the state of Kerala. Only a few families are currently living in Cochin because most members of the once large community moved to Israel.



The Bene Israel Jews arrived 2100 years ago from the Kingdom of Judea and settled in what is now the state of Maharashtra. The original group - either traders or refugees from the Romans – was shipwrecked and the survivors, seven men and seven women, were thrown on the Konkan coast, not far from today's Mumbai (Bombay). With no possessions and unable to speak the language, they joined the cast of oil-pressers. Ironically, they were nicknamed the “Saturday oil pressers” because they abstained from working on Shabbat. They intermarried with mostly dark-skinned locals and later were called the “black Jews” by the “white Jews” of Cochin.

The Bene Israel Jews speak Hindi and Marathi, the languages of the Maharashtra state. Once thriving and populous, the Bene Israel group now accounts for about 3500 to 4000 people. Most of them live in Mumbai, and only a few families live in Calcutta and Delhi. The majority of the Bene Israel, which is ten times their population in India, moved to Israel.

The Baghdadi Jews arrived in India about 280 years ago. The name is somewhat misleading. Not all were exclusively of Iraqi origin; many came from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and other Arab countries. They settled in Rangoon, Calcutta, and Bombay, and because they were rich and educated, they quickly became the wealthiest community. Also called Mizrachi (Eastern) Jews, they turned their new home cities into cosmopolitan, thriving entrepreneurial centers. Some became prominent politicians like the Governor of Goa, Jacob PVS; others turned to philanthropy and built libraries and hospitals. The Baghdadi Jews speak Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali, the languages of the Maharashtra and Bengal states.

Whether they speak Hindi, Judeo-Malayalam or Marathi, none of these languages has a word for anti-Semitism! Nevertheless, after 1948, when India gained independence from Great Britain and after the birth of the State of Israel, most of the India's Jews, the Baghdadi, Bene Israel, and the Cochin, left their Indian homeland. They moved out because after the partition of 1948, Indian Jews found themselves in a different country, one that was burning with violence. As

Above: The best kept secret of Delhi: Judah Hyam Synagogue is hidden right near the tomb of a Muslim emperor



the tiniest of small minorities, they could easily envision being crushed between the conflicting forces of Hindu nationalism and Muslim separatism. So, they left behind more than a 2000-year history of freedom and prosperity and began their mass exodus to the new state of Israel where they now constitute about 1% of the

total population. Some chose to immigrate to the UK or the US.

Okay, our friends would say, then who is left? With so few Jews in a 1.2-billion-people Hindu-Muslim country, where would you find any Jewish-related sites today? Where would you meet the Jews themselves? Instead of a simple answer, let me take you on an interesting journey.

Jewish pilgrimage in India: in search of places, people and stories

Delhi/Agra

Synagogue near the tomb of a Muslim emperor

In Delhi, most tourists are encouraged to see the Emperor Humayan's Tomb, which is the World Heritage Site, and is considered to be an architectural precursor to the Taj Mahal. Near by is a tiny, one-room building that houses the best-kept secret in India's capital, the Judah Hyam Synagogue. Here is where we arranged to meet with Ezekiel Isaac Malekar.

Ezekiel Isaac Malekar of Delhi

Mr. Malekar is a prominent Delhi attorney. He is also a Jewish community leader, Rabbi, Cantor, writer, and Hebrew scholar. If you were to see him on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, you would perceive him to be a Columbia University professor. A Bene Israel Jew, his native language is Hindi, and in his perfect British English, he told us about the tiny, but closely tied Jewish community of Delhi. One of the oldest Jewish communities in the world (Jews have been living in Delhi for over 2000 years), it now numbers a little over 40 people or 10 families. So the synagogue also serves the needs of expatriates working in Delhi, Israeli diplomats, and Jewish tourists. When we discussed the complexity of the Jewish identity in the Hindu-Muslim culture, the subject

Above: Inside of the Judah Hyam Synagogue, Delhi



of Mr. Malekar's many studies, he said: "As a Jew, I have Israel in my heart, but as an Indian – India is in my blood. This is my homeland."

After leaving the synagogue, we continued our exploration of Delhi's Jewish history, in - of all places - a mosque.

Jewish atheist's shrine in a mosque

Jami Masjid of Delhi is the largest mosque in Asia, build by Shah Jahan of Taj Mahal's fame. It is an irony of history that both the Shah and the mosque have a curious Jewish

connection. Visitors and worshipers alike enter the mosque through the grand royal entrance. At the right-hand side portal is a Muslim saint's tomb. It is dedicated to a ...Jew. His name was Sarmad and he was from a Persian-speaking, Armenian Jewish merchant family. Sometime in the 1630s, Sarmad arrived in the courts of Shah Jahan in Delhi and Agra and became close to both the Shah and his oldest son, the heir presumptive. Sarmad had an interesting career: He was a Jew who turned from Muslim to Hindu and then to atheist. He discovered a homosexual love, and as a result abandoned his wealth and turned ascetic, wandering through the imperial courts as a naked fakir. A brilliant linguist, Sarmad translated the Torah into Persian. He also ridiculed all major religions of his time but was very popular as both a poet and a philosopher. Aurangzeb, an evil son of Shah Jahan, who killed his oldest brothers and imprisoned his father in order to get the throne, never forgave Sarmad for his friendship with his father and his brother. In 1661, he had Sarmad arrested and beheaded for his heretical poetry. Then Sarmad's final and typical Indian transformation happened: he became venerated as a great Sufi, an Islamic mystic, and was buried in a shrine in Jami Masjid where the anniversary of his death is commemorated annually in a festival.

India and Holocaust

There was another, much more recent Jewish story that we heard while in Delhi. It was told by Ezekiel Malekar when he learned that my grandmother's family perished in Poland during

Above: Author talks to Mr. Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, a prominent Delhi attorney and a Jewish community leader, Rabbi, Cantor, writer, and Hebrew scholar



the Holocaust. It goes like this: In the beginning of the World War II, a ship with 1200 Polish Jewish orphans and some adult guardians was not allowed to dock in Britain. However, it was sponsored by a Baghdadi Jewish philanthropist, and ended up in Bombay. But there again, the British authorities would not grant them

entry without permission from London, so the Maharajah (great king) of Jamnagar, in an India state of Gujarat, accepted them as his personal guests. There, the refugees were well cared for until the war ended. In 1989, the surviving members of the group along with their children and grandchildren, returned to Gujarat from the US and Israel, and dedicated a memorial to their safe haven, India's state of Gujarat. The

same group returned in the year 2000 when Gujarat was badly affected by a natural disaster, and the group worked to rebuild two villages. About ten years ago Ezekiel Malekar wanted to publish an account of that unparalleled chapter in the Holocaust history and contacted the Maharaja's family for comments. Maharajas' son responded that his deceased father would not have wanted any publicity because the Maharajah thought of the Polish refugees as his own brothers and sisters and treated them as such. The story of India as a shelter for Jews during the Holocaust is not commonly known, but what a very Indian story it is.

Not just Delhi, but Mumbai as well proved to be a collection of surprising Jewish stories and sites. Would you ever think of India's financial and movie capital as the city of the eight synagogues?

Mumbai

Jews settled in Mumbai (Bombay) in the 18th century: first Baghdadi arrived in 1730s and then Bene Israel began migrating from the countryside into the city in the 1740s. Today, Mumbai has the largest Jewish community in India: 3500 to 4000 people, most of whom are the Bene Israel. We visited two of the city's eight synagogues: Kenesseth

Above: Magen David Synagogue in Mumbai. This elegant blue building was erected in 1861 by David Sasson, a patriarch of the wealthiest of the Baghdadi Jewish families. Mogen David Synagogue in Mumbai. This elegant blue building was erected in 1861 by David Sasson, a patriarch of the wealthiest of the Baghdadi Jewish families.



Eliyahoo and Magen David. Both were built by the Sassons, the wealthiest family of the Baghdadi Jews. The elegant blue structure of the Magen David Synagogue was erected by David Sasson in 1861. Hanna and Eliyahoo were waiting for us inside.

Hanna and Eliyahoo of Mumbai

Hanna Shapurkar and Eliyahoo Benjamin showed us the imposing Magen David Synagogue. Hanna is an art historian and a tour guide. She is petite, vivacious, and outspoken. We

talked about our families and the food we like to cook for the holidays. “Yeeek,” she grimaced when I tell her about my usual holiday brisket: “Beef!” Hanna says that though she is Jewish, she would never eat meat of a cow, a holy animal for the Hindus. Her family cooks “mutton” for Rosh Hashanah. We also talked about Jewish education in India and importance of the JCC as a unifying center for the young Jews of Mumbai. Like Ezekiel Malekar of Delhi, Hanna is a Bene Israel Jew.

Eliyahoo Benjamin is this synagogue’s caretaker. He proudly told us about the 150-year-old history of his synagogue. At one time, his congregation did not accept the Bene Israel. “They were thought to be too dark-skinned, not pure Jewish in blood,” he says, But now, when so few are left, the differences are forgotten and they often pray together, especially during the holidays. Eliyahoo is a Baghdadi Jew. His and Hannah’s first language is Marathi.

Muslim youths of Mumbai defending the shul

The Magen David Synagogue is now in the middle of the Muslim neighborhood. Hanna and Eliyahoo told us, that during one of the Hindu-Muslim clashes, the street youngsters wanted to make sure that no one harmed the synagogue. So, the group of Muslim boys joined their hands and formed a protective wall across the building’s gates. This is the house of God, they said.

Above: Inside the Magen David Synagogue: Mr. Eliyahoo Benjamin, a synagogue caretaker (left) and Hanna Shapurkar, a tour guide (right), proudly show the author around the synagogue. Mr. Benjamin is a Baghdadi Jew and Hanna is a Bene Israel.



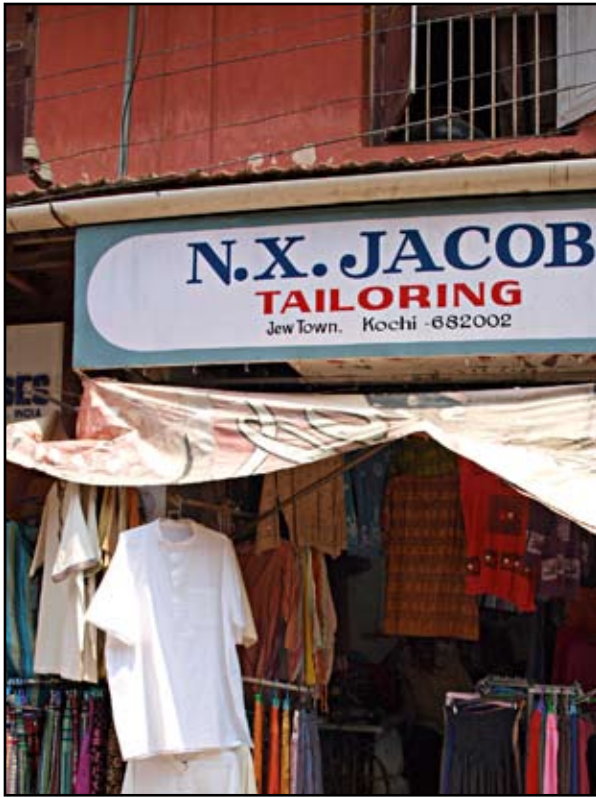
Jewish philanthropy

Colaba, an affluent area in the center of Mumbai, is where most of the richest members of the Baghdadi community lived, including the Sassons, whose ancestor David Sasson fled Iran in the early 1800s. He and his eight sons created an international commercial empire and became one of the wealthiest families in India. They also created something that never existed in India before: philanthropy. The Sassons built synagogues of course, but also schools and hospitals, kosher shops, and leper asylums. They built important Mumbai landmarks too: the elegant Flora Fountain and the Venetian Gothic-style David Sasson Library. After visiting the Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue, we went to the Sasson's library's imposing reading room, absorbed its colonial splendor, and reflected upon the impact the Jews made into so many world cultures.

We also visited another great Mumbai synagogue called Keneseth Eliyahoo ; it is located in the famous Colaba district, not far from major city landmarks like the Taj Mahal Hotel and the Gates of India. And this is where Hannah tells us about the Indian Jewish philanthropy.

But in order to meet the oldest Jewish community in the world, we had to leave the cosmopolitan Mumbai and fly to the south of the country, a town of Cochin.

Above: Inside the Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue in Mumbai. The Synagogue is located in the famous Colaba district where many of the wealthiest Jewish families used to live.



Cochin

One-street Jew Town and the foreigners' shul

The oldest continuously living Jewish community in the world dates back 2500 years and consists now of a few families living in the Jew Town part of the port city of Cochin in the southernmost state of India called Kerala. The

Jew Town now is just one long north-south street bustling with shops and boutiques, some of which have signs like "A.J. Taylor's Shop." The street is called Synagogue Lane and this is where we go to meet Mrs. Salem.



Reema Salem and her Cochin

Reema lived all her life on the Synagogue Lane. She looks a lot like my own Mom, tiny and pale, an elegant lady in her eighties. She and I talk about Canada, where her children and grandchildren live, and Cochin, which she says she would never leave because this is her real home; this is

where she is surrounded by her many friends, both Muslims and Christians. The Salems, Reema's husband's family, were among the oldest families of Cochin, tracing their ancestry to the first arrivals from the Kingdom of Judea 2500 years

Above left: A Jewish tailor's shop in the one-street Jew Town of Cochin: Synagogue Lane. This is where the oldest Jewish community in the world lives.

Above right: Reema Salem has been living in Cochin all her life. Her late husband's family was among the oldest families of Cochin, tracing their ancestry to the first arrivals from the Kingdom of Judea 2500 years ago. Reema herself came from the Paradesi or the "foreigners," the Sephardim running away from persecution in Spain and Portugal in the late 15th-early 16th centuries.



ago. Reema herself came from the Paradesi or the “foreigners,” the Sephardim running away from the persecution in Spain and Portugal in the late 15th-early 16th centuries. Both Reema’s and her husband’s family are the Cochin Jews. Their native language is Judeo-Malayalam.

I bought a book from Reema that her husband’s father Abraham Barak Salem wrote about the 450-year-old Cochin Synagogue. I remember seeing its model displayed in the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. Then Reema showed us where her street ends and the synagogue stands. The synagogue has the most remarkable Clock Tower with different faces. The clock facing the street displays Roman numerals for merchants, the one facing the synagogue has Hebrew letters, and the side facing the

harbor has Indian numerals. The “foreigners,” the Spanish Sephardim (Reema’s ancestors) built the synagogue in 1568. The name Paradesi means “foreign.”

The Paradesi Synagogue is the most popular site in Cochin. Most of the tourists are Indians. The synagogue structure is unique and resembles Kerala Hindu temples, which are very different from the other Hindu temples throughout the subcontinent. The red-tiled roof covers two of the synagogue’s whitewashed buildings, and the entrance is a plain wooden door leading to a treeless courtyard. The caretaker, Mr. K. J. Joy, tells us that the courtyard is used for Simhat Torah procession just like Hindu temple courtyards are used for their celebrations. We were asked to remove our shoes, just like anyone should when entering a Hindu temple. Here we see the most colorful of interiors: blue tiles from China cover the floor (every one of them is different); silver and brass chandeliers from Belgium; and a multitude of oil lamps of every possible color. The Holy Ark, a work of art, made by the Kerala wood carvers, houses the famous copper plates, upon which is written the Raja’s guarantee of all freedoms for the Cochin Jews. The Ark is covered by a beautiful curtain. Mr. Joy told us that the curtain is made from a ceremonial dress, called mundu, that Cochin Jewish women make for their weddings or when their six-year-old son reads from the Haftorah.

Above: Though Paradesi Synagogue of Cochin was built in the 16th century by “foreigners” (“paradesi”) it stands as a symbol of the 2,500 year-old Jewish community.



No longer do they have a Rabbi, but a few remaining congregants continue to pray together every Shabbat and on holidays. The synagogue is adjacent to the Krishna Temple. Mr. Joy told us that one might hear the chanting from the Temple during the prayers at the synagogue. This could be a manifestation, I think, of uniquely Indian harmony: two ancient civilizations, with their languages and religions blending together in peace.

Our final visit in Cochin was to the grave of an old sage.

Above: Inside the Paradesi Synagogue: Chinese tiles and Belgium chandeliers



Everybody in Cochin prays to a Jewish saint

The ancient cemetery that was in that part of town for many centuries did not survive. Small houses surround the only remaining grave memorial that is honored by many symbols brought by Muslims, Hindu and Christians. The people of India are the most pious and tolerant, we are told. They come to pray, bring their grievances, and ask for favors from an ancient Jewish saint, who they say has divine powers. The sign reads in Hebrew: "...the abundance of the light of his wisdom ("Torah") shines on all communities...let his soul be in the bundle of the living (ה"בצנת), his rights will protect us, Amen (א"ע"ז)...". (Translated by Hanoch Ben-Yami, Ph.D., Philosophy Professor at the Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, 2011)

Delhi, Mumbai, and Cochin were along our Jewish pilgrimage route. All our newly made friends are members of the tiniest

among the smallest Indian minorities -- the Jews of India. They are the least known among the Diaspora and arguably are the most interesting.

Above: People of Cochin, notwithstanding their faith, come to pray, bring their grievances, and ask for favors from an ancient Jewish saint buried in this grave. They say he has divine powers. The sign reads in Hebrew: "...the abundance of the light of his wisdom ("Torah") shines on all communities...let his soul be in the bundle of the living (ה"בצנת), his rights will protect us, Amen (א"ע"ז)...".

These new friends, our US friends, continue asking “are they Indian or Jewish?”

Who do they think they really are?

The truth about the Jews of India is that they are both: fully Jewish and, at the same time, fully Indian. How did they manage that? I found the best answer in the writing of Nathan Katz, the world’s leading authority on the Jewish communities in India and a pioneer of the Indo-Judaic studies.

Dr. Katz maintains that Indian Jews formed their historic identity based on myths and legends which they continue to tell about themselves. These stories relate events that may not be purely factual, but they serve to organize people’s perceptions into meaningful experiences. Just like many of us who may talk about World Wars I and II as pivotal events in our family histories, the Cochin and the Bene Israel Jews talk about their arrival to India over 2000 years ago, as though these events are still fresh in their memory. And they are.

The Cochin Jews’ ancestors might be traders or the refugees from the invaders who destroyed the Temple, either the First or the Second. The first Bene Israel might be running away from the Romans, or they might be people of commerce. And, they might be neither. As far as I know, nothing supports any of these stories, but at the same time, nothing contradicts them. Actual facts are not really relevant when we deal with identity; it is the thousands-year-old narrative, the stories people tell about themselves over many generations, which create that identity. “Peoples’ historical self-understanding shapes their identity more than mere history,” says Katz.

Because the person you are now depends on whom you think you were – very long ago.

What can we learn from the Jews of India?

As for me, their stories prompted me to think of how my own Jewish identity was formed: “Aggressors, murderers, Zhidy parshivue (wretched kikes)!” It was the Six-Day War in Israel, and in Soviet Russia two little girls, my friend and I, were desperately trying to shrink, to become invisible, when crossing the courtyard of our development. Our hearts were pierced by angry stares and shrieks of those, who just-yesterday, were kind neighbors. In the forty years that followed, my husband and I travelled the world, remaining ever-attuned to the Jewish story that seemed to be an endless chain of persecutions, humiliations, mass murders: from century to century, from country to country. But when we came to India, we uncovered an entirely different chapter in Jewish history, the happiest of Jewish stories ever told. As Katz states, the tiniest of India’s communities managed to live happily in freedom while preserving their religious and cultural identity without either rejecting or being overwhelmed by the large society they lived in. Why did that happen? Because of the acceptance and tolerance of Hindu? Because of creativity of the Jews themselves who created their own myths of origin while managing to adopt local customs?

The Indo-Jewish stories might lead us to think of something very important for many a Diaspora Jew: acculturation versus assimilation.

For many Jews, like my family and me, who immigrated to the US from the socialist countries, acculturation – understood as becoming part of the society while retaining one’s own religious and historical identity – was never an option. The loss of that identity as the pre-requisite to acceptance or assimilation was our only way. Being Jewish in the old country was an obstacle to overcome, a stamp in your passport preventing you from achieving your full potential. In the new country, all we ever wanted was to mutate from “immigrants” to “true Americans,” whatever that meant. Few were able -- or willing -- to find their religious identity.

But is it true only for the former Soviet Jewish immigrants? Numerous recent books and studies lament either the disappearance of the American Jewry or the decline of strength of Jewish identity.

No Indian Jew would ever be able to relate to that issue.

Our trip to India gave us more cultural and spiritual treasures than we could have ever expected. It affirmed our original belief: India indeed proved to be the place for self-discovery and personal growth -- in a way that could not be matched by any other country. I kindly challenge you to prove it for yourself.

The author expresses her deep gratitude to Mr. Raj Ahmed whose talent, patience and great knowledge of the region, have made our explorations possible.

NOTES:

Judah Hyam Synagogue: <http://delhishul.com/>, 2 Humayan Road, New Delhi 110003; phone 91- 981- 831-7674. They have services every Friday: 7:00 PM in the summer, 6:30 PM in the winter.

India and Holocaust: After we returned home, I was able to locate an extraordinary study published in Delhi in 1999, now out of print: Jewish Exile in India: 1933-1945, edited by Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voigt.

Mogen David Synagogue: <http://www.jacobsassoon.org/synagogues.html>; 340, Sir J.J. Road, Byculla, Mumbai, 400008.

Kenesseth Eliyahu Synagogue: <http://www.jacobsassoon.org/synagogues.html>; 55, Dr. V.B. Gandhi Marg, Fort Mumbai, 400 023; phone: 91-22-22831502.

Books by Professor Nathan Katz that became our gateway to understanding the Jews of India: The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India, University of South Carolina Press, 1993 and Who are the Jews of India? University of California Press, 2000.

Among the books analyzing the decline of strength of Jewish identity: Steven M. Cohen’s A Tale of Two Jewries: The “Inconvenient Truth” for American Jews, 2006 and The Vanishing American Jew by Alan M. Dershowitz, 1997.

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