

# Introduction

The Bene Ephraim, ("Sons of Ephraim") also called Telugu Jews because they speak Telugu, are a small Jewish Community scattered all over Andhra Pradesh State of South India. The Bene Ephraim claim to trace their observance of Judaism back to ancient times, and recount a history similar to that of the Bnei Menashe in the northeastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur: adoption of Christianity upon the arrival of Baptist missionaries around the beginning of the 19th century.

The Bene Ephraim community has been preserving its history and traditions since prehistoric times. They live separately and continue in their Jewish traditions in a quiet way due to subtle anti-Semitism all around.

The community has been visited over the years, by several groups of rabbis, reporters and tourists. They met with the members of Bene Ephraim community and interviewed personally, took videos & photographs, published in magazines, Newspapers, showed in T.V's in USA, ISRAEL, INDIA.

To know the detailed, clear and original history of Bene Ephraim, everyone need to read the book called 'THE CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS' an introduction to the cultural translation of the Hebrew Bible among the ancient nations of the Thalmulic Telugu Empire of India, written by Shamuël Yacobi.

I have collected in this paper few articles, letters and pictures etc., in order to draw the clear picture of the Bene Ephraim community and to share the past and current information about this community. For further information or with any questions, please feel free to contact me at: [yehoshuayacobi@gmail.com](mailto:yehoshuayacobi@gmail.com), address: POB 24115, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem – 91240, Israel.

*Yacobi Yehoshua*

# A letter from Chief Rabbinate Office, 1992



הרבנות הראשית לישראל

OFFICE OF THE RISHON LEZION  
CHIEF RABBI OF ISRAEL

מכתב הראשון לעיון  
: הראשון לישראל

ב"ה, ט' אדר א' תשנ"ב  
/579-15

לכבוד

מר שמואל יעקבי הי"ד

ויז' וודה-הודו

השלום והברכה!

קבלנו את מכתבך ובו בקשתך לקבל ספר תפלות בעברית עם הסבר באנגלית וכן שאר תשמישי קדושה.

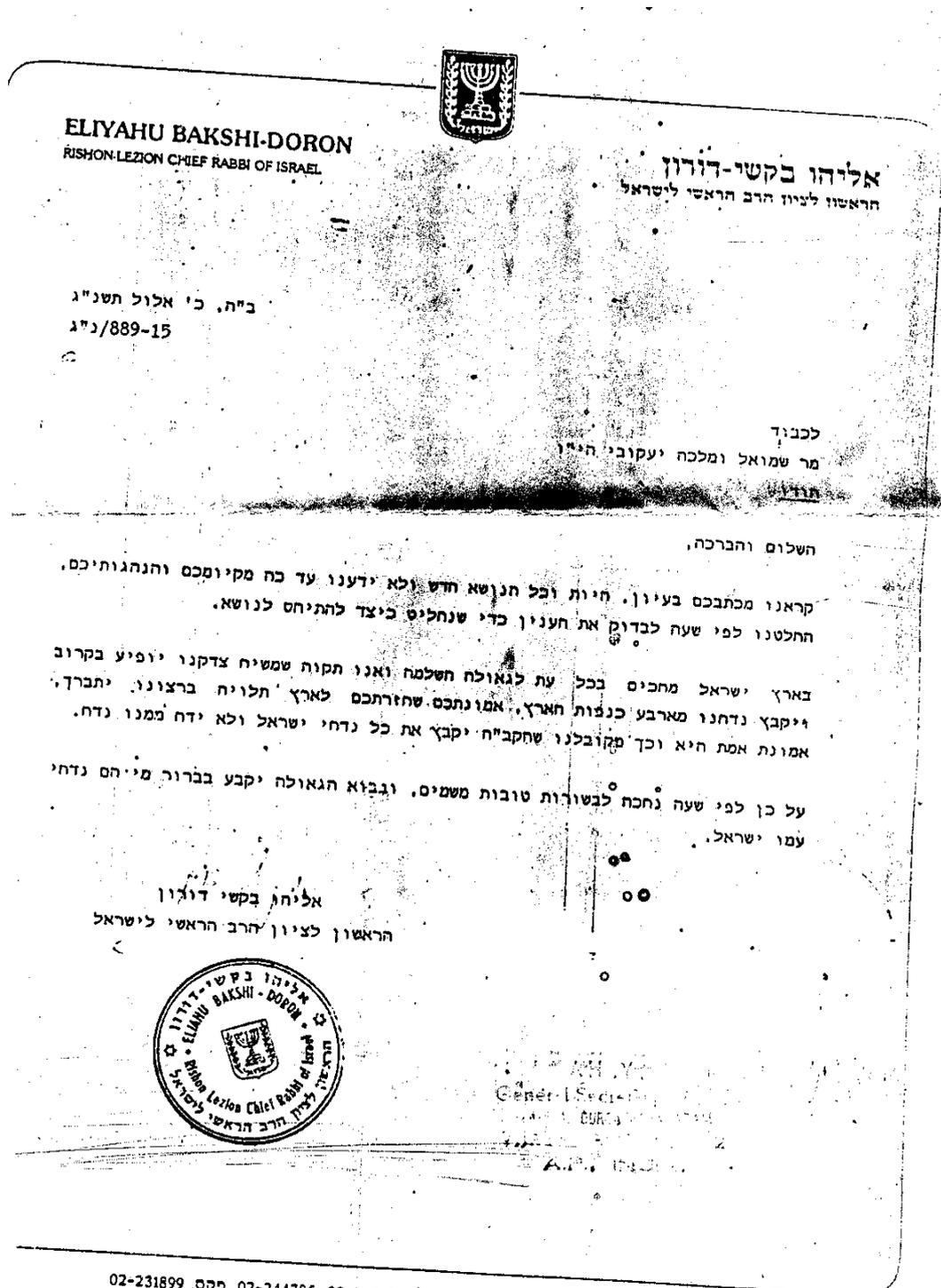
ברצוני לאיין בהניך כי עליך לפנות למר בנימין אברהם מבומבי-הודו אשר יעזור לך בנושא.

הנני מאחל לך ברכה והצלחה.

בברכה וכל טוב

הרב שמואל זעפאני

# A letter from Chief Rabbinate Office, 1993



ELIYAHU BAKSHI-DORON  
RISHON-LEZION CHIEF RABBI OF ISRAEL



אליהו בקשי-דורון  
הראשון לציון הרב הראשי לישראל

ב"ה, כ"א אלול תשנ"ג  
15-889/נ"ג

לכבוד  
מר שמואל ומלכה יעקובי הי"ד

השלום והברכה,

קראנו מכתבכם בעיון. חיות וכל הנשוא חדש ולא ידענו עד כה מקיומכם והנהגותיכם. החלטנו לפי שעה לבדוק את חנונין כדי שנחליט כיצד להתיחס לנושא.

בארץ ישראל מחכים בכל עת לגאולה שלמה ואנו תקות שמיח צדקנו יופיע בקרוב ויקבץ נדחנו מארבע כנפות הארץ, אמונתכם שהזרתכם לארץ תלויה ברצוננו יתברך, אמונת אמת היא וכך מקובלנו שחקב"ח יקבץ את כל נדחי ישראל וכל ידח ממנו נדח.

על כן לפי שעה נחכה לבשורות טובות משמים, ובבוא הגאולה יקבע בברור מי הם נדחי עמו ישראל.

אליהו בקשי-דורון  
הראשון לציון הרב הראשי לישראל



General Secretary  
Rabbi's Office

היכל שלמה, ת.ד. 7525, ירושלים, 91074. טל. 02-240676, 02-244785, פקס. 02-231899  
HEICHAL SHILOMO, P.O.B. 7525, JERUSALEM 91074, TEL. 02-240676, 02-244785 FAX 02-231899

# A letter from Prime Minister's Office, 1993

Prime Minister's Office

משרד ראש הממשלה

August 19, 1993  
213-6

Mr. Malkah Yacobi  
General Secretary  
Council of Eastern Jewry  
52-1/4-8, Plot 117, Veterinary Colony  
Vijayawada - 520 008  
A.P. India

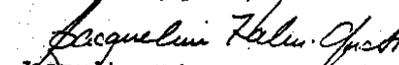
Dear Mr. Yacobi,

On behalf of the Prime Minister, Mr. Yitzhak Rabin, thank you for your letter dated August 5, 1993.

I regret to advise you that your request is beyond the parameters of this office. I would recommend that you continue your work with the Jewish Agency and the Chief Rabbi.

With good wishes from Jerusalem,

Sincerely yours,

  
Jacqueline Hahn-Efrati  
Public Affairs Department

רח' קפלן 3, הקריה, ירושלים 91919, 02-705555  
3 Kaplan St. Hakiryd, Jerusalem 91919, Israel. Tel: 972-2-705555

# **Questions and Answers – The facts, traditions, and legends related to our entire tribe**

*Malkah Yacobi, 1994*

To: Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail Chairman, AMISHAV

From: Mrs. Malkah Yacobi, General Secretary, The Council of Eastern Jewry

Dear Sir,

Baruch Ha Shem. Thank you very much for your letter dated 9-2-1994, wherein you have asked us several pertinent questions for our identity. Whereby submit the facts, traditions, and legends related to our entire tribe.

***Question No. 1: What is the population of your tribe in A. P.?***

***Answer:*** The population in the State of Andhra Pradesh is estimated about 80 Millions as per 1991 Census. Our Tribes (Castes) Madiga and Mala roughly constitute about 14% - 20% according to different sources. The Government records vary from year to year and from time to time.

According to the reliable sources known to our community, our population which is estimated to be about more than a half million, scattered throughout the State. They are found in most of the villages known as Madiga and Mala communities. So we are unable to give you the exact figure in this regard. But we are sure that our population is more than the estimated official figures.

***Question No. 2: where do your people live, City, Town, and Village?***

***Answer:*** Our Castes which are locally known as Madiga and Mala live in the villages. The practice prevailing in rural areas was that these castes were earmarked to live exactly in North (Madiga), and Southern (Mala) sides of the villages in A. P. Any new comer or tourist visiting the village will easily know about Madiga Ghetto or Mala Ghettoes. The local people Hindus, Muslims call our Ghettoes as Madiga Palle and Mala Palle or Madiga Gudem and Mala Gudem. It can be observed that Caste name is used as prefix to the residential localities of our communities. As such the residential localities of our communities are easily identifiable.

Some of our people in search of employment have migrated to the Towns and Cities, and were not identified or distinguished from the rest of the population, on account of their education and employment.

The name Palem and Gudem...our Traditions: After the scattering of our communities has made their way to Hodu (India) then Bharath. Our sect worked for the daily wages and offered themselves for serving the Land – Lords with a request to live separately from the rest of the population, and began to call themselves as

"people to work for, but lived separately from them" on the Northern and southern sides of the each village as stated above.

The Land – Lords set us apart on the North and the South side of every village so that we may protect them from their enemies. And thereby we are also known as "people who protect", i.e. people surrounding to protect, as per the tradition passed on since ages.

***Question No. 3: Since when did you come to know that you are Sheveth Ephraim, or Dan? Who discovered this? When? How do the non – Jewish people call you? Does the whole Tribe come back to Israel?***

***Answer:*** Our ancestors told us that in the ancient days, they came down from North India to the South, which includes A.P., Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Kerala apart from Maharashtra which is on the western side of the country. The present Telangana situated in Deccan plateau have the Semitic resemblance "Tel-ein-gaanah. Our people said to have opted for vine-pressing in the early ages and were called as "vine-pressing people". There are many traditional stories and legends about our ancestors.

**Legend 1:** When they were living in North India a great miracle happened. Our ancestors were living in the Tents (Succoth) and also called themselves as "Ohalyas" or "holeyas" (Tent Dwellers, or Hut-Dwellers). Our tradition says about "Gathams and Ohalyas – Miracle", which follows as:

The husbands were at work. The gentiles who worship the 'sun', visited our Tents when the wives were alone. They taught them "sun-worship" in secret. When the husbands returned from the work, the wives used to tell about the "sun-worship". This went on for several days. After some time the husbands came to know about the secret visiting of the Gentile priests, by which time the wives learnt about the "sun-worship". The husbands gathered the community court and asked Ha Shem to show His power over the Hindu-Sun-god. And the Ha Shem cursed the Gentile priests with small-pox. Then they admitted that Ha Shem's power is greater than their "sun-god" and begged the husbands to pray to Ha Shem to heal their small-pox. Finally the Gentile priests were healed as detailed in the following; when the husbands prayed to Ha Shem.

Our ancestors were known as medicine-men. Then the Gentile priests were posted with wounds looking like Female-genitals. Then our ancestors said, "Let the wounds on the bodies of the Gentile priests become like eyes". Then they gave the medicine by sacrificing a goat and prescribing the testicles of the goat to be eaten by the gentile priests who were vegetarians. The Gentile priests were healed by eating the prescribed goat testicles. Today in the P.P. State, small-pox is called "AMMAVARU" (Maaore). The Hindus ask us to sacrifice a buffalo or a goat to propitiate the goddess, AMMAVARU.

The husbands later cursed the wives to become sun-worshippers as Gentiles once and for all and get lost. The husbands determined to divorce their wives, and some wished to forgive their wives if they gave up the sun-worship. The Gentile priests took this opportunity and invited those husbands who followed their sun-worshipping wives. The Gentile priest named Viswamitra then adopted a Bow-man whom he named "god-Ephrata", and later persuaded to convince them and tried to convert them. But he also cursed them who revolted against him and the sun-worship, to become out-castes and slaves. Then our ancestors understood his plan and left North India and came to the south, bearing the names of Madigas and Malas from that time... and are now treated as the worst slaves and servants in this State.

**Legend 2:** Another legend is that our ancestors were known as "Drunken-Ephratas" (Shatyaphrata or Satyavratas). One of the legends is that the "Drunkard-Ephrata once fed the Gentile priest's wife and children with beef during a severe famine. The gentile priest came to know of this incident and cursed him to become "a cow-killer and a drunkard for the rest of his life." In course of time he forgot all the Jewish customs and became Madiga, leaving Judaism and at the same time not to be allowed into Hinduism either.

**Legend 3:** Another legend is that we were sold to the Andhra kings as a "gift" in exchange of elephants and salt of south India. Since then were we called as Mattangas (Madigas) and Malas.

**Legend 4:** Once our ancestors were propagating "non-hurting the people", a doctrine that influenced Buddhism. At that time they were living in the tents and were eating beef. The Gentile priests who were vegetarians asked them about our habit of killing the animals such as buffaloes and challenged them to explain the doctrine of non-hurting the life." Our ancestors explained that to kill the animal to eat the flesh is not considered as hurting the life. The Gentile priests were enraged by the answer and excommunicated us. Because of such jealousy, we became out-castes. After sometime there was none to till the lands of the Gentiles. The Land-Lords begged the Madigas to come and enjoy the Tax-free lands. Since then we were known as agricultural labourers in the fields. Thus our ancestors changed their trade from vine-pressing to the vine-growing and others field labour in Tel-Ein-Gaanah area.

**Legend 5:** drunken-Ephrata whose name was Manuva (Manoah) whilest bathing, found a tiny fish in his hands, which begged him to remove it from the sea where no small fish was ever safe. Manuva accordingly placed it in a bowl of water. But it quickly outgrew the bowl and various larger vessels, until finally he replaced it in the sea. It then warned him of the impending deluge and directed him to put a pair of all living creatures as well as the seeds of every plant into a boat. He was then to go to the south when a great fish appeared, he should use the body of the serpent as a rope and attach it to the horn of the fish which would then tow the boat to safety.

On hearing this Manuva realized that the miraculous fish was none other than the tiny fish once he saved. Later when a great storm arose, the fish duly appeared, towed the ship to a mountain and then showed him how to let the vessel slide down as the waters subsided. Thus our ancestors came from North to South, and re-started their lives in Tel-ein-gaanah area and were spread there. Since then our ancestors called themselves as fish men and salt men (i.e. Madiga and Mala).

Our people believe that the fish denotes growth and rapid reproduction. They also believed that Moshiach will be like "Fishman" and will save us from deluge.

**Legend 6:** Another legend is that our ancestors were great medicine-men. The drunken-Ephrata always sits under a tree and teach Torah – way of life. The gentiles laughed at him. Ha Shem cursed the Gentiles with a sickness. They begged him to heal them. The drunken – Ephrata mixed his spit in water and asked his wife to sprinkle it on the gentile priests. Then they became whole. But later excommunicated us. He began to live on the bank of a river. The Gentile priest asked him to go towards the down – stream. Then he went to the down - stream but asked the river water to flow backwards and taught a lesson to the Gentile priest. Again the Gentile priest asked him to leave that place within seven days. On the seventh day, he stopped the sun – rise and taught a lesson to the gentile priest.

**Legend 7:** The legend which is well – known to all our people is the story of Aron – dhatia. She belonged to our community, but married a Gentile priest named Vasista, the husband of Vasti. Aron – dhatia later was given status of a star in the stellar system and was considered auspicious. The newly wedded couple are shown the star Arom – dhatia as mark of auspicious to vogue for all castes. She warned our community not to marry the Gentiles. Despite her strict instructions not to teach our customs to gentiles, our community betrayed her in passing all customs to the gentile priest Vasista. Then Aron – dhatia cursed us for teaching our customs to the gentiles. Because of the effect of her curse, we became very poor and sold ourselves to the Hindu Land – lords of south India. Even to-day the Gentiles call us as "Aron – dhatians".

### **The Teachings of Sadok:**

In Guntur district, some years ago, a learned man of our caste, started teaching Torah among our people. His family brought the saying that Madigas are from Ephraim, and the Malas are from Dan. According to Sadok, our ancestors came from North India to the south. They have hidden all the information at a place called Nandyala. His family members David, Isaac, Yoseph, Shimeon, Benyamin, Yacob (Who had gone to Netal, Africa), Sarah, Deenah, Elia, Solomon, Mary Victoria, David Benyamin, Shamaiah, Peraiah, Ramaiah spread the above said saying to their family members.

The dig – out of the graves of our ancestors at Nandyala revealed their connection with Hebrews: to cite examples the coins found in the graves wherein Hebrew

language was present. However, this dig – outs were not widely publicized. In course of time we lost our tribal characteristics and we are now called as Madigas and Malas.

The Government included us in the Scheduled castes list. The names aron – dhatians, Goshentgis, Atsadis, Kommu or Komma (the Horn – blowers), etc are included in the list. At present a few families accepted the teaching of Sadok and started observing Shabbath first. They all gathered and discussed about the community. Sadok's nearest relatives were spread in three districts at present. As a matter of fact all the members of the tribes are related very closely by their surnames.

The relatives of Sadok observe all the possible Jewish customs today. They are willing to make Aliah as the first – fruits of these tribes from A. P. State. They are very humble and hard working. They depend solely on Ha Shem to take them back by sending Eliyahu Hannabi.

***Question No. 4: How did you arrive to the conclusion that you left Babylon 2450 years ago?***

***Answer:*** According to Sadok's relatives, our ancestors had been excommunicated and were sold to the Hodu kings, because our priests married the Gentile women.

They left Eretz Israel and came to Hodu. They have undergone Ha Shem's "yedu yedu janmala bandam" (i.e. 7 times 7 generational tie or punishment) among the Gentiles. We are not aware of it's beginning or end. Sadok's relatives say that it was always 7 times 7 generations.

Sometimes they also say that it is 'Abraham's yesar'. In our colloquial saying when someone sets us up, our people use this as a saying. 'To put yesar to somebody' means setting up a plan for destruction, in the sense, he has set up a plan to destroy someone. Sadok's relatives teach us that the time will come when Israel elcts their king over them again, and then all tribes will return to Israel including us and build the Temple. Till the return of Aron – dhatians the Temple will not be built.

Meanwhile if somebody says that the Temple is built or the king is elcted in Israel, the Aron – dhatians should not believe according to Sadok. Sadok was a Moreh (also Bodakudu which means a teacher). There is now remained a village called Morehpudi or Murikipudi. There was a great famine in that village (A. P. State) and people ate the dead bodies and mud for their survival. Sadok taught Torah stories in that village.

***Question No. 5: What are the signs that make you different from the people around you? In the past and now? Is there any difference in your looks that distinguish you from the gentiles around you?***

***Answer:***

**In the past**

1. The turban.

2. The sissith.
3. The walking stick (rod).
4. A leather belt on the left shoulder (Bodduvaru).
5. Living on the Northern and southern sides of the village.
6. Beef – eating prevalent in the Madigas.
7. Burying the dead in our own burial place with a Kaburu (a message of death).
8. Marriage always at the groom's house, after the payment of the bride – price (oly).
9. Marriage two times, i.e. 1. Betrothal 2. Consummation.
10. Dedicating the first – born, selling and buying from the community – house auction.
11. Tonsuring ceremony by maternal uncle.
12. Buffalo – sacrifice to El – amma, and leaving a live buffalo in the fields/wilderness (Devara pothu or Makira – dunna, which means a buffalo dedicated to Ha Shem).
13. Buffalo beheading by a special man with a special knife.
14. Bringing the bride under 'Ullidam' (Huppah) to the grooms house.
15. Special musical instruments called tappeta or Dappu (Taph-ta, Doph).
16. Yearly sacrifices to El-Amma (the maid servant of Ha Shem), a virgin daughter of Mathanga who is know as Ephata or Pothuraju.
17. Offerings such as Cup, Basket, Earth, etc of 7 kinds .
18. Lamenting 7 days, 30 days, and 1 year for the dead, depending upon the akinness to the deceased.
19. Kula Kattu (a community court) maintained to settle religious, social and other community matters.
20. A festive day observation when a girl attain puberty.
21. Practicing of the community laws (kula kattu) for marriages, deaths, burials, levying of fine for violation of kula kattu.
22. Community dinners/festivals for El-Amma, Mysamma, Pochamma, Sammakka, and Sarakka.
23. Observation of the harvest festival.
24. Kolupulu (yearly or occasional sacrifices) at the times of the spread of contagious diseases like cholera, malaria, plagues, famines, and draughts to propitiate.
25. Sword dance at the time of festive days.
26. Selecting the kula – pedda (the headman of the community), and others such as the elders of the community and the servants of the community namely Kulapeddal, Talari, Saladi, Yetti, Mothadu, according to the surnames, number of families and hereditary.
27. The widowed woman should bear the surname of the deceased husband and his brothers will take care of her and the kids.
28. First – fruits festival (pelalu, atukulu etc).
29. Circumcision at different ages for the males by the elders of the community.
30. Observation of menstruating period of woman as unclean until taking a ceremonial bath.

31. Celebration of "purudu", (celebrating the new-born), Annaprasa (first feeding of rice), are being followed.
32. Members of some families are (secretly some times openly) having house – gods and goddesses like Teraphim.
33. The community attends to field labour, brick – making, butchering, tanning, wool – work, weaving and all types of hard labour.
34. The community have their own priests like as Dasulu, musicians, kommu, komma, Asadis or dancers and Binedu or toddy – tapers, mastin or the body – guards of the community.

At present the above said practices and rituals distinguish us from the other communities and make us feel we are same of the Hebrew descent.

### **At present**

1. The elderly people still observe some of the above mentioned customs even to-day. Due to urbanization, industrialization most of the practices were forgotten today, also in the matters of strictness of the community concern, but let go the strictness in any matters of modernism.
2. Circumcision is not observed in our communities today.
3. Sacrifices are not observed today as strictly as in the past except in some places that too secretly as the Government has restricted the practices of the animal – sacrifices.
4. Use of Turbans, walking with sticks, can be seen in remote villages but not used among the educated, and the youth in the urban and semi - urban communities...And the wearing of the leather – belts in public were forgotten long back.
5. Shabbath observation and some of the other festivals are not observed.
6. The self awareness that we are Jews, is not at all there unless someone discusses it.
7. Treated as "untouchables" and included in the Scheduled castes list.

### **Regarding the past or the present:**

1. Marriages within the community subject to observation of lineage (with a few exceptions) is our strict practice.
2. Practices such as 'Huppah, Bride – price, marrying twice, and other marriage customs are strictly observed.
3. Beef eating, koshering by a special man with his special knife, shedding the blood on the floor and covering it, with dirt all these are strictly observed.
4. At the times of natural disasters, the sacrifices are still observed.
5. Dedicating the first – born to Ha Shem is still observed.
6. Burial practices in a separate burial place with a message of Kaburu and all the related customs are strictly followed.
7. The widowed woman will have the surname of the deceased husband.

8. The community court and the community Laws are strictly observed in remote villages.

Those who are aware of the above practices distinguish themselves from the Gentiles and try to identify themselves with the ancient Hebrew community by the appearance. But all the natives in the villages easily distinguish us by our looks. However in towns and villages it is very difficult to differentiate us from others.

The Madigas are fair in complexion in Telangana. In the Northern parts of India they are called Tsamars (who deal with dead animal skins) are fair in complexion. But in the southern parts of A. P. and in down south, the Scheduled castes in general are dark in complexion.

We have a wonderful media of communication and reaching our communities and all the members of the caste all over A. P. to some extent. Our Sur – names are familiar among ourselves.

***Question No. 6: When did you convert to Christianity? How did this happen?***

***Answer:*** The history of the Notsrim of the Madiga caste says that during a great famine, 120 years ago, the American Baptist Mission took up famine – relief work and converted 2222 Madigas in A. P. on a single day. Later the Mala tribe was converted by the American Evangelical Lutheran Mission. Anti – Semitism was taught more by the Lutherans amongst the natives. But the local preachers were attracted by the stories of the Torah and therefore the Missionaries were disappointed by the continuation of our old customs. They called us "Nominal Christians" during the famine time.

Our local preachers observe all the ancient customs on all occasions with some exceptions. Because of the poverty, we were forced to depend as bonded – labour on the Missionary funds, ever since the beginning of conversions till today. When we express some extra interest in our own customs, the Missionaries threatened to stop the financial aid. The Missionaries continued the financial support still from abroad. The members of the castes who live in remote villages (though they are called "nominal Christians) observe all these old customs.

About 90 years ago, the British Government appointed a commissioner to study and record our traditions. We are enclosing a copy of that report by Edgar Thurston "castes and tribes of southern India, 1909 under the sub – heading of Madiga and Mala page numbers from 292 – 325 and 329 – 387. The commissioner being a Gentile / Christian took a Brahmin assistant named K. Rangachari of the Madras Government Museum as interpreter. Therefore the report of the commissioner does not reflect the true picture and not enough to understand our past traditions and customs. In the other sense it is a report in a Brahmin's perspective. However, we herewith appended the extract of the said report for your information. We also enclose another report submitted to the UNO about the persecutions of our castes with

a few illustrations. But these are all just enough for you to have a bird's eye – view on our castes, as they do not say that we belong to Sheveth Ephraim or Dan.

**Questions relating to the community that practice Judaism:**

***Question No. 7: How many men, women, children are there in the community?***

***Answer:*** This again is a critical question because we all are scattered through – out the State of A. P. All the members of castes except a few Notsarim, observe ancient Hebrew practices as mentioned above. In some remote areas still our people observe Buffalo, goat, sheep sacrifices secretly since the practice is prohibited. At present about 125 families observe all Jewish Mitsvoth.

***Question No. 8: when did you start observing Mitsvoth? How did this happen? What did you practice before this?***

***Answer:*** Since times immemorial, our people have been observing the Mitsvoth. But having been sold by the Persian kings to Hodu and then to the A.P. State in exchange of Elephants, fish, and salt, we were living like slaves. Because of such a slavery, we were treated in a way known as "Am – Anusim" (Treatment given to the depressed classes, Daliths, down – trodden and the people of God...all these names are related to Madigas and Malas). In course of time all our Jewish characteristics slowly withered away, leaving us with certain vestigial characteristics/practices as we are today. In a modern changed way of life, it is very difficult for us to prove our Jewish identity. The Government of A.P. does not recognize us as Jews, in spite of our representation. But we strongly believe and can say boldly before anyone and anywhere that Ha Shem has revived Judaism in us, bringing the dry – bones back to life. A few families related to Sadok started observing Shabbath, learning Torah and Hebrew Be Ezrath Ha Shem. These have the Jewish spirit in and out.

***Question No. 9: What Jewish literature do you have? From the past and now?***

***Answer:*** From the past: After being sold away as slaves, we were prohibited from learning. As such our legends, history and traditions passed on from generation orally and lost its original characteristics in the course of time. But it is understood that certain sub – Sects of our castes i.e. Dokkala still are in possession of the scriptures written in ancient language. The practice of keeping some scriptures in "gunas" (clay – pots) was said to be observed in Kurnool district, at a place called Nandyala (Nun – dayal). Unless someone like yourself initiate and recommend to our Government to carry out excavations in the Nandyala area, we may not be able to prove our identity firmly.

At present we are using the Jewish literature (Hebrew and English) brought from Israel by our representative. However the same is given as message in local Telugu language.

***Question No. 10: Did anyone help you or is helping you to learn Judaism? If yes when and how?***

***Answer:*** Mr. Shmuel Yacobi is teaching the stories from the Torah and also the preliminaries of Hebrew language to all of us. All prayers and messages are mostly given in the local language only. The Torah stories are taught by a few educated people of our caste in three areas, i.e. Guntur, Krishna and Prakasam districts. We are using the Torah translated by the Notsarim. We do not have a Torah scroll, but we have Tanachs.

***Question No. 11: Which Jews of the world are you in contact with?***

***Answer:*** We have contacted the world council of Synagogues of the Conservative Judaism (The Masorti Movement), who in turn have advised us to contact you for all related matters.

***Question No. 12: Is/are there Jewish customs/traditions that were practiced in your far away past and continue till today?***

***Answer:*** We have dealt in detail elsewhere, the practices followed by us as mentioned previously. We still observe all the ancient Hebrew customs and traditions.

Lastly, at present we do not have a Fax facility or a Telephone. However as soon as we receive any communication from you, we will send you the necessary information by Fax or can call you over phone from a postal departmental office. Regarding this information, we request you to visit us and see our members. We are scattered around 100 kilometers near and around Vijayawada, situated on national highway No. 5 by road and a prominent railway junction.

In the A.P. State we are known as Madiga and Mala. But nobody can believe us that our ancestors were Jews. In Vijayawada we gather at some ones residence or a rented house on Yom Shishi and on Shabbaath evenings and on special occasions. We gather and sing songs, read some Torah stories, and conduct prayers in the local language. Since the congregation is new to the Hebrew language, only certain important scrolls are read / made understood in the Hebrew language.

There are two other villages called Chebrole and Yerajerla where the relatives of Sadok gather and did the prayers in local language.

At these three places (Vijayawada, Chebrole, Yerajerla, Machilipatnam, Ponnur) mainly and at other places also, the local people call us as Madigas, and will not identify us as Jews. Therefore when you ask anybody in these areas, you can ask anyone from our people (Madigas) only.

We bring the above said facts and practices that establish our identity with the Hebrews to your notice for your better understanding. Hence we are here with the lost identity looking to Ha Shem for help. Yes, the G-d of Israel is mighty. Baruch HaShem. Shalom and Lihithraoth.

**Some Telugu words used by the community (Madigas and Malas) + their other names + General words.**

<i>S.No</i>	<i>Telugu word</i>	<i>Hebrew Word (Equivalent)</i>
1.	Adi (unto + a place) Adi – Jambu, Adi – Andhra, Adi – Karnataka, Adi – vasi(places in India)	Ad + Erets
2.	Madiga (a caste)	Midag
3.	Mala (a caste)	Melah
4.	Saladi (an attender)	Seled
5.	Chamar (a caste)	Tsemer
6.	Aron – dhatians (a caste)	Ahron – dhati
7.	Bariki (a caste)	Baruchi
8.	Dandasi (a caste)	Dan + Dassi
9.	Gasangi (a caste)	Goshen + Gi
10.	Mathangi (a caste)	Mattan (Mathan)
11.	Ell – amma – varu (a caste)	El – Amma
12.	Holeya (a caste)	Aholah
13.	Mahar (a caste)	Mahar (Machar)
14.	Manne (a caste)	Manoah
15.	Mashti (a caste)	Mashthith (Mishthah)
16.	Mitha (a cet, pillow, a high place)	Mitha
17.	Asadhi (a Caste dancer)	Atsdhi
18.	Tel – an – gana (a place in A.P.)	Tel – eyn – gannah
19.	Ainavolu (Bikkavolu, Rajole, Minavolu – villages in A.P.)	- + Avale
20.	Vistharinchu (Increasing)	Ashtera
21.	Puran (There are several villages of vine pressers)	Purah
22.	Peraiah (2 name of person)	Perayya
23.	Kaburu (at time of death)	Keber
24.	Padu (name of villages)	Padhui
25.	Nagar (name of towns)	Nagar
26.	Nagarika (concerning other towns)	Nakri
27.	Gali (cast away)	Gaal
28.	Palem (ghetto)	Pala – am
29.	Kula (some our castes)	Galuth
30.	Abbo (Alas)	Abo
31.	Ebudi (Ashes)	Ebood
32.	Abba (Daddy)	Abba
33.	Agadam (Legend)	Agadah
34.	Avva (Lust, desire)	Avvah
35.	Oi (oh, alas)	Oi
36.	Oi –bab – oi (Times of trouble)	Oi – ba - Oi
37.	Aviri (Steam, Air)	Aviri
38.	Ah (Alas)	Ah
39.	Amma (Mother & Maid – servant)	Amma
40.	Gai (Small valley)	Gai

<i>S.No</i>	<i>Telugu word</i>	<i>Hebrew word (Equivalent)</i>
41.	Naganna (2 name) Nagaiah (2 musician)	Nagan
42.	Gola + Konda (Place of high, where slaves live )	Gola
43.	Gatham (People dig trenches)	Gatham
44.	Darshan (Make it clear, a school of thought)	Darash–Midrash–Darshan
45.	Baari (strong)	Baari
46.	Guna (pot)	Ganez
47.	Galli (Turning)	Galil
48.	Natu (To plant)	Naata
49.	Sodi (Secret)	Sodee
50.	Ellaiah (Name)	Eliyahu
51.	Saduru (arrange), Sudra (a caste arranged)	Seder, Sidder
52.	Chaku, Tsaku (a knife)	Saken
53.	(para) – Manam (divine) feed	Mannah
54.	Barre (Buffelo)	Pharah
55.	Thala (Head), Tala–tala (Concerning curly or sharpnests)	Tal – tel
56.	Rushi (a sage, headman)	Rosh
57.	Matla (a branch, sect shoot of a tree)	Matteh
58.	Arugu (Place to lie down high place)	Aruga
59.	(Gonthu) kol (Throat, voice)	Qol
60.	Kannam (to steal)	Gannav
61.	Akali, Akalinchu (to eat)	Aakal
62.	Kura (Curry, Chilli)	Karif
63.	Dunna (Ballock, Buffelo – god for sacrifice)	Adon
64.	Adoni (a village in A. P.	Adoni
65.	Katha (a ledger written)	Kathar
66.	Yetu (a stroke of a per)	Yate
67.	Kala (dream)	Chalome
68.	Kamma (a caste of Buyers), Kommce (Trumpet blowers)	Kamah
69.	Ye-vypu (which way)	Eifo
70.	Balaiah(a name)	Baal - yah
71.	Co – bali (a word in sacrificing)	Kabbalah
72.	Akka (sister)	Achah
73.	Bo Bo (Calling any one particularly hen)	Boi Boi
74.	Kula – katt (Community rules)	Halakka
75.	Kattu (Binding of a sect)	Kath
76.	Banthe (Community dinner at Bar/ Bath Mitzvah)	Ben / Bath
77.	Uru (village)	Yeer
78.	Shat yavrata, Shat – Ephrata (a name)	Shat – Ephrata
79.	Gatham (a sect digging vine presser)	Gath – Am
80.	Phalani (certain one)	Pheloni
81.	Kothagandlu (Harvesters)	Kotzavim
82.	Narudu (a man)	Naar
83.	Yeka, Okadu (one, one person)	Echad
84.	Mayam (like many waters) Jana wayam	Mayim

## **Sadok's teachings**

### ***1. Devarim 31 : 17, 18***

At that time my anger will be stirred up against it; I will forsake then; I will hide my face from them so that it will fall prey to destruction and many evils and troubles will come upon it. At that time it will say : "Truly because my G-d is not in my midst have these evils come upon me".

And I, I will hide ma face at that time only because of all the evil that it has done in turning to other gods.

### ***Devarim 32 : 17, 20, 26***

The song of Moshe Rabbinu:

"They made offerings to demons, Non – gods, Deities of whom they knew nothing, new ones that came up of late, Whom your fathers never dreaded".

And He said: I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be; For they are a generation of constant change sons in whom there is no trust.

I would say: "I will put there in a corner; I will make their memory disappear from among mankind;

### ***2. Nehemiah 7:61, 64***

And these were they who went up from Tel-Melah, Tel-Harsha, Keruv, Addon, and Immer; but they could not tell their father's houses, nor their seed whether they were of Israel.

These sought their register, i.e, the genealogy, but it was not found; therefore they were excluded from the priest hood as unfit.

### ***3. Esther 3:8***

And Haman said to the king Ahashverosh, there is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces (from Hodu as far as Kush, 127 provinces) of the kingdom; and their laws are different from all people; nor do they keep the kings laws; therefore it is of no benefit to the king to tolerate them.

### ***4. Vayikra 26: 38, 39, 40***

You will become lost among the nations, and the land of your enemies will devour you.

But those of you who will remain will rot away because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies, and they will rot away also because of the iniquities of their parents which are still with them.

Until they will acknowledge to themselves their iniquity and the iniquity of their parents with which they committed perfidy against me, and also that they walked with me only by chance.

**5. *Ekah 4: 14, 15, 16***

They stagger blindly through the streets; they are defiled with blood, and none can touch their garments.

They called out to them; "Depart, unclean! Depart, Depart, do not touch! For they are fugitives even wanderers; they said they shall sojourn among the nations".

The presence of the HaShem divided them! He will regard them no longer! They respected no more the presence of the priests, they favored not the elders.

***Ekha 5:20, 21, 22***

- Why do you forget us forever, for sake us so long?
- Restore us to you, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.
- For is
- For if you have utterly rejected us, you have already been exceedingly wroth against us.

**6. *Yeshayahu 47:6***

I was angry with my people, I have profaned my inheritance, and given them into thy hand; thou did'st show them no mercy; upon the aged hast thou very heavily laid thy yoke.

**7. *Yirmeyahu 50:6, 7***

My People has been lost sheep; their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away on the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their resting place.

All that found them have devoured them: and their adversaries have said, we are not guilty, because they have sinned against HaShem; the habitation of justice, even HaShem, the hope of their fathers.

Sir, Besides the few above mentioned verses Sadok's family members show us many, many things from the Torah. And some of our old Telugu community songs, also explain our situation in this countrige.

**For Example:**

"I will not leave you until you bless me O Elohim.....until you seek me .....until you find me, as you promised.....".

According to Sadok's teaching even if few of Arondhatians are restored and make Aliah, HaShem's promise will come true. This is our hope and prayer. From the beginning till today, all the qualities remained in us, even thought vague or pale, we present ourselves before you. We can not prove anything that belong to Ephraim and Dan tribes except a tradition known to only Sadok's family.

Please go through these photo – copies and other materials and write us back for further information regarding any particular item. These details are quoted from the following books.

1. E. Thurston – Castes and Tribes of southern India, Assisted by K. Rangachari, Vol 1 – 7, Government press publication, Madras, 1909, (Madiga and Mala, Vol IV K–M).
2. Ancient Hindu mythology – Narayan Aiyangar, pub – Deep & Deep publications, New Delhi, 1983.
3. Memorandum to the U.N.O. 1968, shows that the Madiga and Malah (Adi Andhras) had no awareness that they were Jews. But they are depressed classes, continually persecuted by the Hindus, till today.
4. Deccan Chronicle, Vijayawada, Sunday February 27, 1994, p 7.

# A letter from Prime Minister's Office, 1995

Prime Minister's Office

משרד ראש הממשלה

March 23, 1995  
כ"א בשבט התשנ"ה  
PAD5.852

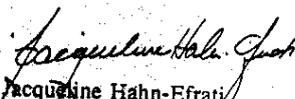
Mr. Shmuel Yacobi  
H.No. 30-24-5/4  
Durga Agraharam  
Vijayawada - 520 002  
India

Dear Mr. Yacobi,

On behalf of the Prime Minister, Mr. Yitzhak Rabin, I  
acknowledge receipt of your letter which reached our office  
on March 11, 1995.

Before I investigate your request, I would appreciate if you  
would send me a copy of your letter of invitation from  
Yeshivat Nahalat Ha Zvi.

Sincerely yours,

  
Jacqueline Hahn-Efrati  
Public Affairs Department

רח' קרית 3. הקריה ירושלים 91919 סל' 705442 02

# Meet the Telugu Jews of India

*Jason L. Francisco, 1995*

*(Editor's note: The author, a documentary photographer, is currently living in Detroit and working on a project covering the American "Rust Belt.")*

When I arrived in the villages of rural Andhra Pradesh, in southeastern India, in the summer of 1994 to begin a year of photographing and researching the lives of working families, most people assumed I was an itinerant Christian priest.

Approximately 70 percent of the untouchable communities in coastal Andhra district are Christian, which is to say 30 percent of the entire population. Although the Bible is widely taught, it took me some time to discover the Telugu word for Jews, *yudulu*, which was not a commonly used word anyway. Most people, including the Christians I came to know, had never heard of Judaism, and seemed to think it was a Christian sect. I figured I was probably the only Jew in the state.

When a friend informed me after several months that a Jewish family was living nearby, I attributed it to communication difficulties. I was shocked when I was greeted with a hearty "shalom" and found a *mezuzah* on the door of the family's house. I was introduced to the world of a tiny Jewish community which makes up in effort and desire what it lacks in certainty about its destiny.

Shmuel Yakobi, currently living in the city of Vijayawada, is one of six children of an "untouchable" family. His father was able to enlist himself in the Indian Army during the Second World War, to acquire an education and after the war to find work as a schoolteacher. For generations his family, like virtually all untouchables, worked as farm laborers, sometimes as bonded laborers.

The family had practiced Christianity for several generations, and when Shmuel Yakobi, the oldest, received an education, he decided to become a Christian preacher, which afforded training in English (the language of the Indian ruling classes), as well as a good salary. As his career progressed, he felt a growing disaffection socially and spiritually with his Christian world. In the early 1980s, while still a preacher, he made a trip to Jerusalem, where he encountered Judaism for the first time. He recognized the Jewish people intuitively as his own, and returned to India intent on leaving Christianity and living as a Jew.

Shmuel Yakobi in time convinced his siblings and approximately 30 families in his home village of Kottareddipalem, near Chebrolu, Guntur District, to join him in living as Jews. His two brothers, Sadok and Aaron, became leaders with him in the community. The brothers studied and taught Torah, and began to teach themselves

Hebrew with materials Shmuel Yakobi brought from Israel. In two subsequent trips to Israel, Yakobi acquired a beginning knowledge of Jewish customs and prayer.

For economic reasons Yakobi's formal break with Christianity was long. His financial connections were critical to the building of the community's synagogue in Kottareddipalem, The House of the Children of Yakob, which opened in 1992. He also founded an independent open university offering correspondence courses in Torah and Hebraic Studies. Calling the community the Council of Eastern Jewry, Yakobi slowly began to navigate what he calls the lost history of Jews in south India.

He believes that Jews migrated from northern India, perhaps Afghanistan or the North-East Frontier region (Manipur, Mizoram) sometime during the 9th or 10th centuries C.E., and settled around the area of Nandial in what were at that time nascent Telugu-speaking areas. He claims currently to be writing a comparative philological study of Hebrew and Telugu, which argues that Hebrew is the unrecognized source of many words in proto-Telugu, the still-unreconstructed Dravidian language that anteceded Sanskritic influences. Yakobi also claims that Telugu Jews for centuries formed a distinct *kulam* (birth-marriage-occupation group, or as it is often poorly termed, caste). They maintained, he says, distinct customs, eating habits, occupations, and literacy in Hebrew. In my discussions with him, I must say he was cagey and not forthcoming with evidence for these claims. In fact, he provided me no evidence. He is currently unsuccessfully appealing to the Archeological Survey of India to fund investigation.

To the rest of Hindu society, the Telugu Jews, if they did exist historically, were grouped with outcasts, and associated particularly with the Madiga community of untouchables. Thus the community was assimilated into Christianity when colonial missionaries reached the Telugu areas during the British period. Why the community might have been assimilated precisely then, after so many centuries, remains an important question. One provisional answer might be as follows (according to my own reasoning): Scholars of South Asia have drawn a reasonably clear picture of the intensification of economic pressure on the peasantry during the colonial period, which was often extremely severe and widely produced a feudalization of agrarian relations. Such pressure has in many respects not subsided, and it is clear today that poor rural Indians need material and financial relief wherever they can get it. Well-funded and eager Christian missionary groups happily service desperation across India, building homes and schools in exchange for a pledge of loyalty. It seems possible that sheer economic need broke apart a 19th century Telugu Jewish community, driving many of its members to embrace Christianity, along with millions of other poor Indians. However, this remains to be determined.

Is the community actually the progeny of the Lost Tribe of Ephraim, as Shmuel Yakobi believes? I was shown no Hebrew Torah or distinctively Jewish ritual objects, and am under the impression that these have not survived. Neither was I shown

genealogies. Most of the art factual evidence of the community's history seems to be in the form of folklore, sometimes scraps of folklore, and perhaps linguistic analysis.

My own opinion is that the importance of the community for world Jewry lies not in its history, which cannot be documented. Rather, its importance lies in the spiritual and ethical practice it has developed, which is, to me, within Jewish tradition. Moreover, by being Jews this community challenges other Jews to honor their own Jewish commitments?

Telugu Jews are unquestionably among the poorest Jews in the world. Like other rural Indian untouchables who depend on farm labor for a living, most of the families survive on less than \$300 per year, lack access to the most rudimentary health care, lack housing adequate to the seasons, lack balanced nutrition, are easily driven into debt at interest rates as high as 120 percent, from which they never emerge, and become subject to the harassment of thugs and collectors.

I believe that their spiritual efforts, given these pressures, prove central to their lives. Their Judaism is virtually devoid of Talmudic and rabbinic influences. Rather, it focuses on God's sheer power and commitment to His people, and on the ethical imperatives of the Prophets. The community cherishes the Biblical account of the Exodus, and identifies deeply, I would say ardently, with its promise of liberation. This promise forms the backbone of the community's spiritual life; in group and individual prayer these Jews plead to God for it, demand their right to it, thank God for it, and struggle to be patient for it. For them, the living God delivers signs and responses to their prayers daily, in small ways. Sadok Yakobi, the resident leader of the community, whom the community supports with weekly donations, spends his days moving from hut to hut leading prayer and giving support. Though neither a preacher nor a healer, he tells many stories of having witnessed miraculous healing, as well as small, inexplicable changes of fortune, which he and the community attribute to God's direct intervention. Sadok is convinced that the power of the community's prayer and the faithfulness of the God committed to them are responsible for their survival under otherwise insufferable conditions.

The community distinguishes itself from its Christian neighbors by keeping the Sabbath and major Jewish holidays, and following Jewish dietary laws. (Keeping the Sabbath is no mean feat: landlords and factory owners continuously threaten to fire Jewish workers for not working a seven-day week). The more learned members of the community are engaged in ongoing, intensive discussions with one another and with their neighbors about why Jesus is not the Messiah, about the meaning of redemption, and about direct communication with God. These discussions appear to have been vital to the community's development. They continue as lively spiritual investigations.

I spent three Sabbaths with the community. I studied Torah with Sadok and a group of men in sessions lasting all day. Our sessions were provocative and beneficial to all. Abraham and Reuben Koshi, elders of the community, are dedicated students of Hebrew. Sadok's son, Yakob, knows rudimentary Hebrew well.

The Sabbath services are original, beautiful and moving, much of them dedicated to song. The congregation poignantly and powerfully sings the Hebrew of the Psalms to Telugu folk melodies. The synagogue itself is a spare structure of bricks, a large room with a high ceiling and a single table on which stands a perpetually burning flame. It is the only brick building belonging to the community (all families live in mud and thatch huts), and people are exceedingly proud. Next door to the synagogue lives a Hindu family which donates its electrical connection to the synagogue on the Sabbath, providing everyone with the pleasure of electricity once a week (an irony much appreciated when I explained that many Jews will not turn on an electric switch on the Sabbath).

Most of the members of the community in Kottareddipalem, as well as a small number of related families living near Ongole in Prakasham District, are eager to integrate into world Jewry.

The community faces religious intolerance, particularly from the local Christian clergy, which uses the emergence of the Jewish congregation to tighten Christian solidarity through anti-Semitism, something they are remarkably quick to learn despite their admitted ignorance of Judaism.

Slowly the community's existence is being recognized by other Jews. In early 1994 three Israeli rabbis visited the synagogue for a day, and this year a group of Israeli tourists visited. Shmuel Yakobi's son has emigrated to Israel and obtained Israeli citizenship. These positive developments were offset, however, by a series of articles from Israeli sources appearing in Indian newspapers in 1994, claiming that the Council of Eastern Jewry considered all Indian untouchables to be lost Jews, and proposed a mass exodus of millions of untouchables to Israel. Yakobi denies these claims, but such rumors are apparently strong enough in Israel to block even tourist visas to Indians.

I was altogether impressed by this isolated community's Jewish commitment, sincerity and generosity. My respect and admiration for their effort and initiative increased as I came to know the members personally. Whether they are the Lost Tribe of Ephraim or not, they are a young community of devoted Jews, suffering, surviving, practicing what is perhaps a kind of Jewish liberation theology.

# Let's Go to India!

*Jason Francisco, 1995*

*(The last newsletter contained a detailed article by Francisco on his encounter with the Telugu Jews in southeastern India.)*

I would like to reiterate the Telugu Jewish community's commitment. I believe they have made an irrevocable choice to be Jewish — a choice that they treat as a destiny. I am convinced they will strive to live as Jews regardless of whether other Jews ignore them, and regardless of resistance from surrounding communities.

A visit to the community by a Kulanu delegation would, I am certain, be joyously received. Such a visit would serve several functions. The community's knowledge of Jewish observance is still young. All members express eagerness to learn. A Kulanu group's insights on the Sabbath and holiday observance, for example, and on liturgy, would be extremely meaningful to all. Any gifts of books and religious articles would be received gratefully.

I would like to make some sundry suggestions for a Kulanu trip to India:

Round-trip air fares from New York to Delhi can be found for as low as \$700-800.

The *dargaz* of Hazrat Sarmad in Delhi is worth a visit. Sarmad was a Persian or Armenian Jew who came to Delhi in the early 18th century as a trader, and became a well-known mystic and a close associate of Aurangzeb's brother and rival, Dara Shikoh. He was executed with several associates of Dara Shikoh when Aurangzeb seized power in 1757. Sarmad was responsible for a translation of the Torah into Persian, and wrote the chapter on Judaism for a book of comparative religion, the *Dabistan*, commissioned by Dara Shikoh. (A reference on Sarmad: Walter Fishel's "Jews and Judaism at the Court of the Mugal Emperors in Medieval India," *Islamic Culture*, 25:105-31.) Also, there is one synagogue in Delhi, whose *shammash* is a man by the name of Ezekiel Issac Malecar.

I understand that there is a fairly extensive collection of Jewish materials at the National Library in Calcutta — so a brief stop there might be worthwhile en route to visit the *Bnei Menashe* in Manipur and Mizoram.

From Calcutta the trip to the community of the Telugu Jews is easy and direct. The Coromandel Express runs from Calcutta down the east coast of India to the city of Vijayawada, which is approximately 45 kilometers from the community. The community lives in the village of Kottareddipalem, which is a kilometer from the town of Chebrolu. Bus service between Chebrolu and Guntur (and between Guntur and Vijayawada) is frequent. I believe it is possible for those interested to stay in the

village itself, in the homes of community members. I stayed with Sadok Yakobi's family each time I visited. Those who do stay in Kottareddipalem should be prepared for rather basic accommodation. There is no running water; there are no outhouses; there is generally no electricity. There is a small brick structure next to the synagogue in which hand baths can be taken. I advise that everyone drink boiled or purified water and carry their own drinking water with them when visiting the village — simply to spare the members of the community the trouble of boiling gallons of water daily. The best months for visiting are November to February.

From Vijayawada the journeys to Cochin and to Bombay are easy. In Bombay I suggest a visit to the Fort Synagogue near the Prince of Wales museum in the Colaba section of the city. The leader of the small congregation is an amiable and knowledgeable man, Freddie Sopher. I spent a memorable evening with him discussing the history of the Iraqi Sephardim in Bombay and western India.

Also, there is a small Jewish community in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujerat.

# Partly by Wits, Partly by Faith: The Trials of the Telugu Jews

*Jason Francisco, 1997*

<http://web.mac.com/jlfrancisco/iWeb/Jason%20Francisco/Telugu%20Jews.html>

Originally published in *The India Magazine*, Vol. 17 (December), pp. 46 – 51, 1997.

Several months after I moved to Nandigama, a small town on National Highway 9 in Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, a friend told me of a Jewish family living in my neighborhood. My response was diffident. A Jew in Nandigama? Unlikely. A misunderstanding, I thought—probably a family belonging to a Christian sect with "Israel" or "Zion" in its name. Jews, after all, are not well understood in rural Andhra. The Jews of Bombay, Ahmedabad, Cochin and Calcutta are virtually unknown. For many in the Telugu countryside, if they have ever heard of Jews at all, Jews are the imputed Jesus-killers of the Old Testament, or the people murdered by Hitler, or citizens of modern Israel. A Kamma whose son lived in San Francisco had perhaps the most incisive idea. "My son has described them to me very well," he told me confidently, "the Jews are high-caste Americans."

I followed the friend to the house, where to my amazement I discovered a mezuzah fixed to the door—the parchment inscribed with the Jewish watchword, "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Ehad," "Listen oh Israel, the eternal is your god, the source of life is one," The family greeted me with a hearty "shalom!" The Ten Commandments, boldly calligraphed in Hebrew, hung prominently in the parlor. With a strange mixture of joy and confusion, I entered the world of a tiny Jewish community which makes up in effort and desire what it lacks in certainty about its origin and destiny.

This family was among the thirty or so who in March, 1991, in the village of Kottareddipalem near Chebrolu in Guntur District, dedicated the Synagogue of the Children of Yacob and publicly committed themselves to follow the Torah and to live as religious Jews. For the occasion, no rabbi was present. With the exception of one man, none of the self-styled Jews had ever met a Jew or been inside a synagogue. Indeed there were no synagogues in Kottareddipalem, or in the entire state of Andhra Pradesh. In short: these families turned themselves into Jews in utter isolation, choosing fundamentally to alter their identity based not on knowledge of Judaism, but on a primal, in many ways nascent, but nonetheless wholly trusted urge to be Jewish.

It is perhaps difficult for non-Jews to appreciate what an extraordinary event this was. Consider the Jews: for centuries a people alternately despised and feared in Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East, a people driven to the economic margins, periodically confined to ghettos, perennially subjected to exile and slaughter. The

Jews: a people become expert in the art of social survival, in morphing their given role as Western civilization's unassimilable other into that of Western civilization's moral conscience. Who would willingly join such a people? Who would willingly take on the obligations of Jewish history, not to mention Jewish religion? And more to the point: who in rural Andhra, where there are no Jews, would do such a thing? Why?

The origins of this Jewish community, or at any rate the most secure origins, are found in the intensive Christian missionary activity that has persisted for several decades in the Andhra countryside. The majority of the newly Christianized population are Madiga and Mala Harijans. Christian missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, have won conversions partly through material incentives, including housing, education and medical care and partly through creation of an ideological alternative to Brahmanic Hinduism and untouchability—emphasizing universal salvation regardless of birth.

In the early 1980's, a Christian preacher from Kottareddipalem, the son of a converted Madiga agricultural laborer, began out of his own curiosity to study the Old Testament, the Christian presentation of the Torah, the Jewish scriptures. Who were the Jewish people of the Old Testament? Why did they not accept Jesus? Why did Jesus so severely castigate them? Why was Paul so interested to abrogate Jewish law and the redemption given to the Jews at Mt. Sinai? What was the Jewish relationship with God? The preacher arranged a short trip to Jerusalem on his way back to India from the United States, where he had attended a conference of evangelical Christians. In Israel he encountered living Judaism. The intense solidarity he saw in the Jewish people, combined with their relative material prosperity, seemed to him fulfillments of the promises of the God of Jewish scripture, and proof of the truth and efficacy of worshipping the God of Israel.

Back in Kottareddipalem, the experience led the preacher, together with his two brothers, to undertake committed study of Old Testament in Telugu translation. The brothers began to develop what could be called a Jewish liberation theology. They applied their understanding of the Jewish history presented in the Bible to their own socio-economic situation. The brothers and their neighbors, as Madiga Christians, owned no land and depended for their livelihood on farm and menial labor--the lowest paid, lowest status work in the Indian countryside. Most survived on less than \$300 per year, suffered chronic debt, and lacked access to the most rudimentary health care, to housing adequate to the seasons and to balanced nutrition. Like most of the rural poor, they lacked the autonomous political organization to assert their interests, and were forced to seek the protection of contending groups of political and social elites—whose protection was, as often as not, fickle and shrewd.

In Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, left wing Roman Catholic theologians developed "liberation theology" to meet a similar crisis among the rural poor,

emphasizing Jesus as defender and redeemer of the poor and the outcast. In the view of Sadok Yakobi, one of the brothers who developed Judaism in the Telugu community, "it is not Jesus but God—the God who heard the cries of the ancient Jews enslaved in Egypt and freed them, as the Exodus story tells--who will hear the cries of suffering Jews even in Andhra Pradesh, where there are no other Jews." Like Abraham, these former untouchables turned to god not from prior instruction but from the depths of their humanity. Many members of the community reiterated that in a Jewish perspective, their lives were not a misfortune, but an injustice. In contrast to the Christian path, which urged them to make peace with the inertia of their suffering--however blessed--they decided to challenge themselves and God. They decided unilaterally to live as Jews.

Becoming Jewish meant formidable changes in their lives. As Jews they became commanded by God to act on their own behalf, concretely, in the world. They embraced the commandment to observe Shabbat, a weekly day of rest--in contrast the lives of most unskilled laborers, the surplus of whom landlords and factory owners routinely exploit by demanding a seven day work week. Further, as Jews they became required to observe holidays and life cycle events commemorating covenant, freedom, survival and atonement. In becoming Jewish they did not merely call themselves by a new name, but found a sanction to act for themselves materially and spiritually, under the wings of a compassionate universal justice.

The brothers' reading of the Bible and their actions proved highly controversial in the village. Local Christian clergy reproached them for defending the Jews, whom Jesus abominated in Christian writings. The resistance deepened their resolve. But becoming Jewish involved a complex breaking-away from Christianity. The preacher, who renamed himself Shmuel Yakobi, and his brothers Sadok and Aharon Yakobi, maintained their Christian affiliation outwardly, using their meager foreign Christian financial connections secretly to fund a synagogue, which after four years of construction was dedicated in 1992. The community was born.

In a simple twist of fate, it was the community's effort to join world Jewry that introduced into it a fracture line that persists even to the present day. None of the Telugu Jews counted on having to negotiate the politics—much less on becoming a litmus test—of a thorny issue in contemporary Judaism both in Israel and the United States. As noble as the Abrahamic idea of self-conversion is, established Judaism holds it in suspicion. Indeed, Jewish tradition has gone to great lengths to stress the collective practice of Jewish religion to encourage solidarity and to mitigate the sectarian breaks. Self-conversion is simply not honored in much of the Jewish world, particularly by the orthodox. Even liberal-minded Jews affirm that individuals become Jewish—and most conversions are individual—by joining an existing Jewish group.

The Telugu community, which had converted itself into Jews with such passion and commitment, did not expect to be told by other Jews that their Jewish status was questionable. The community began to divide over the issue. Sadok Yakobi urged that the community should simply go through a normative Jewish conversion. Shmuel Yakobi found another answer. Other Jews would consider the Telugu self-conversion legitimate, or virtually legitimate, if the Telugu Jews were already Jews—if, that is, they were genealogically Jews who had lost their heritage.

Thus began Shmuel Yakobi's invention of what he calls the lost history of Jews in India. In fact Jews do have a long and imperfectly recorded history in the subcontinent, from the two thousand year old community founded by merchants on the Malabar coast, to Iraqi Jews in Maharashtra and Calcutta, to the ancient Shinlung community in Manipur. Yakobi's project is something else entirely. He asserts that Jews from the Lost Tribe of Ephraim—one of the ten Jewish tribes driven into exile after the collapse of the northern kingdom of Israel in 586 B.C.E., -- migrated from Afghanistan into northern India, becoming teachers in the Ashokan capital of Magadha – which is, for him, the etymological root of "Madiga." Further, the Buddhists who converted Ashoka were actually Jews, and Buddhism is an Indianized version of Jewish wisdom. Sometime during the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., the story goes, these north Indian Buddho-Jews migrated south ostensibly with Torah scrolls and other artifacts that Yakobi is unsuccessfully appealing to the Archaeological Survey of India to research, settling around the area of Nandial in what were at that time nascent Telugu speaking areas. Yakobi claims currently to be writing a comparative philological study of Hebrew and Telugu proving that Hebrew is the unrecognized source of many words in proto-Telugu. Yakobi is convinced that the Telugu Jews for centuries formed a distinct kulam (jati), marrying only among themselves and maintaining distinct customs, eating habits, occupations, and literacy in Hebrew, but converted to Christianity during the colonial period. Why the British, of all people, should have been able to break their iron wills remains an open question. But all of this obfuscates the point. What really motivates Shmuel Yakobi's desire to be a remnant of a Lost Tribe is that he might thereby qualify to emigrate to Israel under the Law of Return.

To say that the community is divided between the two brothers' perspectives would be misleading. Most believe something of both—and even the two brothers, in moments of fatigue, affirm something of the other's perspective. Many members have expressed a general interest in emigrating to Israel--which has spawned a handful of spurious articles in the Israeli press warning of the descent of millions of Indian untouchables on Israel. But others focus their energies on leading Jewish lives in India. It remains to be seen whether they will sustain their Jewish social activism, or—barring substantial material improvement—come to understand their faith as the solace that comes in trusting God. Likewise it continues to be debated whether the community will continue to innovate and practice the Judaism of its own vision, or

seek conversion, probably by the Orthodox, who are intent on being for the young community the arbiters Jewish belonging.

At this point it is still enough to appreciate the sheer existence of the Telugu Jewish community. For a community to have reached Judaism in striving to be just to itself in its own, uniquely Indian circumstances, is by all accounts extraordinary. For other Jews it is even exemplary. Will the Telugu Jews' initiative challenge other Jews to honor their own Jewish commitments? Can Jews around the world accept Judaism as a liberation theology? After all, this is a community of isolated, devoted Jews, suffering and surviving with their God—not so different from other Jewish communities throughout history. Perhaps enough Jews around the world remember the drawn-out urgency of having to live partly by wits and partly by faith that the wonder of Jews in the middle of rural India is not so unbelievable.

# "Discovering" the Telugu Jews of India

Jason L. Francisco, 1998

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*India*

*"Discovering" the Telugu Jews of India*

Jason L. Francisco

Among the most successful Christian missionary efforts in India has been the conversion of approximately 40 percent of the populace in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. The majority of the converts are Harijans, the so-called untouchables, who generally own no land and form the bulk of the agricultural laboring class. The Christianization of the working poor in the Indian countryside has produced one result almost certainly unforeseen by the missionaries: a small number of families have embraced Judaism.

Although the Bible is well known and widely taught, it was not until several months into the year I spent in the Andhra countryside that I discovered the Telugu word for Jews, *yudulu*, an uncommon word. The Christians I came to know, and indeed most people I asked, had never heard of Jews or Judaism, and seemed to think it a Christian sect (I did meet one person who described Jews as high-caste Americans). When a friend told me of a Jewish family living nearby, I was incredulous. I was shocked when I saw the mezuzah on the door of the family's home and was greeted with a hearty "Shalom, brother!" I was introduced to the world of a tiny Jewish community which makes up in effort and desire what it lacks in certainty about its destiny.

Shmuel Yakobi, currently living in the city of Vijayawada, is the oldest of six children of an untouchable family originally from

the village of Kesara, some 25 miles north of the Krishna River, in Krishna District. His father enlisted in the Indian Army during the Second World War, and so acquired an education and knowledge of English, a language used by elites in India. After the war he found work as a schoolteacher in the town of Chebrolu, in nearby Guntur District. Shmuel's father's achievement was extraordinary. For generations his family, like virtually all untouchables, had worked as farm laborers, sometimes as bonded laborers. According to Yakobi, his father instructed the first three children—Shmuel, Vijayalaxmi, and Sadok—in English and a range of subjects, determined in his intent to pass to them as much of his learning as possible. Yakobi remembers his father as an intense and far-sighted man. He died in the mid-1960s, not yet fifty years old, having educated only half of his children.

The family had converted to Christianity, according to Yakobi, sometime around the turn of the century. However, both Shmuel and Sadok Yakobi remember their grandmother and their father telling them that though they were called Madigas, a Telugu untouchable caste, and practiced Christianity, in fact they were Jewish. Neither of the Yakobi brothers knew precisely what this meant, except that their heritage was somehow concealed from them. The information remained dormant until the mid-1980s.

Capitalizing on the education his father had given him, Shmuel Yakobi decided to become a Christian preacher, which afforded advanced training in English, a good salary, and upward mobility. Often Protestant clergy develop ties with foreign churches, preside over the disbursement of foreign-donated funds, and receive invitations and money to travel abroad. Yakobi built a successful career. He developed relationships with evangelical Christians in the United States, where he has traveled several times; he married the daughter of a successful Madiga Christian and received a healthy dowry.

As his career progressed, however, he felt a growing disaffection socially and spiritually with the Christian world. Somehow

his disquiet attached itself in his mind to the lost Jewishness passed to him in stories from his father and grandmother. He began to study the Old Testament of the Christian Bible with increased seriousness. In the early 1980s, while still a preacher, he arranged a trip to Jerusalem, where he encountered living Judaism for the first time. He experienced a powerful, intuitive identification with the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. He returned to India intent on leaving Christianity and living as a Jew.

Sadok and Aaron, a younger brother, decided to join Shmuel. The three Yakobi brothers in time convinced approximately thirty families in their home village of Kottareddipalem, near Chebrolu, to join them in living as Jews. There are, I think, four principal reasons for their success.

First, the Jewish emphasis on a direct, rather than a mediated, relationship with God, combined with the Jewish emphasis on God as the redeemer of the poor and the vulnerable, resulted in a strong sense of what might be called Jewish liberation theology. The Telugu Jews, as much as any group of afflicted Jews, have come to identify strongly with the Torah's promise of deliverance by the God of universal justice. Understanding the importance of this promise demands a closer look at what I would call the community's socioeconomic vulnerability.

Like other rural Indian untouchables who depend on farm and menial labor for a living—the lowest-paid, lowest-status work in the Indian countryside—most of the families survive on less than \$300 per year. As the poorest of the poor, they generally lack access to the most rudimentary health care, housing adequate to the seasons, and balanced nutrition. As a result of the seasonal unemployment built into agriculture (only planting and harvesting require labor), combined with the fact that the area generally supports only one crop per year and there is a tremendous surplus of unskilled labor, borrowing money even for food is necessary, at interest rates as high as 36 percent. Emergency loans for medical and other expenses are usually given, when they are given, at in-

terest rates as high as 120 percent. Many families are driven into debt from which they never emerge. They become subject to the harassment of thugs and collectors. In general untouchables lack an autonomous political organization to assert their interests, and must seek the protection of contending groups of political or social elites—whose protection is, as often as not, fickle and shrewd.

The Torah's promise of the redemption of the vulnerable is closely tied to the second reason for the decision to become Jewish. It is an audacious, and in some ways a defiant, act of self-determination. The choice to become more zealously Christian, a choice they could conceivably have made, would not have been so bold. Christian liberation theology is not practiced in India. Christianity is practiced as a faith of conciliation, of reconciliation, whose trappings of deliverance more closely reflect the sheen of Western investment than the imminence of the Second Coming. Gratitude for grace given, for gifts given, rather than the moral passion of the prophets and the extraordinary power of the Exodus narrative, characterize church teachings. The choice to remain Christian, another option, might have earned them some of the benefits that befall many Telugu Christians: foreign-subsidized cement and tin houses (rather than the standard mud-and-dung thatched-roofed houses, which many people admit are actually cooler and better suited to the climate), opportunities to attend missionary-run English-language schools, perhaps better chances to qualify for university seats reserved for untouchables, perhaps access to missionary hospitals. For all the undeniable benefits Christian relief has brought, it comes at the cost of an authoritarian church structure and deference to a sometimes unscrupulous clergy who wield substantial power. The choice to remain Christian, for all its benefits, in many senses amounts to a forfeiture of self-determination. More than that, it is compatible with and does not challenge the rudiments of socioeconomic suffering.

The forms of self-determination attendant on becoming Jewish were not merely nominal—and this is the third reason for the Telugu

Jews' choice to become Jewish. As Jews they are required by God to act on their own behalf, concretely, in the world. They are required, importantly, to observe the Sabbath, a day of rest denied to most agricultural laborers. As Jews they become entitled both to work and to rest—an option denied most unskilled laborers, routinely exploited by landlords and factory owners who demand a seven-day work week. Indeed, the choice to become Jewish initially guaranteed aggravation of their material suffering. Employers simply replaced many Jewish workers because of their religious views. Still, the right both to work and to rest proved so humane and so civil that its holiness could hardly be doubted. The community's increased suffering in the years following its emergence seems, in fact, to have bolstered the members' convictions, and enhanced the value of being Jewish. Further, as Jews they are required to observe Jewish holidays and lifecycle events commemorating covenant, freedom, survival, and atonement. In becoming Jewish they did not merely call themselves by a new name, but found a sanction to act for themselves materially and spiritually, under the wings of a compassionate universal justice.

The fourth reason to become Jewish concerned reclamation of the past. Shmuel Yakobi began to navigate what he calls the lost history of Jews in south India. Now more than ten years into his research, he believes that Jews, possibly descendants of the Lost Tribe of Ephraim, migrated from northern India, perhaps Afghanistan or the North-East Frontier region (Manipur, Mizoram), sometime during the ninth or tenth century C.E., and settled around the area of Nandial in what were at that time nascent Telugu-speaking areas. He claims currently to be writing a comparative philological study of Hebrew and Telugu, which argues that Hebrew is the unrecognized source of many words in proto-Telugu, the still-unreconstructed Dravidian language that anteceded Sanskrit influences. Yakobi also claims that Telugu Jews for centuries formed a distinct *kulam* (birth-marriage-occupation group, or, as it is often poorly termed, caste). They maintained, he says, distinct customs,

eating habits, occupations, and literacy in Hebrew. In my discussions with him, I must say that he was not forthcoming with artifactual evidence for these claims—a Hebrew Torah, genealogies, ancient Telugu Jewish ritual objects. I am under the impression that these have not survived. He was equally not forthcoming with details of historical evidence in the form of folklore and linguistic analysis. He is currently appealing, so far unsuccessfully, to the Archeological Survey of India to fund his investigations.

To the rest of Hindu society, the Telugu Jews, if they did exist historically, were grouped with outcastes, and associated particularly with the Madiga community of untouchables. Thus the community might have assimilated into Christianity when colonial missionaries reached the Telugu areas during the British period. Precisely why the community might have been assimilated then, after so many centuries, remains an important question. One provisional answer might be as follows. Scholars of South Asia have drawn a reasonably clear picture of the intensification of economic pressure on the peasantry during the colonial period, which was often extremely severe and widely produced a feudalization of agrarian relations. Such pressure has in many respects not subsided, and it is clear today that poor rural Indians need material and financial relief wherever they can get it. Well-funded and eager Christian missionary groups service economic desperation, building homes and schools in exchange for a pledge of loyalty. It seems possible that sheer economic need broke apart the nineteenth-century Telugu Jewish community, driving many of its members to embrace Christianity, along with millions of other poor Indians. However, this remains to be determined.

For economic reasons Shmuel Yakobi's formal break with Christianity was long in coming. His financial connections were critical to the building of the community's synagogue in Kottareddipalem, The House of the Children of Yakob, which opened in 1992. In the late 1980s, Shmuel moved his residence to the nearby city of Vijayawada, where he founded, also with the assistance of foreign

Christian donors, an independent open university offering correspondence courses in Torah and Hebraic Studies to Christian seminary students across India. Sadok and Aaron Yakobi became the resident leaders of the community, studying and teaching Torah and Hebrew with materials Shmuel Yakobi brought from Israel. Aaron Yakobi died of tuberculosis in 1992.

While the details of the community's ancestry remain cloudy, its members are firm in their choice to be Jewish, and become Jewish. My own opinion is that the importance of the community for world Jewry lies not in its history, but in its having developed independently and by its own initiative a Jewish response to the realities it faces. It has developed a spiritual and ethical practice which is solidly within Jewish tradition. The members of the community have assumed and not merely inherited their Jewish commitments, and in this they honor and extend the best efforts made by any Jew.

The Judaism they have developed is, at this point, virtually devoid of talmudic and rabbinic influences. Rather, it focuses on God's sheer power and commitment to His people, on the ethical imperatives of the prophets, and on the strength of their covenantal relation. The community cherishes the biblical account of the Exodus, and identifies deeply, I would say ardently, with its promise of liberation in exchange for the practice of justice and kindness, and religious observance. These promises form the backbone of the community's spiritual life; in group and individual prayer these Jews plead to God for it, demand their right to it, thank God for it, and struggle to be patient waiting for it. For them the living God delivers signs and responses to their prayers daily, in small ways. Sadok Yakobi, the leader of the community, whom the members support with weekly donations, spends his days moving from hut to hut leading prayer and giving support. Though neither a preacher nor a healer, he tells many stories of having witnessed miraculous healings, as well as small, inexplicable changes of fortune, which he and the community attribute to God's direct intervention. Sadok is convinced that the power of the

community's prayer and the faithfulness of the God committed to them are responsible for their survival under otherwise insufferable conditions.

The community distinguishes itself from its Christian, Hindu, and Muslim neighbors—a distinction that is as important to them as it has been to Jews throughout the centuries—by keeping the Sabbath and major Jewish holidays, and following Jewish dietary laws. The more learned members of the community are engaged in ongoing, intensive discussions with one another and with their neighbors, particularly about the difference between Jewish teaching and the Christian doctrine they have comparatively recently rejected. The subjects include why Jesus is not the Messiah, the meaning of the redemption at Sinai, how to be a people of priests and a holy people, how Jews communicate with God, what the prophecies of the ingathering of the Jewish people mean for them. The discussions arising from these and related questions are vital to the community's development. They continue as live spiritual investigations. I spent three Sabbaths with the community, during which I studied the Torah with Sadok Yakobi, Abraham and Reuben Koshi, and a group of other men in sessions lasting all day. Our sessions were provocative and beneficial to all.

Telugu Sabbath services are original and moving, much of them dedicated to song. The congregation—men and women together—poignantly and powerfully sings the Hebrew of the psalms to Telugu folk melodies. The synagogue itself is a spare structure of bricks, a large room with a high ceiling and a single table on which stands a perpetually burning flame. It is the only brick building belonging to the community (all the member families live in mud-and-thatch huts), and everyone is exceedingly proud. Next door to the synagogue lives a Hindu family which donates its electrical connection to the synagogue on the Sabbath, providing everyone with the pleasure of electricity once a week (an irony much appreciated when I explained that many Jews will not turn on an electric switch on the Sabbath).

In my visits with the Telugu Jews I tried repeatedly to verify the authenticity of the community's Jewish commitment. I asked myself: Is it possible that their Jewishness is merely a vehicle to escape their economic suffering? Is their Jewish ancestry a fabrication? Perhaps it is a far-flung fantasy, born of intense suffering, to emigrate to Israel, a comparatively affluent country, much in the way other Indians dream of relocating to the United States or to Europe? Is their Judaism practiced for the sake of being Jewish regardless of where they live and die? I asked these questions of them in a variety of ways. I drew two conclusions. First, the clarity and calmness of their comments, and the passion of their worship, convinced me of the truth of their Jewish commitment. I believe they have made an irrevocable choice to be Jewish; they treat the choice as a destiny. Their commitment, I believe, is so strong that they will strive to live their Jewishness in spite of the resistance of the people around them, and regardless of their reception by other Jews. I believe they will die as Jews, whether in India or elsewhere. Second, because material poverty pervades their lives, I believe it is unreasonable to expect them to make any choices, including being Jewish, independent of their day-to-day struggles. Such struggles have been an active force in their decision to become Jewish.

Still, other Jews' acceptance of their choice to be Jewish matters greatly. Rabbi Avichail's visit to the community in 1994 and Kulanu's efforts have reassured them that their existence does matter to other Jews. Naturally they hope that fellow Jews will help them in their religious observance and also in their struggle to ameliorate their economic condition. Many of the Telugu Jews express a desire someday to make aliyah to Israel. Shmuel Yakobi's son has emigrated and obtained Israeli citizenship. These positive developments have been accompanied by a damaging series of articles from Israeli sources appearing in Indian newspapers, claiming that the Council of Eastern Jewry, the steering committee for the Telugu community, considers all Indian untouchables to be

lost Jews, and proposes a mass exodus of millions of untouchables to Israel. Sadok Yakobi denies these claims, but such rumors have been strong enough in Israel to block even tourist visas to these Indians.

The sheer existence of the Telugu Jewish community is something of a miracle. For the community to have reached Judaism by striving to be true and just to itself in its uniquely Indian circumstances is, to me, extraordinary. Will their Jewish commitment challenge other Jews to honor their own Jewish commitments? Will other Jews admit the lives of the Telugu Jews into the story of the Jewish people? Will Jews around the world witness Judaism as a liberation theology in the experience of the Telugu Jews? Whether or not they are the Lost Tribe of Ephraim, they are a young community of devoted Jews, suffering and surviving with their God. Perhaps enough Jews around the world still know the isolation and the drawn-out urgency of having to live partly by wits and partly by faith that the wonder of a Jew in Andhra Pradesh is not so unbelievable.

(Further information about the Telugu community can be obtained from The Synagogue of the Children of Yakob, Kottareddipalem, Chebrolu Mandal, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh, 522 212 India.)

## תעלומות / עשרת השבטים האבודים – הודים בני ישראל

### שמעון לב

עבור הודים רבים שאלת עשרת השבטים האבודים אינה תעלומה או מיתוס, המעוררים סקרנות ועניין. זוהי עבורם שאלה קיומית, שחייהם תלויים בה. אם יכירו בהם כיהודים, יוכלו לעלות לישראל. שמעון לב פגש במהלך ביקוריו בהודו אנשים רבים שטענו בלהט ובחום שהם אכן מבני עשרת השבטים האבודים

### מחכים לנס

במדינת אנדרה פראדש **בדרום הודו**, מאמינים כמאה כפריים, המתגוררים בשני יישובים קטנים, בניסים. אומנם בהודו קל למדי להאמין בניסים, בעיקר כי הם מתרחשים, אבל אם מדינת ישראל אומנם תכיר ביהדותם של כפריים אלה, זה יחשב לנס מסובך. ש', מנהיג הקהילה, מוכן גם לנס קטן יותר: "שיתנו לנו להתגיייר". ואם זה לא יקרה אז כדאי להתאזר בסבלנות, זה אולי ישתלם. "הסבלנות שלנו היא ארוכה מאוד", הוא מציין. "ארוכה לפחות כמו גלות עשרת השבטים" (על פי בקשת בני המקום, החוששים מסיבוכים פוליטיים, איני מציין כאן את שמותיהם ואת שם הכפרים). מבנה הלבנים היחיד בין בתי הבוץ של הכפר, משמש כבית כנסת. בניין צנוע ומטופח, צבוע בלבן ובכחול ומעוטר מבחוץ במגיני דוויד, ללא ריהוט וללא ספרי תורה. הנעליים והסנדלים, כמו בכל בתי התפילה האחרים בהודו, נשארים בחוץ. ש' מנהיג הקהילה פתח בשיר בעברית, למלים מספר תהילים, במנגינה שחיבר בעצמו, והקהל חזר אחריו. הוא ערך מעין טקס הבדלה קצר, לפי המסורת האשכנזית שלמד בישראל, וסיפר בשפת טלגו המקומית, לקהל הקטן שהתאסף במיוחד, על האורחים "החשובים" מישראל. על מחצלות הקש ישבו סביבי גברי הכפר. במעגל החיצוני ישבו הנשים, מציצות מבעד לסארי. הילדים הביטו בעינים גדולות ומצפות, בולעים כל מלה ומנסים לפענח כל תנועה. הגברים שאלו שאלות, ורצו לדעת כמה שיותר על ישראל. מדי פעם פרצו בצחוק כש' תרגם בדייקנות את התשובות. השיחה התמשכה לתוך הלילה, והחדר היה כבר חשוך לחלוטין. בדיון פנימי קצר הוחלט להתחבר לעמוד החשמל, שעמד ליד דרך העפר. אחד הנערים טיפס למרות מחאותי ברגליים יחפות על העמוד וחיבר את הכבל. לאורח מישראל בכפר, שבו יודעים יותר על ירושלים מאשר על ניו דלהי, אין הרבה סיכוי להתנגד. "רשויות השלטון של המחוז הקטן מסרבות לספק חשמל לבית כנסת, בעוד שלמקדש ההינדי, ששוכן מעבר לגדר יש חשמל", התלונן ש'. הם לא היחידים שאינם מכירים בהם כיהודים. אף אחד לא מכיר בהם כיהודים, גם לא הקהילות היהודיות של הודו, ובוודאי שלא הממסד השלטוני והרבני בישראל. בחיפוש אחר ה"יהודים האקזוטים" של עשרת השבטים מעורבים היום, כמו בעבר "מקרבי גאולה" למיניהם, אנתרופולוגים, חוקרי אוניברסיטאות מלומדים, נדבנים עשירים מאמריקה, חובבי מסעות, שזו להם הדרך היחידה לנסוע, וסתם תמהונים. הרב אביחיל מירושלים הוא כיום הכוח המניע, בקרב הציבור הדתי, בחיפוש אחר עשרת השבטים. הרב אביחיל מחפש, אבל גם מצליח למצוא ברחבי העולם קבוצות אתניות, שהוא משייך לעשרת השבטים, החל משבטים בפרו שבאמריקה הדרומית ועד ל"בני מנשה" במניפור ובמיזוראם, שבמזרח הרחוק. במסגרת אחד ממסעותיו "גילה" את הקהילה הקטנה והמפתיעה הזו. ש', המנסה להעלות את בני קהילתו

לישראל, עשה בתמימותו ההודית טעות קריטית, ופנה לקונסוליה הישראלית בבומביי בבקשת עזרה. הוא הופתע לגלות שהם לא בדיוק רוצים לעזור. בעבר הצליח לבקר בארץ, למד קצת עברית והביא מישראל ספרי לימוד ויהדות. בעקבות פנייתו לקונסוליה, ספק אם יקבל פעם נוספת אשרת כניסה לישראל. אם היה איש עסקים הודי, המתעניין בחקלאות הישראלית המפותחת, היה זוכה באשרה ללא בעיות מיוחדות. החשש העיקרי ממיליוני הודים מקסטות (מעמדות) (הטמאים) (מונה שבהודו לא מעיזים להשתמש בו), שפתאום רוצים להיות יהודים, הוא חשש המדיף ריח גזעני. וזאת לא רק בגלל השאלה הסבוכה והבעייתית של מי הוא יהודי, ולמי יש את הסמכות לקבוע מהו יהודי, אלא בעיקר בגלל ההסכמה, הלא מפורשת, לאחד הפשעים הגדולים ביותר באנושות - שיטת הקסטות ההינדית. למרות כל התירוצים היפים כמו אלה המופיעים בספרו של עזריאל קרליבך על הודו, ובהסברים הארוכים המתנצלים בספרות ההודית, ההגדרה של אנשים כשייכים לקסטות "נמוכות" או "גבוהות" היא גזענית ומקוממת. החשש ממאה אנשים כהי עור המשויכים על ידי סביבתם לקסטות הנמוכות, שעושים מאמץ בתנאים בלתי אפשריים להיות יהודים ולעלות לישראל, אינו מוצדק. השיחה על ישראל גלשה לשעות הלילה המאוחרות. האנשים שאלו בסקרנות, על האוכל, על מזג האוויר, על משכורות, על שיטות החקלאות, על קסטות בישראל, על אפשרויות עבודה ל"פליחים פשוטים" וכדומה. מישהו הלך להכין באחת הבקתות עוד סיבוב של תה וביסקוויטים. התרגשתי מאוד. לפתע מצאתי עצמי בתפקיד של מגלה אחד מעשרת השבטים, שליח עלייה, המתאר את קשיי החיים בישראל, ריאליסט שמנסה לא ליצור ציפיות, שקרוב לוודאי לעולם לא יתממשו, ובעיקר: אדם ללא יכולת לעזור לקבוצת אנשים, שהיהדות חשובה ומשמעותית בעיניהם הרבה יותר מאשר לרוב היהודים שאני מכיר. שאלות הזוהות של "ישראליות" ו"יהדות", בסגנון "תנועות הנוער הישראליות", קיבלו לפתע משמעות הרת גורל בכפר ללא כביש, ללא חשמל, ללא מים זורמים, מאנשים שמרוויחים כעשרים רופי (שני שקל) (ליום עבודה בשדות, שלעולם לא יהיו שלהם).

ביום המחרת לא הלך אף אחד לעבודה. כולם רצו לשמוע ולהשמיע עוד. הלכנו בין בתי הכפר, המוגבהים מהאדמה, כמחסום בפני גשמי המונסון. על קירות הבתים היו מצוירות מגורות שבעה קנים והמלה שלום, באותיות מעוקמות, נכתבה על כמה מן הבתים. בכל בקתה נאמרו הדברים באותה רוח, עם ניסוחים עדינים וביישניים, שתורגמו עבורי לאנגלית. כולם אמרו שהם מוכנים לכל הקשיים בישראל; רוצים לעבוד בכל עבודה; מבינים שהילדים לא יכבדו את ההורים, כמו שם בכפר השליו; יודעים אפילו שאתם בכינויי גנאי. הם מוכנים לכך שהשפה, הלבוש, האוכל וההתנהגות יהיו שונים וההסתגלות תהיה קשה. תושבי הכפר המבוגרים, שמעולם לא ניתנה להם ההזדמנות ללמוד לקרוא, מארגנים לעצמם פעם בשבוע שיעור בעברית. ברור לכולם שהדרך להכרה ולעלייה ארצה, ארוכה ומייאשת, אבל את התקווה אף אחד לא יוכל לקחת מהם. בערפל הסמיך של הבוקר, לפני החום הכבד, פסעו הילדים מסורקים ובלבשות אחידה לבית הספר, מרחק של כחמישה קילומטרים בדרך העפר המאובקת. כשראו אותי אמרו לי שלום בעברית. מולם פסעו בחבורות צחקניות וצבעוניות נשים, שהתמזל מזלן וקיבלו עבודה במפעל הסיגריות "בידי", כמה קילומטרים מזרחה משם. ש' קרא לי לבוא לשתות את התה ולאכול את ארוחת הבוקר שמרים

אשתו הכינה. עגלות השוורים העלו אבק איטי בדרך העפר, ונשות הכפר מילאו את כדי הנחושת הגדולים במים ופסעו בדרך כמו בגלויות הודיות צבעוניות. שאלתי את ש' את השאלה העדינה, אבל המתבקשת, האם הרצון לעלות לישראל וההשתייכות לעם היהודי הם ניסיון להיחלץ מהדיכוי החברתי והמצב הכלכלי הקשה? ש' הקשיב בעניין וענה, כשהוא מצביע על שני ילדי השכנים, שהיו בדרכם לבית הספר: אנחנו מעולם לא קיבלנו את ההתייחסות הסביבתית אלינו כאל קסטות נמוכות (הוא השתמש במונח הפולטיקל קורקט ההודי SCHEDULED CASTE, להבדיל מהמונח המערבי UNTOUCHABLE אנחנו גם לא רוצים התייחסות כזו, אבל בית הספר הממשלתי, למשל, מקבל תקציבים יותר גדולים, לפי מספר הילדים מהקסטות הנמוכות הלומדים בו, ולכן הם מעדיפים להתייחס אלינו כך.

"אבא שלי", הוא סיפר, "שירת בצבא הבריטי, ולפני מותו העביר לי את התפקיד, וביקש ממני לעשות כל מה שניתן על מנת לחזור ליהדות". ש' מייחס את המספר המועט של בני הקהילה לעובדה, שאחד הדברים שנשמרו לאורך השנים הוא ההקפדה על נישואין בין חברי הקהילה. "אחותי הגדולה התחתנה עם הינדי ממדרס, ולכן נודתה מהקהילה. מאז לא ראיתי אותה, ולעולם לא אלך לבקר אותה", אמר בשקט. "המסורת שלנו מספרת, שאנחנו צאצאי שבט דן, שהגיעו לדרום הודו דרך קשמיר ועמק הגאנגס". ש' הכיר את הסיפור של שבט הפאתאנים בגבול פקיסטאן ואפגניסטאן, "אולי אנחנו צאצאים שלהם". אין לש' ולקהילה כל עדויות כתובות, חפצי קודש ופולחן, גם לא מהעבר הקרוב. הם גם לא פנו עם הקמת מדינת ישראל בבקשת עזרה. אין שום ידיעות לגביהם מנוסעים וחוקרים, כפי שיש על קבוצות יהודיות אחרות, והקהילות היהודיות בהודו מעולם לא שמעו עליהם. ש' מסביר את כל הבעיות הללו בניתוק ארוך ובשכחה, בגלל הדיכוי החברתי המתמשך, אך מדגיש שהם תמיד ידעו שהם יהודים, גם אם לא ידעו בדיוק מה פירושה של השתייכות זו. ייתכן, שכמו הקהילה המרתקת של "בני מנשה" באזורים המרוחקים מניפור ומיזוראם (ש-200 מחבריה כבר נמצאים בישראל), גם הם חזרו ליהדות בהשפעת המסיונרים הנוצרים. ייתכן שש' למד את הדברים מהספרים, שהרב אביחיל מירושלים נתן לו, ועבר יחד עם אנשי קהילתו תהליך של שכנוע עצמי. ייתכן שתושבי הכפר מדקלמים את מה שלימדו אותם, שכן זה הסיכוי היחידי שלהם להחליף מהסטיגמה היהודית האכזרית של הקסטות הנמוכות. ואולי מאה הכפריים היהודים, שנאבקים על הישרדות יומיומית, נמצאים בעיצומו של תהליך מרתק וייחודי - גיבוש זהות חדשה, המשתלב בתופעה נפוצה של "הטמעת הרוח העברית". "באותם לילות שיחה ארוכים ומיוחדים שבתי והרהרתי בשאלה: האם יש חשיבות לקשר ההיסטורי לעשרת השבטים? האם זה בכלל משנה? אולי הרצון הכן, הנכונות והדבקות, ומעל לכל התקווה, חשובים יותר מ"העובדות ההיסטוריות", שאין לגביהן ספק?

לפני כחודשיים קיבלתי מש' מכתב שנפתח במילים "ברוך השם", ובו פנייה נרגשת לעזרה. "אנחנו לא יכולים להיות כאן יותר 'בין הגויים', האנשים שלי מוכנים לבוא לישראל כמו העובדים התאילנדים שיש בארץ", כתב. עדיין לא ענית לו.

פורסם בגיליון "מסע אחר" 52

# DNA, Indian Jews, Manipuris and Telugu speaking community

*Tudor Parfitt, 2002*

The Cohen gene so-called may prove to be a marker of ancient Middle East populations. Its absence or presence does not necessarily indicate Judeans versus Northern Kingdom. The point of the *Times of India* article was that both in the case of the Jews of Cochin (Black, White and *Meshuhrarim* [=freedslaves]) and the *Bene Israel* there is sure evidence linking them both to the ancient Middle East.

I have not been involved in collecting DNA from the *Bene Menasheh* although I believe colleagues in Israel are conducting genetic research on them. However I did collect from the Telugu-speaking community in Guntur Province and the results as the *Times of India* article indicated were neutral. They were not negative, they were neutral. That is, no particular markers linking them to any of the populations for which markers are known were found.

The research in no way invalidates the Telugu-speaking community's claims to be viewed as Jews. During my recent research visit among this community I was impressed by the sincerity and devotion of this community who maintain a synagogue in a large, very poor village which has 2 mosques, a thousand Hindu temples, and several dozen churches. Whereas the churches are beneficiaries of help from abroad particularly from Europe and the USA, the synagogue is not. I receive almost daily pleas from the community — not for money but for my help in acquiring rabbinic instruction for their teachers.

In my view these people are as “Jewish” as their cousins in Manipur, yet strangely they are ignored.

# **My Jewish Commitment**

*Yacob Yacobi, 2002*

My forefathers have a Jewish background. We are the Telugu speaking people living in the Andhra Pradesh state in India. India is a mixture of many cultures, many races, many castes, many religions and many languages etc., and economically very poor country. Even though there is vast Diversity in many aspects, people here are living friendly & peacefully by respecting each other. Our people were mingled with others to maintain friendly and peaceful lifestyle. For this reason we lost our Jewish identity, our traditional values, links with Israel and the world Jewry etc., one can't differentiate us from other people. We are beyond recognition.

My parents got a chance to study in various religious aspects at the seminar. They are professionals, dedicated religious (Bible) teachers and social reformers. My father visited many countries like ISRAEL, USA, UK, CANADA, SINGAPORE, EGYPT, EUROPE, AUSTRALIA, ASIAN Countries etc., and read many books, improved spiritually by gaining knowledge about Judaism and identified our Jewish background. He wrote many books in English and in our own Telugu language ("The Cultural Hermeneutics" recently published book, 2002). He also wrote songs in Hebrew and in Telugu languages and developed communities here by conducting special classes to teaching Jewish customs, traditional values and Jewish way of living, Hebrew Language with the help of Jewish Books, Audio and Video Tapes etc., He registered "The Council of Eastern Jewry (CEJ)" which is non-profitable, non-political, non-racial and non-tribalistic society. He educated and helped to grow all of our people by giving moral as well as financial support. We opened our Website and contacted different Jewish institutions, organizations, met with rabbies, yeshiva Directors and discussed our matters with them. Some gave us moral support & encouragement by providing Jewish books, some rabbies, reporters, tourists visited our communities, met with our people, interviewed personally, took videos & photographs, published in magazines, Newspapers, showed in T.V's in USA, ISRAEL, INDIA. Some yeshiva Directors gave admission to study i.e Dvar Yerushalayim Yeshiva, Nahalath Tzvi, ISRAEL gave seat to my elder brother (Yehoshua Yacobi, Citizen of Israel) and invited 10 students in 1993 from our community but we are failed to get visa sanction. My parents Shmuel Yacobi and

Malkah Yacobi and my younger brother Dan Shmuel Yacobi visited Israel. My brother Dan Shmuel Yacobi had learned Hebrew and Torah in Dvar Yerushalaim Seminary in Yerushalaim. He came back to India to teach our communities Hebrew and Torah. We applied for Aliah.

.I was actively participated for the community development from 1990. I was circumcised by the local doctor. From that time onwards I habituated to observe some of our Jewish festivals and laws i.e Shabbath, Succoth, Pesakh, Shavouth, Hanukkah, Purim, Yom Kippur, Berithmilla Ceremonies, Bar Mitzvah Ceremonies, Wedding Ceremonies and Observing dietary laws etc., conducting youth programs, writing and composing Telugu as well as Hebrew songs and making audio cassettes, video tapes, cd's, single piece photo laminates, teaching basic Hebrew language, computer operations etc. As a tourist I was extensively traveled all over India and visited very famous & old synagogue in Cochin "Pardesi Synagogue". I met there some of black & white Indian Jews. I also visited Mumbai synagogues several times and met with the synagogue members of 1. Knesseth Eliyahoo Synagogue, 2. Magen David Synagogue.

Though I am a post graduate student (M.Sc. environmental sciences) I was not looking for my personal growth but dedicated to work voluntarily with my family members to help fellowmen to grow for the benefit of the community development. For this only purpose we our family members faced more problems, spent money, time and worked very hard. I have a personal Jewish commitment to learn torah systematically and work hard to improve our community intellectually, spiritually and physically.

# Lashkar module busted in Hyderabad

Staff Reporter, 2004

HYDERABAD, AUG. 29. The Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) had planned to attack Americans visiting the State and incite communal tension through a series of explosions during the coming Ganesh festival in Hyderabad. **It also planned to target Jews and had reconnoitered the houses of some Jewish families in Guntur.**

Eight suspected Lashkar agents, including the Hyderabad-based president of the Tehreek Tehfooz Shariat-e-Islam, Moulana Naseeruddin, who were formally arrested today, made these disclosures during interrogation, the city Police Commissioner, R.P. Singh, claimed at a press conference here.

On Friday, acting on a tip-off, the City Police Task Force raided a Lashkar hideout in Chandrayanagutta of the Old City and took into custody four youths — Rashid, Quader, Fareed and Shareef. However, Abdul Aziz of Toli Chowki, the alleged kingpin of the Lashkar's activities in the State, managed to flee. Some explosives, a car and four motorcycles were seized. Based on their confession, Naseeruddin and three others — Farooq, Javeed and Siddiqui — were arrested.

## Elaborate plan

Mr. Singh said it was planned to send Rashid during the 10-day festival to the Ganesh temple in Secunderabad, disguised as a devotee by shaving his beard and applying 'tilak' on his forehead. Once inside, he was to trigger an improvised explosive device by remote control. Asked if Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was behind the conspiracy, Mr. Singh said that the "activities of religious fundamentalist organisations such as the LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammad are sponsored by the ISI only." Naseeruddin had been funding the Lashkar activities and providing ideological and moral support to the arrested, the Commissioner charged.

## Women's protest

A short while before the press conference, a group of women accompanied by some youth barged into the Commissioner's office at Basheerbagh. The demonstrators forcibly entered the conference hall alleging that Naseeruddin's arrest was illegal even as Mr. Singh sat in his office. Caught unawares, police had to resort to a mild lathicharge to disperse the crowd. Later, the protesters squatted on the road in front of the commissioner's office. Fifty persons, including 30 women, were taken into preventive custody. The Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen MLA from Chandrayanagutta, Akbaruddin Owaisi, who was speaking to the demonstrators, was also arrested.

# AP Dalits claiming to be Jews

*Rama Krishna Bhupathi, 2004*

When the police last month unearthed a 'plot' by alleged Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) operatives to attack Americans in the city and some 'Jewish' families in Guntur, a little-known group claiming to be Israelites were startled to know that anybody noticed them at all. Until this information leaked from the police files, no one had any inkling that there were any Jews in Guntur, not even the police.

This group of about 30 Dalit families of Kothareddy-palem village near Chebrolu in Guntur district claims to be Jewish, having proclaimed allegiance to the religion of Israel under the leadership of a maverick theologian who calls himself Shamuel Yacobi.

These families are Telugu-speaking people like any in Guntur but they follow all the traditions practiced by Jews. As is the religious custom among Jews, they do not work on Saturday, the seventh day of the week of the Sabbath.

In his communication with Jewish groups in Israel, Yacobi claimed that they were born Jews, but Christian missionaries converted their forefathers.

Yacobi, whose real name, the Times of India found, is Sunder Raju. He came from a family belonging to the American Baptist Church. He studied theology at the Andhra Christian Theological College (ACTC) in Hyderabad in the 1970s.

His transformation into Shamuel Jacobi began when he happened to visit Jerusalem. When he came back to India, he proclaimed himself a Jew and also persuaded several Dalit families in Kothareddypalem about their Jewish ancestry. Jew or not, this little community has real links with Israel.

When the White Western racist leadership of Jews did not accept some Russian and Black Jews from Africa will they admit the Dalit, the Black Untouchables of India, into their closed circle? Some of these AP Dalits claiming to be Jews did approach us some years back. We impressed them of the futility of making such a claim. Yet some Protestant Dalit Christians are continuing their efforts to make a fast buck — EDITOR.

# **News Letter - the Council of the Eastern Jewry, Vijayawada**

*Shmuel Yacobi, 2004*

*An open letter to the: Prime Minister of India, Chief Minister of A. P., President of the USA, Prime Minister of Israel And the concerned Embassies*

## **For an immediate response:**

30-8-2004 The Deccan Chronicle, The Hindu, The New Indian Express and all the other local Telugu News Papers of Vijayawada and Hyderabad Editions of Andhra Pradesh, India had covered the following news of the arrests of the LeT terrorists:

Hyderabad, Aug 29: Lashkar-e-Toiba terrorists had planned to kill Americans and the Israeli tourists at Begumpet Airport and Jews in Vijayawada and Guntur regions of Andhra Pradesh apart from blowing up the Ganesh Temple near Secunderabad railway station.

Police said that LeT operatives conducted recess at Begumpet airport for the morning flights that reach the city between 3 to 4 A.M. In Vijayawada and Guntur Regions they were entrusted to identify the Jews.

The task force personnel arrested eight LeT members and Tahreek Tahfuz Share Islam president Moulana Naseeruddin so far. Police seized ammonium nitrate, carbon tetra chloride, a five kg cylinder, timer mechanism, a country-made revolver, one dagger, two bundles of detonators, soldering iron, a radio transistor, 10 religious books, an atlas and two hand script note-books in Urdu and Arabic. They also seized four motorcycles and a car.

When questioned, these terrorist group members admitted that they are here to kill the American and Israeli Tourists and the Jewish families in the Vijayawada and Guntur regions of A.P. state.

In this regard the members of the Jewish families and the elders of the Council of the Eastern Jewry Vijayawada Andhra Pradesh hereby inform this news and request the concerned authorities of America, India and Israel to urgently do the needful and protect the innocent Jewish families of Andhra Pradesh from these terrorist groups or shift these scattered families to a safer place immediately. HaShem yazor!

For more information about the Jewish families of Andhra Pradesh, please read the following brief history.

## **The Bene Ephraim Community**

A Brief History of the scattered Bene Ephraim Communities of Andhra Pradesh South India:

## **Introduction:**

The Bene Ephraim Community is a small Jewish Community scattered all over Andhra Pradesh State of South India. The majority of the members are involved in agricultural farming. Some of them are involved in educational, literary, medical and self-employment project works.

To promote Jewish identity through Jewish Education, peace-loving and self-sufficient way of life and establishment of links with the world Jewry the Elders of the Community had registered 'The Council of the Eastern Jewry' as a non-profit organization in the Andhra Pradesh state government.

But the Council of Eastern Jewry Vijayawada has not obtained any licenses to receive any foreign aid or financial assistance. This is because the world Jewry or Israel never heard of the Bene Ephraim Communities of the Telugu Country. The Bene Ephraim Community has been preserving its history and traditions since prehistoric times. They live separately and continue in their Jewish traditions in a quiet way due to subtle anti-Semitism all around.

## **The Brief History:**

The Bene Ephraim Community members speak Telugu language. Some of them can understand English well enough. They use the Ashkenazi Hebrew Siddur in the daily synagogue prayer services. They have learned the basic Hebrew in the Community Ulpan at Vijayawada.

The youth go to the government public schools to learn computer applications, medical and secular education. The educated youth can never get the jobs in the government since the state government provides jobs to the persons who belong to one of the known castes. The Bene Ephraim Community members do not belong to any of the local castes.

Therefore they have to find a way for their survival through self-employment schemes. This has become a continuous struggle for the members of the Bene Ephraim Communities in their daily lives. Thanks to HaShem for he had preserved the Community all these years safely.

Yehoshua Yacobi a science graduate from the Bene Ephraim Community Vijayawada region went to Israel and became a citizen in 1993. He studied Torah in the Hebrew University. He lives in Yerushalaim at present. He has sent the Hebrew literature to the Community. With the help and assistance of Yehoshua Yacobi, the Community opened ulpans in Vijayawada, Guntur and Machilipatnam towns in Andhra Pradesh state.

His parents Shmuel Yacobi and Malkah Yacobi visited Israel. Dan Shmuel Yacobi the third son of Shmuel Yacobi had learned Hebrew and Torah in Dvar Yerushalaim Seminary in Yerushalaim. He came back to India. He conducts prayer services in Hebrew in the synagogue at present. He visits the scattered members on invitation and teaches Hebrew.

He and his brother Yacob teach Hebrew to the youth in the Community Ulpan. Shmuel Yacobi applied for family aliah to Israel. They have been waiting for the approval from the Interior Ministry of Israel since 2001.

The Prime Minister's office of Israel wrote that they were also waiting for the official reply from the officials of the Ministry of Interior regarding their aliah file approval for more than a year. When HaShem opens the door for this one family, they will go to Israel and introduce the Community to the proper authorities and do the needful for all the willing members to make aliah to Israel some day.

In the meantime many visitors from Israel came to the Community in the past. Rabbi Avichail the Director of Amishav from Yerushalaim visited the Community in 1994 and encouraged them to learn Torah.

Shimon Lev a freelance writer and photographer had visited the Community several times. He has published articles about the Community in the Israeli Hebrew Magazines.

Aaron a videographer from Israel had visited the Community and took the video film and relayed the program in channel two in Israel Television.

The local organizers of the Israeli Film Festival at Vijayawada city had invited the Community Elders to participate and offer Hebrew prayers in the Israeli Film Festival. The District Collector attended the inaugural function and enjoyed the Hebrew cultural demonstration by the Community members at the beginning of the Israeli Film festival.

About 125 families of the scattered Bene Ephraim Community members strongly feel that they should move to Israel as soon as possible. Their second option is to move to a single place and to live together and learn Torah and Hebrew systematically when HaShem provides Eretz Ephraim for all the Diaspora Communities.

They have been actively promoting the idea and waiting for the opportunity to do so. They have expressed this very idea to the visitors, friends and authorities to move to a single place. They appealed to the Jewish donor agencies and builders of Community to do the needful.

They are willing to move even to Mizoram Bene Manasseh Communities. But so far nothing happened in that direction. They are waiting for HaShem to provide them Eretz Ephraim and the opportunity to live and support Israel as a sister nation to Israel in the UN.

Some of the local religious Hindus, Christians and the Muslim groups had developed anti-Semitism very much towards the Bene Ephraim Community members. Yet the Bene Ephraim Community members had survived all the persecutions to this day.

Some newspapers wrote that the Bene Ephraim Communities are willing to make aliah to Israel to escape poverty in India. Others conducted the blood tests and said that the members of the Bene Ephraim Communities can never prove their Jewish Identity to go to Israel through the DNA tests. The state government and the local

governments simply refused to recognize the Community as Jewish in spite of written petitions many times in the past. The Elders of the Bene Ephraim Communities finally approached some regional newspapers representing their problems. The regional daily newspapers had published articles describing the difficulties of the Community members to obtain community certificates or birth certificates as members of the Bene Ephraim Communities. The Elders had tried all the doors in that direction. But there is no positive response from the government officers.

There is no Rabbi in the Community. The Elders take care of all the daily religious activities. They are authorized to supervise B'rits, celebrate marriages and grant G'ets. They supervise the kosher food items.

The women learned the Niddah practices from the elderly women and had been continuing for ages past. The Community practices traditional Halakkah and all the Jewish festivals according to the Israeli traditions and calendar in their families and synagogues. They have been following the Jewish traditions, traditional Halakkah and all the customary minhaggim since generations. They kept themselves away from the Hindus, Christians and Muslims in all respects.

The members are scattered around the state and therefore became very weak to enjoy their normal life style. They all felt that they should come and live together in a single place so that they can learn Torah and strengthen the Community Identity. They are welcoming the moral support from all the Jewish visitors, rabbis and donor agencies towards achieving their goal. But so far nothing happened. The members of the Bene Ephraim Communities have approached the Brooklyn Chabad Lubavich Rabbis who are doing the outreach work in Thailand for the Israeli tourists.

When the Bene Ephraim Community members wrote the Chabad Rabbis told that there are no Thai Jews in Thailand and they are conducting prayer services for the Jewish tourists.

If there are any Rabbis, community organizations or Jewish donor agencies that are interested in *Community building* the Bene Ephraim Community members are welcoming and willing to learn Torah and Hebrew in a systematic way to the normal world Jewry standards.

The members of the Bene Ephraim Communities at the Council of the Eastern Jewry, Vijayawada can be reached at: [shmuel\\_yacobi@yahoo.com](mailto:shmuel_yacobi@yahoo.com)

The brief history of the Telugu Jewish communities of Andhra Pradesh submitted by:

***Shmuel Yacobi***

# The Telugu Jews

*Yulia Egorova, 2006*

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– and the state of Israel – have a unique prestige. The re-establishment of the Jews' national existence ... is taken to be the fulfilment of prophecy and a portent to the realisation of many others' (Samra 1996: 128–9).

## *The Telugu Jews*

Another Indian community who, like the Shinlung, 'converted' themselves into Judaism was that of the so-called 'Telugu Jews', who come from the Christianised Madiga untouchables of the Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh. This community appears to have been first 'discovered' by Jason Francisco, a photographer and a writer who got acquainted with them during his stay in Andhra Pradesh in 1994. He met his first 'Telugu Jewish' family in the town of Nandigama in Krishna district. They were among the thirty or so families who in 1992 dedicated the Synagogue of the Children of Yacob in the village of Kottareddipalem near Chebrolu in Guntur district.

According to Francisco (1997), their leader was a Christian preacher who, in the early 1980s, became interested in the Jewish people as they were depicted in the Bible and started to study the Old Testament with particular attention. He went on a trip to Jerusalem, where he attended a conference of Evangelical Christians and for the first time in his life got a chance to see living Judaism. Francisco suggests that the solidarity of the Israelis combined with their relative material prosperity convinced him of the efficacy of worshipping the God of Israel and that this seemed like the fulfilment of the promises of the Hebrew Bible. Back at home he and his brother undertook an in-depth study of the Old Testament and considered it in the light of their own socio-economic situation which was quite difficult: their community had no land and depended on manual labour, the lowest status and lowest paid work in the countryside. This developed in what Jason Francisco has called a Jewish liberation theology. In the view of one of the brothers it was the God who had led the Jews from Egypt but not Jesus that will help his community (Francisco 1997).

Elsewhere Francisco (1998) observes that according to the priest who later renamed himself Shmuel Yacobi and his brothers Sadok and Aaron, their family had converted to Christianity around the turn of the century. However, Shmuel and Sadok remember their grandmother and their father telling them that they were Jews in spite of the fact that in the local hierarchy they were untouchables and that they practised Christianity. Shmuel also argued that he had become disaffected with the Christian world even before his trip to Jerusalem, despite his successful career as a preacher. In his view this dissatisfaction was attached in his mind with longing for his lost Jewishness (Francisco 1998).

Thus it was decided in the family to maintain the Jewish way of life. They started to observe the Sabbath, Jewish holidays and life-cycle events, which meant a break-away from their Christian neighbours. However, financially the community still depended upon their foreign Christian donors, which

delayed their formal split with Christianity. In the late 1980s Shmuel moved to Vijayawada and founded there an open university offering correspondence courses in Torah and Jewish Studies to Christian seminary students (Francisco 1998: 258–9). Shmuel used his Christian financial connections to secretly fund a synagogue, which was dedicated in 1992 after four years of construction. This was when their fight to be recognised by the world as a Jewish community began.

It brought with it also a split between the brothers over the strategy of their campaign for recognition. Sadok Yacobi argued that their community should undergo formal conversion; however, Shmuel Yacobi suggested that it would be easier for the community to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the world Jewry if they managed to prove that they had always been Jewish, but had lost contacts with their co-religionists in the past. Thus he asserted that the Telugu Jews were the descendants of the Tribe of Ephraim, one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. According to Shmuel, the ancestors of his community together with other Tribes of Israel, moved to Afghanistan and then to Northern India. There they became teachers in Magadha, and this is in his view where the name of Madiga comes from. Shmuel argued that the Buddhists who converted Ashoka were actually Jews and that Buddhism is an Indian version of Judaism. In the ninth or tenth centuries they moved to South India and settled in the nascent Telugu-speaking area. He was convinced that his community for centuries had been endogamous, maintained customs, diet, occupations of their own, had always been literate in Hebrew, however for one reason or another converted to Christianity during the British rule.

Francisco has suggested that it was the desire to move to Israel under the Law of Return of the Jewish State that motivated Shmuel Yacobi to stick to his version of the origin of his community and that many Telugu Jews wanted to emigrate. According to him, most members of the community accepted some elements both of Shmuel's and of Sadok's tactics and that the two brothers themselves sometimes accepted something from the other's perspective (Francisco 1997: 51).

Who were the people who followed the Yacobis? According to Francisco, the brothers convinced about thirty families in their native village of Kottaredipalam to practise Judaism (Francisco 1998: 254–5). When I visited Kottaredipalam in January 2001, I had a chance to get acquainted with Sadok Yacobi, who was in charge of the synagogue.<sup>8</sup> In an interview he told me that there were about fifty families practising Judaism in his village plus about seventy more families of Telugu Jews living in other villages of the district. His brother Shmuel was in Vijayawada working as a rabbi for another twenty to twenty-five families. In recent correspondence to me, Sadok Yacobi asserted that the number of those families who had 'returned to Judaism' had reached one hundred and twenty-five.<sup>9</sup> Talking about the origin of his community, Sadok said that he had abandoned the idea of their formal conversion into Judaism and that, like his brother Shmuel, he was

convinced that they all belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. According to Sadok, it was their father who was the 'pioneer' of this belief and Sadok and his brother were the first who decided to take some concrete steps to bring the community back to Judaism. Talking about his decision to leave Christianity and to become a practising Jew, Sadok maintained that he had become disillusioned in Christian values and refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

According to Sadok, it may be that all the Madiga and Mala untouchables belong to the tribe of Ephraim; however, only those who follow the Jewish way of life can be considered 'full' Jews. All Mala and Madiga of his village have already joined the first 'converts'. He observed that his ancestors had always had 'specific' rituals which distinguished them from their neighbours – for instance, even before they converted to Christianity they had the tradition to bury their dead. According to Sadok, the first Christian missionaries working with them were convinced that they were Jews. However, it was not quite clear whether Sadok meant the Christian encounter just with his ancestors or with the entire Mala and Madiga group. Generally at the time of our meeting, Sadok did not seem to be sure whether it was all the Mala and Madiga that could claim Jewish descent or a more specified group within them. A book devoted to the community written by Shmuel Yacobi argues that there are about 10 million Bene Ephraim among the Telugu people; however, only about 125 families of them are aware of their Israelite identity (Yacobi 2002: 133).

Talking about the status of his community in the village Yacobi observed that it was extremely low, as traditionally Mala and Madiga are untouchables dealing mainly with skin. Nowadays the members of his congregation are engaged in agricultural labour, shoe and brick making. He referred to his community as to the 'slaves of the Hindus' and compared their life to the slavery of the Jews in Egypt.

In response to a question about the children of those who started practising Judaism, Yacobi replied that they were being brought up as Jews and at the local school which they attended they were referred to as Madiga Jews. However, Miriam, the wife of Sadok, admitted that at school they were treated as untouchables and had to sit on separate benches. Speaking about the relations between the Telugu Jews and their neighbours and the way he thought his community was viewed by the latter, Sadok said that the local Hindus would not be able to distinguish between Jews and Christians. Jason Francisco (1998) observes that the local population would hardly know the Telugu word for the Jews, *yudulu*. Most people he asked had never heard of Jews and Judaism and some thought it was a Christian sect (Francisco 1998: 253). Their Christian neighbours from the local population and missionaries, who belonged to various churches (there were Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal churches in Kottaredipalam to name just a few), according to Sadok, were not willing to recognise them as Jews. **During my visit I had a chance to talk to some of the Muslims of the village.**

They appeared to be acquainted with the notion of the Jews in general and recognised the Yacobis' community as such. My respondents from the Muslim community noted that they were happy to have Jews in the village, as Jewish religious practices and beliefs were close to those of the Muslims. The Telugu Jews confirmed that they were on very good terms with their Muslim neighbours.

When asked whether the community had any contacts with other Indian Jews, Sadok replied that he had always known about the Cochini, Bene-Israel and Baghdadi Indian Jews through the press. He first went to Bombay to visit the Gate of Mercy synagogue in 1981;<sup>10</sup> however, there had not been much interaction with Bene-Israel or other Indian Jews since. As far as Bnei-Menashe are concerned, Sadok maintained that he had first heard about them only after he had discovered that his community was of Jewish origin and never had any contacts with them.

Yacobi argued that the members of his congregation tried to follow all the Jewish customs and regulations closely. He particularly stressed that they observe *kashrut*, circumcise their male children, and refrain from work on the Sabbath. Some of them come to the synagogue on Saturdays. Sadok admitted that they could not conduct any formal service. Instead, those who come to the synagogue (usually twenty to twenty-five people) sing songs in Hebrew composed by Shmuel. Each Saturday Sadok conducted classes of the Jewish religion for children and grown-ups. Members of the community had mainly biblical names. Marriages were performed only with those Mala and Madiga who accepted that they belonged to the Tribe of Ephraim and were prepared to follow the Jewish way of life.

Some time ago Sadok Yacobi with the help of Shmuel produced a typescript which claims to record the legends of the community (Yacobi 2001), some of which figure also in Shmuel's book (Yacobi 2002). All legends included in the typescript and the book to some extent deal with the origin of the Telugu Jews, who are referred to in the typescript as Bene Ephraim, and describe their place in Hindu society. In the beginning the typescript says that the Madigas were looked down upon by their Hindu neighbours because they ate beef and worked with leather. However, it was the Madiga themselves who asked their neighbours to allow them to settle separately from the rest of the population. Their settlements were known as Madiga or Mala Ghettos. This story is followed by a list of seven legends. Most of them describe conflicts between the ancestors of the Bene Ephraim and Hindu priests. According to one of them, once when the Bene Ephraim still lived in Northern India gentile priests secretly taught their wives to worship the Sun. When the husbands learnt about it they asked Ha-shem (His name, Hebrew) to curse the gentile priests with smallpox and then to heal them to show that their God was stronger than the 'Sun-God'. The priests still tried to convert the Bene Ephraim and having failed to do so cursed them to become outcasts. Another legend says that the priests cursed the Bene Ephraim for feeding their wives and children beef during severe famine.

As a result they both forgot their Jewish customs and were not allowed to become Hindus.

The 'Buddhist connection' of the ancestors of the Telugu Jews recorded by Francisco is also reflected here. One of the legends says that the ancestors of Bene Ephraim preached the doctrine of non-hurting people which 'influenced Buddhism'. The gentile priests asked them how this doctrine corresponded to the doctrine of non-hurting life and pointed to their killing of animals and beef-eating. The Bene Ephraim explained that killing animals for food did not mean to hurt life, as a result of which the priests were enraged and excommunicated the Bene Ephraim. Interestingly, this legend also seeks to explain how many of the Bene Ephraim became agricultural labourers. It says that initially they were engaged in vine-pressing and vine-growing, but some gentile landlords begged them to work on their fields because they could not find anybody else to till them.

The last legend tells that the poverty of the contemporary Bene Ephraim is a punishment for having taught the Jewish customs to a gentile priest. This legend mentions Arundhati, who in Hindu mythology is considered to be the wife of Vasistha, one of the greatest sages of the Vedas. According to the Indian tradition, she turned into a little star (the star Alcor in the constellation of the Great Bear), which is invoked in South India in marriage ceremonies (Rathnaiah 1991: 117). According to a legend of the Telugu Jews, Arundhati was a Bene Ephraim, who warned the community against marrying gentiles and teaching them their customs. However, her co-religionists betrayed her by passing the knowledge of their traditions to her husband Vasistha. Arundhati cursed them for that and as a result they became very poor and had to sell themselves to the Hindu landlords (Yacobi 2001).

Thus almost every legend attempts to explain why it so happened that the ancestors of the Telugu Jews forgot their Judaism and became a low-status group. The legends appear to demonstrate the desire of their composers to show that their untouchability was not 'fair' as it was acquired because of a curse of Hindu priests who objected to their traditions or failed to understand them. This may be viewed as a reflection of the tensions between the Telugu Jews and the caste Hindus who were discriminating against them. At the same time, stories implying that their untouchability was not inherent but imposed may also indicate a desire to raise the status of the community in the local hierarchy.

In this respect I would suggest that the legends claiming that the ancestors of the Telugu Jews were the teachers of Ashoka and that Vasistha's wife Arundhati was Jewish are particularly interesting. The former legend implies that Buddhism was influenced by Judaism and the latter suggests that one of the most prominent sages of the Vedas from whom all 'twice-born' Hindus may claim descent received his knowledge from the Jews. The creation of both legends may be considered an attempt to improve the position of the community in the local hierarchy by associating it with famous Indian

mythical and historical figures. I would argue that the Judaisation of the Telugu Jews has elements of the process of Sanskritisation as defined by Srinivas in the sense that one of its aims appears to be to raise the status of the community. However, to do so the Bene Ephraim chose not to appropriate the identity of higher caste Hindus but to adopt the identity of a third group, the Jews, and to impose it on higher castes. This resembles to a degree the attempts of 'Sanskritisation' among the Bene-Israel which were described in Chapter 5. The latter stressed that their legend of origin resembled that of the Chitpavan Brahmans and argued that the Chitpavans were of Jewish origin. It should be noted also that the Madiga have a history of trying to raise their status in the caste system. In this respect the legends of Bene Ephraim are somewhat reminiscent of some of the traditional stories of the Madiga, which explain their untouchability by the sin of killing a sacred cow by their ancestors (Singh 1969: 5-7). Singh has observed that there is a trend towards reinterpretation of the Madiga mythology by educated Madiga leaders. In 1928 one of them argued that the Madiga are descendants of Jambavan depicted in the *Ramayana* epic as a general in the army of Sugriva, an ally of Rama. The implication is probably that the ancestors of the Madiga were among the oldest inhabitants of the country and once they were even its rulers (Singh 1969: 8).

The legend about Arundhati explains the present lamentable condition of the community by their failure to follow the advice not to pass their customs to the Gentiles. Hence, liberation from their state, which is often described as slavery, should come from dissociation from the gentiles. The migration to India is referred to in the same typescript as a punishment for having married gentile women (Yacobi 2001: 4). The repatriation of the Telugu Jews to Israel is expected as the fulfilment of the prophecy about the ingathering of the exiles: 'the time will come when Israel elects their king over them again. And then all tribes will return to Israel including us and build the temple. Till the return of Aron-dhatians [*sic*] the temple will not be built' (Yacobi 2001: 4).

Interestingly, it is argued in some legends that the Bene Ephraim travelled to Andhra Pradesh from Northern India. Thus the Telugu Jews claim a 'double' foreign origin: their ancestors first came to the subcontinent from ancient Israel via Afghanistan, settled down in Northern India and then were obliged to migrate to the South. Most of the legends describe this as a punishment. Peter van der Veer has observed that in South Asia there is a tradition of associating foreignness with prestige: Muslim elites proudly refer to their 'foreign' origin, South Indian Brahmans point out that they come from North India, and high castes claim an origin of 'Aryan' conquerors who come from outside India (Veer 1994: 29). So, the Telugu Jews appear to have followed the same pattern of seeking prestige among their neighbours.

Interestingly, the Yacobis impose Israelite identity also on the Malas, an untouchable group which enjoys higher status than the Madigas. Venkateswarlu observes that there is an ongoing conflict between the Malas

and the Madigas about their status in respect to each other; although caste Hindus treat them both as untouchables, they appear to grant a higher status to the Malas (Venkateswarlu 1990). Sadok Yacobi's typescript says that the Madigas belong to the Tribe of Ephraim, while the Malas to the Tribe of Dan (Yacobi 2001: 3). Thus he created a unifying identity for these two untouchable groups, however, did not entirely relinquish the idea of their division by ascribing the Malas and the Madigas to different tribes of Israel.

The book by Shmuel Yacobi (2002) develops these themes and, interestingly, stresses the affinity that the Bene Ephraim have with the Telugu and other Dravidian people. According to the book, the ancestors of the Bene Ephraim first found themselves in contact with the Dravidians in North-West India after they had to leave Israel. The two groups were getting on extremely well and the Bene Ephraim even influenced Dravidian religion and culture. Eventually both were suppressed by the 'Aryan' invaders and reduced to a lower status (Yacobi 2002: 58-63). The juxtaposition of the Dravidians and the 'Aryans' who are also portrayed as the forebears of the whole of 'Western' culture is followed throughout the book and is very reminiscent of the anti-Brahmanic rhetoric of the publications of untouchable movements, such as *Dalit Voice*, which we looked at in Chapter 4.

What was the source of knowledge about the customs and traditions of Judaism in the community? It appears that for the entire congregation it was the Yacobi brothers. No one else among the Telugu Jews had a chance to get any first-hand knowledge about the Jewish religion. The brothers seem to have had an adequate education which was started by their father, who had managed to escape the traditional occupation of a farm labourer in which his family had been engaged for centuries. According to Francisco, he enlisted in the Indian Army during the Second World War and acquired a good command of English. After the war he worked as a school teacher in the town of Chebrolu. It was he who instructed Shmuel and Sadok in English and a number of other subjects. Shmuel, the eldest of them, decided to become a Christian preacher, which enabled him to deepen his education, improve his financial situation and to develop relations with Evangelical Christians in the United States, where he has travelled several times (Francisco 1998: 254). As was mentioned, it was during one of such trips that he visited Israel, and then back at home he proceeded to studying the Old Testament deeper together with his two brothers, Sadok and Aaron. Sadok himself was initially trained as a shoemaker and admitted that he needed more training to work as a religious leader of his community and wanted to go to Israel to acquire it.

The desire to go to Israel was expressed not only by Sadok but also by many members of the community. In October 1994 Sadok sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin explaining the situation of his community and received a reply from the Public Affairs Department advising him to contact the Israeli Embassy in India.<sup>41</sup> He turned to the Israeli consulate to request visas but was rejected. Apparently that year he was also

in touch with the Amishav organisation. Rabbi Avichail in a letter explained to him that his application for visas to the Israeli consulate and the fact that the rabbi 'was connected to this matter' received bad publicity in Israel and that it was in the news in Israel that 300 million Indians wanted to come to Israel.<sup>12</sup> According to Sadok, that was the last time when he heard from Amishav. The only member of the community who succeeded in getting Israeli citizenship was Shmuel's son Kenosha, who formally converted to Judaism. According to Sadok, at that time he was serving in the Israeli army.

### **Conclusion**

The Shinlung and the Telugu Jews have dissimilar backgrounds. They belong to two different ethnic and linguistic groups who reside in different parts of India and their ancestors adhered to different religious traditions before they converted to Christianity. However, if we attempted to compare the two groups we would find some obvious similarities in their histories. They both sprang from Christianised groups and claimed an Israelite identity. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, the discourse on the Lost Tribes of Israel in the Indian context was started by Europeans, particularly Christian missionaries, who were eager to see in different Indian groups the descendants of ancient Israelites.<sup>13</sup> Though there is not enough evidence to argue with certainty that it was Christian missionaries who were the first to suggest the Israelite origin of the Shinlung and of the Telugu Jews, it is not entirely unlikely. Both the Bnei-Menashe and the Telugu Jews have claimed that Christian missionaries who were working with them pointed to their 'Jewish' customs. Some elements of the traditions of the Telugu Jews are very reminiscent of the European discourse about the Lost Tribes of Israel. For instance, the idea that Buddhism is an offshoot of Judaism, mentioned in the manuscript of the Telugu Jews, had appeared in a book by an English writer G. Moore, according to whom it was brought to the subcontinent by the Lost Tribes (Parfitt 2002: 120).

Both the Bnei-Menashe and the Telugu Jews developed legends explaining how they found themselves in the places of their present habitat and stressing that they had been persecuted by the Gentiles. There were also common features in the processes of their 'double conversions', as Weil (1997) has referred to the Christianisation and subsequent Judaisation of the Shinlung. As was noted, Weil (1997) and Samra (1996) suggest that it was the challenges of the advent of the British and the fear of being absorbed by Hinduism that had prompted the conversion of the Shinlung to Christianity and it was the concern for the future of non-Hindus in independent India that facilitated their 're-conversion' to Judaism. As far as the Bene Ephraim are concerned, I would argue that the 'Hindu' factor played an important role in the evolution of their identity as well. My informants expressed resentment of the treatment that was accorded to them by caste Hindus and

their legends of origin appear to reflect the willingness of the community to shed their untouchability. The Christianisation of the ancestors of the Bene Ephraim was the first step in this direction, which, however, did not bring the desired rise of status. Judaisation, and particularly the one which claims Jewish origin and does not involve formal conversion, was viewed as a safer means of changing one's status in a society where one can become 'somebody else' only if one proves that one is 'somebody else' by birth. Thus, 'tensions' with Hinduism seem to have been a factor of the conversions of the two groups both first to Christianity and then to Judaism.

A sizeable part of the Shinlung and apparently all those who call themselves Telugu Jews desire to emigrate to Israel. In respect to the Shinlung, Shalva Weil has observed that they have 'forged a new nationalism in the guise of the "Children of Menasseh" by uniting the ethnic identities of a multiplicity of tribes and connecting them to the wider nationalism of the complete Jewish people' (Weil 1997: 97). The Yacobis appear to have done the same, as they begin to claim that the entire groups of the Malas and the Madigas are Israelites. One of the goals of these two movements is to relinquish their Indian identity and sometimes even Indian citizenship. There are examples of members of both communities feeling completely alien in their Indian milieu and even resenting it.

Finally, one could describe both movements as two similar responses to the Jewish topic. What the two communities learnt about the Jews by virtue of the fact that they had been converted to Christianity led them to decide that it is the adoption of Jewish identity that was the best way to cope with the challenges that they had to face in their society. At the same time, it is obvious that the lengths of histories of these two movements are quite different, as the emergence of the Telugu Jews is a very recent phenomenon which requires further research. It would be interesting to watch the development of both communities in the future.

# Gene links Telugu Jews to lost tribe

*Deccan Chronicle, 2006*

Guntur, Jan. 31: A research scholar in London has endorsed the claims of a group of people in this district who say they are of Jewish ancestry. The scholar, Ms Yulia, had visited the community in the tiny village of Kothareddypalem, 17 km from here, along with Prof. Tudor Parfitt, an expert in Jewish studies, some years ago.

The two took DNA samples from the community and Ms Yulia also studied their social practices and took note of the fact that they observed the Sabbath regularly. Sadok Yacobi, the leader of the community, said he had recently received a communication from Ms Yulia endorsing the sect's claim that they belong to the Ephraim tribe. There are about 50 families in the community.

The community claims it was one of the 12 ancient Jewish tribes who were in search of the Promised Land with Moses. The Old Testament says the tribes were scattered all over the world. Another community living in Manipur has been identified as belonging to the Menashe tribe, considered to be cousins of the Ephraim sect. They have been welcomed back to Israel. However, the community in Guntur is yet to be officially recognized.

The families originally belonged to the Madiga community. After discovering their Jewish ancestry, Samuel Sundararaju and Deva Prasad changed their names to Shamuel Yacobi and Sadok Yacobi and became the leaders of the group. The DNA test could not prove much and Ms Yulia has also said that though the group could be termed Jews, they had been alienated from their identity.

Despite this, her overall perception is that the community belonged to a Jewish tribe. During the early 1990s, Rabbi E. Avihail also visited the area to observe the lifestyle of the community. When this correspondent visited the village, Mr Sadok Yacobi said the families were happy that the scholar had recognised them as Jews. Our realisation was not intuitive, he said. It is a truth we have known for generations. His scholar brother, Mr Shmuel Yacobi, who had authored a book on Judaism in Andhra Pradesh, had been trying hard for years to induce Jewish practices among the community.

However, the community is not sure whether the much-anticipated 'Aylia', or homecoming, will be fulfilled through the recognition of scholars. Miriam, named after the sister of Moses, said Israel had a statutory programme known as 'Ulphan' for embracing aliens to the Jewish tradition. Our cousins, the Menashe tribe of the Northeast, undertook the training programme, she said.

Mr Sadok Yacobi added that an awareness programme had been scheduled to enrich the community with Jewish spirituality and ways of life. A rabbi from Yeshiva University of the US will be arriving to preach to our group soon, he said. Itzhac

Korahi, a daily wager and a member of the community, asserted that their desire to be known as Jews had no materialistic dimensions. We could have gained quite a lot through Christian ministries, he said, adding, but despite hardships, we have been following Jewish traditions without any regrets.

For many community members their Jewish destiny is irrevocable. Moses had prophesied the reunion of the sons of Abraham, said Abraham Matanya, alias Mahima Das, a lorry driver. We are awaiting that moment.

Threats by certain Islamic groups do not daunt them. Poleramma, who has changed her name to Isterah, said the community did not crave for better living conditions or money. We turn to the direction of the Wailing Wall and pray to Elohim, the Living God, she said, adding, if he decides to wipe us off the face of the earth, we are ready for that too.

# Scholars see Telugu, Mesopotamia link

*Deccan Chronicle, 2006*

**Miss. Samyuktha Kooniah**, M.A.(Ph.D),discovered the forgotten and the missing link between Telmun and Andhra Pradesh In the year 1990,In Bahrain (Arabian-Gulf),Since then she is working very hard to bring it to light. and she says - " I am glad to share my work with the world so that the Telugu language gets its right-full place in history, and I strongly condemn Intellectual theft and stealers like Dr.Sanganabatla Narasiah. To share knowledge is power, to steal it is demeaning."

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**Karimnagar, Feb. 4:** Hurt by the Centre's refusal to grant ancient language status to Telugu, renowned scholars and historians have presented new evidence to prove that the language is at least 4,000 years old. The overlooked historical nuggets brought out by scholars would give added strength to the agitation by literary organizations and political parties to achieve ancient language status for Telugu.

Both Tamil and Sanskrit had recently been conferred ancient language status by the Union government. Apparently realizing that this had hurt people's pride, the State government has decided to collect all relevant manuscripts to stake a similar claim for Telugu. Historians and literary scholars have made the government's job easier by drawing attention to forgotten facts that prove the long history of the language.

Though conventionally Telugu is supposed to date back to the 11th century AD, scholars say that there is enough evidence to prove that it is thousands of years old.

"Experts like Edward Thomas had established the link between Dravidian, Brahmi and Cuneiform scripts," he said. "Prof. James Edgar Swain had traced the trade ties that flourished between the Telmun region in India and the Babylonian and Assyrian kingdoms in Mesopotamia region since 300 BC." Sumerians claimed to be Telimans who had migrated from the Telivaha river banks. References made in the Buddhist epic Sheravaniya about Telivaha river lend credence to the belief that the river was Godavari.

"This proves that Telimans hailed from the region spread along the Godavari river in the Telugu heartland," he said. Excavations at Ur city in Mesopotamia and discovery of primitive Telugu words such as Abba, Ser and Aquu in the cuneiform tablets corroborated this theory.

The Telimans who migrated from the Godavari belt carried with them another Dravidian language, Brahui. The language, similar to Telugu, is prevalent among migrant communities in the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, he said.

Similarity of megalithic graveyards unearthed during excavations at Markuk of Manjeera valley with burial sites discovered at Kirkuk in Iraq substantiated the fact that Sumerians hailed from “Telugu land” and the language spread overseas thousands of years ago, he contended.

According to scholars, the criterion adopted by the Centre in granting the status was unfair. Instead of depending on manuscripts alone, the government should take a more comprehensive view, they feel.

Telangana Writer’s Forum District President D. Narahari Acharya said that the Centre should also peruse ancient inscriptions found at at Godisala, Sanigaram and other places which gave valuable information on the evolution of Telugu script. Meanwhile, the Telugu Desam is also planning to spearhead a movement to achieve ancient language status for Telugu.

Courtesy: [Deccan Chronicle](#)

# Meeting the Jews of Andhra Pradesh

*Karen Primack, 2007*

After years of emailing, it was thrilling to meet Sadok Yacobi in the flesh. Yacobi is spiritual leader of the Bene Yacob synagogue in Andhra Pradesh, in southeastern India. This Telugu-speaking group, known as Bnei Ephraim by their oral tradition, is separate and apart from the four other groups of Indian Jews Kulanu has been following (the Bene Israel, the Cochini Jews, the Baghdadis, and the Bnei Menashe).

Yacobi has been inviting Kulanu teachers and rabbis to visit for almost a decade, but their village, with the tongue-twisting name of Kothareddypalem, is too isolated for many. We met in February in Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, where my husband Aron and I were traveling.

The Bene Yacob synagogue was founded only 15 years ago, but this community of India's so-called "untouchable" caste may have ancient Jewish roots. Sadok and his brother Shmuel grew up Christian but they remember their father and grandmother telling them, when they were young, that they were Jews. Their father had fought with the Indian Army during WWII, receiving a rare opportunity (for an "untouchable") to learn English and become a teacher. After their father died, Shmuel became a Christian preacher, which enabled him to study the Old Testament and to travel to Jerusalem. There, in the early 1980s, he had a spiritual awakening and decided to leave Christianity and live as a Jew. Sadok agreed to join him, and they convinced 30 families in their village to follow their example. The House of the Children of Yakob (Bene Yacob) was founded in 1992.

Now the brothers live in separate cities, with little contact. Sadok Yacobi's flock at Bene Yacob numbers about 200, and there are an additional 150 outside Kothareddypalem who come in for Shabbat. They have no Torah scroll, but on Shabbat they read the *parsha* from a Hebrew-English *chumash*. They recite blessings in Hebrew and readings in Telugu, using an Ashkenazi siddur transliterated by hand into Telugu. They need an additional 40 *chumashim*.

His family of five lives in the synagogue since their hut was destroyed in a storm. The huts of other congregants weren't so badly destroyed. Yacobi ministers to his flock like a social worker, he says, visiting and talking out problems. He is unsalaried but some make donations. Like other "untouchables," he and his congregants survive primarily by toiling in the fields of landlords for very low pay. He sends his children to college using high-interest loans. The community is sending 25 of its children to an English-medium school (Hindu), costing \$180/year/student. His goal is to one day start an English- and Hebrew-medium school. (An English-medium school conducts its classes in English rather than the local Indian language.)

It is the hope of his children, and indeed all of the congregation's children, to make aliyah and apply their computer and other education in Israel. Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail visited the community in 1994 for three days. According to Yacobi, he taught them some Hebrew songs, advised them to practice carefully, and told them "when the time comes the Lord will arrange for aliya."

Aliya could not come at a better time. Two years ago, Sadok saw a headline in a newspaper that members of a Pakistani Muslim terrorist group, Laskar E Thoiba, had orders to kill all local Jewish communities, as well as visiting Jews from the US and Israel at the Hyderabad airport. The terrorists were arrested and the police check on the community's welfare every day. But the Jews have stopped wearing their kippot on the street because they are afraid of Muslim terrorists.

That day of aliya may be closer. Rabbi Marvin Tokayer of New York has taken an interest in the group, and he, together with Kulanu, may be on the verge of locating teachers and rabbis for the community.

Meanwhile, there are a few modest steps that can be taken to alleviate some of the poverty-related suffering. The community needs buffalos for selling the milk. They could also use capital for supplies to make kosher candles. Also on their wish list are a sewing machine, cassettes of Jewish music, money for a musical keyboard (\$175), laptop computers (there are NO computers in Kothareddypalem), and bicycles for selling vegetables in the city, as well as investment money to buy the vegetables. And sponsors for the 25 students in school would also be accepted extremely gratefully.

Yacobi left with a parting gift. He was accompanied at the interview by his wife Miriam, his three grown children, and another member of the congregation. (His son Yacob attends an engineering college in the village, while daughters Sarah and Keziya and congregant Yehoshua Korahi happened to be in Hyderabad on a three-month academic program for their Masters Degrees in computer applications). The six of them agreed to tape some of their religious songs for Kulanu. The hotel lent us their business lounge, Aron appeared with his video cam, and they sang away – beautifully and with heart. Hopefully, we will have this music available on the Kulanu website before too long.

# India Journal

*Rabbis Bonita and Gerald Sussman, 2007*

*(Editor's note: Rabbis Bonita and Gerald and Bonita Sussman worked with the community of Telugu-speaking Jews in Kothareddipalem, Andhra Pradesh, India, from July 19 to August 7. Sadok Yacobi is the spiritual leader of their congregation, Bnai Ephraim.)*

We finally landed in Gunter yesterday at around 3:30. On the way were greeted with flowers by Sadok's daughters and nephews in Hyderabad when we changed planes. A delegation of people from the community including Sadok's family met us when we landed in Vijayawada and accompanied us by cab to Guntur, where we are staying in the Hotel Geetha. They were very happy to greet us and also gave us flowers.

It is hot, but not hotter than NY in the hottest part of the summer. Our hotel has marble floors and a good pure-vegetarian restaurant downstairs. Sadok found us transportation in a car to ride the 20 minutes from Guntur to Kothareddipalem. We plan to spend Shabbat with them in the village.

They were very happy to get the *chumashim*, tapes, and other books and things that we had brought. We brought them a paper *Sefer Torah* of reasonable size and explained to them that they could use this as a symbol for a *Sefer Torah*.

Sadok's daughter Kesia thought we could teach in the evenings for 4-5 hours after people have finished with their work. We planned a course around the holidays and life cycle. We added to the stash a *havdalah* candle, a seder plate, *haggadot*, hand-baked *matzah shemurah* from Israel, and other odds and ends. Now that we have met the community, we have lightened our load of luggage.

## ***Shabbat in the Village***

Shabbat in the village was quite an experience. We were greeted with flowers by a delegation and escorted to the synagogue with drums with a big welcome sign on the front gate. The synagogue consists of a one-room concrete building with electricity but no running water. It doubles as the home of Sadok and his family. When Shabbat or anything else occurs, they move their two cots to the side, and various things are put on shelves. Living in the *shul* involves a tremendous lack of privacy and having to set up and dismantel things frequently.

We slept in the *shul* while Sadok's family slept in the courtyard. This experience isn't for everyone. We and their rats slept in the *shul* together. We have become quite fond of the lizards too. The outhouse has a toilet that is non-flushable. It is hot and has lots

of flies. There is no running water, refrigeration or Western comforts. They cook on one small gas burner.

Around 6 am showed up for Shabbat morning. The place was completely full with everyone sitting on the floor except for us, Sadok, and one of the elders. There was no room for anyone else. Their davening consists mostly of translations of sections of the service in Telegu. The children all read Hebrew and know *brachot*. The women sit separately from the men during the service and they (including the girls) cover their hair with the saris. The girls make the blessing on the *tallit* too.

They know that they should not cook on Shabbat, but since there is no refrigeration they do. They also have someone who is a *shochet* though I doubt that he is aware of all that we consider to be involved in kosher slaughter. Food for us has not been a problem, since we eat at the pure vegetarian places. The food is familiar to us, having patronized the kosher South Indian places in NY over the years.

On Shabbat we went over the Holidays picture book Kulanu members sent with us and I explained *Yom Hashoa*, *Yom Haatzmaut*, *Yom Yerushalayim* and *Yom Hazikaron*, which they knew nothing about. We also taught them *havdallah*, which they will now do.

We are teaching children. We bought a wooden *aleph bet* block set and everyone picks out the letters of their names. The blocks have *nekudot* too and they find them as well. Also we bought a beautiful children's book which those who know English translate for the others. They recited the months and days of the week in Hebrew for us. Sadok told us that there are about 15 children from the community attending school.

Sadok took a loan for his children's education and is paying 120% interest. The local newspaper says they are beginning to put legislation in place around these moneylending practices.

As soon as we heard the congregation daven, we decided we wanted to record their liturgical music. There are some good singers who could sing for a recording. They do a *wow Shema* and *esa ainai*, and *yevarechecha*. As of now we are not planning professional recording. The most we could do is tape recording. We have a digital camera that also videos small segments, and we will take short videos.

We will also record the songs we taught them so they will have them there. Everyone is eager to learn songs. So far they have learned *Shabbat Shalom*, *Am Yisrael Cha*, *Shalom Chaverim*,<sup>i</sup> and *Eretz Aavat Chalav Udevash*. We also sang *Hinay Matov*.

We bought the best tape recorder we could find, and we set up a recording session, but were rained out. On the next night Sadok brought in the best singers, including his sister, but the lights went out. We went ahead anyway — they sang by candlelight.

We recorded their music, some in Telugu. Jewish Telugu songs, imagine that! We feel it is a treasure. There is about 45 minutes of it.

### *A Year of Holidays*

We observed one actual holiday while we were there — *Tisha B'Av*. It seems to be a new holiday for them. We explained it and told a long version of the story of *Kamtsa* and *Bar Kamsta*. We sang *im eshkech yerushalyim* and read excerpts from *Aichah* and *Kinot*. Quite a few I'm told fasted though I'm not sure if they meant from eating and drinking or just from eating.

We are teaching the holidays in their order, starting with *Sukkot*. We had the children draw pictures of their *succah*, which we hope to bring home. They signed their names in Hebrew

When we taught about *Channukkah*, we made *levivot* (latkes) for everyone. I bought lots of potatoes and onions; Mrs. Yacobi and daughters peeled, I chopped onions, and we made *levivot* for about 50 people. The women were given the recipe for next *Channukkah*.

In addition to *Channukkah*, we taught about Purim. I bought some magic markers and the kids made masks of Indian Queen Esther and Mordecai.

Sadok's wife asked to learn *matzoh* baking. Till now they just used *chapatis* (flat Indian bread made with oil, flour, and salt), but there is a picture in that above-mentioned holiday book that shows an Indian woman baking *matzoh*. She is wearing a sari and has a star on her forehead. This picture is captivating to them as well as to me.

Last night was extraordinary. In response to Mrs. Yacobi's request for a *matza* recipe I bought the roller and a fork to put holes in it, and she had the flour. (In India they don't own forks, only spoons). We didn't have an oven, so we took a flat skillet (like one you could make pancakes on) and put a lid over it so it was enclosed like an oven! The *matzas* came out looking perfect!. Mrs. Yacobi's daughters helped too.

We also brought the leftover hand-baked *matza shemurah* that we had from *Pesach*. This box came from Israel to the US and then to India! We gave out this *matza* too. They made a *shechyanu*. I must say that this *matza* baking was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. Just to watch this all happen for the first time in the community. Mrs. Yacobi will teach all the women how to do this and they will have real *matza* this year, not *chapati* as they were used to.

In addition to our regular curriculum for adults, other issues came up. I don't feel competent to teach *shechita*, though they seem to be willing to learn. We did teach

about *tefillin*, which was unknown to them, and we showed a wedding. Jerry went over items in the rabbis' manual with Sadok and is giving him a copy.

On Monday, Sadok invited us to a *channukkat habayit* in someone's newly built home. This man went into the construction supplies business a few months ago and must be doing well, in that he moved out of his one-room clay and thatched house to a four-room brick and concrete one. Jerry was asked to bless the house and be the first to turn on the electricity.

Afterwards two gentlemen came to meet "the grand rabbi who was visiting" and asked what you need to do to become Jewish. They were involved with a "Yeshua" group. One was a Christian and the other of Hindu background originally. The Yeshua stuff led them to look at Judaism and they have been studying on their own. This is a new issue for Sadok to deal with, especially since they seem to be more educated, well off and of a higher caste background. Jerry told them that they should leave it up to Sadok for guidance.

### **Aliyah?**

Upon our arrival, Sadok said he thought they all were anxious to get on with the program of formal conversion and ultimately to emigrate to Israel.

It turns out that not all are interested in making *aliya*. Some do want to make *aliya* or at least be buried in Israel. There is so much adjusting to do and problems to overcome. I am not sure what kind of Israeli rabbis would convert them since their practice is not main stream on different levels. Also India doesn't allow others to come in and convert people, which is another issue in the newspapers these days. The truth is while their lives are very difficult, whose life isn't on some level? They have family, community and friends, and lifelong connections. Besides, there is the money issue of getting to Israel, which to them seems insurmountable. Also, for now they are not as threatened as one may think. Jews have been protected here for many years and while they are a tiny, tiny minority, most people think they are just another Christian sect, of which there are many. They have a great relationship with the police and do not live in fear at all. Except for one terrorist incident three years ago, they would say there has been no discrimination at all.

Jerry got the impression that they claim to have over the generations observed the Shabbat, circumcised their boys, and slaughtered animals in a special way. One of the elders spoke quite eloquently that they are waiting patiently for being gathered into the land of Israel, as had been prophesied, and that if they were not so privileged, their bones should be brought there, as in the story of the Biblical Joseph.

It is interesting that in the Indian Jewish history book that we read here, it says that the *Bene Israel* originally did not know Hebrew and kept only the same few *mitzvot* until they were instructed by the Cochini Jews several hundred years ago.

Not too long after our arrival, I sent the following note to the spiritual leader of the *Bene Israel* congregation in New Delhi:

**Dear Mr. Malekar,**

We would like to thank you for your warm welcome in New Delhi and taking the time to meet us. I regret not being able to spend Shabbat with your lovely community. We had a lovely Shabbat in the village of Kothareddipalem. The group is impoverished yet has a noble and gentle manner and lovely children who can read Hebrew perfectly. I think they would very much benefit from being part of the broader Indian Jewish community.

There are various kinds of homes in the village, from concrete houses that seem quite lovely to a kind of thatched-roofed hut. We soon began visiting the community members in their homes. The first home was brick with electricity. Then a hut. The ambience is like a *moshav* or camp, with the huts close to each other and sparse, though this one had a black and white television along with a dirt floor and thatched roof. They make living without many possessions look inviting, considering how we live in the US.

Generally, they live in very small homes that could fit into our NY kitchen, which is not all that big. Most have electricity; none have running water. They all have *shadai* or a *mezuzah* on their doors or other Jewish symbols like a *menorah* or *Magen David* with the word *Tzion* on it. One had the *Shema* in Telegu transliteration on a wall.

They are very hospitable and sincere. We are learning many lessons on life from being here.

There is one family that lives about 200 kilometers from the community. They got rich but remain connected. The family has another five families in their region whom they celebrate with, like a *chavurah*. It reminds us of the Jews in Vermont who travel long distances to get together to celebrate.

### ***Police Encounters***

An Islamic terrorist threat from three years ago is still on people's minds, though they don't think it is a serious danger. In any case Sadok went on our first day to the chief of police to tell them about us. We are not exactly sure why. Sadok's nephew told us that they are reluctant to tell people that they are Jews and that most of their fellow villagers think that the Jews are just another of the other Christian sects of the area.

We met with people from the local special section dealing with foreigners

The outcome is that they suspect us of being missionaries on a tourist visa. We went to the district inspector with Sadok. Sadok apparently convinced them that we were

not Christian missionaries but tourists who were also visiting other places in India (as we are) and were not holding large public meetings to preach to others but were having quiet conversations within the confines of the group. The matter seems to be straightened out except that something was left unsigned and we and Sadok are to return to the district inspector. In addition, Sadok mentioned that someone from Intelligence called and wants to meet with us tomorrow, but that everything is fine. I don't know exactly what to make of all of this or if there is any cause for alarm.

In an interesting and somewhat disturbing occurrence, someone claiming to be a reporter for *India Today* came to the *shul* on Wednesday. Sadok did not let him stay but arranged that he interview all of us in our Guntur hotel the next day. As the man rambled on it became clear that he was not who he said he was. Sadok checked it out with *India Today* and they did not recognize his name. Because he seemed to know a fair amount about us and the whereabouts of the community, we went to the police, who said they would look into the matter.

When the “reporter” came on Shabbat with a videographer, as we had arranged, Sadok summoned the police, who were waiting for his call. They took him to the headquarters of the special branch dealing with foreigners to find out who he really is. They also told him to leave Westerners alone because it hurts tourism. We don't know the end of the story yet.

### ***Economic Development***

It is natural to want to help such a poor community. We said we would try to limit items to those that are income-producing. We discussed buying two used bicycles so they can sell vegetables in the marketplace (\$100), one sewing machine (\$100), and some candle-making equipment for up to \$250. This is still being negotiated.

*Erev Shabbat*, we went shopping with Sadok. We bought two bicycles for \$120 and named them Karen and Harriet (after two Kulanu women helping the community). We got them a non-motorized sewing machine that does zigzag and embroidery (two features that they requested) for \$150. We went to the candle-making store, and it was an expensive adventure. Everything together will cost about \$370. Since we have \$230 left of Kulanu's money we will add the extra \$140 to complete the purchase.

In our opinion they do have a realistic game plan to make a go of the bicycles, sewing, and candles. We will see. They plan to sell the candles locally, and possibly through Kulanu. They have the capacity to make *Channukkah* candles that burn about an hour long in different colors. Sadok will look into an export permit.

*Marbeh nechasim, marbeh d'aaga* (the more material items, the more worry). New needs develop along with the purchases. The sewing machine and the candle-making need a place, since the place where they are now stored is the one-room *shul* where

Sadok and his wife live. If this project flies, there will really not be enough room. They say they can put up a working shack for \$500, plus they need start-up money for the vegetables and baskets to put them in, another \$30 which we will give. And in the beginning they are purchasing 50 pounds of wax (about \$75), when they really could use 100 pounds. We have put some of this on hold till we have a clearer picture of the finances.

We were thinking they could make *challah* covers easily with the sewing machine. For *havdallah* candles, they will need the bigger molds, which we haven't purchased. To prevent fights, the elders decided who will get the bicycle. They picked a man whose sons had studied the most Torah. The second bike belongs officially to Sadok, but we have requested that he pick someone to share it with so they also can sell vegetables when he is not using it.

Yesterday we picked out the sewing items for the *challah* covers. Mrs. Yacobi will make two samples and we will see. We think this project is perfect for them since they have the sewing machine.

We ordered a *havdallah* candle mold (about \$35) which we will be picking up shortly. We have called the candle business that will be exported the "Bnai Ephraim of India" candles and those that will be sold here, *Ner Tamid*, Everlasting Candles. The latter will be sold to Christian groups if things go as planned. Everyone seems satisfied with these names.

We will see how these businesses go. In the beginning they may need a greater outlay of money, but all this is yet to be seen. We go around with Sadok to purchase the odds and ends, baskets, threads, etc., that the projects need to get off the ground. We are hoping to return with some candles and a *challah* cloth to show Kulanu. We have added a nice sum to the \$500 of your allotment, plus we treat everyone to lunch every day. Not that this comes to a lot, but it does add up with car and the gas every day. But we feel we are doing the right thing and *tzedakah* is *tzedakah*, especially if you put people into business.

We designed a 12 inch *havdallah* candle that has swirls and is not tapered. There will be four candles to a mold. We were in luck because the standard candle mold fits the *Channukkah* menorahs that we had. They bought wax dyes in yellow, pink, green and I think blue. We never discussed Shabbat candles. On our list of to-dos is to make the insert labels for the candles. Our ideas for the labels were either to reproduce one of the children's drawings or to take a photo with the children holding candles. This seems to be the way we are going.

For the *challah* cloths, we bought two kinds of fabric — one plain white and the other sari material in kelly green with gold designs. We insisted that we have a sample that has a distinctive Indian look to it. We thought they should have selected material in

the blue color line, but they voted on this Kelly green. It should be beautiful. We bought some rhinestone-y things and many color threads, and we also bought embroidery patterns for them to choose borders. We think they might come out gorgeous. We suggested that they be sold cheaply at first so they feel successful (like \$20-25 a piece). We hope to be coming home with two samples.

At Kulanu's request, we told Sadok that future funds are dependent on a proper system of administration and accountability. We asked him to meet with the elders and come up with a written plan. We also recommended that they consult with Christian groups in the community who regularly receive overseas funds.

### *Summing Up*

The closing ceremony was somewhat of a love festival. We asked them about their origins. They said that they had a tradition that they came in 722, the fall of Samaria, from Assyria to Persia to Afghanistan to Kashmir and somehow to where they are now. What they said was a little bit confusing because they also said that there was a period where they worshipped idols like Hindus. They made some connection between themselves and the Madiga people, saying that since their ancestors made sacrifices they knew about slaughtering animals, which was the traditional work of the Madiga peoples, who are a branch of the "untouchables." They said that the Hindus also referred to them as God's people and asked their advice on butchering animals.

We are coming home with what we feel is a huge responsibility to get the word out about this community. We are thinking about next summer. It will take a while to digest this experience. In any case we think it would be extremely helpful to learn at least some Telugu...

## **A week with the Bene Ephraim of Andra Pradesh**

*Jonas Pariente, 2008*

Last week we followed one of our main characters, Sharon Galsulkar, on his journey to meet with the Bene Ephraim community, settled for generations in the central state of Andra Pradesh.

Last summer, the American organization Kulanu sent a rabbi and his wife (Bonita and Gerald Sussman) to visit the Bene Ephraim. They met Sharon on their way back as they were stopping in Bombay, and told him about this community, lost in the plains of the Deccan. For Kulanu, finding out about an Indian Jewish educator, fully qualified and living a few hours away from the Bene Ephraim, was a great opportunity. He agreed to go on their behalf, they paid his trip. His mission was to develop the contact with the community and try to understand better their socio-economic needs on one hand, spiritual and religious ones on another hand. On our side, we wanted to follow this Bene Israel educator going to help a community reconnecting with their Judaism, a process through which his own community underwent. The challenge for us was to not be swallowed by the interesting story of the Bene Ephraim but rather focusing on Sharon's approach to the situation.

Sharon, 33, is married to Sharona, the mother of his two young daughters. He is in charge of the Jewish Education department at O.R.T. India, which agenda is to provide professional training to needy Jews. He had the same kind of job at A.J.D.C., the other American Jewish organization holding office in Bombay. He also gave Torah classes in several synagogues in the city. Sharon enjoys a special authority in the community as he is one of the very few Bene Israel who studied in a yeshiva (Talmudic class) in Jerusalem and came back to India afterwards. He and his wife follow orthodox customs, making it often uneasy to lead an integrated life in Bombay. They want to do Aliyah to Israel, where their daughters will have the chance to receive a proper Jewish education. But Sharon is strongly attached to his city and country, developing a true passion for the fantastic Indian wildlife. On another note, his professional perspectives in Israel are still uncertain.

The Bene Ephraim community counts around 30 families, and most of its members work in the surrounding fields of chili and cotton, or in the buffalo farms, which milk is used in the preparation of curd (plain yogurt) or lassi (sweet yogurt to drink). Sadok Yacobi, the leader of the community, his wife and three children, are the only English-speakers. In Andra Pradesh the main language is Telugu. None of the Bene Ephraim can speak Hindi, the Indian official language; Sharon had to communicate with them through Sadok or his daughter Kezia.

This community lives 30 Kms away from Guntur, a growing city, about which nothing could be said beside that it is located 300 Kms from Hyderabad, itself 700

Kms East of Bombay. Their village, Chebrole, is basically a bunch of cheap businesses along the main road, from which smaller tracks go towards the fields and farmers' houses. While commercial and residential constructions are common and a bit ugly, the landscape is gorgeous, offering to the spectator a great variety of greens, yellows and oranges. Animals, vegetation and women's multicolor saris animate this relaxing décor.

As for Jewishness, the Bene Ephraim would be Jews settled in the Telugu region for generations. Like Bene Israel, they would have lost almost all the Jewish rituals, but not the belief in their belonging to a people whose origin is not in India. It seems that for a while they followed Christian customs, without forgetting their roots. For instance, they would have always circumcised their first-borns and would have always eaten beef, which is a great sacrilege in a Hindu country. For several generations they have been put apart of the majority and have lived side by side with the untouchables. Last but not least, they don't work on Saturdays, although most of them are very poor farmers. Their Jewish rebirth seems to have started by Sadok's grandfather onward. We stayed at Sadok's house, renovated in 1991 thanks to American funds, and which is also used as the community synagogue. Every evening Sharon met with the kids, aged 5 to 15, and taught them basic elements of Judaism through drawing, singing but also bird watching. At 8 pm adults came to listen to lectures about monotheism, the Jewish mitzvot (prescriptions) or the Jewish calendar.

It would have taken more than six days for Sharon to really understand the community's needs, and even more to start figuring out solutions. However, during an interview on camera he declared that the ideal solution would be to send the whole community to Israel. It is definitely far from happening as their Jewishness is not recognized by the Hebrew State. But more importantly, one can doubt about the chances of social promotion for Telugu-speaking farmers.

On a personal note, this trip was unforgettable. We were welcomed with great hospitality and generosity. Sadok's family treated us as if we were part of them, cooking breakfast, lunch and dinner for us – and the several chai (tea) it takes to spend a normal day in India. Still, these people are far from being wealthy. Listening to their Shema Israel resonating and reaching heaven was another illustration of their sincere and hopeful faith, leaving us moved and speechless.

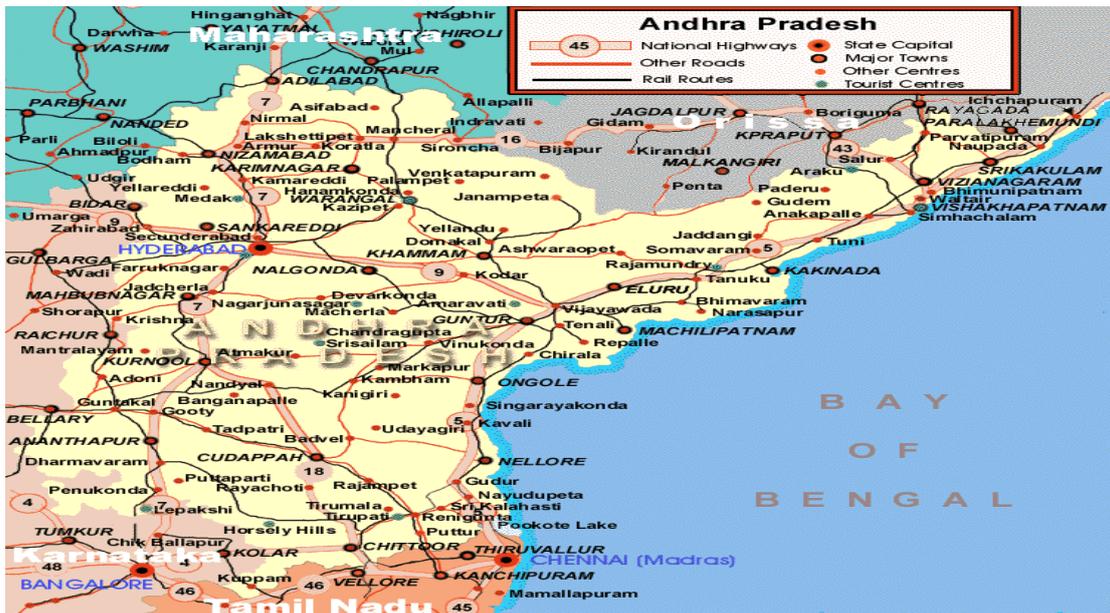
# The Telugu Jews of India

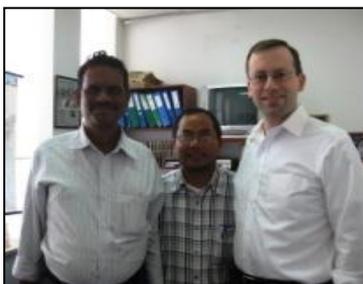
*Avrom Aryeh-Zuk Kahana*

As an interesting side note, I am in communication with a Jewish community that refers to themselves as the Telugu Jews of India. Much of their history has been lost but they allude to their origins taking place around the tenth century coming from somewhere to the north-east. In this historical background they are not dissimilar from the Bene Israel, one of the identified Jewish communities of India that had appeared without any established historical record at about the same time. The date and location corresponds to the time period that many of the Karaites were forced to escape for their lives from the oppressive edicts of Sa'adiah Gaon. These Telugu Jews are part of the untouchables, a beleaguered lower caste in India's societal structure. In many ways they represent everything I have been fighting for. As a small community they were under constant pressure of the Hindu majority, relegated to the status of second class. When the Christian missionaries came they were pressurized to adopt Christianity with the lure of better paying jobs if they did so. Many did succumb and convert but a small remnant held on, adhering to their ancient religious traditions though much had been lost over time. Their lack of any Talmudic documentation, practice of only certain holy days would suggest that they truly were part of the Karaite exodus from Mesopotamia. Their reception by the Ashkenazi Jews is at the best lukewarm. There is suspicion that they may not really be Jews. I counter that with "What is a Jew?" If it is not someone that adheres to the Torah, that believes there is only God, one God and no others, that suffers the persecution and prejudice of the outside world, that has borne losses and tragedies for no other reason than they refused to abandon their beliefs, then I am at a loss as to what the criteria might actually be. If it is only as the Rabbinate insist, that they are born of a Jewish mother, a mother that has some stamp of approval because she's white, European, or 'certified Kosher' by a Rabbinical court, then sadly God will only be able to shake his head in despair at these misguided notions of Jewishness, thinking back to the days when he brought a mixed host out of Egypt. Men of all color, of all nations, some Semitic, some not, and forged them into a nation by marching them into the desert for forty years where they had to learn to depend upon one another in order to survive. But to my Karaite brethren, I say, "yes, these are our people. They have proven it so with their stubbornness in the face of affliction," and we welcome them openly like a long lost sibling returning to our home. One of their members Naomi has asked me to help them by providing them with books and teachings from our communities. I ask the Hachams to hear her plea and let us embrace them whole heartedly. I encourage all of us to help send them the materials they need to ensure their faith in what is a hostile world. I have their contact address and if we can collect books on Karaism, and even Karaite sefers, please let us unite our people as one.

May the Lord bless all of them in what should be our Endeavour and may he show us his mercy as we help those that are unable to help themselves.

# Maps and Pictures





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