

'HEAT AND DUST'

Between Israel and India

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Many years and countless visits to India have passed from the time I first crossed the border from Nepal into Bihar in June 1985, but my first day in India is still unforgettable. A few minutes after my passport was stamped I was invited by three sadhus to join them. I immediately realised that India and its culture were going to be part of my life for many years to come. Today, as an academic and historian of modern India, focusing on Gandhi, Tagore, and the cultural and political encounters between India and the Jewish and Zionist worlds, I no longer subscribe to the 'orientalist', 'spiritual' and 'exotic' image of India, which I had then.

This first extensive trip to India is what led me to study photography in Jerusalem, which resulted in numerous subsequent visits on photo assignments, as a tour guide, and to collect material for articles that I published, most of which were popular pieces dealing with India and its culture. I am ashamed to admit that I cannot bear to read some of those stereotypical articles today. The first article I published was about the Kumbh Mela in 1989, at which time only a few people in Israel, if any, had heard of it.

I have been asked countless times why I went to India. Well, like many other Israelis, I decided to go on the 'big post-military-service trip'. The reason for choosing the East was quite simple: my older brother travelled to South America, which was then the preferred destination for Israelis. And, obviously, who wants to imitate his big brother...? At that time, it was almost impossible for Israelis to get a tourist visa to India because of India's position as the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement and 'cold'—some would

say even hostile—attitude to Israel. Today, this seems strange, even absurd, on account of the excellent relations between the two countries, but at that time only a handful of Israelis travelled to India. Luckily, I held Canadian citizenship because of my father's tragic life story, so obtaining a visa to India was not a problem.

In many ways, I can say that my Indian journey is parallel to the development of relations between India and Israel. I started as a budget backpacker, continued as a writer and later became an academic researcher focusing on India. When I first crossed the border into India, it was impossible then to imagine the warm, natural relations prevalent today between the two countries. These days, it is almost impossible to imagine that once the attitude was quite the opposite, and that there had been 40 years of political disconnect.

The long-awaited diplomatic relations were eventually established in 1992, a milestone which will be marked in 2022 as a historical event. Since 1992, hundreds of thousands of Israelis have visited India, and they are certain to return post-COVID. As a result, such Indian cultural expressions as yoga, meditation, music, dance, and Hindu and Buddhist philosophy have had a growing influence on Israeli culture and society. But beyond the interest generated by tourism, one can identify the lines of similarity in history and culture. The two countries gained independence in parallel—India, in 1947; Israel, in 1948—both following a struggle against the British. Perhaps the most prominent similarity is that both cultures, Indian and Jewish, have an ancient history. They have preserved cultural continuity for thousands of years; yet they continue to develop in today's world.

The exhibition on which this essay is based attempts to investigate how artists, drawing on a wide range of media, use their work to represent hidden and revealed aspects of India and its culture. Most of the artists are Israeli; some are descendants of Jewish communities in India who live in Israel or the United States. Others are Israelis who have travelled in India for varying periods of time; and yet others live there permanently. Yet another group of artists is Indian, those who live, or have lived, in Israel for long periods.

The exhibition's works reflect several unifying themes—sometimes concealed, sometimes revealed. The artists confront issues of identity and belonging—a duality of 'here' and 'there'. They do so by suggesting terms, questions, responses and original

interpretations that have filtered into Israeli culture from India.

For this article, I chose a number of the exhibition's works which represent a few themes and perspectives—the national Zionist perspective, Biblical sources, questions of immigration and identity, and travelling under India's influence.

NATIONAL ZIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Senior multimedia artist Motti Mizrachi (b. 1946) creates politically engaged conceptual works that combine sculpture, video, photography, public art and performance. Disabled since childhood, Mizrachi uses humour and self-irony with an emphasis on the flaws and pleasures of the human body, while examining the oppression and control of the strong over the weak, both socially and politically. Mizrachi explains that, like many Israelis, he grew up admiring the myth of the Zionist Pioneer who lived on a kibbutz (a cooperative agricultural settlement, which played an important role in the development of Jewish settlements in Palestine, and later in the establishment of the state in Israel). His statue, 'The Pioneer', which rose to a height of six metres, was exhibited at the Venice Biennale (1988) and represents the concept that many ideologies begin with beautiful, pure and naive aims, but, with time, reach their 'villainousness' and 'dry up'. Mizrachi chose to represent the 'omnipotent' Zionist Pioneer—'being bigger than life' as resembling Lord Shiva, the Creator, but also the Destroyer. He did so by using humour as well as sarcasm.

Liat Livni (b. 1979), who was never in India, was invited in 2016 to hold her first solo exhibition, 'Lotus in the Backyard', at The Wilfrid Israel Museum of Asian Art. Located in Kibbutz Hazorea, the museum's collection of Near and Far Eastern art was bequeathed to the kibbutz by Wilfrid Israel (1899–1943), friend and patron of its young founders who escaped Nazi Germany. Israel was the last heir of a Berlin Jewish business dynasty and an ardent pacifist in his youth, who was in contact with Mahatma Gandhi. He became one of the leading figures in the rescue of Jewish children from Nazi persecution before and during WWII. Wilfrid died when his plane was shot down by the German air force. Unfortunately, in 2020, in one of the most scandalous art thefts in Israel, some 30 rare works from Wilfrid Israel's collection were stolen from the museum. They have not yet been found.

BIBLICAL SOURCES

Andi Arnovitz (b. 1959) is an American–Israeli conceptual artist who chooses to deal with Vashti as a feminist icon. She describes her work as a ‘visual midrash’. (Midrash is a mode of interpretation that engages with the words of the text, going both behind and beyond the text as well.) Arnovitz is influenced by Persian and Moghul art, but she represents Vashti as a ‘film goddess’ and as Kali. In her rendering, Vashti–Kali is a warrior, a woman both beautiful and terrible.

IDENTITY AND IMMIGRATION

Achia Anzi (b. 1979) is an Israel-born artist who has been residing in New Delhi with his wife and children for over a decade. He uses biblical verse on Cain as a motto for his work: ‘And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the Land of Nod, on the east of Eden’ (Genesis 4:16). The Land Nod, in its biblical meaning, is the land of wandering and punishment. And it is there that Cain had to wander after murdering his brother, Abel. Anzi built an Indian milestone, with the Hebrew word ‘Makom’ (place, space, but also position–place) written on it in Hindi letters. For Anzi, the eternal immigrant might feel like one who carries Cain’s mark. He is swept into a twilight zone—The Land of Nod, a sleepy province of dreams, the in-between space of migration.

This elusive state of living between cultures, societies and habitats also appears in the work of Bengali artist Chanchal Banga (b. 1971), who has been living in Tel Aviv with his Israeli wife and children for the last 20 years. Banga came to Israel as a volunteer on a kibbutz and continued his art studies in Israel. He painted an *alpana*, the traditional Bengali decorative–religious element, on a large canvas, but added a drawing of the Rose of Jericho (*Anastatica hierochuntica*), which is known as the ‘resurrection plant’, and has religious significance in Christianity. This work reflects the move from culture to culture, attempting to communicate with the new landscape and asking to be admitted to the new land, while preserving Indian–Bengali roots. Both Anzi and Banga focus on immigration and identity dilemmas in their new ‘chosen land’, with all their implications and difficulties.

Reuma Moses (b. 1989), who immigrated to Israel from Mumbai, belongs to the Bene Israel community in Mumbai. She was born in Israel and has never visited India. For her final art

project, she dealt for the first time with her Indian–Jewish roots. She describes it 'as a challenge. As a youngster, I felt ashamed of my Indian–Jewish background, my father who mixed Marathi and English words in his Hebrew speech, my clothes, and the Indian music played in our home'. Moses created a textile 'pocketbook', which tells her family's immigration story and her childhood experiences and memories from a personal, emotional perspective. The six-metre textile object is made of various objects found at home such as fabric, embroidery thread, blueprint photos from the family's photo albums, and silk screen printing.

Another artist who has just recently started the process of discovering his Indian roots is Eyal Segal (b. 1982). Segal's mother came from Kochi's Jewish community. In Israel, she married his father, a descendant of a Jewish family that escaped Nazi Germany in 1933. Segal explores the roots and origin of memory. He created a series of paintings with the traditional Japanese *gyotaku* method of printing fish. Over time, he discovered that his grandfather was a fisherman in Kochi, which pieced together a puzzle he was trying to solve.

In another video installation, 'Turgor' (2014), Segal dipped his head into a water-filled aquarium using a yoga handstand, holding his breath for as long as possible under water. The video was shot in Munster, Germany, his grandmother's hometown before she escaped Nazi persecution. He explains that the idea was to awaken a memory during a process of meditation and yoga practice. Although Segal has not yet been to India, he feels it is part of his DNA.

TRAVELLING UNDER INDIA'S INFLUENCE

Maya Smira (b. 1983) is a multidisciplinary artist whose creative process is deeply rooted in larger global and social issues and events, and is influenced by her constant travels around the world. Her recent solo exhibition was mostly produced in India. Like many Israelis, she began her Indian travels after completing military service. Involving herself with dance choreography, she became increasingly intrigued by Indian classical dancers. Her video installation is composed of various classical Indian dance postures performed by her in front of the camera. Later, they combine into a colourful circular motion—Mandala.

I began this article with my Indian biography, which is parallel to the development of India–Israel relations. I would like to end it with my work dealing with my ‘Israeli–Indian Biography’ created for the exhibition. In 1992, I travelled extensively around the source of the Ganges for about half a year. At that time, I was toying with the idea of renouncing the world and becoming a sadhu. I can safely assume that this thought probably crossed the mind of some other travellers in India as well. I had spent many sleepless nights then, but was (luckily) too afraid to implement this idea. For this exhibition, I created a work based on a self-portrait I took at the source of the Ganges near Badrinath, using a rather complicated process of mixed media, looking back on that powerful but strange time in the Himalayas.



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