

## **Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives - ARTIST STATEMENTS**

1- Daniel Elijah Benjamin (Gadkar) Retired senior who lived in Pune.

I met Daniel at the Succath Shelomo synagogue in Pune India. On that Wednesday evening when he met me for a formal interview for my Fulbright project, Daniel wanted to pray first. He prayed alone in the synagogue, his voice echoing in the empty building. Daniel becomes for me a symbol of the vanishing Jewish community in India. Once a vibrant community, India now has less than 4000 Jews today. Most of the Jews from India have left to go to Israel, US and Canada. Daniel was one of the few in the community that kept his tradition alive. Daniel died shortly after I left India in 2011.

2- Sophie Judah Benjamin (Kasookar), Siona Benjamin Kruge, Rachel Kruge

My mother Sophie, a beautiful inspiring woman who all my life taught me the meaning of perseverance and meeting challenges. I photographed her, planning at first to just make a work about her singular presence, her strength hopefully would radiate through her eyes. Then in late November 2012 she suddenly passed away and I was inspired to do a triptych, including a self portrait and a portrait of my daughter Rachel. We three have always been connected and so I choose to show this by having her hair entwine with ours and create many sabbath lamps of hope and remembrance. She lit her sabbath lamp every friday when I was growing up. This flame stuck in my mind and now has become a become a symbol of hope in my paintings, that lets the brilliant color radiate in my work. The flame she lit seems to give me the power to create and has become the wind beneath my wings. Her Jewish spirituality was strong and she has instilled this in both me and her granddaughter Rachel. In Rachel's piece there are five generations of women from our family depicted. Rachel's tree of life abundant with pomegranates will hold this spirit alive.

3- Romiel Elkanah and Susan Moses (Bhonkar) Interior Designers in Mumbai

They took me to a beautifully decorated interior design office where they worked. Susan and Romiel owns and manages this design company and they have designed many five star hotels and offices all over India. Romiel explained to me how he had started with nothing and how they had slowly but surely got very successful with their very hard work. I depicted Susana and Romiel inspired by their keen sense of design. They sit on a chaise designed by them and I chose different elements from their interior design catalog to make up the composition for their piece. A thought bubble emphasizes the process of creation while the hebrew letter Aleph swirls out from the border of Susan's elegant sari.

4- Abner Satkiel (Bhastekar) Bollywood photographer

Abner was a prominent Bollywood photographer in Mumbai and during his productive career he has photographed many stars of tinseltown India. Innovative and very talented in his craft, Abner was trained in photography in the prestigious J J school of Art in Mumbai of which I too was a proud undergraduate student in painting. Abner lived among the Bollywood stars as he went to film shootings most of his career and his photos have been published in many magazines. He was instrumental in guiding me through Mumbai to meet some of my Jewish community members. Abner sadly passed away suddenly a year after I returned home to the US from my Fulbright fellowship. I am deeply indebted to his help and generosity during my stay there.

5- Eddna Samuel (Akshikar) Business woman and mother.

Eddna, is a young Jewish woman living in Mumbai. She owns and runs a printing company and is also a graphic designer. Meeting Eddna inspired me to make a mandala painting that radiated out a sense of her vibrant Jewishness, a feeling of achieving goals and the open blue sky. In this piece about this young woman I wanted to emphasize the value of achieving and overcoming hurdles through perseverance.

6-Diana Elijah (Pingle) Singer and song writer of Indian Jewish songs

Diana sings Indian Jewish songs in Marathi. It is amazing to hear lyrical songs about Jewish prophets like Moses, Abraham and Sarah sung in the local language of Maharashtra. This is the wonder of India, where all cultures live harmoniously and where Jews have lived for over 2000 years accepted and thriving. Diana's songs showcase this diversity and multicultural identities.

7- Leora Abraham (Sankar) Daughters-Casey, Meshi, and Mayan. Dancers

This lively dancing, artistic family was so enjoyable to spend time with during my Fulbright time in India. What struck me most about this talented group of young women was the fact that they were deeply rooted in Indian dance and culture and yet they were so proud of their Jewish identity. From dancing Bollywood to Israeli folk dance they are as diverse and multicultural as India has been through the ages. I think this family is such a great example of India's true diversity and a highlight to what I have tried to showcase in my Fulbright project.

8- Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar) Bene Israel community chef

Everyone calls her Mummun and the name I feel suits her well. She is a bubbly, sweet person who loves to feed everyone with her tasty Indian Jewish dishes. I followed Mummun around several times, recording and photographing her as she bustled around Jewish ceremonies, parties and gatherings making and serving her Jewish delicacies. Fried gharis, and puris stuffed with sweet coconut filling, sandaan a rice pancake, savory kosher coconut curries and specially prepared Bombay duck fish are some of the specialties Mummun creates. Although she looks like a many handed Indian cooking goddess in my photo/collage/ painting, she is also actually a menorah (the traditional Jewish candle stand lit during festivals) as from the many plates she holds up are the flames of strength of her steadfast belief. Around her is a saffron color with real turmeric spice mixed in with the paint, so you could smell the strong flavors of her cooking.

9- Karen Simon (Borgawkar) Indian Jewish (Bene Israel) Bride

Karen is the beautiful Indian Jewish bride. Her rich hennaed hands radiate inwards and her husband's prayer shawl (tallit) is wrapped around her. Karen told me that she likes to paint as a hobby in the traditional tribal Indian Warli style. I therefore used the Warli style to show some scenes from this young couple's life. The hands around her neck symbolize the Kohanim (Priestly) Jewish blessings given during any auspicious event like at a wedding.

10- Esther Sukkur (Belkar), Sukkur Enock, Queenie Sukkur Bene Israel family in Mumbai

I met with this family several times at the David Sassoon synagogue in Mumbai during my Fulbright time in India. Esther is a Jewish woman rooted in her identity and tradition. She

explained to me how important the keeping of this tradition and the Jewish customs were to her. She gave me a beautiful picture to create around her, her Jewishness was in her garden and the multi-religious India was respected but was definitely outside her walls. I therefore made a photo/collage/painting pointing this out, how Esther's strong monotheistic beliefs were in her garden and the rest of the multi diversity that India presented was on the other side of her walls, together yet separate.

11- Maayan Abraham (Shapurkar) Grand daughter of Samson Solomon

When I met Maayan I was struck by her simple and pure beauty. Her face could belong everywhere, she looked Indian, middle eastern and even a little european, or like a portrait from a Renaissance painting. Maayan has become the Mona Lisa of my project. Her timeless beauty reminds us that we must stop compartmentalizing and putting people into racial boxes and categories. Her face for me simply says Jewish, Indian and a citizen of this transcultural world. I represent her in this way, direct and confronting the viewer, challenging them to think otherwise.

12- General (Retired) Jack Jacob (and Pal Singh Gill his assistant)

General Jacob is one of the prominent Indian army heroes responsible for the formation of the country of Bangladesh. He worked for prominent leaders like Indira Gandhi and for well known military officers like Sam Manekshaw. When I interviewed him, General Jacob had many war stories to tell. Pal Singh Gill has been by his side working for many decades and I was fortunate enough to photograph these two lifelong friends together.

13- Mozel and Monica Moses (Pugaonkar) Mother and daughter.

Monica's father was the only Jewish fire fighter in the 2008 terrorist attack on the Taj Mahal hotel. I have represented water and fire as symbols of this incident around the portrait of this mother and daughter.

14- Molly (Milkha) Samuel David (Shahapurkar) Bene Israel Jew born in Burma.

Molly was originally from Burma and after her marriage she lived in Pune. She was a wife, mother and grandmother to her loving family. Molly remembers coming to India from Burma on the train and meeting her future husband there. She spent the rest of her life in India and told me how she observed her Jewishness with much joy and zeal. For example for Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) she prepared her family table with foods that had many meanings: Garlic leek and Beetroots for destruction of those wishing evil, Dates for praise to God, White pumpkin for forgiveness of one's sins, String beans for the unity of Israel, Fish for blessing and plenty, and a goat's head to symbolize Abraham's sacrifice. All these were laid out on her table and prayers were said for the meanings of each one of the foods. Molly's portrait inspired me to arrange her collage with the picture of her childhood home on her head rather like a oriental hat, with all the different foods she explained became decoration. Railway tracks she journeyed to India on became part of the design for her collage. A brilliant red became the predominant color. Molly's transcultural face shows that she could belong anywhere and defies the boundary we put around people coming from a certain place. Her wedding picture and the photo of one of her ancestors decorates the ornamental border around her.

#### 15- Daniel Rafael Joseph (Bhonkar) Shilpa Fisheries

I met Daniel at the Sassoon docks (now renamed Indira Gandhi docks) in Mumbai. It was an amazing and unusual experience. In huge rooms numerous people (mostly women) sat on the floor and were cleaning heaps of fresh fish which were then taken to be shipped out to restaurants and fish markets not only in Mumbai and around India but also internationally. Daniel literally runs a tight ship where he makes sure the freshest fish gets to its destination as soon as possible. I was overwhelmed by the smells and sights and he reminded me of how the Jewish people only ate fish with scales and not crustaceans, and showed me the most fascinating variety of fish from the Arabian sea nearby. I show platters of kosher fish with scales arranged in the composition. Daniel's face is all around and his keen eye watches over his business with great care. The platters of fish become a seven branched menorah and the names of the different variety decorate these branches.

#### 16- Queenie and Ralph Moses Best (Bhastekar) Best Family School

The Best family has contributed to education in a big way in India. Queenie and Ralph established the Best Education Society Trust in 1958. They have worked tirelessly to maintain one of the highest standards of English education in India. I photographed this very dignified couple in their elegant home in Ahmedabad with their wedding photo propped up behind them. I painted with chalkboard paint all around them in the photo collage painting. Drawing lines in blue and red rather like in a hand writing book from elementary school, I used algebra and spelling examples around in the design. The Best family daughter in law Nili who helps run the school is part of the border and the school's unique building makes the border design complete.

#### 17- Moses Abraham (Phansapurkar) Thane Synagogue, Cantor and Mohel

Moses has done 882 circumcisions in his life as a mohel he proudly tells me, and free of charge for his community! He also reads the Torah and the Megillat Esther during the festival of Purim at his synagogue in Thane, near the city of Mumbai. His father taught him the hebrew prayers and Moses is passionate about his Jewish faith. The Sepher Torah from his synagogue radiates in a design from him and his torah pointer spills hebrew letters in lyrical patterns. With Tefillin wrapped and his mohel instruments in the design around him Moses is a wonderful example of Jewish Indian practices and faith.

#### 18- Solomon Haeem (Penkar) Tephareth Israel Synagogue, Shamash

Emanuel (Emu) Samson (Chandgawkar) Shaar Rahamim Synagogue, Shamash

Elkan David (Shirgawkar) Magen Hassidem Synagogue (Mumbai), Shamash

Lamp lighters in synagogues in Mumbai

I photographed the "Shamash" or lamp lighters in three of the 9 synagogues in Mumbai. Solomom, Emanuel and Elkan are the proud lamp lighters who ensure that the Ner Tamid or eternal flame in all their synagogues stays lit 24 hours and 7 days a week. The synagogue Emanuel works for is one of the oldest in India built in 1796. When you shut the main door of this synagogue and peep through the key hole, you can see the Ner Tamid light through it. This is one of the magical features of this beautiful synagogue Emanuel proudly boasts. Many other wonders filled my eyes as these three men pulled down ornate ancient lamps and lit the oil lamps for me to photograph. Every time they lit a flame I was reminded of my mother's shabbat lamp, one that she prepared every Friday with oil, water and a wick made

of raw cotton, in a glass bowl with a brass wick holder. I have many memories sitting with my mother Sophie and father Judah in these synagogues when I was growing up in Mumbai. My heart was filled with light and wonder as I left each of these synagogues, I hope there will be many generations of lamp lighters to keep the flames of my childhood synagogues strong, alive and burning.

#### 19- Esther David (Dandekar) Artist and author

Esther is a well known author, artist and art critic. Her stories are magical as they tell about her Bene Israel Jewish background and her fascinating childhood in her father's zoo in the city of Ahmedabad. I photographed Esther as the multicolored person that she is, her large bindi on her forehead like a crown chakra. Her father, Reuben David Dandekar founded the Kamala Nehru Zoological Garden and Balvatika in the city of Ahmedabad. Her mother Sarah, was a school teacher. Esther's books are filled with wondrous animals and stories of her ancestors, some real and some imagined. Elephants, panthers, peacocks, plum headed parakeets and flamingos inhabited her father's zoo and make Esther's stories so enchanting. I painted her as if her hands are resting on the wall surrounding the city of Ahmedabad and the night sky above her has a bird like creature with Gandhi's head. I imagined this from her book titled "The Man with Enormous Wings" which is about the time of riots between Hindus and Muslims and Gandhi's message of non-violence to India and the rest of the world.

#### 20- Jacob Elijah (Dandekar) Cantor and Hazan

Jacob was in the synagogue in Alibagh waiting for me to arrive to interview him. He was dressed in all white and sat at the bimah with a prayer book in his hands. He told me his life in the village was good and he grew up herding cows and buffalos. He studied hebrew and became a cantor and hazan for his community but slowly everyone started to immigrate to Israel and almost no one was left. Jacob said that during high holy days people do come from Mumbai and also from Israel as the synagogue is beautiful and ancient. Jacob's red hat was my inspiration and I radiated the many cows and buffalos he had herded in a halo like design all around him.

#### 21- Samson Solomon (Korlekar) Marathi Translator, Mumbai

Samson has translated and transliterated a number of Hebrew prayer books into the language of Marathi for the Jewish community in India. Marathi is one of the many language spoken in Mumbai and surrounding areas. Samson and his wife Diana are involved in the Bene Israel community a great deal. Their contribution to making Jewish liturgy and history accessible to community members who do not know how to read hebrew and therefore are unable to follow with the prayers in the Mumbai synagogues is immense. Samson is blind but I was delighted to see how well he knew all the hebrew texts and prayers almost by heart! Diana works as his patient assistant and helps with the organization of his work. I photographed Samson in his profile with an open book in his hands. Behind him I collaged his transliterated prayers as they get smaller in size rather like an eye test board at the ophthalmologist. Samson is a wonderful example of how to overcome hurdles in life and do the work one wants to do anyway, this making a unique contribution to ones community.

## 22- Shannon Benjamin (Kolatkar) Salsa Dancer

This 25 year old has lightning in his feet as he dances his way through life. I interviewed him at the Magen David synagogue in Mumbai. Shannon is very passionate about dance and particularly salsa music. He showed me some of his dance moves and I filmed him in the entrance area of the synagogue. Then he talked to me passionately about how he wishes to pursue dance all his life as it's in every thought and breath he takes. Shannon said he was brought up very Jewish but now his dance practice takes up all his time. He is happy though to participate in all the Indian Jewish festivals as getting a minyan (group of 10 men for prayers) sometimes is tough in some synagogues. He told me he has performed all over India and Israel where he loves to travel to but considers India his home. Jews have never been persecuted in the history of India he reminds me and so he will stay here and hopefully be one of the few flourishing Jewish youth left in India today.

## 23- Natasha Joseph (Bhonkar), Oshrith David-Hai (Gadkar), Meirah Abner (Bhastekar) Sigalith David Isaac (Ghosalkar) JCC Youth in Mumbai.

Bubbly, energetic and enthusiastic youth from the Jewish Community Center of Mumbai surrounded me with many stories and questions. Natasha, Oshrith, Meirah and Sigalith are the Bene Israel Jewish youth who breathe life into a diminishing community in Mumbai. Their spirit and ambition will make this ancient Jewish faith everlasting in India. They all told me stories about growing up Jewish in India, how they felt different yet accepted in the multi-faceted Indian society. In the schools they studied, their unique Jewishness was often celebrated as a proud part of Indian history and culture. Sometimes they had to explain themselves in a sea of Hindus, Muslims and other religions and sometimes they were secure in their particular Bene Israel traditions and customs. Meeting these young ladies was inspiring, radiant and illuminating. I combined pop culture, comic book patterns behind portraits of these young women, with a subtle pattern of the star of David on the parts just behind the center portraits.

## 24- Pennina Bai Abshalom (Palkar). Resident of Pali village near Mumbai

A strange and lovely light was in her small home when I met her. Pennina sat on a swing in living room and told me that she had no family left here in India. Pennina had a niece in Israel and she was waiting for her to take her there. Her face was beautiful with the fine lines and wrinkles like one of my ancestor's portraits I could imagine. I took her photo of this loneliness and the expression on her face that matched it. In the rural town of Pali many miles away from Mumbai I found her, hardly expecting a Jewish woman would be there. Later when I went back to India the following year I asked about her and they said she was taken away to Israel and I was glad. I painted in Warli style around her. Warli is an area in the state of Maharashtra where the tribal people paint to and tell stories of their way of living. The brown wall in Pennina's room was a perfect canvas to paint the mythology of the ship wreck of the Jews from the Galilee who escaped persecution in the 2nd century BCE and landed on the west coast of India.

## 25- Rachel Reuben (Nawgaokar) Film maker and editor

Rachel told me the story of her mother and grandmother as we sat in the living room of her Bandra apartment in Mumbai. Her grandmother Rose was one of the first Bollywood movie stars in India. At the time of the silent movie era only Parsi (Zoroastrian) and Jewish actors

were ready to act in movies as the Hindu girls were not allowed to dance and entertain. Rose along with several other Jewish women became well known movie stars in India. Rachel's mother Marjorie was a Baghdadi Jew, she married Ellis Moses Reuben a Bene Israel Jew and Rachel was born and raised in Mumbai. I photo collaged Rachel like she is levitating in a film noir grey color that surrounds her. Film strips border her piece and the photos of her childhood portrait, Marjorie and Rose surround her. Rachel was pregnant at the time I interviewed her and so I painted a beautiful mandala design around her to symbolize this.

26- Ralphy and Yael Jhirad (Jhiradkar) Travel agent and entrepreneur.

I have known Ralphy and Yael for many years as they arrange tours through Jewish India. I have travelled with some friends and family in the past and they have arranged my trips for me. Both Ralphy and Yael are good people connectors. Ralphy has helped promote the awareness and research of the Indian Jews globally. I photographed this husband and wife at the Mumbai beach with a beautiful sunset behind them. I sketched the Gateway of India behind them as a symbol of them being hosts to International visitors all the time. Ralphy's white shirt transforms into the ends of a tallit (a Jewish prayer shawl) and so does Yael's beautiful red shawl join together in the tzitzit (fringes on the corners of the prayer shawl) to make the shape of an airplane. Airplanes are important in this couple's life as they are part of India's Indian Jewish welcoming committee to the numerous visitors to their country.

27- Salome Hyams Parikh (Mumbai) Journalist, poet

Trans-cultural and multi dimensional are words that describe Salome. Her mother was a Baghdadi Jew from Mumbai and her father a Muslim. Salome is now married to a Hindu businessman. She met me in her lovely home which overlooks the Mumbai marine drive and has a breathtaking view. Elegant, poised and well spoken she created a famous TV program called Montage in the past and is also a journalist and poet. She occasionally writes columns for Mumbai newspapers like the Indian Express. Salome spoke to me of her multifaceted upbringing, as she was initially raised by her Jewish mother and grandmother when they returned from Pakistan. She did not see her father much in her life as she was later raised by her strong Jewish grandmother and also nurtured by a Parsi (Zoroastrian) couple. Salome is a poet searching all her life for her identity and questioning many times "Who am I?" I represent this beautiful woman as a genie of sorts, as she rises from a wooden carved box. A box that was given to her by her mother of letters and stories she said she dared not open for a very long time. This becomes a symbol of a Pandora's box and the letters a symbol of all our stories and legends from all our lives. Salome's story is like a hall of mirrors, multi colored and kaleidoscope like, fascinating and mysterious at the same time.

28- Samson Joseph Isaac (Talkar) Assistant Commissioner of Police. Detection of Crime Branch (CID), Mumbai

Samson is an amazing person as he was both a tough (now retired) Commissioner of Police in Mumbai and an ardent Torah reader in his synagogue. I spent time both talking to him about his life in the Crime branch of the Mumbai police where he worked for many years and also in the local synagogues following him as he guided me through Parashas (prayers) that he read out loud while I videoed him. Samson told me a fascinating story. He was in the middle of tracking down some criminals many years back and he got shot at. He had a small Siddur (prayer book) in his pocket and he believes he was saved because of that with the

bullet escaping him by inches. His belief is steadfast in his God and he is regularly seen at prayer services in the Mumbai synagogues. I photographed Samson half in shadow and designed the background with guns from his police life and the other half with iconography from ancient Jewish books he showed me. The sepia drawing is from a famous ancient Bene Israel Haggadah and the circle of red arrows is the strength of Samson's faith that saved him from many dangers in his life as a Police Commissioner.

29- Diana and Siyona Jonah (Rohekar) Housewife and beauty parlor owner

I met the Rohekar family in Rasta Peth, Pune where they live right next to the Succath Shelomo synagogue. I interviewed and photographed Diana and Siyona (her daughter) making a beautiful mother daughter portrait. While Diana ran a small beauty shop business in the back of her home, she was particular in telling me all the Jewish customs she observed year round in her home. She swept and cleaned her home starting a month before the Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) holidays. She made grape juice from dried black grapes in time for the festivals. There are 13 items to be prepared Diana told me, to be set on her table for the Jewish new year. Apple and honey signifies happiness, garlic leaves, bananas and beetroot signify the removal of evil thoughts, dates remind us to perform good deeds, bottle gourd reminds us to keep our minds clean, beans remind us to live happily with other people, fish reminds us to be cautious, lambs meat reminds us of the offering made by prophet Abraham and seeds of the pomegranate remind us to perform good deeds. Halwa will be prepared made from coconut milk, wheat juice and dry fruits. Diana's table was set, for her daughter Siyona to continue the traditions for the next generation.

30- Siona Yapheth (Killekar) Branch Operations and Service Head CITI Bank, Mumbai

I was keen to meet Siona who shared the same name as me. I met her in her office in the hustle and bustle of the city of Mumbai. She was on the phone on an important call and politely waved me to a chair in her office. After her call she spent quite a bit of time with me, she told me how proudly she followed her Judaism and kept a kosher home. Here was a professional Jewish woman working in a large bank in Mumbai and I marveled at this kind of diversity. Siona was professional yet kind and soft spoken. She had a softness to her tone yet she seemed very smart and poised. I photographed her right outside the large bank doors, on the Mumbai streets, standing confidently cell phone in hand and looking right into my camera.

31- Satkiel Shalom (Bhastekar) Abner's father. Senior community member and cantor

Abner Bhastekar who I had photographed earlier for my project took me to see his father. Abner was very proud of his father and rightly so. Satkiel was a learned Jew who sang the prayers with great fervor. I photographed him and also took several videos of him singing the verses from the prayer books. In Satkiel's living room was a large painted picture of the prophet Elijah ascending to heaven in his chariot pulled by horses. I positioned Satkiel in front of the picture, which made an amazing background around his face and tallit covered shoulders. Later in my studio as I composed his piece, I added the photos of his four grandchildren living in India, flying over him along with the hebrew letters that spewed melodically from this man. When I returned home after my Fulbright stay in India, I heard Satkiel had passed away. I was glad to capture this mans devotion to his faith, just in time, sealing it forever in my work.



32- Sharon and Sharona Benjamin (Galsurkar) Orthodox Jewish family in Mumbai

I spent a whole day with this beautiful family, Sharon, Sharona and their three gorgeous little daughters. The three girls danced around us all the time, happy, singing and playful. Sharon and Sharona, both educated young people, proud of maintaining their strong Indian Jewish identity in the vastness of India. Sharon taught the Jewish youth at the ORT in the city and also was a calligrapher in Hebrew. He studied and taught and they both maintained a strict kosher home. Sharona was studying at the local university and hoped to become a teacher one day soon. When I asked them whether they would make aliya to Israel someday, they said they were not sure. Israel did beckon but so did their need to stay in India and be a big part of educating the Jewish youth here and now. I painted a tree of life between their two portraits, the tree of their solidly planted belief in their faith and their Judaism.

33- Samson and Shera Solomon (Penkar) Keepers of Pen Synagogue

Samson and his wife Shera live in the small village of Pen, a few miles from the city of Mumbai. The small and quaint synagogue in this very small village is in need of some repair, some of the lamps in the main hall need replacing and the floor has been damaged due to heavy rains and flooding. Samson reassures me that there is help coming from sources both foreign and from the Indian government, who have marked all the synagogues in India as national heritage monuments. Samson, his wife and his sons family will not move to Israel. Who will look after this synagogue he told me. It was his job to do so and that is why he is tied to this little village. Shera had made some delicious Indian Jewish food for me at their home nearby. She made "bidda" a lentil which was specifically cooked by Indian Jews during festival times. Rooted in India, gatekeepers of their temple, bound forever to their heritage, Samson and his family, just one Jewish family left in this tiny village.

34- Ruby Benjamin (Bhonkar)(Pune), Lily Isaac (Malekar) (Karmiel Israel), Elizabeth Samuel (Borgharkar) (Pune) Born in Pakistan and raised in India.

Ruby lived all through her childhood in Pakistan. She remembers fondly her house in a peaceful neighborhood of Karachi. She drew the floor plan of her house for me, waving her hands, making markings in the air. Our kitchen was here, the bedrooms here, a courtyard in the center, she said. I made a sketch as she spoke and later incorporated the ground plan of her house in her final portrait collage. My grandmother Elizabeth was also born in Karachi, I told Ruby and we were happy to share this story. Ruby then told me about the India-Pakistan partition and how everyone was asked to leave. Hindus, Christians and Jews were told to vacate what later became more of an Islamic country. She said she was sad to see this happen. India became her new home where she could practice her Jewish faith, just as she had been able to do in pre partition Pakistan. Homes now transplanted, taking her faith with her, she married a Bene Israel Jew from Pune and made her family there. Lily and Elizabeth her two daughters sat by her side, and I photographed them that way. Lily now lives in Israel and Elizabeth lives nearby in Pune. This was a family that told the story of true tolerance and the unbelievable story of Jews once living and practicing their faith in Pakistan. I was so happy to have included them in my series of works, so important in this age of strife and division of land and people.

35- Rabbi Abraham Benjamin (Mendrekar) Thane Synagogue and EL AL  
Rabbi Abraham met me in the Thane synagogue. He was confident and learned but I noticed he was sad. He missed his wife who had passed away a short while back. He told me he worked hard and the days were not so lonely but only when he came home to his apartment in the evening. Rabbi Abraham had studied in Israel and is now the only rabbi in Mumbai. He had many roles and jobs. He was constantly called to oversee and preside over many life cycle events and he also had a job managing the kosher food section for EIAI Airlines at the Mumbai airport. He took time to tell me a few prayers, important prayers for me to remember. I made his tallit big enough in my final piece about him, big enough to envelope all the prayers he had to offer to his community he loved so much.

36- Isaac David (Kehimkar) Naturalist, Bombay Natural History Society  
Isaac worked at the Natural history section of the big museum in Mumbai and was also a Fulbright scholar. He had written several books on nature, on butterflies and plants. He seemed enveloped in his world of science and nature, also living outside the city of Mumbai in a quieter suburb. Isaac said he tried living abroad but he always came back home to India. He was not a religious man, and was tied to his science and love of all things natural. I saw his butterflies flying around him, and so I painted his portrait just that way, whimsical, playful and spontaneous.

37- Ezriel Viju (Penkar) and Shaina Lebana (Penkar) Bodybuilder and gym owner.  
Viju won the Mr India body builder competition many years back, he told me when I interviewed him for my project. He proudly now owns a sports gymnasium in Mumbai. I spent time talking to him, his daughter Lebana and his granddaughter Shaina in his office. I photographed one of Viju's exercise machines in his gym and photoshopped it like it is balancing on his hands rather like Samson from the bible. Lebana gave a wonderful interview with Shaina who is learning Bharat Natyam which is a form of South Indian dance. Shaina wore one of her beautiful costumes and I photographed her in different dance poses. I made a photo collage of Shaina rather like a dancing angel perched here and there in the multicolored gym owned by her grandfather, making a fun collage about this family. Like in many of these series of works, seven branched menorahs are subtly hidden in the forms and colors.

#### **List of people interviewed for the project:**

Mozel and Monica Moses (Pugaonkar), Eddna Samuel (Akshikar), Abner Satkiel (Bhastekar), Daniel Elijah Benjamin (Gadkar), Karen Simon (Borgawkar), Diana Elijah (Pingle), Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar), General (Retired) Jack Jacob (and Pal Singh Gill), Molly (Milkha) Samuel David (Shahapurkar), Romiel Elkanah and Susan Moses (Bhonkar), Daniel Rafael Joseph (Bhonkar), Moses Abraham (Phansapurkar), Solomon Haeem (Penkar), Emanuel Samson (Chandgawkar), Elkan David (Shirgawkar), Leora Abraham (Sankar) Daughters-Casey, Meshi, and Mayan, Ruby Benjamin (Bhonkar), Lily Isaac (Malekar), Elizabeth Samuel (Borgharkar), Natasha Joseph (Bhonkar), Oshrith David-Hai (Gadkar), Meirah Abner (Bhastekar), Sigalith David Isaac (Ghosalkar), Jacob Elijah (Dandekar), Rachel Reuben (Nawgaokar), Shannon Benjamin (Kolatkar), Ezriel Viju (Penkar) and Shaina Lebana (Penkar), Diana and Siyona Jonah (Rohekar), Samson Joseph Isaac

(Talkar), Esther Sukkur (Belkar), Sukkur Enoch (Belkar), Queenie Sukkur (Belkar), Queenie and Ralph Moses Best (Bhastekar), Sophie Judah Benjamin (Kasookar), Rachel Kruge, Samson Solomon (Korlekar), Maayan Abraham (Shapurkar), Esther David (Dandekar), Isaac David (Kehimkar), Ralph and Yael Jhirad (Jhiradkar), Satkiel Shalom (Bhastekar), Rabbi Abraham Benjamin (Mendrekar), Sharon and Sharona Benjamin (Galsurkar), Salome Hyams Parikh, Samson and Shera Solomon (Penkar), Siona Yapheth (Killekar), Penniha Bai Abshalom (Palkar). David Ruben (Wasker), Ezra and Ruby Moses (Mapgaonkar), Jonathan Moses (Mapgaonkar), Ezra and Flora Moses (Mapgaonkar), George and Irene Judah (Ashtamkar), David Moses (Talegaonkar), Nina Haeems (Bamnolkar), Daniel and Reena David (Talegaonkar), Solomon and Shulamith Aaron (Cheulkar), Ariel Ezra (Nowgawkar), Sophie and Moses Abraham (Penkar), Victor and Elizabeth Elijah (Walwatkar), Norma Esther Elijah- Suvarna (Walwatkar), Elijah Samson Jacob (Ashtamkar), Solomon Abraham (Charikar), Judah Samson Joseph Benjamin (Bamnolkar), Joseph Samuel (Pingle), Rosy Solomon Moses (Mapgaonkar), Leora Micah Joseph (Dighorkar), Esther Jonathan Moses (Kehimkar), Flora Joseph (Bamnolkar), Herzel Jacob Simon (Bhorapkar), Leena Solomon Karkera, Mary Levi (Palkar), Mary Moses Solomon ((Penkar), Benjamin Isaac (Bhonkar), Simon Moshe (Varsulkar), Solomon Menahim (Gadkar), Raphael Shimson (Varulkar), Siyon Abraham (Chordekar), Ruby and Robin (in Pune).  
Bayati (Home for the aged) - Sophie Asher (Bamnolkar), Judah Baruch (Pezarkar), Rachel Samson (Awaskar), Bathsheba Aaron Solomon (Mazgaonkar), Rachel Samuel (Gidodkar), Eric Shalom (Agarwarkar)

## **ARTIST STATEMENT:**

**Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives**

**Fulbright fellowship project and research travel to India**

**I am a painter originally from Bombay, now living in the US. My work reflects my background of being brought up Jewish in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim India. In my art I combine the imagery of my past with the role I play in America today, making a mosaic inspired by both Indian/Persian miniature paintings and illuminated manuscripts.**

The terrorist attack that occurred in Mumbai on November 26 – 29, 2008 was a massacre of both resident Indians and visiting foreigners. The Chabad house in Mumbai, a Jewish outreach center with an educational site, a synagogue and a hostel, was under attack and six of its occupants, including the Rabbi and his wife, were killed. These attacks brought notice to the world (or in some cases, served as a reminder), of the existence of a small but ancient group of Indian Jewish people that inhabited the Indian subcontinent for approximately 2000 years.

Brought up as a Bene Israel Jew in a predominately Hindu and Muslim India in the heart of Mumbai, I was immensely disheartened by the lack of media and news coverage. To some of my American friends, there was confusion, asking many

questions. “Did Jews first inhabit India upon the establishment of the Chabad house?” “If not, then what did the local Jewish population look like? Sound like?” This dialogue with my friends birthed the impetus for this proposal.

With the help of the Fulbright fellowship I conducted a 4-month project to explore and reveal the various Indian Jewish faces of India in a visual art exhibition. The goals of this project are to raise awareness about the long-standing history of the Indian Jewish communities in India. To document, using photography and painting, the individual faces and stories of this ancient group and their heritage before their existence becomes a cultural relic of India.

Photographing the Bene Israel Jewish faces, they could be the ghost images from my past, my childhood in Jewish India, weaving new and old stories. Are these faces from dreams and memories or are they just other faces on passports, immigration cards or perhaps from my family’s photo albums? It is with these faces and their stories that the rest of the world, I hope, would come to know more about the Indian Jews in a very transnational India.

My goal has always been to promote cultural awareness, tolerance and understanding in my art. Understanding the true diversity of people in India was achieved and I left with an armload of photos and videos that proved this multiculturalism in India. I believe that my project will help my audience understand the meaning of racial diversity and the need therefore to stop compartmentalizing "the other". I believe in the power of art to be able to make socio-political change in this world. I will strive to accomplish these goals and my art making process has given me more power under my wings to be able to achieve this.

Siona Benjamin