

Out of India

Sophie Judah's stories chronicle a vanishing tribe

BY AMY ROSENBERG



Sophie Judah

Sophie Judah hails from Jabalpur, a small town nestled among the hills, caves, and lakes of central India. In her wide-ranging collection of short stories, *Dropped from Heaven*, she describes a town much like Jabalpur, detailing the ways and manners of the tight-knit Jewish community, known as the Bene Israel, that migrated there from India's southwestern coast in the late 19th century. In Judah's stories, the women wear saris and observe the Sabbath, the families eat curry and keep kosher, and in the synagogue (really the living room of one well-to-do clan), the congregants speak Hindi and utter Hebrew prayers.

Not much fiction has been written about the Bene Israel, and the group's actual history is shrouded in myth. The earliest record of their presence in India, near what is now Mumbai, dates back to the 11th century, but some scholars say that they settled in India earlier, around the second century BCE, when they fled the Assyrian invasion of Galilee. Judah's collection traces a more recent history, proceeding chronologically from the 1930s, when Britain still ruled India; through the Partition of 1947, when India, Pakistan, and what is now Bangladesh became—violently—modern, independent nations; to the present day, when the river in Judah's fictional town has dried up, the Jewish population has nearly disappeared, and the old synagogue has become a pickle and chutney factory. As for the real Jabalpur, where at their peak the Bene Israel numbered about 200, Judah says there are now just four Jewish residents: her cousin, his wife, who converted from Hinduism, her husband's cousin, and his 80-year-old aunt. Judah herself lives in Hod Hasharon, a town in central Israel.

What was it like to be Jewish in India?

I did not grow up very observant because of my father's profession. He was in the Army. We moved around, and very often we were the only Jewish family in town. But every time my father was posted in a place where the family couldn't go, we'd go back to Jabalpur, where my parents grew up. That's where I came into contact with how the Jews lived. But we kept kashrut, we did not mix milk and meat. And we did observe Sabbath, but not the way I do it in Israel. Daddy worked on Saturday. And we went to school. But Mommy lit the candles and did not sew or knit on Saturday.

In one of your stories, a Hindu boy fleeing his village in the newly created Pakistan has seen his entire family murdered by Muslims. The Jewish army officer who finds him intends to adopt him, but a fellow officer argues, "You will have to explain to him what a Jew is. Not many Indians know what Jews are." Why is that?

Because it's such a small community. We didn't have a rabbi. So we never accepted converts—there was nobody to do it. People married only within the community. If I know you've got a son and he's reached the age where he wants to get married, or we think he should get married, then automatically it was: "You know, my sister-in-law has a sister-in-law who's got a friend who's got a daughter." You married in the community, because if you married out you were not accepted, and your children were never accepted. We called them "black Jews," or *Kala Israels*, and we didn't let them into the synagogues. It was really cruel, but that was the way we kept a very small, closed community.

I remember as a child, when I went to a convent school, and one of the senior girls—I must have been about eight—one of the senior girls asked me, "What is a Jew?" So I tried to explain to her. I said, "You know, we believe in one god, and so do the Muslims and so do the Christians, except that the Christians have three in one"—and people didn't understand that. She came back to me about two weeks later and said, "Yes, now I know: Shylock the Jew." She had been reading *The Merchant of Venice*.

You went to a convent school?

Education in India before the arrival of the British was either in a temple or in a mosque. Non-Muslims did not go to the Muslim school that catered only to boys and taught mainly the Koran. Non-Brahmins could not enter the temples and the schools attached to them. The arrival of the missionaries brought equal educational opportunity for all religious communities and castes, and for both sexes. The best schools were and still are run by them. The Jews were too few in number to have schools of their own—it was only in the 1800s that the Kadoorie family and the Sassoon family built Jewish schools in Bombay.

Jewish families like mine that did not live in Bombay sent their children to other schools. I started in the St Joseph's Convent at Jabalpur, moved to the St. Mary's Convent in Allahabad, and then, in Delhi, in spite of being promised admission and buying the school uniforms for the Jesus and Mary Convent, we could not go there because some minister got his relatives into the places promised to us. We went to the Army Children's School instead and then eventually to Christ Church School, which was run by missionaries from the Church of England.

Even in the convent schools there were never more than four or five Catholics in each class. The missionaries do not proselytize in their schools, because then parents would not send their children there. The Catholic students had catechism class while we had "Moral Study."

Did you face anti-Semitism when your father was posted in places where Jews were unfamiliar?

No. Everywhere I went, people wanted to know, "Which god do you pray to? Which temple do you go to?" But, you see, the Indian belief is something like the six blind men and the elephant: None of us has seen God. Each of us has got a different part, and each of us thinks that we know everything. And none of us knows everything. When we really see him, he can be something entirely different. So it doesn't matter in what form you pray to him.

There has never been anti-Semitism in India—except once. There was a little anti-Semitism in the Cochin community when the Portuguese came in the mid-16th century and brought in their version of the Spanish Inquisition, but there has never been a real problem with anti-Semitism. Even though we are closed when it comes to intermarrying and such, we mix with all the communities around ours. It's no problem eating in anybody's house, for example, because most of the Hindus are vegetarian. They are afraid to eat in our houses because we

have meat. But we are not afraid to eat in their houses because it's only vegetables.

What about relations between Jews and Muslims in India?



Synagogue in Cochin, Kerala

Oh, that's very good. I remember in Jabalpur the first time we brought the sefer Torah from Bombay. The Muslim people tied cloth or a handkerchief around their heads and danced. They said, "This is a revered book." And even to our funerals, they'd all come. The Muslims would come, the Hindus would come. We'd go for their funerals and their weddings, and they'd come to ours. There was no distinction.

In addition to the Bene Israel, there are several other groups of Jews in India, like those from Kerala in the south, the Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta—

Yes, and the Mizo Jews from Mizoram, in the northeast. They converted to Christianity hundreds of years ago when the Christians came, and they are now converting back to Judaism. They have always kept their religion, even when they converted. They go into the mikvah. They circumcise after the eighth day. They keep kashrut.

Are there major differences among the groups?



Street in the Jewish quarter in Kochi, Kerala

There used to be a lot of antagonism between the Iraqis—what we call the Baghdadi Jews—and the Bene Israel, because the Baghdadis came in the wake of the British. They came for business, and they settled mainly around Calcutta. But they had been in contact with mainstream Judaism, whereas we had lost contact. So they came with the Talmud and the

Zohar, and they came with all of the new books, and although we were willing to learn, they sort of looked down on us because we had forgotten quite a bit. But now that there are so few Jews... At one time a Baghdadi wouldn't marry a Bene Israel and vice versa, because there were other Jews within their own communities to choose from. But today there's no difference. All the Jews have left.

Why did you leave?

My husband had already emigrated, two years before me. We weren't married yet, but we grew up together. He came back to India to get married. He came back on the first of March in 1972, we were married on the 19th of March, and on the fourth of April I was in Israel. I went back once, 25 years ago, and then I went again last year because an old school friend of mine is very ill with cancer.

Do you miss India?

Maybe because I'd moved so much with my father—two years in one place, two years in another—I'm not really attached to places. I'm attached to people. In the beginning I missed the language. I missed what I knew: that now this particular flower will bloom, now it will rain. But also, I was brought up in the Indian way: You marry, you go to your husband's home. Your father's home is not your real home; your real home is your husband's home. And as soon as I came to Israel, I knew I belonged here.

Because your husband was there, or because you're Jewish?

I think because I'm Jewish. The moment we touched down, I just felt I'd come home. Without looking out the window, without knowing the place, without anything. That could only be my Jewishness.

It was partly a sense of the prophecies coming true, a sense that all Jews have to go back home. And also, I remember when I was about 10 or 11, my uncle gave my sister a book: *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And that was the first time I became conscious of the Holocaust. I asked my dad, "Why didn't you tell us about this?" He said, "What? So my children will leave here and go to Israel?" That was the beginning of the turning point. I knew nobody was going to kill off my people and I was going to do nothing about it. Okay, you killed us—we are going to go back and build a new nation, no matter where we are. It was a feeling that a part of me had been taken away, even though I never knew the Jews who were killed, and it was my duty to replace that part.

After *Anne Frank*, I read *Exodus*, and then I started searching for books on Judaism. All the books I found were written about the Jews of Eastern Europe or America. There was nothing about us.

Is that what compelled you to write the stories in *Dropped from Heaven*?

On the library shelf, there were some books about the Bene Israel, but it was all anthropology. They're looking at you through a microscope: "Are you Jewish, aren't you Jewish; this tradition, that tradition." And then the history. But there was no humanity, the human touch was missing.



In small communities like the Bene Israel, narratives and histories are often passed down orally from generation to generation. And many of your stories read almost like parables or fables; the characters seem to exemplify certain types, and the plots are at times mystical, like in "The Horoscope Never Lies," in which a man who seems to be avoiding his predicted grisly end instead walks right into it. I'm wondering: Are your based on stories based on tales you heard your parents or grandparents tell? Where do they come from?

Most of them are imagined. There's sometimes just a little bit that's true, let's say, just a small incident, and the rest is built up around it because you pull it and twist it and turn it until you get it into shape. Because I didn't want anybody to figure out that I'm writing their story.

So these stories are partly true, but I cannot claim that they are—I don't know how true they are, because it all takes place before me. They are fictional, because I would say 99 percent of it is fiction. But they are built around things I did hear as a child. There was no television; television came to India after I left. The main thing we did was read, and as girls we were not allowed to go out of the house. So you heard older people talking, and I always liked people. I liked to hear stories.

Is there an Indian community in Israel? What is it like?

Yes, there is a big Indian community, but—how should I say it? The Indian community in Israel will soon disappear. And I hope it does because we came to Israel to build up Israel. We've got to forget the country we came from and be comfortable in our new country. 🇮🇱

Amy Rosenberg is books editor of Nextbook.org.

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