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## Antisemitism in Post-Colonial Indian Political Rhetoric

Dr. Navras J. Aafreedi<sup>1</sup>

On March 30, 2021, while addressing a rally in Kerala, a state in India, where elections were taking place for its assembly, Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister, drew an analogy between Judas and the incumbent Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in Kerala. He said, “*Judas betrayed Lord [Jesus] Christ for a few pieces of silver. LDF has betrayed Kerala for a few pieces of gold,*” alluding to a gold smuggling case in which a key aide of Pinarayi Vijayan, the chief minister of the incumbent LDF government in Kerala, is one of the accused.<sup>1</sup> Modi said this with an eye on the Christian votes. Christians, with a population of 6,141,269, are 18.38 per cent of Kerala’s total population.<sup>2</sup> A glossary of forty antisemitic terms published by the American Jewish Committee explains the antisemitism in the reference to Judas as a traitor in the following words:

Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’s 12 disciples, received 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus to the religious authorities. Although Jesus and all 12 disciples were Jews, the Western world – through art, literature, music, and tradition – chose to depict Judas as the Jew who sold out his Savior for money. Thus the name Judas became synonymous with traitor, contributing to the persecution of Jewish communities for two millennia. This false and libellous narrative would feed into Hitler’s propaganda and the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup>

According to Dr. Daryl Schmidt of Texas Christian University, Judas never existed. Dr. Schmidt is of the view that he was a composite character, created to serve the antisemitic agenda of early Christians who accused Jews of deicide.<sup>4</sup> But even the scholars who do not doubt the existence of Judas suspect that even if Judas had not existed as a traitor, Christians “would probably have invented someone like him to legitimate the messy process of their religious separation from Judaism.”<sup>5</sup> Haim Cohn, a Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel (1948-1954) and a member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, wrote as an expert on Jewish legal history in his book *The Trial and Death of Jesus* (1967):

The treachery of Judas is common to all four Gospels. But the report of a conspiracy between him and the chief priests (Matt. 26:14; Mark 14:10), with or without the elders or captains (Luke 22:4), is found only in the Synoptic Gospels, and only there is the story told of money (Luke 22:5) or thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:15) covenanted as a consideration for the betrayal. The Gospel of John tells only that “the devil” was “put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him” (13:2); that Jesus

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was troubled in spirit” and said, “verily, verily, one of you shall betray me” (13:21); that when “Satan” had entered into Judas, Jesus said to him, “That thou doest, do quickly” (13:27); and that Judas indeed betrayed him (18:2). But there is no mention of any conspiracy between Judas and the Romans, which could explain the Roman part in the arrest and even imply a Roman initiative.

It is not that a conspiracy between Judas and the Romans is intrinsically less probable or possible than one between them [Romans] and the Jews: if he wanted to betray his master, he had only to denounce him to the Romans as a rebel or zealot, and he could be sure of swift action. It is that the whole tale of Judas’ treachery is so unlikely, so incongruous, regardless of who his fellow conspirators might have been, that it merits no credence. It may, of course, be that a story of the disciple who betrayed his master and even brought about his death, sinking thus to the lowest depths of shame and immorality, and all because the devil had entered into him (John 13:27), is meant to convey a profound and significant religious message. Nobody, not even the greatest disciple of the greatest master – so the moral would be pointed – is proof against the temptations of Satan or his own criminal inclinations; and there is no escape from doing evil if God has chosen you as His instrument thus to attain his purpose. Perhaps, then the story was included in the Gospels for purely theological reasons...<sup>6</sup>

There is a long history of the invocation of Judas by antisemites to propagate hatred of Jews. Judas and the Jews were seen as interchangeable, and the Jewish people were portrayed as the tools of Satan.<sup>7</sup> One of the best-known examples is how Martin Luther speculating why Jews are so skilful, mockingly declared:

I cannot understand how they manage to be so skilful, unless I think that when Judas Iscariot hanged himself, his guts burst and emptied. Perhaps the Jews sent their servants with plates of silver and pots of gold to gather up Judas’ piss with the other treasures, and then they ate and drank his offal, and thereby acquired eyes so piercing that they discover in the Scriptures commentaries that neither Mathew nor Isaiah himself found there, not to mention the rest of us cursed goyim.<sup>8</sup>

On a more sobering note, he argued that the Jews were in cahoots with the Devil:

I cannot understand it except by admitting that they have transformed God into the Devil, or rather into a servant of the Devil, accomplishing all the evil the Devil desires, corrupting unhappy souls, and raging against himself. In short, the Jews are worse than the devils. O God, my beloved father and creator, have pity on me who, in self-defence, must speak so scandalously of thy divine and eternal Majesty, against thy wicked enemies, the devils and the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

Such savage sentiments were deeply rooted in centuries-old Christian antisemitism, and four centuries after Luther, they were invoked by those who endorsed the perpetration of the Holocaust on Jews. In 1832, when the Duchess de Berry was arrested after Simon Deutz, a Jewish convert to Christianity, betrayed her to Louis Philippe’s government, the writer Chateaubriand denounced Deutz as a traitor in the Christian image of Judas Iscariot, “Let the descendants of the Great Traitor, let Iscariot into whom Satan had

entered, *intravit Satanas in Judam*, say how many pieces of silver he received for the deal.”<sup>10</sup>

Modi’s invocation of Judas becomes all the more distressing because Kerala, where he made this statement, is home to the best known of India’s Jewish communities, the Cochini, whose members continue to be resident there in spite of a large scale Cochini migration to Israel after the establishment of Israel in 1948. The city of Cochin (Kochi), where this community is primarily based, has several gorgeous synagogues. The Pardesi Synagogue is considered to be the oldest in the commonwealth countries. This statement by Modi only serves to strengthen the old stereotype of the Jew as a betrayer and benefits the Islamist antisemites in their propaganda against Jews, influenced by the Jihadist ideology promoted in certain oil-rich Persian Gulf countries where Keralites are employed in large numbers. In modern times, Arab antisemitism, a synthesis of Western antisemitism and polemics in Islam, has found its way into South Asia through the South Asian Muslim expatriate population settled there and via seminaries in South Asia financially supported by Salafi regimes in the Middle East. South Asian Muslims have readily absorbed the Arab antisemitic propaganda because of their deference to Arabs on Islam. The United Nations has reported that there are “significant numbers” of Islamic State (IS) terrorists in Kerala and warned of attacks by al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS).<sup>11</sup> In spite of Jews having enjoyed a centuries-long peaceful existence with their non-Jewish neighbours in India, the Chabad Lubavitch centre in Mumbai was attacked in 2008 and its rabbi and his wife killed. A plot by alleged agents of Lashkar-e-Tayyiba to attack Americans and Jewish families of the local Bene Ephraim community in Andhra Pradesh was uncovered in 2004, four years prior to the attack on the Chabad-Lubavitch Center in Mumbai.

The only antisemitic painting in the world of Indian Fine Arts belongs to Kerala. It is a painting by the famous artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) (*Appendix I*). What is disturbing about this piece of art is that it is the oil portrait of a Jew and is popularised by the title “The Miser”, which only goes to strengthen yet another stereotype of Jews. The report from the Administration of the Government Museum and Connemara Public Library for 1901-1902, describes this painting as “The Jew’s Hoarded Wealth”. It is the portrait of an older man in a crimson tunic firmly gripping a bag of coins as he looks suspiciously at the viewer. The painting is part of the collection of the Government Museum, Chennai (formerly called Madras).

Although Modi is the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel and is seen by many as a friend to Jews and Israel,<sup>12</sup> what he did when he made this statement stands in sharp contrast to what his predecessor, Indira Gandhi from the political rival, the Indian National Congress party, had done. As the then Prime Minister of India, Indira was the chief guest at the 400<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebrations of the above-mentioned Pardesi Synagogue in 1968. She released a special postal stamp and a first-day cover commemorating the event. In the speech that she gave on the occasion, she said, “The Jewish community of India has rendered and continues to render notable service in many fields. It has contributed men of distinction to business and industry, to the civil services and the armed forces, and to the world of scholarship.”<sup>13</sup>

It is worth taking a look here at Modi's political genealogy. He is a life member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Organization), popularly known by its acronym RSS, founded in 1925.

Balakrishna Shivram Moonje (1872-1948) is well acknowledged as the mentor of the founding supreme leader of the RSS, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940). Moonje was the first Hindu nationalist to contact the fascists and their leader Benito Mussolini, an ally of Adolf Hitler. Between February and March 1931, while returning from the round table conference, Moonje took a tour of Europe with a long stopover in Italy, during which he met Mussolini. His thirteen-page account of the trip and the meeting is kept at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. Visits to the Balilla and Avanguardisti organizations, the keystones of the fascist system of indoctrination of the youth, strikingly similar to the RSS, were the high points of his stay in Italy. Although it was largely Hedgewar's vision and work behind the structure of the RSS, one cannot overlook the important role played by Moonje in moulding the RSS along Italian (fascist) lines. By 1934, fascism had become so popular among the Hindu nationalists that they held a conference on it on January 31, 1934. It was presided over by Hedgewar. A year earlier, an intelligence report had assessed that the RSS hoped to be in India what the 'Fascisti' were to Italy and the 'Nazis' to Germany. Hindu nationalist leader Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) openly defended the Nazis and the Fascists. Once Savarkar became the president of the RSS, his rhetoric against Muslims turned increasingly radical and distinctly unpleasant. He continuously held up the Nazi treatment of Jews as a role model. In a speech he made on October 14, 1938, he suggested drawing inspiration from Germany as a solution to the Muslim problem in India: "*A Nation is formed by a majority living therein. What did the Jews do in Germany? They being in minority were driven out from Germany.*"<sup>14</sup> Indian National Congress leader who later became the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), seems to have been eager to help Jews find refuge in India during the Holocaust, but was opposed by Savarkar. Nehru proposed engaging Jewish specialists from Europe in Indian industry and science. R. Shanmukham Chetiar, the Divan of Cochin, expressed his sympathy for European Jews in an interview he gave to the *Jewish Tribune*<sup>15</sup> and disclosed that the Maharajah of Cochin was favourably disposed to the idea of granting refuge to them and that he did not see any problem in settling the matter with the Government of India. But Savarkar, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha (founded in 1915), was severely critical of the Divan's statement. He commented on both Nehru's proposal and the Divan's statement while referring to the Jews of India in a speech he gave in Nagpur:

They [Indian Jews] are too few, have given us no political or cultural troubles and are not in the main a proselytizing people, they will be friendly towards the Hindus who have sheltered them when homeless and can be easily assimilated in a common Indian State. But this fact must not land us again into the suicidal generosity our forefathers had been guilty of in other cases of inviting colonies of non-Hindus to India. With every sympathy with the Jews outside India, the Hindus must, therefore oppose the present Congressite proposal of inviting or allowing any new Jewish colony to settle in India. India must be a Hindu land, reserved for the Hindus. While our own Hindu overpopulation in some parts of India is hard pressed to find land for

extension [*sic*], how absurd it is to invite non-Hindu colonies to settle in our thinly populated parts! How ridiculous it is to find some Congressites preaching birth-control to restrict our own population in order to avoid overcrowding and start straightaway to invite Jewish colonies to settle in India. We must exhort our esteemed Divan of Cochin in particular to take a leaf out of the history of Travancore and set his face sternly against any proposal or outside pressure to allow the alien Jews to colonize the lands in Cochin.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, Savarkar drew inspiration from both National Socialism (Nazism) and Zionism simultaneously. He wrote in the 1920s, “If the Zionists’ dreams are ever realised – if Palestine becomes a Jewish state – it will gladden us almost as much as our Jewish friends.”<sup>17</sup> The Hindu nationalist admiration for National Socialism and Fascism is mediated by their attitude towards Muslims in India. Hindu nationalist leaders such as Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar, V. D. Savarkar, H. S. Hedgewar, and Bal Thackeray uninhibitedly used Nazi discourse to promote discrimination against Muslims and other minorities in India. One of the leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, M. S. Golwalkar (1906-1973), expressed his approval of Nazi policy towards the Jews, in the following words:

To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Race – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.<sup>18</sup>

Yulia Egorova explains, Israelis “thematized as Jews,” are imagined by the Hindu right “as the enemy of Palestinians, thematized as Muslims, and therefore as the friends of the Indian state, construed as the state of the Hindus.”<sup>19</sup> But it is interesting to note that much before Modi drew this analogy with Judas, it was a member of the Indian National Congress who did so several decades ago. On January 29, 1992, India established full diplomatic relations with Israel.

When in May 1993, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres became the first official visitor from Israel to India, he came to be described as “a known terrorist with forty-five years of national and international experience of terrorism” by Mani Shankar Aiyer, a senior member of the then incumbent Indian National Congress party. A former career diplomat, Aiyer was a close aide of Rajiv Gandhi, prime minister of India from 1984 to 1989. He added, “Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Foreign Secretary J. N. Dixit has been rushed to Tunis to explain to the Palestinians that we are not about to betray Tirupati [a town in Andhra Pradesh, India with a famous temple dedicated to Venkateswara, a form of the Hindu god Vishnu] for thirty sprinkler-irrigation sets from Israel. I am glad that I left the Foreign Service before it came to this.”<sup>20</sup> Even his membership in the ruling Congress party could not keep him from being a prominent critic of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel.

Another incident of antisemitic rhetoric from India’s recent political past comes from the 2019 parliamentary elections. Asif Muhammad Khan of the Indian National



Congress party, a former member of the legislative assembly of Delhi, stated in a video available online that a Jew has no place in India and the people have to send this message to every household.<sup>21</sup> He tried to project Atishi Marlena, a candidate from a rival party, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), as Jewish, in spite of the fact that she is not. It was his belief that the Muslim voters of the concerned constituency would see it as a disqualifier and thus influence the election result. According to Khan, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians are brothers to each other but not Jews.<sup>22</sup> Marlena did eventually lose. Whether the rumour about her alleged Jewishness was a factor in her election defeat has yet to be investigated.

Khan is not alone in holding the view that Jews are not a part of the Indian nation. Interestingly, a similar view was expressed by Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973) in the year 1939 in his book *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*. Golwalkar, the supreme Director of the Hindu nationalist organisation Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) from 1940 to 1973, asserted that India was Hindustan, a land of Hindus, where Muslims and Christians were invaders, and Jews and Parsis guests. It was amply clear to him what he wanted the invaders and guests to do:

...the foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges.<sup>23</sup>

One finds in the Indian Jewish scholar and novelist Jael Silliman's acclaimed book *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* (2001), an account of how her Indian identity was once challenged by a progressive Indian friend. While attending a meeting in America, Silliman drew an intricate Indian design during one session, which grabbed the attention of a colleague who complimented Silliman, saying "Indians are so artistic". Immediately, a friend of Silliman's interjected: "But Jael is not really Indian." Silliman recounts that the callous remark hurt her, and she responded sharply: 'Since when have you joined the Jan Sangh?' Silliman writes that both of them knew what it meant. Jan Sangh was a Hindu nationalist party whose contemporary reincarnation is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which currently leads the coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the centre in India. Both Jan Sangh and its successor, the BJP, are known for their anti-minority political rhetoric. Although her friend "backed off and shamefacedly mumbled an apology of sorts", her remark stayed with Silliman "as a symbol of a larger phenomenon, the attempts underway to remake India into a Hindu nation." To Silliman, it was indicative of how a narrow view of who is Indian had gained ground over the decades, marking a decisive shift "from the inclusive rhetoric of the anti-colonial leaders after Indian independence."<sup>24</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, widely acknowledged as the father of India's modern English poetry, is known to have once said of himself, "I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India."<sup>25</sup> When asked in 1979, whether the consciousness of being Jewish shaped his work at all, Ezekiel answered:

It's a question that has really come to the foreground only in the last few years. I'm a little afraid of it. This is basically because, from the time I was seventeen, the attempt

has been to become Indian, and that has meant responding to the Hindu tradition; the Jewish tended to be one among many other traditions. Now, I think that attempt of thirty years has been a failure. I see a great difference between a real Indian and my Indianness. A major Scottish poet recently said to me, at an international poetry festival, in Rotterdam, “You are not a real Indian”, and my response was, “No, we’ve lived in India only two thousand years.” A Jew can never be a ‘real’ Indian or a ‘real’ Chinaman. I’d say Parthasarthy and Ramanujan are real Indians.<sup>26</sup>

Sheela Rohekar is one of the only two Jewish novelists of the Hindi language and the only one to be still alive. She poignantly expresses this feeling of not being accepted as sufficiently Indian in her latest novel, *Miss Samuel: Ek Yahudi Gatha* (Miss Samuel: A Jewish Saga), whose English translation is soon to be released and is currently being translated into Hebrew as well. She writes:

...they [the Jews] were always seen as different and thus deprived of the joy of full integration in the Indian society. They were not insulted, but only seldom did they get honour and recognition. They were always seen as fellow human beings, but could never be included among ‘our own people’. It is for this reason only that they remained rootless and could never muster enough courage to play any significant role in Indian politics and culture. And it is perhaps for this reason only that successive generations went to their graves with the unfulfilled desire of reaching the land they had set out from.<sup>27</sup>

In the same video mentioned above, Khan tells the crowd that they may vote for the political party AAP, but he would find it objectionable if they voted for a Jew. This antisemitism went unnoticed by the Election Commission of India. Instead of condemning it, a senior leader of her party, Manish Sisodia, Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, tried his best to prove that she was a Hindu Rajput and not a Jew. Interestingly, Marlena did not act any different. She condemned this false rumour of her Jewishness but not the inherent antisemitism in it and went on to talk of her *Kshatriya* (Hindu warrior class) lineage. The Indian National Congress also did not bother to condemn what their former MLA said about Jews not having any place in India. In the same video, Khan is heard saying that a Jew can never lead Muslims, and that there is no place for Jews in the hearts of Muslims- to which he received a great applause from the audience. “This is what our Quran says,” Khan continued<sup>28</sup> In an interview he gave to a television channel, he says that the only people mentioned in the Quran are Jews, and based on what is there in the scripture, it is his belief that Muslims can never be led by a Jew. Hence, he is opposed to Marlena. This clearly illustrates how the Islamic scripture has been interpreted, misinterpreted, or reinterpreted, particularly after the creation of the modern State of Israel. Reuven Firestone explains:

Like all scriptures, the Qur’an includes plenty of negative material about opponents. Negative Qur’anic references to Jews or Israelites can be and are exploited today to promote antisemitic sentiments, policies, and actions. Put differently, antisemitism is not inherent to the Qur’an, but the Qur’an can nevertheless be exploited to promote antisemitism.<sup>29</sup>

Antisemitic discourses of Islamic televangelists in Urdu can be found in abundance on YouTube and in wide circulation on social networking sites. Still, it is rare to find a Muslim politician in India indulge in antisemitic rhetoric. I am aware of the American Jewish Congress' efforts to remove antisemitic content from social media, but I also know that it has not met with much success in getting such Urdu content removed from there even if it has been successful with the removal of similar content in European languages. I am not aware of the response of other Jewish advocacy groups to antisemitism emanating from India. What I do know is that the American Jewish Committee has had no qualms in collaborating with the Indian Pluralism Foundation, a Kolkata based NGO, for a series of events and that even Israel's serving ambassador to India, Dr. Ron Malka, has spoken at one of those<sup>30</sup> in spite of the fact that it is headed by Owaiz Aslam (alias Ovais Aslam) who wrote:

After more than 2000 years of living in oblivion as vagabonds, these Jews where [sic] overwhelmingly rapturous on the accomplishment of declaring the State of Israel, redefining their identity as a national group and not just a religious group. The birth of Israel came at the cost of Palestinian blood and treasure at a very prodigious price.<sup>31</sup>

He also equates Benjamin Netanyahu with Al-Baghdadi:

Benjamin Netanyaha [sic], the intemperate prima donna pretentious, diabolic self-declared 'Caliph' of the Jews, who is as large a duress and threat as al Baghdadi is responsible in destabilising the peace of the already precarious near collapse hermetic strip.<sup>32</sup>

Owaiz Aslam has much to benefit from collaboration with the American Jewish Committee. It gets his organisation international exposure and respectability, brightening its chances for drawing funds for the work it apparently does for the promotion of interfaith understanding. Even I once spoke under the auspices of his organization on the UN International Holocaust Remembrance Day, but distanced myself from it as soon as I discovered his antisemitic piece of writing. It might be naïve of me to expect the American Jewish Committee to do so as it is perhaps convenient to believe that Aslam has had a change of heart in spite of the fact that to the best of my knowledge, he has never published any statement regretting his antisemitic and anti-Zionist diatribe. The American Jewish Committee's representative in India badly needs organisations to partner with to sustain the expected momentum of events, and he has found one in Owaiz Aslam's.

It is a fact that the Jews have lived in India for centuries without any persecution, but that should not delude us into believing the official narrative of the absence of antisemitism there. The fact is that there has always been antisemitism in India, which is largely casual, often rhetorical, and occasionally violent. However, it has largely gone unnoticed, helped by several factors. The numerical insignificance of Jews in India has rendered them an invisibility and anonymity in the world's second-most populous country, home to eighteen per cent of the world's population.

The rare occasions when they have been attacked were when they fell victim to anti-Muslim violence on account of being mistaken for Muslims. And whenever the Jews

have been attacked in India precisely for being Jewish, the victims have been White/Western Jews instead of Indian Jews, and the perpetrators have been Muslims, not Hindus. Unlike Islam, there are no scriptural polemics against Jews in the Indic religions, viz., Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Yet, the Jews have always been deprived of equality in India. It is worth taking note here of what the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen says: “If the inclusiveness of India made it easy for Christians, Jews, Parsees and other immigrants to settle in India to lead ‘their own lives’, coming from places where they had been persecuted, the principle that is involved in this ‘equity of toleration’ is one of acceptance – of *swikriti* – rather than equality in any broader sense.”<sup>33</sup> H. G. Reissner explains that “in the past, the Hindus combined hospitality to foreigners with the rigid maintenance of their caste system. The foreigner, be he invader or trader, was treated as an outcast and considered ineligible to embrace the dominant religion and intermarriage with him forbidden.”<sup>34</sup> There is a Judaizing movement called Bene Ephraim that has emerged among 125 Dalit families (those traditionally ill-treated as untouchables, though illegal in independent India) belonging to the Madiga caste. In spite of their change of faith, they continue to register themselves as Hindu in official documents. They do so because they are aware that as Dalits, they are entitled to certain benefits under the state’s affirmative action, such as places in educational institutions and government jobs. This is feasible only until they identify themselves as followers of an Indic religion, such as Hinduism or Buddhism or Sikhism, but not any Abrahamic religion. 79.8 per cent of India’s total population of 1.3 billion is considered Hindu. The Hindu society is divided into four *varnas* (classes) in a hierarchy in which the *Brahmans* (priests) are at the top, below them are the *Kshatriyas* (warriors), followed by *Vaishyas* (merchants and traders), and at the bottom are the *Śudras* (peasants and working-class). Each of these four *varnas* or classes are further subdivided into a number of *jātis* (castes). *Śudras* are represented in contemporary India by the section of the population classified under the category Other Backward Castes. They are 42% of India’s population. Those who are not considered part of any of these classes are seen as falling out of the class system and have been subjected to the worst forms of social discrimination for centuries to the extent that they were considered untouchables. Untouchability is prohibited in modern India and is punishable by imprisonment, yet it persists. It continues to be strong, particularly in rural India, where 66 per cent of India’s population lives. Those traditionally treated as untouchables are now called ‘*Dalits*’ (the term literally means ‘those who have been trampled upon’) or scheduled castes. They are 16.6 percent of India’s population (around 166 million). There are jobs and spots in government educational institutions for these depressed sections of society under the state’s affirmative action, but those members who convert to any Abrahamic religion cease to be eligible. It is so because it is believed that casteism is peculiar to Hinduism. The political activism of Sikh and Buddhist communities led to the amendment of the 1950 Presidential Order. Subsequently, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits were also considered eligible for benefits in 1956 and 1990, respectively. The 1950 Presidential Order, however, continues to exclude from its ambit the Dalits who convert to any Abrahamic religion despite ample evidence that they suffer hardships equal to other Dalit communities.<sup>35</sup>

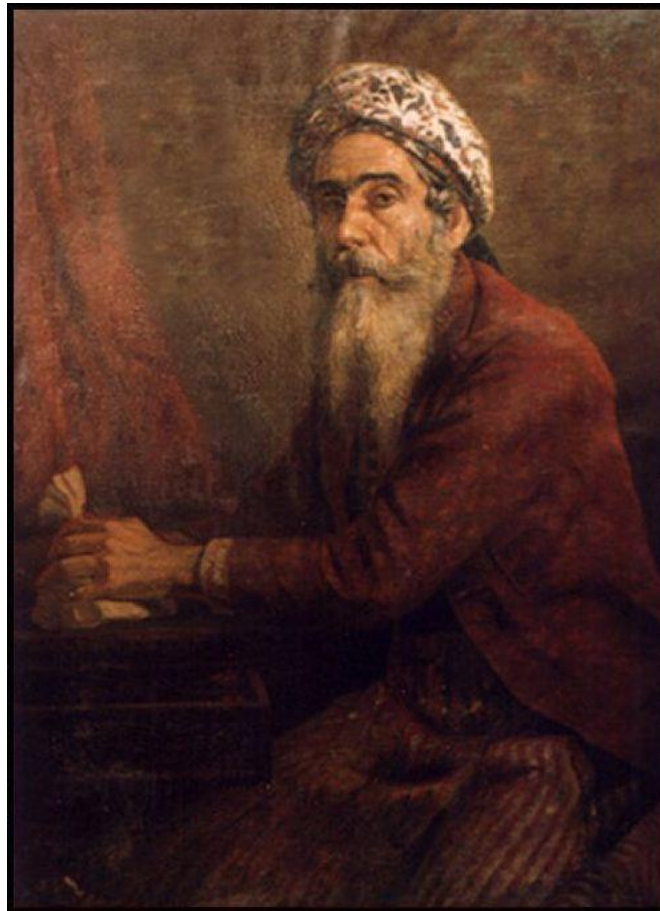
On the other hand, certain sections of Dalit Hindus and Buddhists tend to project the Brahmans, who they primarily hold responsible for their oppression, as Jewish, either metaphorically or by attributing Israelite origins to them. As far as their alleged Jewish origins are concerned, they draw upon the writings of Christian missionaries, many of whom perceived the Brahmans “as having specifically Jewish attributes”.<sup>36</sup> In a YouTube video, a Dalit scholar Vilas Kharat is heard saying all Hindus of the three upper castes, held responsible for the discriminatory practise of untouchability, were of Jewish descent.<sup>37</sup>

This is interesting given how the Bene Ephraim claim that the Madiga (the Dalit group many of whose members have developed the Judaizing movement called Bene Ephraim) have descended from lost Israelites.<sup>38</sup> The Madiga population in Andhra Pradesh has been estimated to be 12 million (46.94 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population of Andhra Pradesh), yet only 125 families identify as Israelite. In another video posted by a YouTube channel called Bahujan HUB, a Muslim cleric states that according to the Quran, Jews are Muslims’ biggest enemy. The interviewer then asks him if the Muslims are aware that DNA research has proved that the Brahmans in India are of Jewish origin.<sup>39</sup> To this, the cleric states that he is not aware of this but that ideally, they should be. Then, the interviewer says that the Brahmans were only 3.5% of the total population while the scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes (ST), and the other backward castes (OBC) made up almost 90%, yet the Jews (the interviewer here refers to the Brahmans as ‘Jews’) ruled, implying that the Brahmans held all the important positions despite their numerical insignificance only because they were as clever as the Jews. The cleric responds by saying that this awareness will enable us to protect ourselves from Jewish conspiracies.<sup>40</sup> The anti-Brahman discourse of the Dalit movement’s radical periodical, *Dalit Voice*, is “full of comparisons between the Jews and the Brahmans, who are often referred to as the ‘Jews of India’. It sees the lack of interest in proselytization as an important characteristic in common between Jews and Brahmans, and from that, it infers that their religions “are founded on hate-mongering, racism and violence.”<sup>41</sup>

The Indian Jews themselves have shown an inclination to embrace the narrative of the absence of antisemitism, which is a manifestation of the pressure of self-preservation often felt by religious minorities across the world. A more detailed discussion of this requires a separate article. Suffice it to say, no matter where antisemitism is and no matter what its intensity, it is never advisable to ignore it, for complacency would only worsen the situation.

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## Appendix I



Varma Ravi, R. (1902). *The Miser* [Picture].

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja\\_Ravi\\_Varma,\\_The\\_Miser\\_\(1901\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_Ravi_Varma,_The_Miser_(1901).jpg)

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<sup>1</sup> Web Desk, “Judas betrayed Christ for silver, LDF betrayed Kerala for gold: Modi,” *The Week*, March 30, 2021. Accessed on May 1, 2021 at <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2021/03/30/judas-betrayed-christ-for-silver-ldf-betrayed-kerala-for-gold-modi.html> [accessed on August 5, 2021].

<sup>2</sup> Nandakumar, T., “54.72% of population in Kerala are Hindus”, *The Hindu*, August 26, 2015, Updated: March 29, 2016. Accessed on April 30, 2021 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/5472-of-population-in-kerala-are-hindus/article7581145.ece> [accessed on August 5, 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, *Translate Hate: Stopping Antisemitism Starts with Understanding It* (American Jewish Committee, February 2021), p. 18. Accessed on May 1, 2021 at [https://www.ajc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2021-02/AJC\\_Translate-Hate-Glossary-2021.pdf](https://www.ajc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2021-02/AJC_Translate-Hate-Glossary-2021.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Hogan, Susan “Was Judas a Good Guy or Bad? Scholars Disagree,” *Tribune News Service, The Dallas Morning News*, April 17, 2003. Accessed on April 30, 2021 at <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/index.php?id=6435>

<sup>5</sup> Gibson, David, “THE WORLD: Anti-Semitism’s Muse; Without Judas, History Might Have Hijacked Another Villain,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2006. Accessed on April 30, 2021 at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/09/weekinreview/the-world-antisemitisms-muse-without-judas-history-might-have.html>

<sup>6</sup> Cohn, Haim, *The Trial and Death of Jesus* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, Dan, *The Crucified Jews: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan and American Interfaith Institute and the World Alliance of Interfaith Organizations, Philadelphia, through special arrangement with HarperCollins, 1997), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> PTI, "U.N. report flags Islamic State threat in Karnataka, Kerala," *The Hindu*, July 25, 2020. Accessed on April 30, 2021 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/un-report-flags-islamic-state-threat-in-karnataka-kerala/article32189443.ece>

<sup>12</sup> Wald, Shalom Salomon and Arielle Kandel, *India, Israel and the Jewish People: Looking Ahead, Looking Back, 25 Years after Normalization (Emerging Super Powers of non-Biblical Traditions No. 2)* (Jerusalem: The Jewish People Policy Institute, 2017), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Koder, S. S. and Fiona Hallegua, "Jews of Cochin – India", in J. M. Benjamin, ed., *Jews of Cochin – India* (New Delhi: Jewish Welfare Association, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> MSA, Home Special Department, 60D(g), Pt. III, 1938. Translation of the verbatim speech made by V. D. Sarvarkar at Malegaon on October 14, 1938, cited in Marzia Casolari, "Hindutva's Foreign Tie-Up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Jan 22-28, 2000), pp. 218-228.

<sup>15</sup> *Jewish Tribune*, December 1938, p. 11, cited in Yulia Egorova, *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Savarkar, V. D., *Hindu Rashtra Darshan (A Collection of the Presidential Speeches delivered from the Hindu Mahasabha Platform)* (Bombay: Syt. Laxman Ganesh Khare, 1949), pp. 69-70, cited in Yulia Egorova, *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> Bose, Sumantara, "Why India's Hindu nationalists worship Israel's nation-state model", *The Conversation*, published online on 14 February 2019, available at <https://theconversation.com/why-indias-hindu-nationalists-worship-israels-nation-state-model-111450> [Accessed 25 July 2021].

<sup>18</sup> M. S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939), E-book published by <http://hinduebooks.blogspot.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Egorova, Yulia, *Jews and Muslims in South Asia: Reflections on Difference, Religion, and Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Kumaraswamy, P. R., *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 243.

<sup>21</sup> Okhla Times, "Netizens slam Asif Md Khan over his Atishi remark," YouTube video, April 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKpB-cgsIEI> [Accessed on August 5, 2021].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Golwalkar, M. S., *We or Our Nationhood Defined*. Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939. (E-Book)

<sup>24</sup> Silliman, Jael, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England in arrangement with Seagull Books, Calcutta. 2001), 167.

<sup>25</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, "Naipaul's India and Mine," *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3/4, Nissim Ezekiel Issue (Spring, Summer 1976), 193-205.

<sup>26</sup> Kohli, Devendra, ed., *Indian Writers at Work*, New World Literature Series: 43 (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1991), 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Rohekar, Sheela, *Miss Samuel: Ék Yahūdī Gāthā* (New Delhi: Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2013), 179-180. (The present author's translation.)

<sup>28</sup> HTN, *Asif Muhammad On Asking Muslims To Not Vote For Atishi: As A Muslim, I Would Never Vote For A Jew*. YouTube video. 28 April, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrXzmFnX17M> [Accessed on August 5, 2021]

<sup>29</sup> Firestone, Reuven, "Is the Qur'an "Antisemitic"?" In *Volume 2 Confronting Antisemitism from the Perspectives of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism*, edited by Armin Lange, Kerstin Mayerhofer, Dina Porat and Lawrence H. Schiffman, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020) pp. 87-108, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110671773-007>

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Ron Malka spoke at a webinar titled "India, Israel & the Gulf: New Opportunities", held under the auspices of Indian Pluralism Foundation, supported by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, on February 14, 2021. The other panellists were Jason Isaacson, Chief Policy and Political Affairs Officer, American Jewish Committee, Arjun Hardas, India Representative, American Jewish Committee, and Navdeep Suri, former Indian ambassador to the UAE. Here is the link to its Zoom video on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/ovais.aslam.7/videos/10164681784610414> [Accessed on August 4, 2021].

The latest event for which the AJC collaborated with Indian Pluralism Foundation was a webinar titled "Deciphering Rising Antisemitism in the West", held on July 29, 2021, during which the speakers were Owaiz Aslam, Rabbi Andrew Baker, Director, International Jewish Affairs, AJC; Holly Huffnagle, US Director, Combatting Antisemitism, AJC; and Fiyaz Mughal, Trustee, Muslims Against Antisemitism. It was moderated by Arjun Hardas, India Representative, AJC. Its Zoom video is available at Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/577130413/videos/363261368538685/> [Accessed on August 4, 2021].

<sup>31</sup> Owaiz Aslam, "Blockade of Gaza Strip – crime against humanity," in Arshi Khan and Zafarul-Islam, eds., *Palestine Essays: Winning Essays in the Palestine Essay Contest organised by the Milli Gazette* (New Delhi: The Milli Gazette, 2016), p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

<sup>33</sup> Sen, Amartya, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, Penguin Books, England, 2005, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Reissner, H. G., "Indian-Jewish Statistics (1837-1941)", *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1950), p. 349.

<sup>35</sup> Arora, Tehmina, "For 70 years, Dalits have been denied freedom of religion – through a presidential order", *Scroll.in*, August 21, 2020. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/970613/for-70-years-dalits-have-been-denied-freedom-of-religion-through-a-presidential-order> [Accessed on August 5, 2021].

<sup>36</sup> Parfitt, Tudor, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Indian Media Book, *BAMCEF क्या है? EVM Ghotala | Do Hindu Brahmins have Jewish ancestry? By Prof. Vilas Kharat* [YouTube video], September 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nO3FvQta2h4> [Accessed on July 18, 2021].

<sup>38</sup> Egorova, Yulia and Shahid Perwez, *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> There has been no such research.

<sup>40</sup> Bahujan HUB, *मौलाना ने बताई भारतीय यहूदियों की पहचान* [YouTube video], September 8, 2018. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ls\\_dbU-Wng0&list=PL-eAaQMrAB-Z99cY9hrEmnzxMtHATgfGi&index=31](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ls_dbU-Wng0&list=PL-eAaQMrAB-Z99cY9hrEmnzxMtHATgfGi&index=31) [Accessed on August 5, 2021].

<sup>41</sup> *Dalit Voice*, 1-15 October 2001, p. 8, cited in Yulia Egorova, *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 76.



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