Book Reviews


The main theme of the work under review centres around the development of Jewish nationalism and its vision for a permanent homeland in Palestine. Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) spearheaded the Zionist movement and the torch was passed on to pragmatic figures like Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952) and David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), who intensified the search for a central location for Jews in the twentieth century and which led to the creation of the “Torah Statue” of Israel. The study also highlights the divide between Secular Zionism and Messianism, the contention between Ben-Gurion and Weizmann, including their supporters.

In Chapter 1, Jacqueline Rose examines the Jewish claim that Palestine was an empty space prior to the existence of Israel, a notion which the author challenges as “not just a blatant lie but a cover” (p. 44). Such a claim is of course typical of any imperial power that usurps a land on a rationale of an uninhabited empty land prior to their arrival. In the same chapter, she mentions Weizmann’s call for Jews to uphold their authentic Jewish heritage against “assimilation.” His compatriot Ben-Gurion was a member of East European Diasporan root who immigrated to Palestine from Poland in 1906. In turn, he encourages Jews to come to Palestine to realize their collective identity in one central spot. However, his controversial move that perplexes a political observer is the contradictory, or bluntly put, hypocritical stance concerning the world reaction to the issue of Arabs being forced out of the land in favour of Jewish “majority.” When did an occupier care for the plight of the aborigines he has displaced?

Retrospectively, Herzl had advocated in 1895 the transfer of Palestinians to other Arab nations in order to give way to the Jews as new settlers. From this scenario, the author takes us to the contemporary political stalemate for peace and the suicide missions in Israel and the mounting of the wall as a
divide between the two formidable enemies. The World Court ruling on the wall as an illegal barrier has been rejected by Israeli policy makers. Israel’s insensitivity to the quest of the Palestinians for sovereign autonomy has inflamed a new brand of fire of anti-Semitism both in the Arab world and Europe. Critics are concerned that “Israel’s policies” are causing a state of insecurity for the Jews in Diaspora worldwide. In fact, according to these critics, it is the survival of Israel as a political unit and the Palestinian people which is at stake.

Justice indeed is a precondition to peace and is necessary for the peaceful co-existence of both parties to the conflict. However, Israel is determined to increase its population in a dramatic and coercive fashion, yet it frowns on Palestinian-Jewish marriages. This undermines the value of tolerance as a stabilizer of peaceful co-existence.

In revisiting the issue of immigration, Rose reveals an interesting case in point, that in 2002 a group of rabbis went to Lima (the capital of Peru) to “convert South American Indians to Judaism” (p. 51) provided they were willing to adopt Israel as their new home. The Indians who accepted the deal were given Arab land for settlement. Similarly, those Ethiopians who called themselves the Flasha Mura or Beta Israel traced their roots to King Solomon (Sulayman). They used the skullcap as part of their dress code. Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930–1974) who is said to be the last Solomonid Ethiopian monarch, embraced the emblematic notion of being the “Lion King of Juda.” Between 1984 and 1991 hundreds of thousand Ethiopian Flashas were airlifted to Israel as permanent transplantation under the code names “Operation Moses” and “Operation Solomon.”

This relocation of Indians and Ethiopians to Israel required a massive territorial space for settlement and the Palestinians again were the victims. Despite their geographical proximity to Israel, their existence as an immediate neighbouring people is a void in the eyes of the Jews. Further, the Israeli gesture was not only a move for reaffirmation of the Jewish collective identity but was also political. It was partly a move to assure the Black skeptics and policy makers in America that Israel now has a black population. Andres Young, who served as an ambassador of the United States to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter’s administration, lost his job only because he had an official dialogue with the Palestinian officials at the UN.

The author tries to address the issue of Jerusalem as a core location of the three monotheistic or Abrahamic religions. As she quotes one observer: “There is no state, no ownership of land; nobody has legal title to the holy sites of Jerusalem .... they will remain the common property of all believers for ever” (p. 60). In theory the claim sounds reasonable, but in reality
Jerusalem is not a high sea or outer space to claim that no state has national claim to it. In other words, Jerusalem is not a stateless piece of land; it will always be a part of some state. Rose makes an interesting point when she highlights the fact that Arabs will not abandon their sovereign rights over Palestine for the Jews. Indeed, political rights are the ultimate goal of every human community. The great Western thinkers have powerfully articulated the idea of political rights as a basis of forming political communities.

Another significant point the author raises in her book is the question of “national sovereign independence,” a conceptual framework she thinks is “absolute.” A French philosopher Jean Bodin (1530–1596), writing in the sixteenth century, defined the concept in “absolute and perpetual” terms, though with a caveat that those in charge of the state affairs are obliged to comply with the covenants, contracts with promises to the people, and the treaties they entered into with other nations. The last clause is reminiscent of the Madrid and Oslo treaties between Yasar Arafat (1929–2004) and Israel with American representatives as witnesses and architects of the protocols.

The author also claims that Moses was the founding father of the Jews as a monolithic community with its own unique identity, notwithstanding that Moses himself had an Egyptian nationality. She defines Israeli nationalism as a political spectrum that “trusts a distance imperial power for protection, while alienating the goodwill of its neighbours” (p. 82). Chaim Weizmann’s appeals to President Harry Truman (r. 1945–1953) and his successors to guarantee the security of Israel is a case in point. The term “survival” has been a cliché in Israel’s foreign policy action towards its neighbours. Here Rose is quick to refute the term as a contested value. Certainly, the striking values in human relationships are “tolerance, peace and equality,” as she correctly observes. America as a protégé and protector of Israel’s security cherishes the “melting pot” nationalism predicated on these values.

Chapter 3 discusses the national background of Theodor Herzl who was a German Jew from Hungary. But he developed a self-doubt about his personality in believing that his German citizenship was incomplete unless a Jewish state is established in Palestine. He feared to be a Jew without an established political root, a resentment of an offspring of a historically stateless people.

In the same chapter, Rose claims that some Western-Christian circles perceive Jews as “latecomers and aliens.” But in contemporary world affairs Israel perceives itself as a strong power in the midst of “hostile” Arabs, a situation which made David Ben-Gurion boast in this precarious and undiplomatic manner: “We kill better because we are better” (p. 150). This despicable remark makes us approbate the claim that “the standard of justice
depends on the equality of powers.” One wonders if the situation would have been different if the Palestinians had similar military strength backed by another superpower. If power indeed were a man, weaker nations would have loved to destroy it so that no one people would lay monopoly to it. Israel’s reluctance to grant Palestinians their desired self-determination will only continue to inflame more and more future conflict.

Jacqueline Rose’s work is a fairly well written piece, though it has several repetitions and omissions or flaws. She endeavours to document the book with fresh interpretations of the literature on Zionism. She raises some thought-provoking theories on the divide between secular and messianic Zionists in Israel. Overall, the study is thoroughly enriched with notes and references, as well as an index, which could be of help to other investigators on the future of Zionism as a political and religious movement in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Mohammed B. Sillah


This is a unique, and at the same time, an authentic case study of the Daudi [Dā’ūdī] Bohra [Bohrah] community who number up to one million and are known to be wary of outside investigators. The work has been written with the instructions of its Da’i [Dā’ī], Syedna [Sayyidnā] Muhammad Burhanuddin, to his followers to cooperate with this outside researcher for the first time. The book is the result of the author’s participant observation during eighteen months of field work, primarily in Mumbai, with a significant portion of time spent in Surat, Karachi and other places which are of importance for the study of the subject. This work of academic anthropology has been carried out by an expert on sociology of religion with journalistic experience of more than a decade serving as a supporting pillar. The funding necessary for the field work in India and Pakistan was provided by the Fulbright Foundation, the Academy for Education Development, the National Security Education Program, the Mellon Foundation, and Harvard
University’s Department of Anthropology.

Daudi Bohras are a branch of the Ismaiilī Shi'as [Shī’ahs]. Forced by a long and continuous persecution, the early Shi'as had to adopt a policy of taqiyya — mandated public dissimulation of belief (p. 26). It is said to have been formally incorporated into Shia practice by Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (57–114/677–733) and his son, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (83–148/702–765), the fifth and sixth Imāms. This accounts for a great deal of the uncertainty surrounding Ismaili history and belief, so much so that today, perhaps the only thing an outside observer can state with certainty about the Ismā‘īli doctrine is that nothing can be stated about it with certainty (p. 27). Even now, after the rediscovery of many authentic Ismaili primary source documents, the pre-Fatimid period of the movement remains shrouded in mystery. Contemporary Ismaili writings are generally too vague to provide a clear picture of the community with historical precision (p. 24). There are also fictitious tales and exaggerated accounts of the Ghulāt and Qarmatis [Qarāmītā] ascribed to the Ismailis. No doubt, the Qarmatis preached radical egalitarian reforms that gave rise to charges of libertinism and Ḳibah or antinomianism. For example, Amīr Khusrau (d. 725/1325) in his Khazā‘in al-Futūh has called them “shameless wretches,” practising incest, and has tried to justify their persecution for an alleged divergence of both mores and doctrines (p. 26).

As a result of persecution at the hands of the intolerant Muslim rulers of Yemen, Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, a number of Ismā‘īlis were forced to leave their homes and migrate to Sind and Gujarat, where they succeeded in converting the Rajput raja of Patan and some of the other local Hindus of Vaishya background (p. 38), later known as Bohras or Vohras. The Bohra traders of Gujarat and other parts of central and western India are representatives of the Ismā‘īli Shi‘ah sect. At present they have both Shi‘ah and Sunnī branches, the former including most of the city traders, while the latter rural agriculturists (p. 40). The high degree of congruence between Ismā‘īli and Ithnā ‘Ashari doctrines is shown by the fact that Da‘ī‘īm al-Islām of Qādī al-Nu‘mān, the basic compendium of Fātimid theology, is drawn largely from the teachings of Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, and that the Ithnā ‘Asharī theologians have even tried to claim its author to be as one of their own (p. 20).1

This research work comprises ten chapters and five appendices. Chapters 1 to 5 present a basic ethnography of the community never before examined by an outside researcher. Chapter 6 describes the pivotal position of the apex cleric, suggesting that this extraordinary centrality has greatly facilitated the

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1 For a fuller and detailed account of the Ismā‘īlis reference is invited to Farhad Daftary’s The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
promotion of both Islamic and Western-inspired modernist values, and examines the modernist means by which the Da’wat has reinforced its spiritual and political hegemony. Chapter 7 outlines the programme by which a (neo-) traditionalist cultural identity has been instituted through the concerted application of centrally mandated codes of orthopraxy, most notably in the areas of dress, physical comportment and personal finance. Chapter 8 highlights the community’s educational system, both as a foundation for and expression of the dual Islamization-cum-modernization programme. Chapter 9 discusses the most noteworthy internal challenge to the Da’wat’s hegemony: the movement of dissidents/reformists who speak for an unknown number of Bohras within the orthodox fold, but who are teetering on the brink of outright schism. Lastly, chapter 10 is the Conclusion of what the author has attempted to deal with in this work.

In short, the author has tried to provide a rough sketch of the Bohra society, showing that traditionalist Islam is quite compatible with an open-minded twenty-first century outlook, and describes how one community has used the very tools of Western modernity to combat the dangers posed by Western modernity. As regards the concept of modernity, Blauk sees eye to eye with J. C. Heesterman in so far as he emphasizes: “Successful modernity does not mean the supercession of tradition or the superimposition on it of a different order. It means that the inner conflict of tradition is now fought within the confines of an expanded reality .... In contradistinction to tradition, modernity must valorize change, because the authority of its code of abstract rules and principles no longer transcends reality.” [The Inner Conflict of Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 25] (p. 259).

Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr has rightly remarked that the Islamic orientation of an Islamic group does not prevent it from adopting modernist approaches. He argues: “Modernization can no longer be regarded as a process that automatically produces secularization, privatization of faith, and the rejection of old values. Nor can religion any longer be seen merely as a set of traditional rites and beliefs, impervious to change and irrelevant to modernization. The task therefore becomes one of reconciling anachronistic values and loyalties with time-honoured assumptions about the content, nature, and direction of modernizing change.” [The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jamaat-i-Islami of Pakistan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xiii] (p. 260).

In the light of the above remarks, it is interesting to note that while adhering to traditional Islamic norms, the Bohras eagerly accept most aspects of modernity, strongly support the concept of a pluralist civil society, boast a deeply engrained heritage of friendly engagement with members of other
communities, and have a history of apolitical quietism stretching back nearly a thousand years. Bohras are a minority of a minority of a minority. Their position has always been far too tenuous to allow for confrontational sectarianism. Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin has continued the policy of supporting any legitimately constituted government. Continuing to spread throughout the world, Bohras are urged by the current Da’i to be loyal and patriotic, saying: “My advice to the followers is but one. Be faithful to the country of your birth and adoption; serve the nation with all your might; work for its prosperity. This is the teaching of our Prophet (SA) Hubbul Watan minal Iman. To love your country is a part of your Deen (faith).”

The central rite of passage for Bohras is Mithāq, the only major ritual unique to this community. It is obligatory for every Bohra who wishes to be part of the community, to enter into a covenant between the believer and God, effected through his Wali. Inter alia, it includes an oath of allegiance: a vow to accept the spiritual guidance of Syedna wholeheartedly and without reservation, after which a Bohra becomes a mature member of the community with all the rights and obligations (p. 61). On 18th Dhū ’l-Hijjah every Bohra congregation renews its Mithāq, and new oath-takers make their pledges separately (p. 63).

From birth to death and burial, most Bohra rituals are variants of pan-Islamic practices, but in all cases find a unique expression through the central place of Syedna in even the most private and intimate family ceremonies (p. 53). Marriage, for example, is the normative state for Bohras like all Muslims (p. 118). Polygamy, though accepted in theory, is rarely practised (p. 76). The Bohras, like other Ismā’ilis, do not practice mutaa [mut‘ab] (p. 74). Just as nikah [nikāh] is not an entirely private contract for the Bohras, neither is talaq [talaq]: both require the permission of Syedna or his representative...

“Divorce is allowed, but it is seldom resorted to, and usually a woman, if divorced, is looked down upon in the community” (p. 75). If an individual wishes to marry outside the community, the spouse is expected to convert (p. 118). Family members and others set up meetings between young people of compatible backgrounds, but the final decision rests with the youths themselves. All dating is expected to be chaste (p. 118). Matches between cousins are often the favoured arrangement (p. 119). Couples are encouraged to have as many children as they can support — and no more. Contraception is not stigmatized, and is even tacitly encouraged. Abortion is forbidden at any stage in pregnancy (p. 119). Tubal ligation and vasectomies are permitted.

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Bohras generally prefer to have two or three children (p. 120). They are one of the most highly educated Muslim groups in the sub-continent, their use of modern forms of birth control are much more common than many would admit (p. 121).

The status of women within the community is one of the most distinctive features of Bohras. Bohra women are now among the most educated and highest-status women of any community on the Indian sub-continent (p. 125). “In general, it can be said that the status of Bohra women is better in religious, social, economic and educational terms, compared to other Muslim women….Unlike [the practice] in a typical traditional … family, the Bohra women mix up freely with the menfolk in the joint family. They do not use Purdah within the house.” [Madhavi Desai, “The Traditional House Form of Bohras in Gujarat: Architectural Response to Cultural Ethos,” Masters’ thesis, Ahmedabad University, Department of Art and Architecture, 1992, 32–33] (p. 127). This special position enjoyed by women in the Bohra society is explained by Mernissi in the following words: “We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition.” [Fatima Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1991), viii], (p. 128).

The high status and high educational levels of Bohra women are mutually reinforcing, as Zubeda says: “We are more free because we are more confident, assertive, and educated. Also, we are more confident, assertive, and educated because we are more free.” (Zubeda, Personal Interview, March 12, 1995). (p. 131).

Despite the hight scholarly standard of the work, a few errors of transliteration or spellings of Arabic and Persian words are found in the book. For example, Qa’ba instead of Ka’bah (p. 25), Hanifi instead of Hanafi (p. 19), Shahzedi instead of shābzādī (p. 135), sezda instead of sajda (p. 140), qarzan hasanah instead of qar -i ḥasanah (p. 196) (p. 287). Words have been use with wrong meanings, as, for instance, qabr (coffin) instead of grave (p. 140), berketi (remembrance) instead of inviting blessing (p. 140), etc. The author has also failed to give his source of information about the number of wives of the Prophet (peace be on him), Imām ‘Ali, and his son, Imām Ḥasan, (p. 77).

The author beautifully concludes:

A vibrant traditional culture can enrich the life of a society, but when ancient customs are seen merely as quaint anachronisms, they are in danger of being cast off as the detritus of history. The Daudi Bohras, however, have succeeded in
chipping the rust off their rituals, keeping their core values and beliefs functional through careful rehabilitation and reformation. By using all the modernist tools in their technological and intellectual toolbox, the Bohra *bricoleurs* have maintained their cultural heritage in full working order. (p. 287).

The Daudi Bohras, a vulnerable minority throughout their existence, have always managed to adapt to the world around them without losing their souls. Modernity, for them, is nothing new. Can other traditional societies reconcile the legacy of the past with the demands of the future? One way or another, all will have to (p. 287).

Ali Raza Naqvi

CORRECTION

In the previous issue we published an article titled “Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband and its Self-Representation on the Media” by Dr Dietrich Reetz. The author’s original title was “Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband and its Mediatic Self-Representation.” This error is regretted -Editor.