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Shalom Salomon Wald and Arielle Kandel, *India, Israel and the Jewish People: Looking Ahead, Looking Back 25 Years after Normalization* (Jerusalem, The Jewish People Policy Institute, 2017, ISBN 978-965-7549-16-2), 253 pages.

Review by Navras Jaat Aafreedi

There are several books on India-Israeli relations; the most prominent being the ones written by P R Kumaraswamy and Nicholas Blarel. There is no scarcity of books on Jews in India, written by scholars like Nathan Katz, Joan G. Roland, Shalva Weil, Shirley Berry Isenberg, Schifra Strizower, Yulia Egorova, Benjamin J Israel, Nissim Moses, etc. There are also a few books on Indian Jews in Israel, authored by Joseph Hodes and Maina Chawla Singh. Yet, there was hardly any book to put the relations between the two countries in the historical perspective of ties between the ancient civilizations of India and Judea, and later the Jewish Diaspora. Shalom Salomon Wald and Arielle Kandel's *India, Israel and the Jewish People: Looking Ahead, Looking Back 25 Years after Normalization* (2017) not only does this, but also makes policy recommendations to the State of Israel. It is in this respect that it breaks new ground, for which Wald and Kandel are to be commended. Part of the Jewish People Policy Institute's ongoing project on emerging superpowers without a Biblical tradition and no history of antisemitism. It is preceded by a similar work by Wald, *China and the Jewish People – Old Civilizations in a New Era*, published a decade ago and translated into Mandarin in 2014.

For strengthening relations with India, the book proposes to Israel a ten-year plan focused on six different domains: Political and Strategic Ties, Economic and Technological Ties, Cultural and Media Ties, Academic, Educational, and Religious Ties, Ties with India's Intellectual Elites and Israeli Tourists and Tikkun Olam in India.

The book, divided into five chapters, viz., Why India?; India Marches West: Fast Growing Links with the Middle East; The Development of Indo-Israeli Ties; India, The Jewish People, and Israel: A Triangular Relationship; and Excursion into History: Ancient and Medieval Traces, is primarily based on 120 interviews, but also draws heavily from secondary sources, with a bibliography of 131 texts. It has

a foreword by Reuven Rivlin, president of Israel, and a preface by Avinoam Bar-Yosef, director of the Jewish People Policy Institute.

The first chapter of the book underscores the importance of India and draws our attention to how “old history provides a favourable framework for growing links between the Indian and Jewish civilizations”. It points out that the “relations between the two are among the oldest continuous links between any living civilizations”. It reminds us that David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, “exhorted Israel and the Jewish people to reach out to China and India because (written in 1963) ‘the two Asian states – China and India – would become the greatest powers in the world’”. Another reason for us to consider Ben Gurion absolutely right in this attitude of his towards China and India, is the fact these two Asian giants are the only such countries where Jews could live in absolute peace and harmony with their non-Jewish neighbours for centuries. This was unlike anywhere else in the world. They were helped in this by the non-proselytizing nature of the religions predominantly practised in these countries, for neither the Confucians and Taoists in China nor the Hindus in India ever made any attempt to convert the Jews in their midst to their religion. Although both China and India established diplomatic relations with Israel in the same year, 1992, yet in sharp contrast to India, where no university, except one, offers any course in Jewish Studies, a dozen universities in China have Jewish Studies, with four of them awarding doctoral degree in the subject. Even the one university in India, the two-hundred-year-old Presidency University in Kolkata, that offers an undergraduate course in Global Jewish History and a postgraduate course in Holocaust Studies, might be compelled to discontinue these courses because of the latest directive from the University Grants Commission aimed to bring about uniformity in curriculum at the tertiary level of education across the country. It would be a big loss. The chapter cautions against ignoring the 180 million Muslims in India, fifteen percent of its population. Wahabi extremism is infiltrating some of India’s Sunni community rapidly through returning expatriates from the oil-rich Persian Gulf states, increasing the danger of terrorism in India and beyond. At the same time a failed attempt to assassinate an Israeli diplomat in Delhi displayed Iran’s influence, for it was abetted by at least one Indian Shia acting on Iranian instructions. Wald and Kandel emphasise that no matter who forms the government in India, its Muslims will continue to “carry a lot of weight, both

domestically and internationally”. Hence, according to them, it is reason enough for world Jewry, “together with but even more than Israel,” to strengthen relations with India’s “moderate Muslims and their leadership” to “mitigate the potential hostility” from them and “its future impact on Indian history”. In fact, one of the three who are considered the originators of Pan-Islamism, was an Indian – Shah Wali Allah (1702-1763). The person who is considered the father of Jihadist militant ideology, Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979), was also born in India, and lived there until he migrated to Pakistan, the state carved out of India in 1947. His Urdu writings were translated into Arabic by Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadwi (1914-1999), the rector of Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow, a highly prestigious Sunni seminary. He was also the founding chair of the board of trustees of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, and this was in spite of the fact that even his own publications were full of antisemitic rhetoric. Mawdudi in Arabic was read by Sayid Qutb, the figurehead of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. He not only embraced his ideology of Jihad against the “Judeo-Christian” West, but also popularised it across the Arab World. The only way to eliminate antisemitism is through the spread of education. "The ignorance about Judaism and Jewish history is, of course, a particularly fertile breeding ground for anti-Semitism...", as Robert Wistrich, author of *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred*, cautioned us. As a matter of fact, Israel has done little for the promotion of Jewish Studies in India and it also does not seem to figure in its list of priorities when it comes to India. The only Indian scholar to have taken the study of Jews in India as his life-long vocation and the one who has done more than anyone to bring about a positive change in Indian Muslim attitudes towards Jews, Israel and Zionism has hardly received any Israeli support to his activities, even when he has approached them.

The second chapter is a critical appraisal of the five major developments that explain India’s evolving relationship with West Asia: Its need for oil and natural gas, expansion of economic exchanges with West Asia, the domestic Muslim influence on India’s policy towards West Asia, political and military links in West Asia, and India’s desire for recognition as a global power.

The third chapter is devoted to the study of the development of Indo-Israeli ties, from 1947 to today. It explains as to why India refused to have diplomatic relations with Israel for more than four decades even after recognising it in 1950, while it

continued to have diplomatic relations with the countries it fought wars with, China and Pakistan. It also explains as to how India came to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and how the relations have progressed. The chapter is insightful in its commentary on constraints and challenges in Indo-Israeli relations. The authors are right in pointing out that “there is no continent where Israeli and Jewish cultural outreach has been as weak and insufficient as Asia”. It laments the lack of Jewish and Israeli cultural outreach in India. The authors are conscious of the fact that insufficient funding severely constraints Israeli cultural outreach. “The overall cultural budget of Israel’s Foreign Ministry is far too small to enable Israel to conduct appropriate and effective cultural diplomacy abroad. The budget allocated for the promotion of Israeli and Jewish culture in India is miniscule considering India’s size, increasing global importance, and rapidly growing population.” But, at the same time the authors rightly indicate Israeli diplomats’ lack of appropriate fluency in the cultural fields, and their generally greater interest in dealing with political matters. There have been instances when they have even failed to provide endorsements and recommendations that did not involve any finances, to those seeking to contribute to the promotion of Jewish Studies in India. The authors wisely advise that student and scholars exchange programmes in the humanities should be expanded, for “these students and scholars could play a positive role in advancing Indo-Israeli ties.”

The fourth chapter discusses at length the triangular relationship of India, Israel and the Jewish Diaspora. The first section of the chapter is devoted to a historical overview of the Jewish presence in India. The second section of the chapter discusses the Zionist efforts to lobby the Indian political leaders in pre-independence India. The third section of the chapter looks at the role played by American Jewry in the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel. The fourth section is devoted to a discussion of relations between the Jewish and Indian diasporas in the United States and the United Kingdom. The fifth section draws our attention to Jewish dialogue with Hindus and Muslims. The sixth section devotes itself to the engagement of Jewish NGOs with the Indian civil society. The last section of the chapter is devoted to how Jews figure in Indian fiction and how India is depicted in Jewish fiction.

The fifth and the last chapter of the book is an exploration of ancient and medieval links between India and the Jewish World, right from the First Temple Period. It concerns itself with Biblical references to spices, fragrances, and animals from India, how India came to be idealized in the Hellenistic imagination of Jews (300 BCE – 200 CE), how Mishnah and Talmud deal with the Indian reality (150-500 CE), Jewish India traders in the Middle Ages (1100-1300 CE), and how India in the medieval Jewish thought (900-1300 CE) fluctuates between admiration and rejection.

The book is a welcome addition to the field of Indo-Judaic Studies for the significant contribution it makes by drawing our attention to all the lacunas in our pursuit for greater Indo-Judaic engagement. It proposes a roadmap for Indo-Israeli relations and Indo-Jewish engagement for the next one decade. The authors are entitled to our ungrudging gratitude for this. The entire text of the book can be read and downloaded from here: www.jpji.org.il

About MEI@ND

Formally launched in February 2010, the Middle East Institute, New Delhi seeks to promote the understanding of contemporary Middle East. It is India-based and not India-centric and its main research focus is geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East including, but not limited to, military matters, economy, energy security, political system and institutions, society, culture and religion, and conflicts in the region. The institute also encourages research on burgeoning Asian interest in and engagements with the Middle East. MEI@ND documents bilateral relations amongst the Middle Eastern states and strives to produce updated analysis of the region's changing strategic landscape.

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