

# Absence of Jewish Studies in India

*Creating a new awareness*

Interior, Magen David Synagogue

# Feature

by Navras Jaat Aafreedi, Ph. D.

A few years ago when I happened to be staying for a few days with a cousin of mine in Colaba, Mumbai, I went to the street book vendors at her suggestion. She told me that I could get books on any subject at throwaway prices. When I asked for books on Jews, I was told to come back the very next day. When I returned there in anticipation, I was shown a book on juice. It is not surprising that the book vendor mistook “Jews” for juice in spite of being in the business of books, given the fact that there hardly is any demand for books on Jews. Most Indians are entirely ignorant of their existence.

It did come as a little bit of surprise to me that this happened in Mumbai, where most of India’s five thousand and three hundred Jews live, and around which, as believed, they have lived for almost two millennia. I find a resonance of the experience I had when I visited Mumbai’s synagogues when I see the filmmaker Sadia Shepard in her documentary *In Search of the Bene Israel* as she struggles to explain to Mumbaikars (locals of Mumbai) what a synagogue is, despite the fact that there are eight functioning synagogues in Mumbai.

## Setting the record straight

Ignorance about Jews is widespread to the extent that I have even come across the head of the Department of Sociology at an Indian university who innocently asked me if the Jews were a sect of Christians. Mixing them with Christians or Muslims or Zoroastrians (Parsis) is a common mistake among Indians, but the academics would presumably be expected to be better informed. Considering this omnipresent ignorance, I should not have been taken aback when my doctoral research on Indian Jews was seen to be related to West Asian Studies when I went for



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Signs from Cochin

interviews for academic positions in Indian Studies at universities in India. They were not sure what box to put my research in.

From my personal experience, I can also say that whoever works on Jewish related themes in India is often suspected of being a Mossad agent or a radical Zionist. There have been a number of attempts in the Urdu press to represent my research as a Zionist or Israeli conspiracy against Muslims. Ather Farouqi explains these types of assertions in, “Urdu Press in India” in Oxford University Press’ *Muslims and Media Images: News versus Views*. Farouqi explains, “...the prospects remain that Urdu journalism will continue the traditional game of arousing Muslim sentiments through provocative writing, and render them susceptible to the influence of the communal leadership, with which a good many Urdu journalists are themselves aligned due to their own

ambitions for political prominence and professional clout.”

## A Lack of Holocaust Education

Few Indian followers of non-Semitic religions know much about Judaism, and the knowledge they have comes mainly through various secondary sources. They rely on English literature, media reports on the Arab-Israel conflict, the accusation of deicide, and the lessons they received in European History at the school or university level with half-hearted passing references to Jews. An example of which is the University of Lucknow which has never asked its students any question about the Holocaust in its examination history in spite of the fact that it teaches courses on European history. It is noteworthy considering the tendency of students to give more attention to the topics on which questions are likely to be asked in the examination. The



Indian shop front

Holocaust isn't even a footnote. Most other Indian universities are not any different in this respect, except the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The apathy towards Holocaust studies perhaps is better explained by a look at India's historical record and the reaction to the Holocaust. As Tilak Raj Sareen argues in *Indian Responses to the Holocaust*, "It was the Indian Muslim attitude towards Jews that largely determined India's response to the Holocaust."

In the year 2002, the Israeli Government protested against the lack of mention of the Holocaust in the standard history textbook. In the book, there was great detail and attention given to the treaty of Versailles. It was merely revised to vaguely mention that many Jews were killed during the war, without specifically mentioning the Holocaust. The fact remains that the students in India are generally never told anything about the Holocaust.

There is actually even no word for the Holocaust in India's national language, Hindi. This apathy towards Jewish Studies is the reason why those who

dub television documentaries on Jews into Hindi are even not aware of the proper use of Yahūdi, the Hindi word for Jews. They usually use the English word 'Jews' instead.

### Do you really believe in the Holocaust?

I was taken by surprise when a Hindu student of mine asked me if I really believed that the Holocaust actually took place after he saw a number of books on the subject on my bookshelves. I see this type of statement as a testament to how well the Holocaust deniers have done their job in India. The media is not the only one to blame; academics are sometimes at the helm. There is even a Hindu professor I know who openly admits his admiration for Hitler, though he did not agree to an interview. The Nazis have been openly admired by the Hindu Right Wing, "whose discussion of Nazi policies towards the Jews was mediated by their general stand on the religious minorities of India, particularly on the Muslim community," according to Egorova, Yulia in *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image*. Not surprisingly there is a growing popularity and admiration for Hitler among Indian youth.

Jaico, the largest publisher and distributor of *Mein Kampf* in India, has sold more than one hundred thousand copies in the last decade. There has been a steady rise of ten to fifteen percent in the book's sale between 2000 and 2009 as reported by Ahmed, Zubair in his article, "Hitler memorabilia attracts young Indians", BBC News, Mumbai.

"The popularity in India of *Mein Kampf*, that bible of social and political intolerance, is not a new phenomenon," writes Satya Sivaraman, in his article *Musings on the Popularity of Mein Kampf from Infochange Agenda*. "From the time," Sivaraman continues, "Hitler rose to power in Germany in the 1930s there have been strong currents in the Indian mainstream that admired the Fuhrer for all he stood for and indeed even sought transplantation of his perverted philosophy to Indian soil."

In 2006 there was an unsuccessful attempt to open a Nazi themed restaurant in Navi Mumbai, a satellite town of Mumbai. A film on Hitler's last days, titled *Dear Friend Hitler!*, is currently under production in India.

### Growing a new consciousness

I have made conscious efforts to bring about positive change in the Muslim attitudes towards Jews, Israel and Zionism by introducing Muslim Indian youth to Jewish literature and cinema from India, Israel, the US and Europe. Awareness of the Holocaust is also essential. I found I needed to begin by combating Holocaust denial in my capacity as a Fellow of the Centre for Communication & Development Studies, Pune, under its youth outreach programme called *Open Space*.

In September-October 2009 I organised a fourteen day Holocaust Films Retrospective, the first ever in South Asia, at the two biggest universities

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in my hometown of Lucknow, a major centre of Muslim scholarship in South Asia. Four thousand people saw forty-six films collected from around the world, without any financial support from the state or any institution. All film screenings were absolutely free of charge. The event was inaugurated by the mayor of the city of Lucknow, where demonstrations against Israel are commonplace. During the American invasion of Iraq, flags of Israel and the US were drawn on the floor at the entrance to Lucknow's most famous landmark, the Shia Muslim monument, the Bara Imambara, so that visitor to the monument would trample on the flags as they stepped in. Americans and Israelis were barred from even entering it.

In response to actions like this, I understood it was important to have the support of Muslim academics and a number of Muslim intellectuals were asked to speak against Holocaust denial, along with many non-Muslims, during the film festival. All film screenings were followed by discussions, which were attended by celebrities like theatre personalities, educators, social activists, leaders of almost all religious communities, a number of academics and university students and an acclaimed filmmaker. Muslim scholars, like the Anthropologist Prof. N. Hasnain, Urdu Poet Prof. Malikzada M. Ahmad and the Secretary General of the Italian Muslim Assembly, Sheikh Professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi, who is the world's only Zionist Muslim cleric, spoke against Muslim Anti-Semitism. Also Jewish speakers from the US, like the Human Rights Activist Dr. Richard L. Benkin and the filmmaker and writer Sadia Shepard, and from Israel, Sharon Rappaport, Political Secretary, Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, gave messages that spoke to Jewish-Muslim reconciliation.

Introduction to other forms of Jewish cultural expression is also essential. I



The Gate of Mercy Synagogue

have tried to introduce Jewish literature from India, Israel, the US, and Europe, by organising the readings of the works of Padmashri Nissim Ezekiel, Esther David, Meera Mahadevan (nee Miriam Jacob Mendrekar), Robin David, Yehuda Amichai, Etgar Keret, Tadeusz Borowski and Katherine Kressman Taylor.

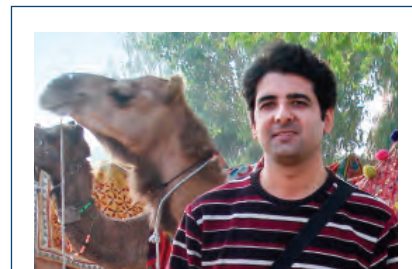
Music is also very useful in building this bridge. I organised "An Evening of Jewish Music" dedicated to World Peace in memory of Daniel Pearl on his birthday, as part of the Daniel Pearl World Music Days peace movement. Likewise, film can speak to the youth. A retrospective of the Israeli filmmaker Professor Yael Katzir's award-winning documentaries was also coordinated.

## A way forward - reaching the next generation

In order to reach out to students, I also seek to use sources outside of traditional media and academic outlets. I maintain an active and strong presence on the social networking site Facebook with groups like *Indo-Judaica* with 443 members, *Jewish Studies in India* with 467 members, *Holocaust Education in South Asia* with

366 members and *The Ten Lost Tribes Challenge* with 407 members, aimed at promoting interest in Jewish Studies among South Asians and bringing about reconciliation between Muslims and Jews. I think that the growing numbers speak for themselves. I have also been trying to build a Jewish Studies library, a resource center, which my students could benefit from.

I hope my efforts bear fruit. Change can only begin with knowledge. ✎



Navras Jaat Aafreedi, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the Gautam Buddha University in Greater NOIDA (a satellite town of Delhi), India. He can be reached on [aafreedi@gmail.com](mailto:aafreedi@gmail.com). The full text of his article, including footnotes, can be found online on the *Asian Jewish Life* website.