

# **Shirei Hodu**

## **Celebrating the Jewish Saga of India**

### **International Conference, Exhibition and Cultural Festival at IGNCA**

**6-7 February 2017**

#### **Concept Note**

Jewish connection with India goes back to ancient times. Trade, lexical borrowings in Biblical Hebrew from Indian languages, travelogues of explorers and oral traditions of local communities speak of very early connections. The arrival and growth of religions such as Judaism in India and their co-existence with several other religions speak of the possibility of human societies to be open and adaptable to different cultures and times. The older communities, the Bene Israel Jews of Maharashtra and the Cochin Jews of Kerala, and the relatively newer communities of Baghdadi Jews of Mumbai and Kolkata have left everlasting imprints in India's cultural landscape.

Though the size of the Jewish population in India has always been very small, the Jewish existence in this soil has been remarkable for the religious freedom enjoyed here and the distinct traditions developed within, over centuries, contributing much diversity to the world Jewry. Interestingly today, the two usages of the Hebrew word Hodu, one referring to "India" and another one referring to "Praise God", are often invoked together to commemorate one of the most benevolent Jewish diasporas of all times.

Apart from the three established groups of Indian Jewry, viz., the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews and the Baghdadis, there were also European Jews, who had arrived in India from countries like Germany, Austria and Poland during World War II and who lived in the cities of Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai. First half of the twentieth century also saw arrival of Jews from Persia, Bukhara and Afghanistan. During their brief period of stay in India, they joined the Baghdadi Indian Jews in social and religious activities and also contributed in individual capacities through various professions and creative endeavors. There are still emerging communities in India today, such as the Bene Ephraim and the Bene Menashe who have rediscovered their own senses of Jewish identities in recent times. A rich variety of legends, tales, rituals, festivals, synagogues, songs, costumes and cuisine bear testimony to these specific strands of Judaism.

Various strands of Jewish thought and experiences, brought in by Jews from different parts of the world have contributed to the diverse Jewish cultural heritage of India. There have been illustrious families of businessmen, Indian nationalists, politicians, physicians, teachers, artists and writers who have made several contributions to the social and cultural life of the country. The Sassoons of Bombay, the Ezras of Calcutta and the Koders of Cochin have played a great role in the economy and industry. Rueben Brothers of Baghdadi Indian Jewish origin have established themselves as leading businessmen and philanthropists in the U.K today. Poet Nissim Ezekiel, author Ruby Daniel, dancer Leela Samson, writer and sculptor Esther David, actresses like Nadia and Sulochana and Lawyer and Social reformer A.B Salem, to name a few, are among the many distinguished personalities and popular figures.

While contemporary artists of Indian Jewish origin like sculptor Anish Kapur and artist Jerry Judah live and work in the U.K and painter Siona Benjamin in the U.S, several senior artists like Carmel Berkson from the U.S, Fredda Brilliant of Polish origin who spent time in India and Odissi dancer Sharon Lowen, who is based in Delhi have made significant contributions to the field of Indian arts. Israel-born Moshe Safdie and American architect Joseph A Stein contributed to the field of urban architecture in India. French artist Mirra Alfassa Richard, known as the Mother, was a great mystic who worked with the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo.

Synagogues in India have been long-standing symbols of confluence of traditions. The Jewish faith and local artistry have combined to create wonderful cultural monuments, the architecture of which are celebrated in the Indian Jewish songs.

International migrations, particularly to Israel, have further reduced the number of Jews in India to about 5,000 whereas in Israel, the Jewish population of Indian origin have grown to about 80,000.

The IGNSA program Shirei Hodu, literally the Songs of India, celebrates this extraordinary cultural heritage, revisiting age-old connections and interactions between cultures and upholding the ideal of cultural diversity and co-existence that are ever relevant to human existence. The program consists of an International Conference, Exhibition and Cultural Festival.