



# Jewish-Muslim Relations In South Asia

Where antipathy lives  
without Jews

The nature of relations between Jews and Muslims in South Asia is largely determined by Muslim attitudes towards Jews. This is because of the miniscule number of Jews both in absolute numbers and in comparison to the Muslim population. South Asia is an extremely important region for studying those attitudes for there are more Muslims in South Asia than anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, Muslims from this region have a diaspora larger in size and geographical spread than the Muslims of any other part of the world and they often take these attitudes and perceptions with them.

According to official sources, presently the only country in South Asia to have a significant population of Jews is India, and the Jewish population there was estimated to only be around 3,500 in 2014 by the *Times of India*. So few in numbers, they actually do not even find a separate mention in the census and are rather placed in the “Others” category, which constitutes 0.7 per cent of India’s total population that now exceeds 1.2 billion. Jews are India’s smallest religious minority and Muslims India’s largest. In fact, Indian Muslims are the largest minority community in the world. While Jews are hardly 0.0004 per cent of India’s population, Muslims are around 13 per cent. The highest the Jewish population ever reached in India was in 1951, just before a mass migration to Israel when the population was estimated to have been less than 30,000.

While 1,199 Jews were recorded in Pakistan in 1941, most of them had to leave Pakistan by 1968. A few years ago the only Jew known to be living in Pakistan was an elderly woman in Karachi. It is estimated that there were about 135 Jews in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1947, mainly concentrated in Dacca. Most of them also left for other parts of the world, leaving behind

only two families who had converted to Christianity

Muslim-Jewish relations in South Asia though, despite the small numbers of Jews, are almost as old as Islam itself, which reached India during the seventh century CE. The earliest Muslims in India were Arabs who settled with local women in Kerala and Konkan on the western coast of India. There they found Jewish communities that had existed for centuries, Cochini and Bene Israel respectively. The two groups, Muslims and Jews, became neighbors in both of these areas. Muslims in Kerala and Konkan as well as those in the cities of Mumbai, Kolkata and Ahmedabad actually went on to develop an exceptionally pleasant and cordial relationship with their Jewish neighbors. Together they produced beautiful examples of Muslim-Jewish amity.

Most of the synagogues in India today are now looked after by Muslims who act as caretakers. In Mumbai, where more than eighty percent of the Indian Jews live today, major Jewish sites are situated in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. Most of the students at two of the three Jewish schools in Mumbai are Muslim. The same is true for the two Jewish schools in Kolkata. In the households of the Baghdadi community, the last of the three South Asian Jewish communities to settle in India, only Muslims were taken on as cooks because of the similarities in Jewish and Muslim dietary restrictions. This subsequently heavily influenced the Baghdadi Jewish cooking in India. Likewise, living in close relation with their Muslim neighbors, the Bene Israel adopted a number of Urdu (the lingua franca of most of South Asian Muslims) words, mostly kinship terms and terms relating to religion into their language Marathi. For example they call a synagogue, masjid, which is Urdu for mosque and for their prayer, namāz, the term for Islamic prayer.

Interestingly, there are also several examples of foreign Jews who embraced Sufism, settled in India and came to be revered by Muslims there: Sarmad (c. 1590-1659/61 CE), Qāzi Qidwatuddīn (1133-1208 CE), progenitor of the Sunni Muslim community called Qidwai/Kidwai, and Badi-ud-Dīn Shāh Madār (d. 1436), founder of the Sufi brotherhood, Madārīs.

Even in contemporary times, there are Jews with a strong Sufi connection. Take for example, the Israeli singer, musician and poet, Shye Ben Tzur, the world’s only Hebrew *qav’vāl* (one who sings Sufi songs).

An Austrian Jew, Muhammad As’ad ne Leopold Weis (1900-1992), is credited for one of the finest translations and commentaries of the Qur’an, *The Message of Islam*. After eventually converting to Islam he settled in India in 1932 and joined the movement for the creation of Pakistan and became the first recipient of a Pakistani passport after the creation of that state in 1947 and represented it at the UN in 1952 as its Minister Plenipotentiary.

Another Austrian Jew who made a significant contribution to Islam and to the Muslim State of Pakistan that emerged later, was Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, a great linguist, who wrote the *History of Islam* in Urdu in two volumes with the help of a well known Muslim scholar Maulvi Karim-ud-Din, published in 1871 and 1876. Within three years of his appointment as the Principal of the Government College in Lahore he raised its status to that of the University of the Punjab.

A person who emerged in South Asia as a bridge between Jews and Muslims is Munr Kazmir ne Munir Kazmi (b. 1957), a medical doctor who was raised as a Muslim in Pakistan but embraced his Syrian Jewish mother’s faith after settling





Street scene from Bangladesh  
Photo credit: Nashra Rahman

in the US in 1984. He is well known for his philanthropy for Jews and Pakistani Muslims and for his Zionist activism.

It is actually a devout Muslim, Khurshid Imam, to whom goes the credit for reintroducing Hebrew Studies in South Asian academia at the university level. Prior to this, it was taught last in 1870 at the University of Bombay. In 2012 Imam came to hold the position of Assistant Professor in Hebrew at the Jawaharalal Nehru University.

The only known Hebrew calligrapher in South Asia is also actually a Muslim from Kerala, Thoufeek Zakriya. Likewise, the only expert engraver of Jewish tombstones in Maharashtra is also a Muslim, a man by the name of Mohammad Abdul Yaseen.

And although perhaps taboo, there have been a number of instances of Jewish-

Muslim romances and matrimonies in South Asia. One of the few personal written accounts to emerge out of the unique experience of growing up as the product of a marriage between a Muslim and a Jew (in this case the Jew happened to be a grandparent) is Sadia Shepard's *The Girl from Foreign* (2008).

There are certain Muslim groups in South Asia that even have traditions of Israelite or Jewish origin. This includes the Bani Israil in Uttar Pradesh, the Kashmiri, and the Pashtuns/Pakhtuns/Pathans in northeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan.

Although the Israelite connections in the Pashtun and Kashmiri traditions have been written about in a number of texts, there is widespread ignorance about the connections among the new generation. In fact, all they know about Jews is through secondary sources, like

most of the South Asians, which in the case of Muslims happen to be primarily the Qur'ān, the *Hadīths* (teachings, deeds and sayings of Muhammad), the media, and for some, also the European fiction. Their perceptions of Jews are formed by negative interpretations of the Qur'ānic references to Jews, literal interpretations of the polemics in the Qur'ān and by their press. They have not based their opinions on any direct contact with Jews or any firsthand knowledge.

Even for the very few who are aware of the connection between their traditions and those of Israelites, they resist being connected to Israel and Jews through such theories of Israelite origin, for they fear it might make their Islamic credentials doubtful in the eyes of others. They have a strong dislike for Jews and Israel, influenced largely by the Arab-Israel conflict. The conflict has also led

# Feature

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to increasingly literal translations of the polemics in the Qur'ān, yellow journalism in the Urdu press (which includes Holocaust denial), and frequent anti-Semitic discourse among many Muslims.

Despite this, however, incidents of Muslim anti-Semitic attacks have been few and are a relatively recent development in the long history of Jewish-Muslim relations in South Asia. Those that do occur have left deep wounds.

On June 28, 1991, there was an attempt to abduct seven Israeli tourists in Kashmir in India, during which one of them was killed and three severely wounded by Islamist terrorists and one went missing.

The South Asia Bureau Chief of the *Wall Street Journal*, Daniel Pearl, who was an American Jew, was abducted and beheaded in Pakistan in 2002. A videotape was then released, *The Slaughter of the Spy Journalist*, the Jew Daniel Pearl, in which he was particularly made to state that he was Jewish, which makes it clear that this was a central reason for his murder.

In 2008, the Mumbai centre of the Chabad Lubavitch movement was attacked as part of eleven coordinated shooting and bombing attacks across Mumbai, by Islamist terrorists, who were trained in and came from Pakistan. According to the radio transmissions intercepted by the Indian intelligence, the attackers were told by their handlers that the lives of Jews were worth fifty times those of non-Jews. They took thirteen hostages at the centre and later murdered five of them, including Rabbi Holtzberg and his pregnant wife. The only attacker caught alive, Kasab, divulged that Chabad was their primary target and the attacks on all the other targets were executed only to amplify the effect, as reported by the daily e-newspaper *DNA India*.

On February 13, 2012, a car bomb exploded when Tal Yehoshua Koren, wife

of the Defense Attaché at the Embassy of Israel, was on her way to collect her children from school. Although she survived, she was injured. Following investigations, four Iranian citizens were suspected to be involved in the attack. A Shia Muslim Indian journalist, Syed Mohammad Ahmad Kazmi, has been charged in the case. When he was released on bail on October 21, 2012, he was greeted by a crowd of supporters and was taken home in an open, decorated jeep in a procession of five hundred people in buses and cars carrying posters of Kazmi and raising the slogan "long live Kazmi!"

The Arab-Israel conflict has a significant and very detrimental effect on the Muslim attitudes towards Jews, Israel and Zionism in some areas. Interestingly though it fails to leave any impact on Jewish-Muslim relations in India, where the two groups are in direct contact with one another. This differs greatly from Karachi in Pakistan, where they were attacked in retaliation to the establishment of the modern Jewish state of Israel in 1948 and also during the Arab-Israel wars that followed in 1956 and 1967. Actual personal acquaintance with Jews leaves little room for any negative stereotypes of Jews among Indian Muslims.

The Muslim antagonism towards Jews has also been a major influence on the foreign policy in South Asia. It is for this reason that the policy has often been one of having relations with Israel

secretly, not publically, lest it provoke the general Muslim masses. Pakistan and Bangladesh still do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, though the Pakistani state has actually always maintained secret ties with Israel just as India did before the establishment of open diplomatic relations between the two states. While the Muslim factor alone would not suffice to explain the Indian policy towards the Middle East, it did play a considerable role in some of the critical decisions taken by India. As one of the eleven members of the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP), India proposed a federal plan, despite the fact that seven of the remaining ten states supported the partition of Palestine. In spite of the opposition, India became one of the three non-Muslim countries to vote against the partition plan on 29th November, 1947. It took India two years to recognize Israel and it did so only after Shia and a Suni countries had recognized Israel (Iran and Turkey). Former Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was candid enough to admit during a state visit to Israel in July 2000 that the Indian Muslim sentiment against Israel kept India from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992.

Given the fact that opportunity to have personal connections to any Jews, in the region, is increasingly less likely, it seems that the relationship will remain fragmented at best. One can only hope that through education, we can work to strengthen these ties. ✎

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