



# Finding Herself in History

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

Sadia Shepard looked at the small, round metal pin in the blue velvet box. She had found it in the bureau of her maternal grandmother’s bedroom. It had an image of Florence Nightingale and the inscription on it said, “Awarded to: Rachel Jacobs.”

“Nana, who is Rachel Jacobs?” she asked her grandmother, Rahat Siddiqi.

“That was my Jewish name, before I was married,” Siddiqi replied, and began telling a story 13-year-old Shepard had not heard before. It was about how the Bene Israel community to which Siddiqi once belonged believed they were shipwrecked on the Konkan coast in western India over 2,000 years ago and, according to their legend, only seven men and seven women survived.

“...This became a kind of catalyst in my own life. I learned that I was not just bicultural but in fact was tri-cultural and I suddenly discovered that I had a Muslim mother, a Christian father and a Jewish grandmother,” says Shepard, a documentary filmmaker and writer based in New York City.

Shepard spent 2001-03 in India documenting the Bene Israel community in photographs and a film. She worked first at the

Film and Television Institute of India in Pune, Maharashtra, under the auspices of a one-year Fulbright scholarship. She continued her research for another year on a grant from the New York-based Jeremiah Kaplan Foundation.

She returned to India this April to release her book *The Girl From Foreign: A Search for Shipwrecked Ancestors, Forgotten Histories, and a Sense of Home* and to screen her documentary, *In Search of the Bene Israel*.

“When you are a kid you aren’t necessarily very aware of the role that history and your own family history plays in your life,” she says.

But as time went on, Shepard began to ask her grandmother more about her past. “I began to pester her to tell me more and more stories. As she did so I began to learn a little bit more about this fascinating community that she is descended from,” Shepard says. “It was a compelling tale that I longed to learn more about. Growing up hearing that story from my grandmother shaped me profoundly. It set in motion this trajectory that I am still on.”

Shepard grew up in Massachusetts, hearing stories of India and Pakistan and celebrating Christmas, Ramadan and Eid. Her

Sadia Shepard during a book discussion at Mumbai's Crossword bookstore.

mother, Samina Quraeshi, went to the United States from Pakistan in 1961 on an exchange program with the American Field Service. She did her final year of high school in Kansas and stayed on for higher studies. Shepard's parents met as graduate students at Yale University in Connecticut. Quraeshi married Richard Shepard in 1973 at his family home in Colorado.

Quraeshi's mother, Rahat Siddiqi, had been born in Bombay and married a Muslim, Ali Siddiqi, in the 1930s. She was his third wife and they moved, with their children, to Karachi in Pakistan after the partition of India. When Shepard was born in 1975, Siddiqi went to the United States to help raise her.

Before Siddiqi passed away in 2000, she had made Shepard promise that she would go to India to learn more about the Bene Israel community and about the confluence of different religions within her own life.

Shepard landed in Mumbai three days before the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, equipped with five cameras, a crumbling mimeograph of family names and a handful of sepia photographs of unfamiliar faces. "I am here as an amateur detective on that most American of journeys: a search for the roots of my own particular tree. This is reverse migration. I have returned to the land that nurtured my grandmother and my mother, to walk where they walked, to make my own map within their maps," she writes in *The Girl From Foreign*.

As she began to research and document the Bene Israel community in Mumbai and the Konkan region she was overwhelmed by how many stories there were to tell and by her "own confusions and mishaps and misadventures along the way." Shepard tracks down every clue and paints a vivid picture of the sights, sounds and smells of the city as well as the verdant countryside where her Jewish relatives live.

"I began to keep a diary and I began to write in my diary every day, taking notes on what I was seeing and observing. As I began to do so, one diary became two, became six, became 10 and at the end of my two years here I had half a suitcase full of journals," she says.

As Shepard began to try to re-acclimatize to life in the United States on her return in 2003 she read those journals again to "try and understand what I had seen and what I had experienced and what impact it might have on my life." Some of those early recollections written

**For more information:**

Sadia Shepard

[www.sadiashepard.com](http://www.sadiashepard.com)

Sadia Shepard and the Lost Jews of India

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-csNXvLXcQ>

U.S.-India Educational Foundation

<http://www.usief.org/in/>

in her notebooks were the foundation of *The Girl From Foreign*.

Speaking about her trip to India in April, Shepard says, "It has been enormously exciting to be able to come back to India and share this story with people here and with the place that inspired this book." She interacted with audiences in Mumbai, Chennai and New Delhi where she found that "many, many people want to know what it was like to grow up with multiple religions in one home and how that can shape your identity as a young person.

That's of course something that's a big part of my work. And it's something that I enjoy thinking about."

She acknowledges that being exposed to different faiths is "a path that's not without confusion" but "it's also one that has the possibility to provide great resources and opportunities for dialogue."

Within her own family there are people, Shepard says, who don't always see eye to eye. "I have cousins in Israel and cousins in Pakistan who certainly have different political views or different religious views and yet they are all united in some way because of the historical serendipity that my grandmother and my grandfather fell in love. As such we are compelled to try and seek some kind of common ground."

Shepard, a Stanford University Documentary Film Program graduate, is also one of the producers of *The September Issue*, which won a cinematography award at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival in Utah. The feature-like documentary is a portrait of the making of the September issue of American *Vogue* magazine and its editor, Anna Wintour. "We followed the creative process, the making of the magazine from January till it comes out on the newsstands in September. The September issue is the largest issue of *Vogue* magazine.... It's the size of an American telephone book," she says.

Shepard says she would love to write another book, in India. "There's such a strong tradition of storytelling in South Asia and I feel very proud to be traveling in that same tradition and there's quite a bit more work that I would like to do here."



Photographs by SADIA SHEPARD

Sadia Shepard created a visual record of the Bene Israel community in photographs and a documentary film.