



## Kedma: Penn's Journal on Jewish Thought, Jewish Culture, and Israel

---

Volume 2  
Number 2 *Fall 2018*

Article 3

---

2020

### Sifra Lentin, Adjunct Fellow Bombay History Studies, Gateway House, Mumbai

Miriam Minsk  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/kedma>

 Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/kedma/vol2/iss2/3>  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

Sifra Lentin, Adjunct Fellow Bombay History Studies, Gateway House, Mumbai

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

---

# Interview: Sifra Lentin, Adjunct Fellow Bombay History Studies, Gateway House, Mumbai

*Miriam Minsk*

---

Sifra Lentin is a Bombay History Fellow at Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations, which is a think tank in Mumbai, India. She was a fellow at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at Penn in October, 2018, where she conducted research on the Jewish community in Karachi before and after the emergence of Pakistan in 1947. This interview was conducted by Miriam Minsk on October 30, 2018. Heather Sharkey contributed slight edits.

**Miriam Minsk:**

Could you start off by telling me about yourself, the work that you do, and why you came to Penn?

**Sifra Lentin:**

I earned a degree in English, and studied law in India. I began my career as a journalist in Mumbai, where I initially worked for a couple of magazines. Then, after I got married, I started working as a freelance journalist. I used to write a very popular column called “Vintage Mumbai” on the history of Mumbai. Parallel to this writing, I have done research on my own community, which is the Jewish community of Bombay.

---

In October 2014, I joined Gateway House: Indian Council for Global Relations as their Bombay History Fellow. As Gateway House is a think tank specializing in geo-economics and geopolitics and its impact on Indian business, my brief was to contextualize the history of the city (renamed Mumbai since 1995), particularly its economic history, in the context of contemporaneous world history. Even in this study area, I have written a lot on the city's Jewish history.

The community in Bombay has two parts. There are the Bene Israel Jews, the community I belong to, whose members came to the Indian subcontinent about 1,600 to 2,000 years ago. And then there are the Baghdadi Jews, who came as merchants to India from what is now Iraq.

I became interested in writing about the Jews of Mumbai in the 1980s and early 1990s. At that time I was writing for Reuters, *Times of India*, *Taj* magazine, and other venues. I went to Israel in 1998 to start surveying the academic territory there for a book on the Jews of India. There I met a few people from the community who had immigrated to Israel, and did some interviews. In fact, most of the Ben Israel Jews now live in Israel. Today in India we have just a community of a little under 5,000. I thought it was important that I get the perspective from Israel and perhaps come out with enough material to write a coffee table book, with photographs.

In the course of visiting Israel, I met an anthropologist by the name of Shalva Weil, who is well-known in the area of Indian-Jewish studies. Her thesis was on the Bene Israeli Jews who settled in Lod, south of Tel Aviv. As an anthropologist she was interested in their rituals, food, culture, birth rites, marriage rites, funeral rites – everything that was part of social culture. I met her and we hit it off. Shortly afterwards she visited India, and invited me to contribute to a book that she was editing on the Jews of India.

That was my first serious break into the academic side of Jewish studies because she commissioned me to write a chapter on the Bombay Jews. I interviewed many community members, and mapped every monument and

---

heritage structure of the community in both cities. I wrote both about the Baghdadis and the Bene Israelis.<sup>1</sup> Much of the material about the Baghdadi community related to the Sassoon family, who became distinguished philanthropists in Bombay. In my study, I also included Pune, which was like Bombay's twin city, about 200 kilometers away. I met in Pune a fantastic man – a history buff – who took the day off to show me the Sassoon hospital, the old age home, and more.

Meanwhile, I was very busy with my family and raising our two sons. But along the way I managed to write the history of the Indian naval fleet in Mumbai, and how it developed from the fleet of the East India Company, when India was under British rule. I published a book on this subject in a beautiful coffee table book format. Maritime history became a huge passion for me, along with the history of Indian Jews. Meanwhile, I have continued to write more about Indian Jewish history.<sup>2</sup>

Coming to the Katz Center this year – when the theme has focused on Jews in Islamic lands – I met many other fellows who are studying the Jews of Morocco, Yemen, Turkey, and more. I am proud to have been the first fellow from India in the history of the center! What we have all realized is that Jewish histories in Islamic lands have not been determined by national or imperial borders, but have transcended border and politics.

I came to Penn partly because of Professor Heather Sharkey. We met last year [in summer 2017] when she was accompanying three management students from the Lauder Institute's joint Wharton and School of Arts and Sciences MBA/MA degree in International Business. She was leading the "SAMENA" program (for students in the South Asia, Middle East, and North Africa track of the Lauder degree). I gave the group a short lecture on the history of Mumbai. When we met I spoke a little about David Sassoon (the distinguished philanthropist). She was intrigued by that, and so, when we went for coffee afterwards, she asked me, "Have you considered applying for a Katz fellowship considering your interests in Jewish history?" She told

---

me about the theme year on Jews in Islamic lands, and I thought of doing something on the Jews of Karachi, in Pakistan.

The Karachi Jewish community is the community from which my mother came. I grew up on her stories about how her family fled in 1948 when the situation became tense in the city and riots broke out. Recall that in 1947 India was partitioned into Pakistan and India. Karachi had been a majority Hindu city but it went to Pakistan because it was contiguous to the geographical territory that was becoming Pakistan. So all of the Hindus and the other non-Muslim communities, who formed the economic backbone of Karachi, just up and left because of the riots and the violence. My mother's family came to India in 1948 and they took the sea route. It was vivid for her because she was 13 years old at that time. She talked a lot about all of the refugees on deck and how they were packed like sardines in a can during the three-day journey coming to Mumbai. That fired my imagination ... Recalling her stories, I started reaching out to the community of Jews who had lived in Karachi, and I started looking at archives, too. I feel as though my research on the Karachi Jews is just beginning.

What I presented at the Katz Center in October 2018 is my preliminary research. On the basis of what I have learned from interviews and archives so far, I am convinced that there is a good book to write on this subject. I hope to show how the history of the Karachi Jews has related to two partitions: the partition of India in 1947, and the partition of Palestine in 1948, which led to the emergence of Pakistan and Israel respectively.

**Miriam Minsk:**

Could you tell me more about your Jewish community in India?

**Sifra Lentin:**

In fact, on the day I arrived in Philadelphia I went to the Mikveh Israel synagogue, which is a Sephardic synagogue on 4th Street near Independence

---

Hall. In Mumbai, the Bene Israel community in Mumbai have learned a lot from the Cochin Jews (from the southern Indian town of Cochin), who have in turn drawn from the Sephardic tradition. We follow the Cochin liturgy, which has its origins in the Sephardic liturgy, and which also the Baghdadi Jews follow. When I came here, it was the second day of Simchat Torah, and the way they sang the music in Mikveh Israel was just like home. The people were like home, too. There were a lot of Baghdadis there ... The dinner, the general atmosphere, and the sense of community and happiness in Mikveh Israel felt just like being home, too.

In Mumbai all of the synagogues have a lot of programs for senior citizens, for working adults, and for children and teenagers. They offer programs in things like martial arts, learning Hebrew, studying the Kabbalah, and learning to read the prayers. The synagogues also arrange get-togethers for discussing religious and community issues – it is really nice... The youngsters there are very much like the American youngsters ... The synagogue is also very active because they try to keep the kids in the faith. We are living in a multireligious, multicultural society in India so the synagogues try to give the young Indian Jews a sense of their roots. I think they are doing fantastic work.

We have got Jewish schools in Mumbai, although the community is very small. Between Mumbai, Thane, and Pune together, we have about 3,400 people. So the Jewish community is really miniscule. Thane and Pune are like satellite cities to Mumbai: they are big but a distance away. Between the main city centers you also have suburbs. Nowadays the community is also dispersed, whereas earlier everyone lived close to the synagogues. Areas which used to be known as Jewish areas have emptied out completely. The synagogues now are in predominantly Muslim areas, though it not that Muslims were not there before. Bear in mind that Jews and Muslims have had very good relationships in India, and they used to live side-by-side.

Again, with the Jewish community now being small and scattered, community leaders have to try actively to keep the youngsters engaged –

---

whether through classes in things like Bollywood dancing and martial arts, or through picnics, or trips to Israel. They also have programs in Mumbai to travel to see the Holocaust sites in Poland and to participate in the March of the Living. Every year there is a group of youngsters who are going on these programs who are learning more about not just world Jewry, but about their own heritage and history, and coming back and staying engaged in the community because they become volunteers in turn. The Bombay scene is very active.

Regarding our Jewish schools, now I am a trustee of the Sir Jacob Sassoon School, which was and still is a very well-known school in Bombay. We have 600-plus students, and out of the 600-plus students we have only nine Jewish students. Since the school is funded by a trust, we have made education for the Jewish children absolutely free: they do not have to pay a penny. We prepare them for the bar and bat mitzvahs, so we have someone to teach them the prayers after school hours. The school is closed on all Jewish holidays. The school closes at around 2 o'clock, which ensures that Sabbath is observed ... We do try to do as much as we can for the Jewish students, even to the extent of having a special school bus to see if we can attract people from the community to use the facilities of the school. We tell them that even if you live a distance away, if you can send your child by train, we do not mind sending a school bus to collect your child from the station and drop her off after school to the station. But even that is often not enough to make it feasible for Jewish families to send their children from the city's suburbs, because when children are small you cannot send them alone on a train... In any case, we are trying to do our best to attract Jewish children to the school.

**Miriam Minsk:**

Is there any anti-Semitism in India?

---

## **Sifra Lentin:**

Our synagogues do have security. Outside every Jewish synagogue now, there are policemen from the local police station sitting there. Security has been especially heightened since the Chabad house attack of 2008. What we call 26/11 (like 9/11 for the United States) was a huge attack on Mumbai by the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a terrorist group from Pakistan ... Ten terrorists held the entire city to ransom for three days ... I have never seen Bombay so eerily quiet because Bombay is a city that is normally safe and alive for 24 hours a day. It was deadly quiet during those three days, it was anxious ... I could hear gunfire and bombs ... The terrorists attacked the Chabad house in Colaba (a historic, vibrant, and prosperous neighborhood in South Mumbai containing many notable sites). Seven people died in that attack, and it suddenly heightened the security concerns for the entire community. The residents of the Chabad house were the Rabbi and his wife who was expecting. They were tortured before being killed; it was horrific. That attack lasted three days. Three days. It was just awful, I do not think there has ever been an attack like that. There have been attacks on Bombay as in bombings, but nothing like that, when people came from abroad and held it to ransom. The attack at the Chabad house was really bad.

Since then, every Jewish institution has been on high alert. We had always felt secure, because we always had good relationships with our neighbors, but I think this really heightened the risk factors and the security concerns. So now if you go to synagogue you are not just allowed inside. You are asked why you are going there, who you are, what you are, what you have come there for. These are things that we now face as Jews in the little community in Mumbai.

---

## **Endnotes**

1. Sifra Samuel Lentin, "The Jewish Presence in Bombay," in *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art, & Life-Cycle*, ed. Shalva Weil (Mumbai: Marg Publications, on behalf of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, 2002), pp. 22-35.

- 
2. Sifra Samuel Lentin, “Mumbai’s Jewish Community”, in *Mumbai: Socio-Cultural Perspectives: Contributions of Ethnic Groups and Communities*, ed. Anila Verghese et al (Delhi: Primus Books, 2018), pp. 117-32.