



ARTICLE

# An Indian Jewish Commandant and a Muslim Begum

Shalva Weil 

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel and University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria, South Africa

Email: [shalva.weil@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:shalva.weil@mail.huji.ac.il)

(Received 6 December 2023; accepted 6 November 2024)

## Abstract

This article explores the oral narratives about Samuel Ezekiel Divekar (1730–97), an officer in the British army and a member of the Bene Israel Indian Jewish community, who was released from the prison of Tipu Sultan (1751–99) by the Muslim ruler’s mother, Begum Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa. These foundational narratives are compared with non-native colonial and other sources, including manuscripts, books, letters and reports located in libraries and archives, in order to see whether there is any synchronicity between the different versions. Of particular interest is the gender dimension in which Divekar’s release from prison was facilitated by a Muslim woman, reminiscent of the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in Egypt. Although prominent in the Bene Israel communal narrative, the Begum’s role is reflected neither in colonial records nor in other accounts (notably, in Cochin Jewish letters). Finally, the question of whether Divekar brought a Torah scroll to the Gate of Mercy synagogue (so named to commemorate the compassion of the Begum) established in 1796 in Bombay is discussed. The article demonstrates that the analysis of subaltern oral narratives can enrich our understanding of history by giving a voice to marginalised groups, and focusing on suppressed narratives about gender.

**Keywords:** Bene Israel Indian Jews; Tipu Sultan; gender; oral narratives; colonial Indian history

One of the most dramatic stories in the repertoire of the Bene Israel Indian Jews is the Divekar narrative. The Bene Israel trace their ancestors to the Kingdom of Israel, who were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast south of Bombay. According to their oral history, during the second Anglo–Mysore war (1780–4), Samuel Ezekiel Divekar (1730–97), a Bene Israel officer, who had enlisted in the British East India Company’s army in 1760, was taken captive by the great Muslim regent, Tipu Sultan, in Mysore.<sup>1</sup> Divekar

<sup>1</sup> I have adopted Howes’s spelling of Tipu Sultan and Haidar Ali throughout this article. J. Howes, ‘Tipu Sultan’s Female Entourage under East India Company Rule’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 31 (2021), 855–74.

was languishing in his prison cell along with several other Bene Israel prisoners, when the ruler's mother came to view the prisoners. She had heard that some Jews had been taken prisoners and that they would have to be put to death since they were *kufri*, Urdu for 'infidels'.<sup>2</sup> When Tipu Sultan's mother caught sight of the handsome Divekar, who was of 'fair complexion', she enquired as to his identity. 'I am Bene Israel', he replied, 'one of the Children of Israel'. In those days, the Bene Israel were not yet part of mainstream Judaism. Tipu Sultan's mother was so relieved that Divekar was an Israelite and not a Jew, whom her son would have to kill, that she demanded that he and the other Bene Israel prisoners be set free.<sup>3</sup>

Upon his release, Divekar made a vow that upon his return to Bombay (present-day Mumbai), he would build a synagogue for members of his community, who were beginning to leave the Konkan villages, south of Bombay, and move to the metropolis in the service of the British. In 1796, Divekar established the first synagogue in Bombay, which became known in the nineteenth century as 'The Gate of Mercy Synagogue' (Hebrew: *Sha'ar Rahamim*). According to one oral version, when he got out of prison, Divekar first went south from his army base at Malabar to pray at the famous Cochin Jewish Paradesi (sometimes referred to as 'Foreigners' or 'White' Jewish) synagogue (as distinct from the Malabar or 'Black' Jews' synagogues),<sup>4</sup> and then returned to Bombay with a Torah scroll for his synagogue. According to another version, Divekar went directly to Bombay, bought land for an 'Israel *mohalla*' (colony/neighbourhood) where he built a synagogue,<sup>5</sup> and then went to Cochin to obtain a Torah scroll. According to this version, he never returned to Bombay.

This story, repeated over and over again by Bene Israel, is one of the most popular oral narratives circulating in the community to this day. In this article, the different components of the Divekar narrative will be examined and compared with surviving written sources of the period. Oral narratives such as the Divekar story present an opportunity for the historian to reflect upon the nature and authenticity of subaltern

<sup>2</sup>For the way Jews are depicted in the Qur'an, see Meir Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* (Princeton, 2022).

<sup>3</sup>It should be pointed out that according to the Bible (1 Kings 11:11–13, 29–39), on the succession of King Solomon's son Rehoboam, the monarchy split into two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel in the north, and the Kingdom of Judah in the south, including Jerusalem, composed primarily of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Jews trace their origin to the Kingdom of Judah. Approximately ten tribes were exiled by the Assyrians from the eighth century BCE on and were known as the Ten Lost Tribes. S. Weil, 'The Unification of the Ten Lost Tribes with the Two "Found" Tribes', in *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World*, ed. T. Parfitt and N. Fisher, (Cambridge, 2016), 25–35.

<sup>4</sup>The Cochin Jews may have arrived in India with King Solomon's merchantmen in the tenth century BCE, or even in the first century CE (Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin* (Columbia, 1993). Despite their small numbers, the Cochin Jews were divided into two separate caste-like groups, 'Paradesi' Jews and 'Malabar' Jews, who neither inter-dined, nor intermarried, nor prayed together. Judah Benzion Segal, 'White and Black Jews at Cochin, the Story of a Controversy', *Journal of the Royal Asian Society*, 115 (1983), 228–52. The tensions between the two groups continued until the twentieth century. S. Weil, 'Effigies, Religion and Reversals in the Celebration of *Purim* by Cochin Jews', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* (2024), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2024.2411344>.

<sup>5</sup>Some members of the community claim that Divekar only paid for the cost of building the synagogue, while others maintain that his sister-in-law Hannabai defrayed the costs after the death of her husband Solomon Divekar.

representations,<sup>6</sup> to work out how much of what is narrated is true, and to discuss to what extent community tales resonate with other familiar tales. In a general sense, the subaltern designation can refer to marginalised groups, including women, peasants and lower classes, or members of non-mainstream religions, in fact all persons who are rendered without agency by their social status. The Divekar narrative is subaltern in that it is narrated by members of a minuscule group, who were neither accepted by the dominant Hindu society in India nor granted agency by the British. Moreover, the role allegedly played by the Begum, Tipu Sultan's mother, both heightens this power differential and introduces a gendered dimension that has been tellingly elided from in the overwhelmingly male colonial sources.

I have elicited the oral histories about Divekar from informants over a long period of time in different global locations. I originally carried out anthropological fieldwork with the Bene Israel, living with them for three years in the 1970s in the town of Lod in Israel, and thereafter visiting India frequently. Since then, I have continued researching and writing about the Bene Israel in Great Britain, Israel, India and elsewhere, in research that has been called 'Anthropology at Home'.<sup>7</sup>

Similar narratives to those I collected have also been recorded by 'native' historians and chroniclers in notebooks, and in pamphlets, which were shared with me by members of the community over the years. These oral narratives can be viewed as a valuable tool to understand a minuscule community's identity in India, as well as its attitude to gender, religion, race, caste and ethnicity.

In the case of the Divekar story, different parts of the narrative can also be compared to non-native written sources in order to see whether there is any synchronicity, and whether colonial and other sources report on the same events in the same way. Non-native sources include manuscripts, books, letters and reports written by the representatives of colonial powers, as well as accounts published by travellers, religious authorities and members of other Indian Jewish groups.<sup>8</sup>

By comparing the different components of the oral narratives and testing them against surviving written sources, a case will be made to validate the Divekar story, and demonstrate that it is not a mere narrative to be examined for its literary tropes and meanings alone.

Of particular interest is the gender dimension reflected in the narrative in which Divekar's release from prison was facilitated by a Muslim woman. The whole story is reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Joseph in Egypt. This biblical tale was

---

<sup>6</sup>'Subaltern' refers to a group that is excluded from society's established structures and denied the means by which people have a voice in their society. This line of thought was championed by Spivak, who advocated for the differing versions of history narrated by subalterns to be heard and read, and thereby revolutionised Indian colonial historiography. G. Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (1988), 24–8.

<sup>7</sup>S. Weil, 'Anthropology becomes Home: Home becomes Anthropology', in *Anthropology at Home*, ed. A. Jackson (1987), 196–212.

<sup>8</sup>These texts have been located in libraries, such as in the British Library in London, and, in recent years, in digitalised works readily available on the internet. In the 1990s, I carried out archival work in the archive of Maharashtra's historical records in Pune, known then as the Poona archives, and previously known as the Peshwa Daftar. Today, the Pune archive in the Maharashtra State Archives is part of the Central Archival Agency of the Government of Maharashtra.

gaining popularity among the Bene Israel due to the steadfast work of Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century, who made the Bible accessible to the Bene Israel in Marathi and Hebrew. It is noteworthy that, although prominent in the Bene Israel communal narrative on Divekar, the role of Tipu Sultan's mother in obtaining his escape is reflected neither in colonial records nor in other accounts (notably, in Cochin Jewish letters, to which I shall refer later). However, the non-native sources do provide confirmation of the existence and release from prison of the Bene Israel Commandant Divekar, such that the story of his life could not constitute a mere tale or flight of imagination. The questions of who set Divekar free and the role of the Begum in his release are discussed in light of historical accounts from the time. Finally, the debate whether Divekar went to Cochin upon his release, or straight to Bombay, and when he established the first Bene Israel synagogue in the city, are then raised. The denouement of the narrative is also examined: did Divekar in fact bring a Torah scroll to the synagogue, or does the evidence show that he died in Cochin before he managed to achieve this?

The first part of the article will outline the origins and identity of the Bene Israel, Divekar's community, as told in oral and written narratives. It will also examine different sources to verify the biography of Divekar as a member of this community, and his progress and fate in the British Indian Army. The role of the Begum in facilitating Divekar's release from prison will then be examined. While the oral narrative, which shows remarkable similarities to the biblical story of Joseph in Egypt, places the Begum's role in centre stage, colonial sources revealed here do not mention a woman's intervention on behalf of the incarcerated Divekar. Of particular relevance is the role of Cochin Jews in Divekar's release and the gift of a Torah scroll to Divekar for the newly established synagogue in Bombay, the Gate of Mercy Synagogue, which reminded one and all of the mercy he was once shown by a Muslim Begum.

### The Bene Israel backdrop: Divekar in context

Today, the Bene Israel ('Children of Israel') are the largest of India's Jewish communities, but tiny compared to members of other religions in India.<sup>9</sup> From the eighteenth century until the twentieth century, the Bene Israel embarked upon a long journey to align with mainstream Judaism. After Indian Independence in 1947, and the independence of the State of Israel in 1948, most Bene Israel opted to immigrate to the Jewish homeland. In twentieth-century Israel, the Bene Israel encountered difficulties in being accepted as Indian Jews, not least because they had considered themselves to be 'the Children of Israel' and in the past had not identified as Jews. In 1964, after a two-year Gandhi-style strike, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate relented and declared the

<sup>9</sup>According to the Indian census of 1941, which included Pakistan, there were 22,480 Jews living in India. H. G. Reissner, 'Indian-Jewish Statistics (1837–1941)', *Jewish Social Studies*, 12 (1950), 349–66. At their peak prior to Indian independence in 1947, the Bene Israel numbered 28,000. The Baghdadi Jews migrated to Bombay, Poona and Calcutta largely in the nineteenth century, and swelled to over 6,000 during the Second World War. E. D. Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry* (1986); S. Weil (ed.), *The Baghdadi Jews in India: Maintaining Communities, Negotiating Identities and Creating Super-Diversity* (London and New York, 2019). The Cochin Jews numbered only 2,400 in 1947. They were divided into two separate groups, 'Malabar' and 'Paradesi' Jews. Segal, 'White and Black Jews at Cochin'; S. Weil, 'The Place of Always in Modern Cochin Jewish History', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 8 (2010), 319–35.

Bene Israel 'Jews in every respect'. Today, an estimated 90,000 Bene Israel and their descendants reside in Israel, while fewer than 3,000 remain in India; others migrated to Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

The Bene Israel have no documentary proof of their existence prior to the time of Tipu Sultan, and their identity and collective memory are based upon oral history. According to the origin myth, which all Bene Israel recite to this day, their ancestors belonged to the seafaring tribe of Zebulun, who were trying to flee Antiochus Epiphanes, the Hellenistic despot of the Seleucid Empire in the year 175 BCE, set sail from the Kingdom of Israel and were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast.<sup>10</sup> They lost all their holy books, including the Torah (Pentateuch), and only remembered the *Shema Israel* (Hear O! Israel) prayer in Hebrew, which declared their faith in monotheism in their new polytheistic surroundings. Only seven men and seven women were saved from the shipwreck,<sup>11</sup> and the rest were buried in the cemetery in the Konkan village of Navgaon. The survivors worked as *Shanwar Telis* or Saturday Oilmen, so called because they refrained from work on the Sabbath. In time, the Bene Israel spread out all over the Konkan and inhabited more than 100 villages. They adopted -kar names, such as Penkar from the village of Pen, Ashtamkar from the village of Ashtame, and Divekar, from the fishing village Dive Agar, 170 kilometres south of Bombay.<sup>12</sup>

When they were eventually discovered by a Jewish foreigner named David Rahabi,<sup>13</sup> who, in all likelihood, was an eighteenth-century Cochin Jew, the Bene Israel possessed neither the Talmud nor the Jewish Oral Law.<sup>14</sup> The Bene Israel, at the time of Rahabi's arrival, observed the Sabbath, dietary laws, circumcision and many of the Jewish festivals,<sup>15</sup> while retaining an intense belief in Elijah the Prophet.<sup>16</sup> On Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), known as Darfalnicha San (The Festival of the Closing of the Doors), the Bene Israel would arrive in synagogue before dawn so that they could avoid contact with other people, or other 'castes'.<sup>17</sup> In order to ascertain whether the Bene Israel

<sup>10</sup>This version written down by Haeem Samuel Kehimkar, *History of the Bene-Israel of India* (Tel Aviv, 1937), 12–15, is the most popular. A later Bene Israel scholar was of the opinion that the Bene Israel could have belonged to the tribe of Asher. Shellim Samuel, *A Treatise on the Origin and Early History of the Beni-Israel of Maharashtra* (Bombay, 1963).

<sup>11</sup>The shipwreck was even mentioned by T. M. Dickinson, 'An Enquiry into the Fate of the Ten Tribes of Israel', *Journal of the Royal Asian Society*, 4 (1837), 251. At times, the author confuses the 'Black Jews of Malabar' (sic) with the Bene Israel.

<sup>12</sup>S. Weil, 'Names and Identity among the Bene Israel', *Ethnic Groups*, 1(1977), 201–19.

<sup>13</sup>According to Fischel, the origin of the name Rahabi is Rahaba, a city on the banks of the Euphrates. W. Fischel, 'Cochin in Jewish History', *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 30 (1962), 45.

<sup>14</sup>Some Bene Israel ascertain that the encounter between their ancestors and David Rahabi took place in the twelfth century, and that the man who discovered them was the brother of the great Sefardi Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204), also known as the Rambam or Maimonides. This narrative is especially popular among young religious Bene Israel living today in Israel.

<sup>15</sup>S. Weil, 'Bene Israel Rites and Routines', in *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art and Life-Cycle*, ed. S. Weil (Mumbai, 2002), 78–89.

<sup>16</sup>Whereas most Jews believe that Elijah the Prophet ascended to heaven from a site in the Carmel Mountain range in Israel, the Bene Israel maintain that he departed on his chariot from the village of Khandalla in the Konkan. There, they make wishes for the redemption of vows, or pray to the Prophet for thanksgiving. S. Weil, 'Diffused Religion in Judaism in Unusual Contexts: Elijahoo Hannabi among Bene Israel Indian Jews in Israel', in *Sociologia Sovranazionale*, ed. C. Cipolla et al. (Rome, 2022), 91–100.

<sup>17</sup>S. Weil, 'Yom Kippur: the Festival of Closing the Doors', in *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, ed. H. Goodman (New York, 1994), 85–100.

were Jews (since they had defined themselves as ‘Children of Israel’), David Rahabi asked the women to prepare him a fish meal. When they singled out the fish with fins and scales (cf. Leviticus 11:9–10) – that is, the kosher from the non-kosher fish – Rahabi was convinced of the Bene Israel’s ‘Jewish’ identity and agreed to instruct them in the tenets of Judaism. According to the Bene Israel educator Rebecca Reuben (1889–1957), the Bene Israel had lived in an ‘age of darkness’ for generations; only after the advent of Rahabi did they start evolving as part of mainstream Judaism.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, as Bene Israel soldiers enlisted in the British East Indian army, they became aware of the existence of members of other religions and Jewish communities, and gradually embarked upon their long journey to come in line with world Jewry. It was at this period in history that the Divekar episode took place, and it was Divekar who established the first synagogue for the Bene Israel in Bombay in 1796.

### Verifying Divekar’s life

Since the Bene Israel were not part of the caste system by virtue of their religious practices and belief in monotheism, the British East India Company offered these Indians, whom they classified as ‘Israel caste’, opportunities to enlist in their regiments. An impressive number of Bene Israel left the Konkan villages and reached the highest possible rank for Indians in the British Indian Army as Native Officers fighting in the service of the British in the Anglo-Mysore (1767–9; 1780–4; 1790–2; and 1799), Anglo-Afghan (1839–42) and Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–6).<sup>19</sup> As opposed to stereotypes of Jews as unscrupulous and unworthy, the British had formed a positive image of the Bene Israel as brave sepoys and faithful officers.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, these ‘native Jews’ demonstrated their loyalty to the British during the Indian Mutiny of 1857.<sup>21</sup>

The Divekars were prominent members of the Bene Israel community from Janjira state during the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The patriarch of the family, Bowaji from Diva in Hubshi territory, had seven sons, five of whom – Isaji, Sillamon, Samaji, Elloji and David – are known to have enlisted in the British army around 1760: ‘Almost all of them were present in the war against Tippoo, during which they served the East India Company very zealously and faithfully.’<sup>23</sup>

Colonial sources confirm that Divekar, also known in the time of Tipu Sultan as Samaji Issaji Divekar, rose in rank in the army, attaining the rank of an Indian junior officer *Jemadar* (equivalent to the rank of lieutenant) in charge of a Company in the Sixth Battalion of the British East Indian Army on 2 July 1775. Later, he was promoted to the rank of *Subedar* (equivalent to the rank of captain), and then *Subedar Major* (equivalent to the major), the highest possible rank for Indians in the British Indian Army. It is also known that Divekar, along with some other Bene Israel officers, were taken captive by Tipu Sultan in the second Anglo-Mysore war (1780–4), when General

<sup>18</sup>Rebecca Reuben, *The Bene Israel of Bombay* (Cambridge, 1913), 4.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>20</sup>M. Numark, ‘Perspectives from the Periphery: The East India Company’s Jewish Sepoys, Anglo-Jewry, and the Image of “the Jew”’, in *On the Word of a Jew*, ed. N. Caputo and M. Hart (Bloomington, 2019), 248.

<sup>21</sup>J. R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia* (1838), 368.

<sup>22</sup>Kehimkar, *History*, 83–4.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 190.

Richard Matthews was forced to capitulate at Bednur in the Malabar in 1783.<sup>24</sup> This is the sequence of events after General Richard Matthews's regiment was conquered by Tipu Sultan in 1783:

In the following days Tipu separated the captured officers into two groups. One would be sent to the fortress town of Chitteldroog<sup>25</sup> and would mostly survive their captivity. The second group including General Richard Mathews himself and Captain William Richardson would be marched in irons towards Mysore's stronghold of Seringapatam. Their fates would be less fortunate.<sup>26</sup>

The prisoners were sorted according to religion. The European Christians were treated the worst and put to death on the spot. The Hindu inhabitants of Coorg were massacred or forcibly converted to Islam. According to Cadell, altogether there were 600 European soldiers and 1,500 sepoy (Indian privates).

Out of the 2,000 who are said to have occupied Tippoo's prisons at different times, as the different batches were most carefully separated, it is not surprising that the fate of many should never be known. Tippoo released a large number of soldiers in March 1784 (as he asserted *all*), but as the number so returned bore but a small proportion to those lost on the different services on both coasts, either a very great number must have been butchered, or have died from the rigour of their imprisonment.<sup>27</sup>

Samuel Ezekiel Divekar was the highest-ranking officer among the Bene Israel who was taken captive. According to one researcher of Indian Jews: 'What can reasonably be assumed is that there were at least six other Bene Israel prisoners with Divekar.'<sup>28</sup> Since the Bene Israel captives did not declare that they were Jews, and since they were not European, their fate was better than many of the other prisoners. In addition, while reports were rampant about forced circumcision of prisoners,<sup>29</sup> it was unnecessary to enforce this practice on the Bene Israel, since all males were circumcised according to the Old Testament prescription (Genesis 17:10–12) on the eighth day after birth. The surviving prisoners were released in 1784 as part of the Treaty of Mangalore, but it appears that they remained hostage to Tipu Sultan, until he captured the strategic fort of Adoni in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh from the Maratha Confederacy in 1786. In a letter dated 11 August 1786, Charles Malet (1752–1815), the British Resident in Poona since 1785, in correspondence with Sir Archibald Campbell, described how Indian soldiers belonging to Bombay battalions had been detained on the general

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>Today, known as Chitradurga.

<sup>26</sup>Tim Willasey-Wilsey, 'Searching for Gopal Drooge and the Murder of Captain William Richardson', *FIBIS*, 31 (2011), 16–25.

<sup>27</sup>Patrick Robert Cadell, *History of the Bombay Army* (1871 (1938)), 412.

<sup>28</sup>Yohanan Ben David, *Indo-Judaic Studies* (New Delhi, 2002), 103.

<sup>29</sup>In the postcolonial struggle in favour of Tipu Sultan, even the practice of forced circumcision appears to have been excused by some protagonists. Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World* (New York, 2000), 287.



release at the ‘pacification’, namely the Treaty of Mangalore, but had managed to escape in 1786 amidst the confusion that prevailed.<sup>30</sup> It should be pointed out that in 1792 Adoni was reclaimed by the British East India Company, resulting in its cession to the Nizam of Hyderabad, and its incorporation into the British Madras Presidency.

The most exciting finding corroborating Bene Israel oral history and Divekar’s captivity and release can be found in a letter in the Poona archives written by Charles Malet to the Governor-General of Bombay, mentioning by name the native officer Commandant Samuel Ezekiel (Samaji Hasaji). On 31 July 1786, he wrote that twenty-four days previously he had received in Poona:

Shamajee Hassajee Commdt. [sic], two Subhedars, two Jamadars of the Bombay establishment, and two Englishmen, all of whom had been detained upon pacification and since enlarged on consenting to enter into Tippo’s service, arrived here having made their escape with great peril and difficulty from the army near Adoni from the Bombay Battalions who had been taken prisoner with General Matthews by Tipu Sultan’s army, and had escaped.

Malet added that he found the Commander to be a ‘very observant and shrewd man’.<sup>31</sup>

In a separate letter sent by Malet to Sir Archibald Campbell, then Governor of Madras, on 11 August 1786, he mentioned that he had requested Lieutenant Hiern to provide the native soldiers with money for expenses, and dispatch them to Bombay.<sup>32</sup> This confirms the Bene Israel account that Divekar and others returned to Bombay with enough wealth to purchase land and establish an ‘Israel *mohalla*’ and synagogue.

### The validation of gender

In the oral community narrative, it was Tipu Sultan’s mother who released Divekar and his comrades. In the past, historians have tended to cast women, such as the women of Tipu Sultan’s court, as passive, voiceless victims. However, following wider historiographical trends, historians of colonial India have made great strides reclaiming the role and agency of women, and important methodological advances have been proposed in Indian gender studies.<sup>33</sup> Significant progress has been made in the documentation of the role and agency of women in South Asian history,<sup>34</sup> and the ‘sexuality’ of South Asian women.<sup>35</sup> Recently, Howes has brought in from the sidelines a woman called Roshani Begum, a dancer at the court of Tipu Sultan, who prompted the Vellore

<sup>30</sup>Poona Residency Correspondence, 2/36. [https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.503180/2015.503180.poona-affairs\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.503180/2015.503180.poona-affairs_djvu.txt)

<sup>31</sup>Poona Residency Correspondence, 2/12. [https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.503180/2015.503180.poona-affairs\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.503180/2015.503180.poona-affairs_djvu.txt)

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.* Hiern had previously been in charge of the Resident’s Guard at Poona, and was now in Bombay.

<sup>33</sup>See O’Hanlon’s pioneering article on males as gendered people: R. O’Hanlon, ‘Issues of Masculinity in North Indian History: The Bangash Nawabs of Farrukhabad’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 4 (1997), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152159700400101>.

<sup>34</sup>R. O’Hanlon, ‘Gotmāi’s Suit: A Brahman Woman of Property in Seventeenth Century Western India’, in *Science and Society in the Sanskrit World*, ed. C. Fleming et al. (Leiden, 2023), 17, 448–66.

<sup>35</sup>I. Chatterjee, ‘When “Sexuality” Floated Free of Histories in South Asia’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 71 (2012), 945–62; I. Chatterjee, ‘Monastic Governmentality, Colonial Misogyny, and Postcolonial Amnesia in South East Asia’, *History of the Present*, 3 (2013), 57–98.



Mutiny against the British in 1806.<sup>36</sup> Roshani managed to motivate the sepoys of the Madras Native Infantry to protest at the East India Company's disrespect for their court traditions, and to proclaim her and Tipu Sultan's joint son, Faiteh Haidar, as their king, but the mutiny was cruelly suppressed. Upon examination of colonial sources, Howes has revealed that women used their domestic powers to influence the way they were treated, and were even strong enough to encourage men to instigate a mutiny.<sup>37</sup>

In the Bene Israel narrative, a non-commissioned officer in the British army, who was a member of the marginalised Bene Israel Indian Jewish community, was saved by a woman even closer to Tipu Sultan than Roshani Begum, the ruler's mother. The Bene Israel did not give her a name, but historical records indicate that Tipu Sultan's mother was the Begum Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa. Fatima, the daughter of the governor of the fort of Kapada, had married Haidar Ali (1721–82),<sup>38</sup> and had raised their son Tipu Sultan at Seringapatam fort,<sup>39</sup> where he received a princely education, including sports and military skills, and proficiency in languages. Tipu accompanied his father in the first Anglo-Mysore war (1766–9), and after Haidar Ali's death during the second Anglo-Mysore war (1780–4), he took over as the undisputed ruler of Mysore. Tipu was a devout Muslim: in 1787, he built a large congregational mosque, the Jami Masjid, his throne was inscribed with Koranic verses and he adopted the tiger as his personal motif.<sup>40</sup> Tipu became very wealthy, conducting global trade from his headquarters at Seringapatam throughout India and abroad.

Clearly, Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa was an elite female figure, and historians are still far from documenting the agency of women of lower status. Nonetheless, as Lal has so ably demonstrated, in the Mughal context, the agency of elite women should not be taken for granted: the distinction between public and private women's domains did not necessarily hold up, particularly during the latter days of the Mughal empire. Royal women were confined to particular spaces and suffered from a pattern of what Lal calls 'sacred incarceration'.<sup>41</sup> Tipu's mother was one of the last 'zenana women' residing in luxurious conditions in the inner apartments at Seringapatam.<sup>42</sup> She, like other royal court women, concubines, female servants and attendees, would withdraw behind a purdah, thereby officially removing herself from the political sphere. Nevertheless, as Jhala shows, despite the purdah, *zenana* women managed to challenge the status

<sup>36</sup>Howes, 'Tipu Sultan's Female Entourage'.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>When Haidar Ali was away with the troops, and Fatima Fakhr-Un-Nisa had reached her full term of pregnancy, it is told that she was secretly ushered into a carriage to give birth at Devannahalli fort, conquered by her husband from the Marathas in 1746. However, she ended up giving birth inside the vehicle outside the fort, where a monument can be seen to this day marking the very spot. S. Prasad, 'Older than Bengaluru stands a Grizzled Guard', *The New Indian Express*, 28 Jan. 2016. <https://www.mpositive.in/tag/fatima-fakhr-un-nisa>

<sup>39</sup>Seringapatam is known variously as Srirangapatnam, Srirangapatna or Shrirangapattana.

<sup>40</sup>By 1789, Tipu Sultan was employing 400 Europeans in his service working in the mint and the royal arsenal. Tipu's guns were inscribed with Arabic and Persian invocations, and the tiger became the predominant image on all his weapons. Susan Stronge, *Tipu's Tigers* (2009), 21.

<sup>41</sup>Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge, 2005), 4.

<sup>42</sup>There is extensive literature on *zenana* women. Of particular interest, J. Nair, 'Uncovering the *Zenana*: Visions of Indian Womanhood in Englishwomen's Writings, 1813–1940', *Journal of Women's History*, 2 (1990), 8–34.

quo and influence male rulers.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa, there is little doubt that she wielded power in the affairs of state of her son.<sup>44</sup> It also appears that she was in charge of deciding the fate of Tipu's prisoners. In a book by Mahmood written in Urdu in 1939, he reports that in 1782: 'Next morning as per the instructions of the mother of Tipu Sultan few convicts (sic) were killed through the firing of a cannon.'<sup>45</sup> Presumably, the same influential woman who could decree that prisoners be put to death at Seringapatam could also request their release, as in the case of Divekar.

Fatima Fakhr-Un-Nisa was recognised as the power behind the throne by the colonial powers in their attempt to curry favour with her son. Two examples highlight this point: in 1792, at the termination of the third Anglo-Mysore war (1790–2), Lord Charles Cornwallis (1738–1805) presented to the Begum a half-length portrait by G. F. Cherry (1761–99) of her son in turban, striped shirt, necklace and other accessories. In this way, the colonial authorities acknowledged Fatima's control of the domestic arena, as well as reasserting her status as an intermediary in foreign affairs.<sup>46</sup> In addition, when Begum Fatima Fakhr-Un-Nisa died in 1782, the British paid their respects to her. They took her from Vellore Fort, where she had been exiled from Seringapatam together with Roshani and nearly 600 other women,<sup>47</sup> to be interred at the Gumbaz mausoleum at Seringapatam. Here they laid her to rest flanked her husband Haidar Ali, who had been killed in battle in 1782, and her son Tipu Sultan, who had been defeated at the Siege of Seringapatam in 1799.

Despite the British recognition of the power and importance of the Begum Fatima Fakhr-Un-Nisa, her role in saving Samuel Ezekiel Divekar appears to have been elided from colonial accounts. By contrast, in oral narratives told and retold by the Bene Israel, Fatima Fakhr-Un-Nisa's act in releasing Divekar and the other Bene Israel prisoners is centre stage. It is significant that in the Divekar oral narrative, in addition to the salience of gender, issues of race, religion and status come into play. Fatima Fakhr-Un-Nisa believed in one world religion, Islam, while the Bene Israel came to be identified with another, Judaism. According to Bene Israel who have lived among

---

<sup>43</sup>In postcolonial history, women from the royal courts emerged as significant political personalities, and mothers of the heads of other princely families, such as Rajmata Gayatri Devi of Jaipur and Rajmata Vijaya Raje Scindia of Gwalior, succeeded in becoming elected politicians. Angma Day Jhala, *Courtly Indian Women in Late Imperial India* (2008), 33–51.

<sup>44</sup>This situation reflected the status of royal women in the Ottoman Empire. Royal mothers were the custodians of the sovereignty of dynastic families. The mother of a regent had access to the mechanisms of power, and often received royal grants, even if she was segregated within the palace. Leslie P. Pierce, *Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, 1993), 17.

<sup>45</sup>M. K. Mahmood, *Sultanat e Khudadad* (Bangalore, 1939), translated from Urdu to English by Anwar Haroon, *Kingdom of Haydar Ali and Tipu Sultan* (Bloomington, 2013), 117. Mahmood's sources for this interesting observation are unknown to me.

<sup>46</sup>H. Yadumurthy, 'I looked closely at two famous portraits of Tipu Sultan', *Scroll.in*, 20 Nov. 2021. <https://scroll.in/article/1010779/i-looked-closely-at-two-famous-portraits-of-tipu-sultan-and-found-that-one-isnt-actually-of-him>. The portrait was passed on to Tipu Sultan's youngest son Prince Gholam Mohammad, who gifted it to the East India Company. Today, it can be found in the British Library, BL, F28.

<sup>47</sup>By 1806, more women had arrived at Vellore Fort, before the Mutiny erupted. Howes, 'Tipu Sultan's Female Entourage', 865.

Muslims both in the Konkan and in Bombay, the Koran is positive about Israelites,<sup>48</sup> and since Divekar had declared that he was an Israelite and not a Jew, Tipu Sultan's mother took mercy upon him and requested that he and his soldiers be set free.

### Parallelism with the biblical story of Joseph

Of particular interest is the parallelism between the Divekar oral narrative and the Old Testament story of Joseph recounted in the Book of Genesis. The Divekar story is narrated by the Bene Israel with bated breath, reminiscent of the way that they relate their favourite Old Testament story of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:7–20). The Joseph story is also the Bene Israel's most popular *kirtan* (devotional song), called *Yosefache git* ('Joseph songs'), enacted on theatrical and communal occasions to this day.<sup>49</sup> The *kirtan* was adopted by the Bene Israel at some time at the end of the eighteenth century, at the same time that the Divekar narrative was emerging. During the nineteenth century, the genre gained in popularity and consisted of the presentation of Bible stories composed in Marathi verse, the vernacular of the Bene Israel, and sung to Hindu tunes by the *kirtankar* (the singer of devotional songs) with musical accompaniment. Although the Protestant missionaries had little success in converting the Bene Israel to Christianity, their unintentional role in fostering a rapprochement with mainstream Judaism should be noted; they translated the Bible into Marathi, and made Old Testament texts available to the Bene Israel. The *kirtan*, which was usually a Hindu genre, thus emerged for the Bene Israel as a didactic tool to teach and remember the biblical stories. The Joseph songs include the lyrical *Maazha Yosef* ('My Joseph') in which the *kirtankar* mournfully narrates that Joseph has gone, and that he was very beautiful, young and clever. 'Somebody, please tell me to search for his brothers', goes the song.<sup>50</sup>

The resemblance between Divekar and the story of Joseph is remarkable. Divekar, like Joseph, disappears, and he, too, is supposed to be with his brothers. He is thrown into jail like Joseph, where he encounters Tipu's mother, in a similar manner to the way Joseph, languishing in prison, meets the wife of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, and the representative of another religion. Tipu Sultan's mother in the Bene Israel narrative is unnamed like Potiphar's wife, who is also not given a name in the Bible; both are attached to important men. It is also notable that the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is popular in Islamic cultures and literature throughout the sub-continent (in Persian and Arabic, as well as in later Jewish medieval sources influenced by Islam), under the title Yusuf-o-Zulaikha (or Yusuf-Zulaikha), and was therefore familiar to the Bene Israel's Muslim neighbours.

Like Joseph, who 'was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon' (Genesis 39:6), the Bene Israel narrate that Divekar was good-looking and hint that Tipu Sultan's mother was attracted physically to this handsome man. The men and women in both stories belonged to different races, and to different religions. In the case of Joseph,

<sup>48</sup>To this day, Muslims safeguard the Jewish places of worship in India, and look after the Jewish cemeteries, even after they were disbanded.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. A. Schultz, 'The Afterlives of Publishing', *Acta Musicologica*, 88 (2016), 74.

<sup>50</sup>A transcription and translation of the Joseph *kirtan* text appears in *Eliyahoo Hanabee* (Tel Aviv, 1997), BTR 0101, 7 (introductions by S. Weil and S. Manasseh).

Potiphar's wife tried to sleep with him and then accused him of sexual harassment, whereas in the case of Divekar, things never went so far. A feminist reading of the Potiphar incident, which is applicable to the Divekar story, suggests that the story revolves around a woman, who is trying to assert herself and gain agency, thereby overcoming her subaltern position. The female, who in the final analysis is owned by a male whatever her rank, makes her independent choices, and, at the same time, abuses her position of power.<sup>51</sup> In the Divekar story, the intervention of the Begum places two men in the balance, the prisoner and her son, the ruler; it decides the fate of the prisoner and his co-religionists, and questions the judgement of the mighty Tipu Sultan. In the Joseph story, the role of Potiphar's wife threatens to challenge the status differential between the prisoner and her powerful husband. The outcome, both in the Divekar and in the Joseph stories, is that through the mediation of a woman, two previously downtrodden men became leaders; both, subsequently, enjoyed freedom and economic prosperity. The major theme of both narratives can be analysed in terms of binary oppositions, cutting across gender (female-male), religion (Muslim/pagan-Jewish/Bene Israel), race ('white'-'coloured') and class (high-low) and status (royalty-captive). Joseph, the male, is contrasted to Potiphar's wife; he observes a different religion from her; he is a member of a different people; as a prisoner, he is low class. Divekar, the man, stands in opposition to Fatima, the woman. Judaism is compared to another world religion, Islam. A high-class Muslim stands in contradistinction to an Indian officer serving in the British East India Company. Finally, the status of a lowly prisoner stands in opposition to a high-ranking queen mother.

### Who actually released Divekar?

The contemporary oral narratives that I have collected align well with the Bene Israel's own chronicles and texts,<sup>52</sup> which attribute Divekar's release to the Begum. The most famous of the Bene Israel 'native' historians is Haeem Samuel Kehimkar, whose manuscript was completed in 1897 in Bombay, but published posthumously by the Sanskrit scholar Dr Immanuel Olswanger in Tel Aviv in 1937.<sup>53</sup> He endorsed the Divekar narrative, which is very similar to the story Bene Israel narrate today, as follows:

During the reign of Tipoo Sultan and the prosperity of the East India Company, that is, during the Second Mysore War (1780-4), several Bene Israel, who had enlisted in the service of the Honorable Company, were taken captives by Tipoo's army, and would have been put to the sword had they declared themselves *Yahudim* (Jews). They were released in consequence of Tippoo's mother having begged of her son to spare the lives of the 'Bene-Israel' so much talked of in the Koran, and whom she had never had the opportunity of seeing in India.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup>J. McKinlay, 'Potiphar's Wife in Conversation', *Feminist Theology*, 4 (1995), 69-80.

<sup>52</sup>This is similar to the Jewish Oral Law, which is a commentary and legal interpretation of the statutes on the Torah, but was in fact written down after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE by Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, in a period in history when he feared that they might forget the oral word.

<sup>53</sup>Kehimkar, *History*.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

Another native written version of the same narrative can be found in a pamphlet written by A. S. Shapurkar, a prominent member of the Bene Israel community, in 1927. According to this version, after Divekar and his fellow prisoners were interrogated about their religion in a *darbar* (Urdu: court session), they were given the choice of conversion to Islam, or death. When Tipu's mother heard that they said they were Bene Israel, she shouted out from behind the purdah screen that the Children of Israel were honoured in the Koran and should be released.<sup>55</sup>

The oral narrative, then, and indeed the communal narratives that have been written down in their wake by 'native' Bene Israel historians, attribute Divekar's release to Tipu Sultan's mother.<sup>56</sup> However, other sources – both colonial and Cochin Jewish – have claimed credit for the release of the prisoners held by Tipu Sultan, and do not mention the Begum.

An 1829 letter written in French, by the Comtesse de Rollat in Pasri, to Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington, mentions that when her father, General Conway, was governor of the French establishment in India in 1788, he paid a large sum of money to Tipu Sultan to secure the release of British prisoners, in lieu of a handsome pension due to commence in 1812, but it was never received.<sup>57</sup> The Duke of Wellington answered that there was no record either of the actions of General Conway in 1788 or of the promise of a pension.<sup>58</sup>

An examination of British colonial documents leads to the conclusion that Divekar returned to Bombay in 1786, but subsequently re-enlisted in the East India Company's army, returning to Bombay only in 1792. This turn of events was noticed by Kehimkar, as follows:

The records that would throw light on the war services of this able officer can nowhere be traced, with the exception of a warrant issued under date 4 July 1791 at Tellicherry by Major General Abercromby, Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's and the Honourable Company's forces on the coast of Malabar, appointing him President of a court martial.<sup>59</sup>

It transpires that in 1791, the Bombay Sixth Battalion, in which Divekar served as Commandant, was indeed in Tellicherry, only 140 miles north of Cochin. A diary entry by Macquarie attests to the fact that Abercromby and his staff set up headquarters at Tellicherry during the monsoons, and the army was sent to different cantonments: the Bombay Sixth Battalion rested at Billiapatam. 'Thus ended our Campaign!', he wrote

<sup>55</sup>A. S. Shapurkar, *Samaji Hassaji Divekar, who built the Gate of Mercy Synagogue in Bombay in 1796* (Bombay, 1927) (in Marathi), cited in Shirley Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel* (Berkeley, 1989), 317. During fieldwork in India in the 1980s, I used to stay with Mr A. S. Shapurkar in Bombay near the synagogue.

<sup>56</sup>Recently, the story of the Divekars has been revived in a book and in a play by Eliaz Reuben-Dandeker, an eighth-generation descendant of Samuel Ezekiel Divekar. Eliaz Dandeker, *The Different Branch: The Story of the Descendants of Dada Kammodan Divekar* (Tel Aviv, 2016); Eliaz Dandeker, *Kol Bene Israel (The Voice of the Bene Israel)* (Mumbai, 2021), 24–6.

<sup>57</sup>Letter from Comtesse de Rollat to Arthur Wellesley. *Wellington Archive Southampton*, 17 Apr. 1829. MS61/WP1/1010/24.

<sup>58</sup>Letter from Arthur Wellesley to Comtesse de Rollat. *Wellington Archive Southampton*, 17 Apr. 1829. MS61/WP1/1010/24.

<sup>59</sup>Kehimkar, *History*, 190–1.

on 7 June 1791.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, mention of a court martial presided over by Major Hay Macdowall, a British officer of the 73rd Regiment, by the Officers of the Regiment at Tellicherry, who brought an unworthy officer to the court martial, can be found in an entry in a diary for 20 July 1791.<sup>61</sup> The Indian non-commissioned officers and the sepoy were returned to Bombay in 1792.

A different source claiming credit for the release of Divekar and his co-religionists comes from Cochin Jewish chronicles and letters, stating that a member of the Rahabi family may have intervened on Divekar's behalf. The man who taught the Bene Israel about Judaism in the oral narrative cited above could have been David Rahabi (1646–1726), who belonged to the Paradesi Cochin Jewish community, thereby linking two Bene Israel narratives: the advent of a man from 'outside' who first introduced Jewish customs, and the Divekar narrative. David Rahabi was the son of Ezekiel Rahabi, who first arrived in Cochin in 1646 from Syria, and became the leader of the Paradesi community.<sup>62</sup> In 1686, when Moses Pereyra de Paiva of Amsterdam, the head of a commission of Amsterdam Portuguese Jews, visited Cochin, he singled out David Rahabi as one of the wealthiest merchants in Cochin, 'worth more than 20,000 pezos'.<sup>63</sup> His son, Ezekiel Rahabi (1694–1771), was the principal merchant of the Dutch East India Company, and signed his business deals in Hebrew. Ezekiel's son was also called David Rahabi (1721–91), and it is equally possible that this latter David Rahabi was the foreigner who taught the Bene Israel about the Jewish festivals and rites as they are observed in other Jewish communities in the world. It is known that he engaged in trade and travelled extensively, and he could well have encountered the Bene Israel non-commissioned officers in the British army taken captive by Tipu Sultan in battle.

Fischel has documented that an independent Jewish trader, Isaac Surgun of Calicut and Cochin, had dealings with Haidar Ali, Tipu Sultan's father, and later with Tipu Sultan himself, through the Dutch East India Company.<sup>64</sup> It is known that Surgun had acted as a mediator between the Cochin Jewish Rahabi family and the Mysore courts in 1766. In 1775, he and one of the Rahabis were received in great style at Seringapatam, bearing lavish gifts for Haidar Ali.<sup>65</sup> It is probable that Ezekiel Rahabi, or perhaps his son David Rahabi, learned of the Bene Israel prisoners at the Nawab's camp, and may have requested Divekar and his co-religionists' release.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup>L. Macquarie, *Journal*, 1 (15 Dec. 1787–24 March 1792), ML Ref: A768, pp.309–11. <https://www.mq.edu.au/macquarie-archive/lema/1791/1791june.html>.

<sup>61</sup>There is no specific mention of Divekar, and the sepoy are not named in the diary. <https://www.mq.edu.au/macquarie-archive/lema/1791/1791july.html>.

<sup>62</sup>W. Fischel, 'Cochin in Jewish History', *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 30 (1962), 45.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>64</sup>W. Fischel, 'The Jewish Merchant-Diplomat Isaac Surgun and the Dutch Mysore War Conflict 1765–1791', *Revue des études juives*, 126 (1967), 27–53.

<sup>65</sup>Sargon's subsequent 1788 meeting with Tipu Sultan without the Rahabis was less of a success. *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>There is often a confusion between the earlier David Rahabi and the later one (grandfather and grandson with the same name), and a conflation of events, such that the date of Divekar's release mentioned in the chronicles (1786 and not 1766) does not tally with all the information. Basing her account on a manuscript 'of the House of Rahabi', Joseph reaches a similar conclusion. B. Joseph, 'Samaji's Synagogue: Tales and Traditions', in *Jews in India*, ed. T. Timberg (Delhi, 1986), 361–6.

According to a very plausible argument by Fischel, in which he points to the conflation of history in oral narratives, David Rahabi, was none other than the eighteenth-century figure of David Rahabi of Cochin, the son of Ezekiel Rahabi, who had 'discovered' the Bene Israel at the time of Samuel Ezekiel Divekar: a tradition attributing his arrival to a distant past was erroneous.<sup>67</sup>

It is notable that Divekar is mentioned by name in a letter sent by a member of the Rahabi family in 1768 during the period of the colonialisation of Cochin by the Dutch East India Company. Ezekiel Rahabi wrote to the Dutch banker Tobias Boas as follows: 'Samuel Divenkar (sic) approached the Rahabi brothers and begged for their intervention.'<sup>68</sup> In this letter, Divekar is said to have returned with Rahabi to Cochin, where the Bene Israel Commandant was amazed at the beauty of the Paradesi synagogue and vowed to build one for his own community. This account would neutralise the role of Tipu Sultan's mother in releasing Divekar from prison, and also give credence to the narrative that Divekar went straight to Cochin after his release, and not to Bombay.

### The synagogue and the Torah scroll

While the Bene Israel oral narrative tells that Divekar brought a Torah scroll from Cochin to the first Bombay synagogue – a synagogue without a Torah is almost a contradiction in terms – once again, Bene Israel oral traditions do not appear to be borne out by non-native historical accounts. In 1808, the missionary Rev. Claudius Buchanan visited the Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay, 'where he had an opportunity of meeting with some very intelligent men of the Jewish nation'.<sup>69</sup> They told him that, if he would accompany them to the Bazaar in the suburb outside the city walls of Bombay,

he would find a Synagogue without a *Sepher Torah*, or Book of the Law. He did so and found it to be the case. The Minister and a few of the Jews assembled, and shewed him their Synagogue, in which there were some loose leaves of prayers in manuscript, but no book of the Law. The Author did not understand that they disapproved of the Law; but they had no copy of it. They seemed to have little knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures or history.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup>W. Fischel, 'Bombay in Jewish History', *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 38–9 (1970–1), 141.

<sup>68</sup>S. S. Koder, 'A Hebrew Letter of 1768', *Journal of the Rama Varma Archaeological Society*, 15 (1949), 1–6. This letter was first published in Hebrew by N. H. Wesseley, *Ham'assef*, vi (Koenigsberg and Berlin, 1790), 129–60 and 257–76. In the letter, Rahabi mentions that 'there are Jews called Bene Israel in Maratha and Mogul areas where Bene Israel make oil, some are soldiers; they know nothing but the Shem'a and keep the Shabbat'.

<sup>69</sup>Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia* (Boston, 1811), 184. This pagination is from the second out of twelve editions of his book <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044079375119&view=1up&seq=7&skin=2021>. My gratitude to Frank Bowles, Archivist at Cambridge University Library, who facilitated my viewing Torah scrolls from Cochin, and other manuscripts deposited there by Buchanan in 1808, during the period when I was a visiting scholar in the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge in 2021.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.



Twenty years later, when Rabbi David d'Beth Hillel visited Bombay, there still was no Torah scroll in the synagogue. He wrote:

There was no synagogue before but some years ago a fine synagogue was built by one of them named Samuel who was Captain in the Honorable Company's Army. He was a very rich man and childless, therefore he caused this synagogue to be built with many houses round it, the rent of which is to be appropriated for sundry expenses of the synagogue. It is denominated Mesgad Beney Israeyl, it is situated at Barcoot, not far from the custom house. There is no manuscript.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, the first Torah scroll on parchment obtained by the Bene Israel in Bombay originated in Aden, and was written by Yemenite Jewish scribes. It was donated by Abraham Isaac (Issaji) Galsulkar in 1844 to the second Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay, the 'New Synagogue', known as Sha'are Rason Synagogue.<sup>72</sup>

The puzzle thickens concerning the year Divekar brought a Torah to Bombay, and if he did at all, with the discovery of the gravestone of Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, uncovered in the Cochin Jewish cemetery on J. J. Road near St Teresa's College in the city of Ernakulam, Kerala, which this author saw *in situ*. The tombstone, transferred by a Paradesi Jew from Mattancherry, Cochin, over a decade ago to the Catholic Art Museum, states that on the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, 5557 (14 December 1796),<sup>73</sup> Divekar died in Cochin, in the year that he had established the Gate of Mercy Synagogue, and not before.<sup>74</sup>

The old Cochin Jewish cemetery in Ernakulam belongs to the Malabar ('Black') Jews, while Divekar was apparently a guest of the Rahabi family belonging to the Paradesi ('White') Jews. Divekar evidently died in Cochin unexpectedly, and the Cochin Jews were caught off guard. Indeed, the 1927 booklet on the Gate of Mercy Synagogue mentioned above recounts that Divekar took a Torah scroll from Cochin, and was about to embark for Bombay. 'All of a sudden he fell sick and within two days of illness Samaji Divekar died in Cochin.'<sup>75</sup> It can only be assumed that when Divekar died suddenly, the Paradesi refused to bury him in their grounds, in the same way that they prohibited Malabar Cochin Jews from being buried with them in their own cemeteries. The Paradesi aimed at preserving their 'purity' vis-à-vis their darker-skinned co-religionists, and since there were doubts about the 'Jewishness' of the Bene Israel, Divekar was buried in the Malabar Jews' cemetery. On this occasion, mercy was not extended to Divekar, and he was not spared. Nevertheless, his deliverance at the

<sup>71</sup>David de Beth Hillel, *Travels of David de Beth Hillel* (Madras, 1832), 134.

<sup>72</sup>L. M. Benjamin, Lisa-Mazal, *The Remnants of Israel who were in the Country of Ophir* (Jerusalem, 2008).

<sup>73</sup>Facebook and internet sites state that Divekar died in 1797, but this is incorrect. The Jewish New Year occurs around September or October, according to the lunar calendar. Since Divekar died in December, the new Gregorian year had not yet started, and the correct year written on the gravestone in Hebrew works out as 1796.

<sup>74</sup>D. S. Sassoon, *Ohel David*, ii (Oxford, 1932), 574–5. Today, the cemetery is derelict, but Divekar's grave is mentioned here: <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/300517/jewish-cemetery-now-a-dumpyard.html>.

<sup>75</sup>Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel*, 317.

hands of the mother of Tipu Sultan still lives on in Bene Israel oral narratives preserving communal memory in which a Muslim woman showed mercy to an Indian non-commissioned officer, which the Gate of Mercy Synagogue commemorates.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to reconstruct the biography and narrative of a hitherto obscure figure, Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, who belonged to a marginalised minority, the Bene Israel Indian Jews. The Bene Israel can be considered 'subalterns', in that they had no access to power and their voice was unheard. These 'Children of Israel', who claim that they were originally members of the 'lost' Israelite tribe of Zebulun, did not belong to the dominant society in India, and were recorded by the British in their archives and censuses as 'Israel caste'.

For years, the story of Samuel Ezekiel Divekar remained in the realm of legend, told and retold within a minuscule Indian minority group. However, today, an examination of colonial and non-native sources can corroborate the existence of the Bene Israel Commandant and his release, and provide evidence of synchronicity, even if the intervention of Tipu Sultan's wife cannot yet be confirmed by contemporary official records. While members of a minority group give credit to the powers of a royal woman behind a *purdah*, colonial histories – as well as Cochin *Paradesi* ('White') annals – exclude her from their letters, diaries and narratives. In the reports written by British (and French) soldiers, the role of an Indian woman in deciding the fate of a very small ethnic minority has gone unnoticed, whereas within the marginalised group the role of a powerful female is central. In colonial history, even a high-ranking woman could reflect subaltern contiguities, reinforcing Lal's observations about the structural role of powerful women in politics.<sup>76</sup> In the same way that Roshani Begum, who encouraged the Vellore Mutiny of 1806, was one of the most influential women in Tipu Sultan's inner court, Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa was not a suppressed voiceless woman; and yet her role beyond ethnic and religious boundaries in utilising domestic powers in order to contest masculine royal definitions of ethnicity has hitherto gone unrecorded. At least in the memory of community members, the action of a single woman indirectly changed the community's history forever. In the same way, Potiphar's wife, who released Joseph in the popular biblical story, is still celebrated by the Bene Israel in India and in Israel, and memorialised in song and performance through the *kirtan*. The story of the trials and bravery of Joseph in Egypt and his involvement with a woman, who was also a member of a different religion and of higher status, has undoubtedly become the most popular biblical story among the Bene Israel.

It would be hasty to surmise why the discrepancy exists between communal narratives and colonial reports. Perhaps one day, a record of the heroic deed of Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa in saving Divekar will be found, or, alternatively, her brave act will be forgotten forever. Meanwhile, one could point out that from the nineteenth century on, Bene Israel men and women alike proudly supported powerful women in their own community. Many of these educated Bene Israel women, who qualified as doctors, social workers or authors, did not marry, since they could not find equally

<sup>76</sup>Lal, *Domesticity*.

educated Bene Israel males, and marrying out of one's *jati* (caste-like group) could not be entertained.<sup>77</sup>

According to native Bene Israel oral history, the compassion displayed by Tipu Sultan's mother to Divekar was the catalyst for the establishment of the first Jewish synagogue in Bombay, and the deliverance granted to a Bene Israel soldier, who believed in a monotheistic God in a polytheistic society. A synagogue can only be established if a *minyan* (quorum) of ten males is present. The first Bene Israel who arrived in Bombay in 1760 was a member of the Awaskar family from the Konkan village of Awas and was known as 'Mombaikar'.<sup>78</sup> The synagogue attests to the fact that there were at least ten families in Bombay of Bene Israel origin in the thriving metropolis at the end of the eighteenth century. Within 150 years, the majority of Bene Israel had moved to Bombay, while other Bene Israel served in the British military and in auxiliary occupations in places as far afield as Karachi, Rangoon and Aden, where the Bene Israel established their own communities and synagogues.

The inscription on a marble slab at the entrance to the Gate of Mercy Synagogue, located today in the predominantly Muslim-populated Mandvi quarter of Bombay in Samuel Street, which was previously called Samaji Street named after Samuel Divekar, reads as follows: 'This synagogue was built by Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, Commandant Sixth Battalion 1796 A.D., which being smaller was enlarged and re-erected at the expense of the Bene-Israel community. Dedicated on the 24th March 1860'. This inscription shows that by the mid-nineteenth century, the Bene Israel were firmly aligned with Judaism as Jews, and prayed in a synagogue with a Torah scroll. Furthermore, in 1919, a meeting of the whole congregation of the Gate of Mercy Synagogue voted in favour of setting up an independent homeland in Palestine.<sup>79</sup> In time, after Indian independence, the vast majority of the Bene Israel would eventually opt to live in Israel.

In conclusion, by reviewing subaltern narratives reiterated by members of minority communities, who retain neither agency nor dominance in society, and comparing them to written more conventional sources, the historian can reflect upon the validity and authenticity of key figures and events in oral narratives. In the past, historians have been wary of using oral history sources, especially when they relate to a distant past. Nonetheless, as the analysis of the Divekar narrative has shown, these oral sources can be corroborated by other written sources, cross-checked and validated. The analysis of oral narratives can thus enrich our understanding of history by regarding subaltern literature and orality as serious material for study, and by giving voice to marginalised groups and suppressed narratives about gender.

**Acknowledgements.** The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers and editor of the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* for their exceptionally helpful comments.

<sup>77</sup>Some of these women have been recorded by J. Roland, 'The Contributions of the Jews of India', in *India's Jewish Heritage*, ed. Weil, 111–21.

<sup>78</sup>Kehimkar, *History*, 78.

<sup>79</sup>Joan Roland, *Jews in British India* (Hanover and London, 1989), 146.

**Cite this article:** Shalva Weil, 'An Indian Jewish Commandant and a Muslim Begum', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2024), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440124000197>