Appendix A

Yeshvihas, Gaon and Nagid

Participation of Jews in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean has not received its due recognition. In the present study, an attempt has been made to examine their participation in the Indian maritime trade. But, it seems necessary to study the role of Yeshiva, Gaon and Nagid in Jewish community. These offices were not situated in India, but their impact on the Jewish diaspora was manifold. Various letters from India to Geniza attest to the supremacy of Babylonian Yeshivas, Gaons and Nagids from Yemen (Aden).  

The highest authority in the Judaism lay in the Yeshivas, a kind of medieval collegiums. The person in charge of a Yeshiva was known as Gaon. The development of a Yeshiva depended entirely upon the brilliance of the Gaon. Yeshiva performed not only scholastic duties but also decided religious, social and political issues. The Gaon was all the more important, realizing the peculiarity of these Yeshivas. Unlike Christianity or other religions, Yeshiva, though final in its judgements, was not alone. There were three Yeshivas. Two Yeshivas were situated in Iraq and one in Palestine. The Yeshivas of Iraq were founded in Sura and Pumbedita, but finally moved to the capital, Baghdad, a prominent centre of trade under the Caliphate. It is again interesting that there might be some difference in the interpretation of the laws, yet no mutual rivalry existed between these three Yeshivas. On the contrary, to avoid any confusion, the Jews were always expected to follow one Yeshiva at a time. When the scholars of Qayrawan addressed two


Yeshivas for some clarification simultaneously, they were sternly snubbed to avoid this practice.³

Destiny of each Yehiva depended on the integrity of its Gaons. They could ensure a large growth of followers with their wisdom and devotion. The hard work on the part of Gaon was required because there was no strict code controlling the conversion of followers from one Yeshiva to another. Migration of followers not only brought a bad name but also hampered the inflow of donations.

Gaon was entrusted with a variety of other duties along with religious ones. He provided interpretation of religious books. To infuse religious order, he issued circulars to his communities. Local scholars turned to him for clarification. Finances were looked after by him. He took up the grievances of his people with the authorities concerned. He also appointed local leaders of the communities. An important office of the Nagid was started by Gaon Han in Tunisia. During favourable governments the prestige of the Gaon grew manifold. When the caliphate shifted its capital from Damascus to Baghdad, it granted zimmi status to the Jews. The expansion of the Islamic armies therefore enabled the Yeshivas to reach to the distant communities. The Yeshvihas enjoyed good times under the liberal caliphate. The Fatimid caliph Al Hakim even gave donations to the Yeshiva. Joshiah Gaon (1013 AD) declared, “At the time, we derived our livelihood from the government we did not trouble you with request.”⁴ Thus the protection of the Fatimid government helped the Gaons to consolidate their communities around the Indian Ocean. The Jews were having a pervasive influence in the banking institutions of Iraq.

Affiliation with the rulers enabled the Yeshivas to get their orders executed. The Gaon sometimes executed imprisonments on the guilty and the state helped him to carry out his judgement. Many a times, the state police conveyed his judgements to the culprits. If the Gaon was dependent on the state along with the


⁴ Ibid., p. 12.
community, he also needed the letter of investiture from the government. When al-Zahir, a Fatimid ruler, ascended the throne, the Gaon of Jerusalem asked his friend to obtain the letter of installment from him.\(^5\) The official standing of the Yeshivas and Gaons among the Jews (the minority) inspired the Muslim governments to assert their control. It could control small but rich Jewish community peacefully through the office of the Gaons.

Several monetary benefits were available to the Gaon. Being the head of the community, the Yeshivas received donations under the control of the Gaons. Apart from the institutional donations, individual donations ranging from money to valuable cargo of spices and clothes, were also sent to the Gaon. Donations were given both to the institutions (the Yeshvihas) and individuals (the Gaons). In fact, it was customary to address Yeshivas once in a year.\(^6\)

In view of the importance of the office of the Gaon, there were numerous incidents for the succession to the prestigious post. There was no strict code regarding the accession to the post. Conventionally, the president of the High Court attached to the Yeshiva was unofficial aspirant to the office of the Gaon. These High Courts were also attached with the Yeshivas. Nevertheless, the Gaon prepared his children for the coveted post by appointing them scribes. In this way, these future claimants came into contact with whosoever mattered in their rise. Communities and small leaders also sometimes helped in getting one the prestigious office. For example, in 1038 AD, the community was dissatisfied with the Gaon Solomon b. Judah. They went to Nathan b. Abraham and requested him to read the scripture and be the next Gaon. Sometimes these feuds also reached the government. Caliph al-Ustansir received a complaint from one party that a local governor was supporting the other party against the desires of the community.\(^7\) Thus Yeshivas, the

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 12.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 16.
community and the government provided legitimacy to the office of the Gaon under the caliphate.

Nagid was another important office among the Jewish community. In simple words, the Nagid stood as the territorial head of the Jewish community in a given region. With the passage of time, important titles like that of ‘Prince of the people of the lord (or Israel)’ and ‘Prince of the princes’ were also attached to him.\(^8\) Goitein finds the first reference to the application of this title to a man outside Yeshivas around 1038 AD. The great Gaon Hay bestowed this title upon Abraham b. Ata of Tunisia who was attached to the royal family of Tunisia and acted as a saviour of fellow Jews.\(^9\) Around the middle of the eleventh century, the office of Nagid was abolished in Spain and Tunisia. However it was revived in Egypt where court physician Judah b. Saaday and later the reputed Mevorakh adopted the title. Nagids were appointed specifically for different regions and, during the times under study,\(^10\) one finds that the Nagid of Yemen was very influential, owing to the tremendous growth of trade between India and the Red Sea under the Fatimids. He signed treaties with pirates and petty rulers on behalf of his clients in the Indian Ocean. But it is not that he merely acted as the agent. The Geniza documents contain several letters pointing to the duties of his office. The Nagid, with the passage of time, replaced the office of the Gaon in its operational influence. He started appointing judges on his behalf in different regions. His own office contained judicial powers and he acted like the High Court. He listened to various marriage, property and inheritance suits. He mostly aimed at bringing about reconciliation, but sometime he also pronounced decrees (ex-communication being the major weapon in his hands). He also issued letters to the persons of foreign and obscure origin before

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\(^10\) Ibid., pp. 24-25.
their marriage into the community.\textsuperscript{11} He was also required to act as a support to his co-religious. In fact he was ‘the judge of the widows and the father of the poor and the shield of the oppressed.’ A poor woman desiring to have a new veil, miqna'a for the holidays, requested the Nagid to appoint a man to make collection for the purpose. She added, “To whom shall I apply, if not you.”\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, the Nagid took care of the poor in need of medication and other needs. He also arranged for the religious taxes of the people (the poor) who were unable to pay them to the government.\textsuperscript{13} The daily routine of the Nagid was so hectic that one letter in the Geniza revealed that the Nagid Mevorakh did not even get time to take his meals.

Like the Yeshivas and the Gaons, the Nagids displayed close proximity with the central government. But in reality he was more closely related to the local government while guiding the Jewish community of the region. The government supported him because that would have prevented the locals from pledging allegiance to some foreign and distant Gaons. The Nagids, therefore, not only got confirmation from the community and the Gaon but the government also. It was the government that officially recognised him to be the Nagid. The Nagid’s judgment carried weight only if accompanied with the sanctity of the governments.\textsuperscript{14} Establishment of Nagids also smoothened the administrative works of the government. Nagid was held responsible for the activities of the Jews. The office of the Nagid collected taxes from the Jews and deposited it in the royal treasury. Interestingly many contemporary Muslim historians looked upon the Nagid as ‘the protector of the Muslims’ because he ensured the obedience of the Jews to

\textsuperscript{11} S.D. Goitein, \textit{A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza}, Vol. III, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 37.

\textsuperscript{13} After the Fatimids, Goitein finds the benefits of remission of jaziya (religious tax) was not granted even to the poor. They were punished in case of non-repayment. The Nagid collected funds for the help of the poor. Ibid., pp. 36.

\textsuperscript{14} He was also backed by the Jewish customs that accepted him as their leader and guide. Ibid., p. 35.
discriminatory laws like wearing the badges of one clothing upon their arm. Goitien takes this example to be of later times when the religious fanaticism was at its height as an aftermath of the Crusades. Nevertheless, even in earlier times, the Nagid advised his people not to act in a way that would create friction with other communities.

The office of the Nagid did not carry any salary or direct income. Primarily, he earned his income from his own profession like that of physician and so on. Sometimes he was also the courtier. He would also receive gifts from his clients. He must be having land to compensate his income. He also invested in trade. Goitein did not make reference to his active participation in the maritime trade, yet it would have been unthinkable owing to the contacts of Nagid in the maritime world of the Indian Ocean. For example, when the pirates from Tripoli and Lebanon captured some prominent persons, the Nagid approached the commander of the imperial fleet to rescue the captives. Similarly, when a Tunisian Jewish merchant was robbed by sailors, he approached the Nagid with the hope that he would get his cargo released even in foreign lands. The Nagid of Yemen also signed treaties with the pirates and petty rulers of the Indian Ocean to ensure the safety of his clients and their cargoes.

Thus the Nagid was an influential office for the Jews. This office continued to dominate the Jewish communities throughout the period under the study. The reason might not be related to religion alone. It is said that with the passage of time, the Nagid replaced the Gaon and even attached judicial powers to his office. But was it a usurpation or expediency? After studying the general scenario, one gets

16 Ibid., p. 39.
17 Ibid., p. 37.
the impression that the offices of the Asian Nagids (of Yemen and Egypt etc.) was closely attached to the rising and declining fortune of Jews in the Asian trading empire. Around eleventh century, the Jews were quite active in the maritime empires of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean. The Nagids knew the sea better. They could mobilize state machinery in case of emergency. They ensured a comfortable stay and bargain for their clients in the foreign lands. Such was their control that we come across several letters sent from India to Yemen, with great epitaphs attached with the office of the Nagid.\textsuperscript{19} The Gaons were influential in Jerusalem and Baghdad. However, they were uprooted from their homelands due to the inroads of the Mongols and Turks from central Asia. The Jewish community therefore sought the protection of the Nagids in Yemen and al Fustat. The office of Nagid was also useful to the local government because it ensured the allegiance of the minority to the government. However, with the passage of time, fanaticism emerged as an aftermath of the crusades. Commercial policy of Saladdin (the Ayyubs) also closed the Red Sea for the foreigners, as it was declared an 'Islamic waterway.'\textsuperscript{20} Karimi organization of the Muslims replaced the Jews and dominated the Red Sea trade upto the sixteenth century when the Europeans (mostly Christians) attempted to monopolize the Indian Ocean maritime trade with better navy. With the decline of Jewish share in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean, one also encounters the degradation of the office. The prestige and need of the office of the Nagid diminished. The high sounding titles like that of the Nagid of Yemen, 'The Prince of the princes,' remained only the relic of a glorious past.
