

Growing Up Jewish in India



...and the roof with its deep overhangs is an exposed wooden structure covered with traditional terracotta tiles.
 Storm caused serious damage to the Synagogue
 Jews have lived in Ennakulam for centuries...

...from the early 18th + 19th Century... members left for Israel... In 1972



Some claim that the original Synagogue was constructed in the early 13th century. The current building has elements from the early 18th + 19th Century... members left for Israel... In 1972

13th century... The current building has elements from the early 18th + 19th Century... members left for Israel... In 1972

Growing Up Jewish in India

*Synagogues, Customs, and Communities
from the Bene Israel to the
Art of Siona Benjamin*



Editor
Ori Z. Soltes

NIYOGI
BOOKS

This book was made possible by the generous support of
Indian Jewish Heritage Center



Published by

NIYOGI BOOKS

Block D, Building No. 77,

Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,

New Delhi-110 020, INDIA

Tel: 91-11-26816301, 26818960

Email: niyogibooks@gmail.com

Website: www.niyogibooksindia.com

Text © Ori Z. Soltes

Images © as individually credited

Editor: K.E. Priyamvada

Design: Misha Oberoi

Cover image: Finding Home (*Fereshteh*) #77: Miriam,

Siona Benjamin, 2006, see p. 270.

Frontispiece: Kadavumbhagam-Ernakulam Synagogue *heikhal*,

Siona Benjamin, 2011

ISBN: 978-93-89136-81-4

Publication: 2021

All rights are reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without prior written permission and consent of the Publisher.

Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India



Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 7

FOREWORD 11

Ralph Jhirad

PREFACE 15

Jewish Migrations to the Far East

Erica Lyons

INTRODUCTION 33

Indian Jews as a Diverse Diaspora

Ori Z. Soltes

CHAPTER ONE 51

The Bene Israel and their
Customs and Structures

Ori Z. Soltes

CHAPTER TWO 115

The Kerala Synagogues:
Heritage of the Cochin Jews

Orna Eliyahu-Oron and Barbara C. Johnson

CHAPTER THREE 193

Therein Lies a Tale:
The Synagogues of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta

Jael Silliman

CHAPTER FOUR 213

How I Gradually Turned Blue and Other Stories
I Remember Growing up Jewish in India

Siona Benjamin

CHAPTER FIVE 249

Refocus and Return:
Siona Benjamin's Multi-layered Art

Ori Z. Soltes

CHAPTER SIX 305

Epilogue: Indian Jewish Communities
between Past and Future

Ori Z. Soltes

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES 313

INDEX 317





Acknowledgments

*T*here are three particular groups of individuals and organizations whom I would like to thank for making this volume possible. Each of the writers, it goes without saying—and yet it bears saying—has expended significant effort to provide what has emerged as a work that looks at India, and Jews in India, from a range of different angles—historical and cultural, art historical and ethnic-religious. I am thus grateful to Erica Lyons for framing our book so elegantly within the larger context of the Jewish presence in southern and eastern Asia. Jael Silliman, Barbara C. Johnson and Orna Eliyahu-Oron contributed impressive discussions of two of the three primary Indian Jewish communities—the Baghdadi and Cochini Jews—to complement my own essay on the Bene Israel. Each of these three discussions has managed to represent its subject from different perspectives, including history, culture and above all, synagogue architecture.

Both Siona Benjamin's eye-opening memoir and the following discussion of her art, toward which her essay organically leads, carry the overall narrative forward from past to present and future, while also returning it full circle to the observation in the Introduction regarding India's long history of diversity and hospitality—the experience of which provided a stepping off point for Benjamin's ongoing efforts to use her art as an instrument that can help to improve the world by broadly opening the minds of her visual audience.

Siona was also the key member of our two-person organizational team who pursued funds from the outside to help elevate the production possibilities of this volume, making it feasible for the publisher to spend more energy on the production itself. With this in mind, I wish also to thank a trio of organizations that have assisted this publication with generous subventions. I—we—offer heartfelt gratitude to the Bene Israel Heritage Museum & Genealogical Research Centre, in Mumbai, India; as well as to Marvin and Dan Tokayer and the Foundation for Remote Jewish Culture, in the United States. Both the Centre's president, Ralphy Jhirad, and the Tokayers, have long been supportive of Siona's artwork and also of my own writing, so that it proved a wonderful meeting between our worlds not only for Siona and me to share in a project that includes both of our respective areas of focus, but to re-encounter patrons whom both of us have reasons beyond this project to admire and appreciate.

Above all, I thank the Indian Jewish Heritage Center in Nevatim, Israel. In the midst of their own important cultural center project (briefly discussed in Chapter Six) they stepped forward to assure that our own project could proceed with as little fiscal pain as possible—and we look forward eagerly to the publication of this volume in a Hebrew translation that they will subsequently undertake.



I also wish to thank the staff of Niyogi Books for the attentive and sensitive job that they consistently accomplished at long distance. I am particularly grateful to Professor Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and K.E. Priyamvada, who shepherded this project through the final stages of the process, bringing it to fruition as they brought their talents as editors and—in Nirmal’s case, as a translator—to bear. We have never met, yet I feel as if both of them are colleagues and friends, a relationship that has evolved through myriad emails and their discussions.

The same is true of Siddhartha Banerjee. Indeed, Siddhartha’s demise was a shock to everyone at Niyogi and to both Siona Benjamin and myself, who enjoyed such an extensive email correspondence with him during the initial stages of this project. It is with respect and affection that I would like to dedicate this book to Siddhartha Banerjee’s memory.

ORI Z. SOLTES
Washington, D.C.





Detail from the *Megillat Esther* (Esther Scroll) by Siona Benjamin, 2007, depicting the Judaeans rejoicing after the defeat and destruction of Haman



Foreword

*T*he three main Indian Jewish communities—the Bene Israel, Baghdadi and Cochini—are easily remembered as the ‘BBC Jews of India.’ These communities are unique in the manner in which they exhibit a most dynamic combination of the Jewish and Indian heritages. The Jewish communities in India have experienced Philo-Semitism rather than the Anti-Semitism that many Jewish communities across the Diaspora have faced; they are an important part of the mainstream Indian world, well-integrated within Indian society, yet retaining their distinctive Jewish traditions and culture.

Scholars from around the world have over the years researched these Indian Jewish communities. Fascinating narratives record diverse times of immigration into India during the past many centuries, as well as more recent emigration from India to Israel and Europe, to North America and Australia—creating an unusual diaspora within the Diaspora. Researchers have produced a growing library of books and



Finding Home (Fereshteh) #102: Lilith (with finely carved wooden frame), Siona Benjamin, 2009

articles—and yet a new book such as this one is most significant. It enables the reader to explore a range of newly uncovered information regarding the three well-known Jewish communities as well as learning about new and emerging groups eager to be a part of the Indian Jewish world. The narratives present the rich Indian Jewish heritage in its migrations within the Indian subcontinent, the development of its distinctive synagogues and customs, the emergence of new Indian Jewish communities, and its own dispersions in the past seven decades.

Two particularly important and interesting chapters are the personal account and the discussion of the work of the renowned artist, Siona Benjamin—a great source of Indian Jewish pride. Siona’s discussion of growing up Jewish in India and becoming an artist is inspiring; the analysis of her work is enlightening and will introduce many readers for the first time to a singularly important part of the Indian Jewish heritage that extends a rich past into a powerful present and dynamic future.

I wish to congratulate the editor and writer, Ori Z. Soltes; the authors and scholars, Erica Lyons, Barbara C. Johnson, Orna Eliyahu-Oron, and Jael Silliman; the artist, Siona Benjamin; Niyogi Books—as well as those who directly and/or indirectly helped to make this publication possible.

I enthusiastically welcome the many readers who will find this volume so very useful in fulfilling their desire to learn more about the Indian Jewish communities in an illuminating and enriching manner.

RALPHY JHIRAD
Mumbai, India





Fig. 8. Ohel Leah Synagogue, Hong Kong

PREFACE



Jewish Migrations to the Far East

Erica Lyons

The Jewish story is ultimately a story of migrations and resettlements, exiles, expulsions, and returns. These themes present themselves as early as Genesis, the first book of the Torah, with the expulsion of Adam and Eve (and Lilith) from the Garden of Eden. Following this, Abraham leaves Ur, and later Joseph and ultimately his entire family migrate to Egypt. The entire second book of the Torah is titled Exodus, the movement of the Israelites anticipating the migratory and resettlement patterns of the Jewish people throughout its long history.

Most scholars agree that despite these early Biblical period expulsions and dispersions, the Jewish identity as a Diaspora people begins just after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. With the destruction of the Temple—and even more emphatically after the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132–135 CE—many Jews left Judaea, with many ending up after generations in the four corners of the earth. It is following this mass expulsion that the Jewish people