

## Essay

# Motivation and Meaning in Regional Studies: The Case of Indian Studies in Israel

Carmen Brandt and Marina Rimscha

### Abstract

This essay explores the motivations, experiences, and aspirations of scholars and students engaged in Indian studies in Israel, presenting a case study that speaks to broader global debates about the history, relevance, and future of regional studies. Drawing on interviews with three generations of Israeli scholars and current students from three major Israeli universities, it traces the diverse paths that lead individuals to engage deeply with Indian languages, philosophy, and culture, and thus also the history of Indian studies in Israel. Against the backdrop of postcolonial criticism that casts regional studies as complicit in Orientalist or neo-imperialist agendas, this essay offers a more nuanced perspective—one rooted in personal stories, intellectual curiosity, cross-cultural encounters, and a desire for international collaboration. It highlights both the challenges and the enduring appeal of the field in an age of declining regional studies enrolments and increasing pressure to pursue market-driven higher education. In doing so, the essay calls for renewed attention to the transformative potential of regional studies and suggests that the Israeli experience may offer insights into how such disciplines continue to matter in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** Indian studies, Indology, South Asian studies, Israel, regional studies, area studies, history of science

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## Introduction

When one of the many young Israelis checked into a hostel in India, the receptionist asked her, “How many Israelis are there?”

The Israeli tourist replied, “About 10 million.”

Confused, the receptionist said, “No, I mean in total—not just in India at the moment.”

(A joke circulating in Israel.)

Travelling through India, especially in the north, leads not only to encounters with the local population but also with tourists from many different countries. Among those, surprisingly, are a great number of young Israelis whom I often met on trains, in hostels, or at prominent sightseeing spots. Notices and signs in Hebrew in places such as Paharganj in Delhi or Sudder Street in Calcutta, where backpackers find affordable accommodation, drew my attention during my many travels to India. And when I had the opportunity to go to Israel this year for a research stay funded by the Humboldt Foundation, I wanted to find out not only why so many young Israelis are travelling to and through India but also the reasons for studying and teaching Indian studies<sup>1</sup> in Israel. As a current professor of contemporary South Asian studies at the University of Bonn—the German university often credited with the official inception of German Indology, as August Wilhelm Schlegel became a professor there in 1818 (Brandt and Hackenbroch 2017: 42)—this trip was naturally linked to my own search for why I have been studying the past and present of India for the last two and a half decades. Now more than ever, the urge to reflect on one’s own motives to study another culture is also provoked by discourses put forward primarily by scholars of postcolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> During my studies and teaching in Germany, my research in South Asia and at conferences, I have been repeatedly confronted with the accusation that by studying another culture I am continuing the infamous legacy of Orientalists and their construction of the ‘other’ and that I am serving a neo-imperialist agenda. These accusations are not infrequently combined with demands to abolish disciplines such as Indology, South Asian studies, and regional studies<sup>3</sup> in general once and for all.

Obviously, this article is a plea to maintain regional studies. It provides insights into the reasons why Israeli scholars and students study India, its neighbouring

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- 1 While there is a clearly defined difference between the disciplines “Indology” and “South Asian studies” in Germany, in Israel, the name of the discipline depends on universities’ internal factors. Since the names vary across Israeli universities, we use the neutral and descriptive term “Indian studies” throughout this essay. For differences between “Indology” and “South Asian studies” in Germany, see Brandt and Hackenbroch 2017.
- 2 These discourses were undoubtedly sparked by Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, published for the first time in 1978 (Said 2001).
- 3 Another common term for “regional studies” is “area studies”.

countries,<sup>4</sup> their languages, literatures, cultures, and religions. By portraying three established Israeli scholars and their paths to becoming the scholars they are today, the first part of this article will also provide an overview of the history of Indian studies in Israel. While the first part is written by Carmen Brandt, who conducted interviews with the three scholars Sivan Goren Arzony, David Shulman, and Yohanah Friedmann, the second part is written by Marina Rimscha, who has studied Indology at the University of Bonn and has been teaching Hindi for more than ten years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Having conducted interviews mainly with current students, she delves into their motives for studying this region and discusses their job prospects. She also provides an overview of the status quo of Indian studies in Israel. And instead of addressing in detail the often generalising accusations levelled against regional studies, especially against Indian studies, and attempting to refute them, it is left to the reader to judge whether we scholars of Indian studies have a hidden agenda or what kind of agents we are.

### **Sivan Goren Arzony: From Hindi, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Malayalam to Maṇipravālām**

When I met Sivan Goren Arzony, a lecturer at the Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, a city close to Tel Aviv, her kind and open personality impressed me straightaway. After lunch together, we sat in a wooden seating area under some of the many trees on the huge campus of the Bar-Ilan University and talked about her journey to studying India, in particular premodern South Indian literary cultures. Sivan Goren Arzony has been teaching at the Department of Asian Studies of the Bar-Ilan University since 2024. She was surprised but very happy when she got this tenure-track position—one of only very few in Israel for scholars working on India. She grew up in a kibbutz and still lives with her husband and their four children in a kibbutz about an hour south of Tel Aviv. She is convinced that her research stay at Harvard University in particular, for which she received a prestigious post-doc fellowship and became a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows, contributed to her current position. And now Sivan Goren Arzony teaches at Bar-Ilan University, the second largest university in Israel, well-known for its excellent research in engineering, computer science, and medicine—and for the rule that all Jewish students must complete at least five courses in Jewish or Torah studies. Non-Jewish students can instead choose general courses. And sometimes these students end up in the Department of Asian Studies—as is the case this semester, when Sivan Goren Arzony is giving an introduction to premodern India—a period that can be reconstructed through the rich Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit is one of the many languages she has learned and reads, but until now there have been no courses for

<sup>4</sup> One reason why India's two largest neighbours, Pakistan and Bangladesh, are less studied by Israeli scholars is that these predominantly Muslim countries forbid entry to Israeli passport holders. And although many Israelis have dual citizenship, most of them do not take the risk of conducting field studies there with their other passport.

Indian languages at Bar-Ilan. Thus, she cannot read original texts with her students. That there is a Department of Asian Studies at the Bar-Ilan University at all is already a big step forward, approved only a few months ago after a long process. However, there is no MA programme yet and students in the BA programme “Asian Studies” can still only study Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. It might take many more steps before Indian language courses are offered there as well.

Her love of languages was Sivan Goren Arzony’s entry point to studying Indian languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. And this love evolved while travelling for one year—like so many young Israelis before her—through India and Nepal in 2003 and 2004. However, after her mandatory service in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) as a kind of social worker for soldiers, she did not go abroad straightaway but worked for one year as a machine operator at the printing factory in Kibbutz Be’eri to earn and save money. This kibbutz was established in 1946 and is well-known for its printing house Be’eri Printers. In contrast to other kibbutzim, it has not been privatised yet and retains the old cooperative model. Its inhabitants are therefore in most cases politically left-wing and many among them are peace activists. And many of them were killed or taken hostage during the Hamas-led October 7 attacks in 2023—more than one hundred. Sivan Goren Arzony mentions her stay at Kibbutz Be’eri only very briefly and I dared not ask whether she had lost friends or colleagues—people she met there every day. But if one considers the length of time she lived and worked there and the population of this kibbutz—around 1,000—the answer is obvious.

Why she chose India for her stay abroad is not so obvious but rather surprising. Laughing, she told me, “And if you ask me why India, it’s a funny question because I knew I would go somewhere, but I think I had some issues with my body. And I remember my sister went to South America, and she sent me this picture of her in a bikini in the rainforest with a machete. And I said, ‘No chances that I will go to a place where I am expected to wear a bikini in public!’” With a smile, she added, “I was a kid. It’s only one explanation.” The other reasons were that she wanted to go somewhere where she could afford to stay for one year, where there was beautiful landscape but also rich culture. However, after some time, she grew tired of being a passive tourist and started learning Hindi in Varanasi. And after six months in India, she went to Nepal. There, her attention was drawn to the Kopan Monastery that regularly offers courses on meditation and Tibetan Buddhism to foreigners. It was during one of these courses that she developed a fascination with Tibetan Buddhism. This and her love of languages led to her decision to learn Tibetan and become a translator for a lama, a spiritual master of Tibetan Buddhism. Today, she laughs about it: “It was like a fantasy. I realised it’s not going to happen.”

Back in Israel, she continued to participate in Tibetan Buddhist retreats organised by Dharma Friends of Israel and began her studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In addition to pursuing a BA in psychology, she also studied at the Department of Indian, Iranian and Armenian Studies, where she started learning

Tibetan and Sanskrit, and later also Hindi. With a huge smile, she told me, “I really loved Sanskrit from day one.” And by the second year, she “really was swept away from philosophy to *kāvya*—Sanskrit poetry.” One of the main reasons for this was that she enjoyed David Shulman’s classes, with whom she read Sanskrit literature beginning from her second year onwards. Sivan Goren Arzony completed her studies with a master’s thesis on Sanskrit messenger poems from Kerala—poems that belong to the literary genre *Sandeśakāvya*, a form of poetry that revolves around separated lovers and a message of longing sent to the beloved through a third person or, in most cases, elements of nature such as a bird, a cloud, or the wind. However, her interest was also drawn to Malayalam, the official language of the Indian state of Kerala, during her bachelor’s studies. In the third year of her BA, she took the chance to join a subsidised excursion to Kerala to study the traditional Sanskrit theatre *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*,<sup>5</sup> although she had to learn Malayalam as a precondition: “Again, I loved language. I always loved it. So, I said, ‘I don’t mind learning Malayalam. Good idea! I just want to go back to India.’” She seized the opportunity and began studying Malayalam with Ophira Gamliel. Those classes opened a new world for her, and five years after travelling to India for the first time, she was back in India—this time in the south where her journey to becoming one of the very few Manipravālam scholars started. Manipravālam (literally: “rubies and coral”) is a combination of Sanskrit and Malayalam, a linguistic variety used, for instance, for premodern poetry often “dedicated to the praise and description of wealthy, local courtesans” (Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2025). For many years, Sivan Goren Arzony studied Manipravālam and Sanskrit texts from Kerala with Malayali teachers and especially with Venugopala Panicker (1945–2025), who was professor for linguistics at the University of Calicut. He passed away unexpectedly in early April this year, which is a great loss to the community of Kerala scholars. She told me, “I am grateful for the time, the energy, the wisdom, and the kindness I received from my Malayali teachers, and from my many friends and hosts in Kerala throughout the years.” Thanks to her Malayali teachers, Sivan Goren Arzony was able to learn Manipravālam in depth and finally wrote her PhD dissertation, titled “Eighteen Poets and a Half: A Literary Renaissance in Medieval Kerala”, on Manipravālam and Sanskrit from Kerala. Since then, she has edited the dissertation into a book, which is now under review.

Besides her fascination with languages and local literary cultures, Sivan Goren Arzony’s research interest also lies in the representation of women in literature and women in premodern South Asia in general, and today, she is one of the few Israeli female scholars to have a permanent position working on India. There was no plan to become the scholar she is today when she was heading to India for the first time: “I really remember that I told myself, ‘I don’t want to change in India. I just want to

5 Later, Sivan Goren Arzony also wrote a chapter about this theatre form for a volume edited by the two heads of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* research project, Heike Oberlin and David Shulman (Goren Arzony 2019).

have experiences.' But you know, it's never like this: you change through your experiences." Once she started studying, these experiences were also highly provoked by David Shulman. She talks about him with great respect—with the respect she received from him when she was still a bachelor's student in his Sanskrit class during her second year, when she joined the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* excursion to Kerala in 2008, and when she worked in one of his research projects while still a master's student. Naturally, he became her doctoral supervisor, and he continued to be supportive—also when she became pregnant for the second time while doing her PhD. When she found out that she was pregnant again, she wrote him a long email. But instead of expressing concern that a second child might hamper the progress of her doctoral thesis, David Shulman replied, "I am sure this added personnel will help with the dissertation." Today, Sivan Goren Arzony has four children, is an established scholar herself and one of the many academic children of David Shulman. And almost every Israeli colleague I talked to referred to him as the scholar who laid the foundation for Indian studies in Israel.

## **The Beginning of Indian Studies in Israel**

I met David Shulman at the end of my stay in Israel, even though he was the first I had contacted for an interview before flying to Israel. Now 76 years old, he is officially retired but in fact busier than ever—academically and politically. By coincidence, I had met him two days earlier during one of the many protests by Israeli citizens who are critical of the politics of their government. His Wikipedia entry states that David Shulman is "an Israeli Indologist, poet and peace activist" (Wikipedia 2025). Indeed, he was and is active in these three fields: He is a veteran activist in Ta'ayush, a non-violent volunteer movement that was founded in 2000 by Jewish Israelis and Palestinians and is committed to the reconciliation process between Israelis and Palestinians. Its members are mainly active in the West Bank, where they support in non-violent ways Palestinians facing eviction and violence from Israeli settlers and the Israeli army. David Shulman has also written three books on his experiences in the West Bank: *Dark Hope: Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine* (2007), *Freedom and Despair: Notes from the South Hebron Hills* (2016), and with Margaret Olin *The Bitter Landscapes of Palestine* (2024). And when he received the Israel Prize for his scholarship on South India in 2016, he donated the prize money of \$20,000 to Ta'ayush. The importance of poetry in his life, having himself published poems in Hebrew, should not be underestimated, as it was his starting point for becoming the most prominent scholar working on India in Israel today. When I met David Shulman in one of his favourite cafés in Jerusalem and talked to him about the praise I had heard about him, he was very humble—as humble as everyone told me. He hesitates to talk about himself, but I am glad that in the end I gained an idea about what led him to study India and Indian languages. Before tracing his path to becoming the scholar he is today, it is therefore only fair

to tell the stories of three people who made a deep impression on him and thus also paved the way for Indian studies in Israel.

### **Moshe Spitzer (1900–1982)**

The first scholar David Shulman mentioned is Moshe Spitzer. Born in a small town in what is now the Czech Republic, Spitzer studied Indology, especially Sanskrit under Otto Schrader (1855–1919) in Kiel, where he also obtained his doctorate. Apparently, his family was not happy with his choice of discipline. Smilingly, David Shulman said, “His uncle made him swear an oath on his grandfather’s grave that he would not go to India. They were afraid that he was going to leave Europe.” But Spitzer did leave Europe—like many other Jews—but not for India. After he had moved to what was then Mandatory Palestine in 1939, he founded Tarshish, a printing press dedicated to the translation of classic literature into Hebrew, for instance, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. These literary works naturally also included Sanskrit literature such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Immanuel Olsvanger (1888–1961). David Shulman laughs, “Today it is barely readable.” Modern Hebrew was still in the making and many people at that time still used forms of archaic Hebrew. To this day, Hebrew is the only liturgical and literary language that has been successfully revived as a vibrant modern language, and Moshe Spitzer was one of many who contributed to this success.<sup>6</sup> Besides Spitzer’s printing publications in Hebrew and keeping interest in Sanskrit literature and philosophy alive among the many Jewish intellectuals who emigrated from Europe, David Shulman told me that “there were people who wanted to learn Sanskrit and knew about him. So, he taught it, you could say, in the underground—actually, literally in the underground. There were people in the Haganah, the pre-state army, who wanted to study Sanskrit. And so, when they were not actually fighting somewhere, they would come to him and learn Sanskrit.” Spitzer himself also made translations. Being a brilliant Indologist, his translations were beautiful, for instance, the Rig Vedic poems he translated into Hebrew. However, Spitzer was never able to secure a position at a university, but for Indian studies in Israel, David Shulman is certain, “He was the beginning.”

### **Tuvia Gelblum (1928–2007)**

Unlike Spitzer, Tuvia Gelblum was born in what is now Israel, in Tel Aviv. And unlike Spitzer, Gelblum made it to India. But before discovering India as a subject of his studies, Gelblum developed a deep interest in Biblical studies and Arabic. The latter interest was fuelled by the unusual opportunity to learn Arabic when, as a soldier during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, he was a prisoner of war of the Arab Legion in Jordan for several months, close to the border with Iraq. After completing his studies in Arabic and Biblical studies at the Hebrew University in 1952, Gelblum received a scholarship from the Indian government, about 400 rupees a year, to study

6 See also Spitzer’s contribution to the modern design of Hebrew fonts (Wardi 2016).

Indian languages and cultures, even though there were no diplomatic relations between India and Israel at that time. Tuvia Gelblum's obituary reads (White 2008: 555):

As such he was treated by Jawaharlal Nehru and Ben Gurion as an unofficial ambassador between the two recently independent countries, befriended by leading Indian writers as a fellow-enthusiast, and adopted as neophyte by ascetics to whose cave-dwelling lifestyle he could equally readily adapt himself.

Gelblum's first place of study was Santiniketan, a small and, literally, "peaceful place" (Bengali: *Śāntiniketan*; Engl.: "peaceful abode") in the eastern state of West Bengal. Santiniketan is famous for the Visva-Bharati University, established by the Bengali intellectual and Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Maybe it was too peaceful for Gelblum. He did not stay there for long, travelled to many other places in India, and continued his studies in Delhi. Between 1957 and 1960, Gelblum studied Sanskrit at the University of London, where he received his doctorate with a thesis on "Perception and Inference in the *Nyāyasiddhāntamāñjari*". After returning to Israel, he was appointed as lecturer and then senior lecturer at the Hebrew University, where he taught Indian studies and Sanskrit between 1962 and 1966 and thus laid the official foundation for today's vibrant Indian studies in Israel.<sup>7</sup> However, when his doctoral supervisor John Brough (1917–1984) fell ill and asked Gelblum to take over his Sanskrit teaching for a while, he did not receive the necessary leave and therefore resigned from his position at the Hebrew University and left Israel for good. Tuvia Gelblum lived in the United Kingdom for the rest of his life, became a Sanskrit lecturer in 1968 and Reader in Indian Philosophy in 1972, both at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where David Shulman also studied Sanskrit with him. Thus, the links between Gelblum and Israeli scholarship on India were never completely abandoned. This is most evident in Gelblum's long-standing collaboration with another Israeli scholar of whom David Shulman also speaks with great respect: Shlomo Pines.

### **Shlomo Pines (1908–1990)**

Shlomo Pines was appointed as lecturer in the Department of Hebrew Philosophy and Kabbalah and the Department of Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1952 and promoted to a full professor in 1961 (Harvey 2022). He was mainly an Arabist but knew all the important modern and classical languages, among them Sanskrit. Born in Charenton-le-Pont near Paris, he spent his childhood in different European cities—Riga, Arkhangelsk, London, Berlin—where he naturally also learnt the local languages. His studies then brought him to Heidelberg, where he studied philosophy and Arabic; to Geneva, studying linguistics and French literature; and finally, again to Berlin. There he continued his Arabic and philosophy studies, learned Persian, Turkish, and Sanskrit, and obtained his doctorate on

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7 For an overview of the diversity of Indian studies in Israel, see, for example, Shulman and Weil 2008.

medieval Islamic atomism in 1934. He returned to the country of his birth, where he taught history of science in Islamic countries at the Institute of the History of Science at the Sorbonne in Paris between 1937 and 1939. Like many other Jewish scholars, Pines had to flee Europe to Mandatory Palestine—with his family on the last ship leaving from Marseille in 1940, just before the German invasion of France (Harvey 2022). He also became one of the refugees who laid the foundations for Oriental studies at the Hebrew University, which was founded in 1918 by Albert Einstein and Chaim Weizmann and opened in 1925. But before Pines secured a position at the Hebrew University in 1952, he had to earn his living in different ways. Among other things, he worked in the office of the British imperial censor in Jerusalem during the Second World War. Knowing many languages, he was able to read and censor almost all letters that came in and out of Mandatory Palestine—regardless of whether they were written in Arabic, English, French, German, Persian, or Russian. David Shulman refers to him as “a genius—by any standard” and seemingly his genius was highly appreciated by the British authorities too. It is an irony of fate that he used his language skills as a censor during that time, as his main scholarly interest was the search for connections between different cultural spheres and philosophical influences that transcend time and space. In this regard, he studied Jewish philosophy as part of many cultural and regional spheres, in different languages and during different times. As a professor at the Department of Jewish Thought and the Department of Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from 1961 onwards, Pines did not teach Indian studies or Sanskrit, but Indian philosophy remained one of his main areas of interest. For example, Shlomo Pines collaborated with Tuvia Gelblum for 25 years on al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic version of Patañjali’s *Yogaśūtra*. David Shulman commented on Pines’ interests in Indian philosophy:

You can see that even though there was no one teaching Sanskrit in a steady way, there was a kind of atmosphere, a milieu in which Sanskrit was not out of the picture—Sanskrit, Indian studies. That German-speaking intellectual humanistic world was, after all, the foundation of the humanistic studies of the Hebrew University. That kind of philological, historical, philosophical humanism is still alive here. Amazing. It’s fighting for its life, but it’s still alive.

And one person who has been contributing to this philological, historical, philosophical humanism for decades is undoubtedly David Shulman himself.

### **David Shulman: From Flat Iowa to Spicy Israel, Turkey, Iran, and India**

David Shulman was born neither in Europe nor in Israel. He was born into a Jewish family in Waterloo, Iowa, USA, in 1949. He does not see himself as a traditional Zionist, even though his mother was one. Nevertheless, he felt a strong bond to the Hebrew language and therefore twice visited Israel before he moved there for good in 1967. He told me, “I came because of the Hebrew language. I fell in love with the language as a young boy when I was 13 or 14.” Besides teaching himself Hebrew autodidactically, of course, there were also other reasons. He laughed:

Climate, the food, and the human warmth. It's a very warm country in this respect. Iowa, where I grew up, is as flat as this tabletop. And it's flat also in other ways. I wanted to come to some place where there was a little spice, and life, and warmth. I liked all of that, but the language was really the critical thing for me. And even now, today, I've been here for 50 some years, I think the strongest bond I have is to the Hebrew language.

He talks enthusiastically about Hebrew, the different forms of Hebrew—the Hebrew he hears on the street, the Hebrew spoken by soldiers in the army, the Hebrew used by young people—the Hebrew others look down on and consider to be a “barbaric slang”. How then did he end up becoming a professor of Indian studies?

When I told him that I had never planned to have an academic career, David Shulman nodded and said, “I have the same story. I never intended to do a higher degree. I finished my BA a long time ago, in 1971. I hadn't thought even for a single second that I would do an MA or a PhD. And then, through a series of coincidences...look what happened.” He laughed while looking back. When he came to Israel, David Shulman enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with the intention of obtaining a BA degree in Semitic linguistics due to his love of Hebrew. He started learning Arabic, Aramaic, Amharic, and Syriac. But after he went to Greece and Turkey for two weeks with friends during his first year, he switched to Islamic studies: “Turkey changed my life. I was totally charmed by Istanbul.” For Islamic studies, he also had to learn Persian, and he fell in love with the language: “I was drunk on Persian poetry.” And of course, he then also visited Iran.

His Persian teacher, Yohanan Friedmann, appreciated his enthusiasm and talent for learning languages and one day suggested that he do a degree in Indian studies. After all, the Hebrew University was very strong in Islamic studies—maybe the best in the world at that time. For Iranian studies alone there were five positions in the early 1970s. And there were already the beginnings of Chinese and Japanese studies, but there was no one teaching Indian studies after Tuvia Gelblum had left. Yohanan Friedmann offered David Shulman the prospect of doing a doctorate in Indian studies abroad with a scholarship from the Hebrew University and perhaps getting a job after his return to Israel. David Shulman told me, “I thought this was a ridiculous idea. Truly, honestly, I didn't know where India was—except that it is somewhere beyond Iran.” And he had other plans. But then he told his friend Daniel Sperber, professor of Talmudic-period economic history at Bar-Ilan University, about this offer and Sperber told him, “You're making a mistake—a huge mistake.” Being a religious Jew and a scholar of Jewish theology, Daniel Sperber also has an interest in other cultures: Seven times he walked by foot from Istanbul to India in the 1960s. He took a boat for almost no money to Istanbul and started walking—all the way to India. David Shulman remembers, “In those days that route, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, was the most quiet and peaceful place in the world.” Daniel Sperber liked India a lot and he tried to convince his friend to think seriously about Yohanan Friedmann's offer: “He started bringing me books about India that he would leave on my doorstep. I would come home at night and there would be

another book or two that Danny had left about India.” And since David Shulman has had a fondness for books since his childhood in Iowa, where the library was his favourite place, he read them. He fell in love with Eileen Lendman in those days, and soon she became Eileen Shulman. She, too, liked the idea of going to India. Finally, it was again poetry that was the deciding factor. After talking to Chaim Rabin (1915–1996), a professor of Hebrew and Semitic languages who had studied Tamil because of his interest in Tamil loanwords in the Hebrew Bible, David Shulman went to the library and found a book of beautiful translations of old love poetry in Tamil by A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993). With a smile, he said, “And that was enough. It was language again that brought me to India.”

After visiting Tamil Nadu with his wife in 1972, the decision was easy: David Shulman went to London in the same year, where he studied Sanskrit and Tamil and obtained a doctorate for his dissertation on “The Mythology of the Tamil Śaiva *Talapurāṇam*” at SOAS in 1976.<sup>8</sup> Back in Israel, he was appointed as instructor, then lecturer, and then full professor at the Hebrew University in 1985. When he was appointed in 1976, Yohanan Friedmann, a man with a subtle kind of humour, told him, “You will be teaching the empty walls. You will have no students. And it makes no difference. Nobody cares about that.” But students started coming, started learning: Sanskrit and Tamil, and later also Hindi, Malayalam, Pali, Telugu, and Tibetan. As the number of students grew, more faculty members for Indian studies were appointed, and Indian studies became a vibrant discipline in Israel. Once India and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992, the numbers started increasing even more. David Shulman recalled:

There was a huge emigration of Israelis, usually young Israelis after the army. There were tens of thousands. And some of them would come to us. There were different categories in these people going to India: some were like lemmings, following the mass on a well-defined route—Rajasthan, Benares, Nepal. But the more adventurous ones, the ones who were truly moved by India, would come to us to study languages. There were quite a lot of Sanskrit students—most years 10 to 15 students, for quite a long time. And there were also students for Hindi.

Sivan Goren Arzony was one among those tens of thousands and one of the more adventurous ones—like many of the younger scholars who teach Indian studies at Israeli universities today. David Shulman is a very modest person, but when he talks about these young scholars to whom he taught Sanskrit, Tamil, and Indian philosophy, who completed their doctorates under his supervision, who were employed as post-docs in his many research projects, and who were then able to secure permanent academic positions, he looks very proud. However, he doesn’t seem to be proud of himself but rather of them. After he told me about his journey to becoming the scholar he is today, I can easily relate, and I imagine many others who have built careers in regional studies can as well. Laughing again, he concluded,

8 For example, the book *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Shulman 1980) is based on David Shulman’s PhD research.

“It’s a kind of strange story, very strange, zigzag, oblique. But most important things in life are like that.”

### **Yohanan Friedmann: A Long Series of Coincidences**

“Zigzag”—that’s what I thought as well when I was listening to Yohanan Friedmann’s path to becoming the distinguished scholar of Islamic studies he is today. Yohanan Friedmann has been working on various aspects of Islamic thought and interfaith relations for more than 60 years. He has published several books, for example, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī: An Outline of his Thought and a Study of his Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (1971), *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and its Medieval Background* (1989), *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (2003), and *Messianic Ideas and Movements in Sunnī Islam* (2022). And although he is now 89 years old, he does not think of leading the life of a retired person. Instead, he goes into his office or the national library every day to work on his latest project that has brought him back to South Asia. He told me with passion about his current research:

And now I am doing an odd thing. You know that the Ahmadis were excommunicated by the [Pakistani] parliament in 1974. Forty years later, the minutes of the meetings were opened to the public. The website, which includes 3082 pages of minutes in which the Pakistani parliament discusses the most subtle things in Islamic theology—the nature of prophecy, the nature of jihad, what kind of prophets there are—from morning till night. For more than one month, the parliament was closed as a committee, and the attorney general, whose name was Yahya Bakhtiar, questioned Nasir Ahmad, the third successor of the founder of the Ahmadi movement. This is unique: a parliament discussing theology for a month. By now, I have read around one third of the minutes—about 1300 pages. At some place, around page 600, one of the members of parliament stands up and says, “Sir, we don’t know anything. We don’t understand anything.” They really didn’t understand. These are most subtle things, and in his questioning, Mr Attorney General was guided by some ulama who were members of parliament. This is very odd: In a parliament, somebody stands up and says, “I don’t understand anything”, but then the parliament votes unanimously to excommunicate the Ahmadis. This is odd, but it is also a unique document in which a modern parliament discusses theology. So, I am fascinated by it and hope to complete my analysis in the near future.

And Yohanan Friedmann is determined to finish this research, even though he is concerned that he might not be able to do so:

I am beyond 89. Most of my peers are not with us anymore. I myself am about six or seven years beyond the life expectancy. I always thought that I would not live long because I was born in Slovakia in 1936 and was robbed of my childhood. You can imagine what happened to me there. But apparently, if you survive the Holocaust, you must have been very strong.

Before he told me about his journey from what is now Slovakia to Israel, Canada, and finally India, he added:

My whole life is a long series of coincidences. You know, here we have every year an initiative called Zikaron BaSalon on Holocaust Memorial Day, which means “memory in the living room”. Now there are few survivors who can participate in this initiative. There is almost nobody now who is alive. So, I am frequently invited to some place to tell my story. And about four years ago, I was invited to speak to a group of girls. When I finished, one girl came and said, “Wasn’t it that you survived because of Hashgaha Pratit?” Hashgaha Pratit is divine providence for a specific person. People like to have the world in good order—that things are organized, that there is some justice in historical events. But one and a half million children, victims of the Holocaust, were not less entitled to Hashgaha Pratit than myself ...

He didn’t finish his sentence and instead took a deep breath and said, “So, now I start telling you about the importance of accidents in my life.” Yohan Friedman was born in Zákamenné, a village in what is now Slovakia. His mother ran a pharmacy—the only one in the whole region. Since most medicine was not ready-made and often had to be prepared by the pharmacist herself, his parents, grandparents (his mother’s parents), and him were granted an exception from deportation as “Jews essential to the economy”, while most of the other Jewish families in Slovakia and all the other Jewish families from Zákamenné were deported and murdered in concentration camps. The Slovak Republic was ruled by clerical fascists collaborating with Nazi Germany and his family lived in constant fear. The situation worsened when the German army and the SS occupied the region in autumn 1944. In the middle of December 1944, SS men arrested Yohan Friedman and his family and brought them to Námestovo, where upon arrival they were separated from his grandparents. Only later did he learn that his grandparents had been killed on the same day in a nearby forest, while Yohan Friedman and his parents were held in prison for around three weeks. From Námestovo they were then taken to the transit camp in Sered in southern Slovakia, where he and his mother were separated from his father and brought to the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Only after the end of the war did they find out that his father had survived in a forced labour camp in Oranienburg, near Berlin. In hindsight, it was his mother’s profession that had saved his and his parents’ lives.

The fact that he was born at all can be seen as another coincidence. Yohan Friedman smilingly said, “I wouldn’t even have come into the world without the silent movies—without my father’s love of silent movies, possibly by Charlie Chaplin.” Before his father studied medicine in Prague and later became the village doctor in Zákamenné, where he married Yohan Friedman’s mother in 1933, he had studied at the Neolog Rabbinate Seminary in Budapest.<sup>9</sup> There, his Arabic teacher was Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921), one of the founders of Islamic studies

<sup>9</sup> The founding of this seminary in 1877 can be traced back to liberal and modernist Jews, known as Neologs, who favoured secularly trained rabbis to serve their communities.

and one of the few Orientalists spared Edward Said's famous criticism.<sup>10</sup> However, Yohanan Friedmann's father was more interested in silent films than in learning Arabic and often missed his Arabic class, which is why Goldziher refused to sign his study records. Ultimately, his father gave up his rabbinical studies due to his poor performance in Arabic. Had he been a diligent student in Goldziher's classes, he would have become a rabbi in Hungary or in Slovakia and in all probability, he would not have survived the Holocaust. As it happened, he studied medicine and met Yohanan Friedmann's mother. Yohanan Friedmann joked, "Now I have been atoning for his sins for more than 60 years." And this atonement started when his family moved to Israel, close to Haifa, in 1949. At the Hebrew Reali Secondary School of Haifa, his Arabic teacher happened to be Meir Jacob Kister (1914–2010). Yohanan Friedmann remembers him:

He was convinced, and convinced many of his students, that the only real subject meriting study was Arabic. I had big quarrels with my parents. They were Europeans. They barely knew that Arabs existed, and it was quite clear to them that I should be a medical doctor like my father. There were no other possibilities in their minds at all. But this charismatic gentleman prevailed over my parents, and I never regretted this.

Meir Jacob Kister studied Arabic at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, completed his master's degree in 1949, obtained his PhD in 1964, and became a professor there in 1970. Yohanan Friedmann followed his path, albeit that his was a little more zigzag. He confirmed what David Shulman told me about the role of Germans and German-speaking scholars in the founding of the Hebrew University:

Our institute, when it was established in 1927, consisted mainly of Jewish Germans. I mean, everybody was German, for example, David Zvi Hartwig Baneth [1893–1973], who was chair of the Department when I was a student in the late 1950s. And we joked in the 1960s that this was the last German university, because German academia was still recuperating from Hitler, and our university was the last German university on the face of the earth. So we used to joke. In the Department of Arabic, the second foreign language which we had to study was German, because of German writing scholars like Ignác Goldziher and Theodor Nöldeke.<sup>11</sup>

After Yohanan Friedmann had finished his master's studies on the Arab poet Al-Ma'arri in 1962, he had a conversation with Uriel Heyd (also an immigrant from Germany), a historian of Turkey and chairman of the institute at that time. Heyd suggested that he obtain a PhD from McGill University in Montreal and specialize in Indian Islam. Yohanan Friedmann agreed, soon took a boat to Venice, travelled through Europe for some time and then took another boat to Montreal, from where his journey to Indian Islam began. In Montreal, he studied Indian Islam and Urdu

10 One reason for this lies in the fact that Said did not analyse in detail the works of German-speaking Orientalists (Said 2001: 18).

11 For further details about the history of the foundation of Oriental studies in Israel by German Jews, see Levy 2020.

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and did his PhD on the Indian Islamic mystic Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) in 1966. However, during his PhD studies at McGill, it was compulsory to spend a year in the region of one's specialization, but when he applied for an Indian visa:

No answer—one month, two months, four months. Nothing. Because relations between India and Israel were very bad in those days. So, I consulted my teachers at McGill. One of them knew Zakir Husain, who was at that time the president of India, and he approached him. In no time I got a “presidential” visa. Isn't it wonderful? A presidential visa from Zakir Husain? Fantastic! So, I spent a year at Aligarh University, south of New Delhi.

Yohan Friedmann laughed about this coincidence, which made possible his stay in Aligarh, where he also studied Urdu intensively and realized the importance of Indian studies for the Hebrew University. He came back to Israel in 1966—one year before David Shulman moved there. As his Persian teacher, he recognized his talent and enabled him to pursue a doctorate at SOAS, as mentioned above. He is sure, “When Shulman came, Indian studies mushroomed.” However, many colleagues I talked to referred to Yohan Friedmann as the person who made the official establishment of Indian studies possible when he was chair of the institute between 1975 and 1978. During this period, the Department of Iranian and Armenian Studies became the Department of Indian, Iranian and Armenian Studies. He is too modest to take the credit for that: “I was the chairman of the institute when this happened. And I was active in that, but it is a slight exaggeration. I supported it—strongly. But it doesn't work like that, somebody doesn't just establish a department. It is always a collaborative issue.”

Today, Yohan Friedmann hardly teaches any courses on Indian Islam or Urdu anymore, although he continues to teach other subjects on a voluntary basis. However, there is no question about the contribution he has made to Indian studies in Israel. Ultimately, he, Sivan Goren Arzony, and David Shulman are aware that the circumstances that made them the scholars they are today were a series of coincidences. And it seems that this also applies to most current students of Indian studies in Israel.

## **From Yoga to the University: Mapping the India Learning Landscape in Israel**

As someone who has taught Hindi at an Israeli university for over a decade, I did not expect that writing this essay would reveal just how wide and diverse the India learning and teaching community in Israel truly is. Beyond the university classroom, India, its cultures, languages, philosophies, and religions are actively studied and taught in a variety of non-academic spaces. Yoga and Buddhism are gaining popularity worldwide, but in Tel Aviv, as one interviewee put it, “everyone is doing

yoga.”<sup>12</sup> For many years now, the city of Tel Aviv, together with the Indian Embassy and the Israeli Yoga Teachers Association, has celebrated International Yoga Day on July 21 with public events. Striking images of hundreds of people practising yoga in the middle of city streets circulate widely online. What I hadn’t realized before conducting interviews for this essay is that today, nearly every reputable yoga teacher training programme in Israel includes at least one course on Indian philosophy—and sometimes even Indian history and Sanskrit. As a result, in these increasingly popular spaces—sometimes labelled as part of the “public humanities”—there is a clear and growing demand for knowledge about Indian philosophy. Many of those teaching yoga and Buddhist philosophy in Israel are graduates of university departments of Asian studies. One interviewee, a PhD student with no intention of pursuing an academic career, explained that she continues her studies out of a deep personal desire to learn and was surprised to find that she could actually make a living teaching courses in non-academic frameworks. University departments play a dual role in this ecosystem. On the one hand, they produce trained graduates who go on to teach in public humanities spaces. On the other hand, students who ultimately pursue formal Indian studies at the university level often come to it through earlier encounters with yoga and Indian philosophy outside academia. For this essay, I interviewed 17 students from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University and University of Haifa. Quite a few of them trace their journeys back to this world. Many are certified yoga teachers. For them, their interest in yoga goes far beyond the physical practice. It often begins with a personal transformation—several interviewees described going through a personal crisis, which they were able to navigate with the help of yoga practice—and this, in turn, sparks curiosity about Sanskrit and yoga philosophy. Yoga, they say, is not merely a form of exercise but a way of life, a coping mechanism, or even a spiritual path. Some already teach yoga philosophy alongside physical practice. Though interviewees seldom referred to specific philosophical schools, they consistently used the term “philosophy” or spoke of “Indian thought” more broadly—as a way of looking at the soul and the body. One former student and yoga teacher emphasized the personal and ethical dimension of philosophy in her life:

I’m deeply interested in Indian philosophy and, along with it, Indian culture. Just as our own spiritual history profoundly shapes us as Jewish people, Indian culture is also deeply rooted in its spiritual tradition. As a yoga teacher, I wanted to make philosophy practical—not to be just another instructor offering a workout class at a studio, but to truly understand how I could apply it in my own life. I wanted to channel this knowledge and use it to have an impact on others. And I believe I succeeded—I could really see how it helped me grow.

The same person also shared a touching anecdote about when a student who came to her for advice and she found herself quoting Krishna’s counsel to Arjuna. Yoga

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12 All quotes come from interviews conducted in March and April 2025 with students and teachers connected to India-related studies in Israel.

and yoga philosophy are especially prominent among students from Tel Aviv University, where a charismatic and talented Sanskrit teacher, Rafi Peled, has developed a strong following. Several of his yoga-focused Sanskrit students have since enrolled in university-level Indian studies programmes. They mention the study trips to India that he organizes for his students, where they get the opportunity to study with an Indian teacher. “And we do respect traditions: the teacher becomes my guru, and I become his shishya”<sup>13</sup>, one interviewee said.

Many of the students motivated by a desire to teach also express interest in related fields such as psychology, special education, or school-level instruction. For them, what might initially seem like esoteric or highly theoretical material—such as mantras, the *Upanisads*, or the *Mahābhārata*—often acquires direct and practical relevance to their future work. From personal experience—having studied at the University of Bonn and taught Hindi in Germany (2007–2008) and Sweden (2010) before starting to teach in Israel—I know first-hand that Israeli students tend to be exceptionally practical. Often older and more mature by the time they begin their studies, most have completed compulsory military service in the IDF and have taken time to travel before deciding on a direction for their academic and professional lives. One might assume that this pragmatism would steer them toward more conventionally career-oriented fields, rather than disciplines like Indian studies. Indeed, many do opt for more conventionally ‘practical’ fields. Yet, those who do choose to study India are often remarkably skilled at making their academic interests work for them—finding creative, real-world applications for what they learn. One student shared that after years of working in Israel’s high-tech sector—a field known for its high salaries and fast-paced lifestyle—she realized that professional success alone was not bringing her happiness. She left her job and enrolled in the Indian studies programme at the Hebrew University. Looking ahead, she hopes to combine her previous experience in international business with her current studies: while she once facilitated partnerships with European firms, she now envisions building professional bridges with South Asian counterparts. For her, Indian philosophy and Sanskrit are not a break from her earlier career, but a way to align her skills with what brings her meaning.

Another interviewee, Sarel, shared that after completing his BA in philosophy, he found Western philosophy “too abstract to be of relevance for the human experience” and felt drawn to explore other intellectual traditions. This curiosity led him to Indian philosophy—an area he hadn’t been deeply familiar with before beginning his MA in Indian studies at the Hebrew University. Discovering the rich diversity of Indian philosophical thought, including Vedānta, sparked a strong personal interest and a desire to pursue it further. When asked whether his current

13 The Sanskrit terms *guru* (Engl.: “teacher”) and *śisya* (Engl.: “disciple”) refer to a traditional model of knowledge transmission (*paramparā*; literally: “lineage”), which may be spiritual or practical in nature—encompassing fields such as art, architecture, and more. In this model, knowledge is conveyed through the evolving relationship between guru and disciple.

programme meets his expectations, he noted that while the curriculum does not include many courses specifically focused on Vedānta—his area of greatest interest—it has nonetheless provided him with valuable cultural and historical context. He emphasized that the department has been supportive and flexible, allowing him to pursue relevant topics through elective courses and independent work. “The lack of courses on Vedānta is something I feel”, he acknowledged, “but the programme gave me the tools to begin discovering it.” Sarel envisions continuing on to a PhD but also imagines teaching, whether Indian philosophy or spoken Sanskrit. “If we want to preserve this culture”, he says, “we need to keep it alive beyond academia. I see myself spreading and maybe even teaching Sanskrit—even as a volunteer.” He told me about an organisation offering online spoken Sanskrit courses, in which he is currently enrolled. As a serious and thoughtful student, he has his critiques but, true to character, he doesn’t dismiss the initiative. Instead, he reflects on how it could be improved. Thinking ahead, he imagines Sanskrit not only surviving but flourishing. “Think of it this way”, he says, “if everyone in Israel were speaking German, who would learn Hebrew from scratch? Hardly anyone! And I’m afraid Sanskrit might one day be heading in that direction.” While less drawn to translation, he is intrigued by the possibilities of using Sanskrit in contemporary settings. He imagines writing in the language and even integrating it into everyday life. At the same time, he is interested in digital tools for Sanskrit learning and research. “Right now, digital editions are still a major challenge”, he explained, referring to machine-readable texts that enable computational analysis. “Lemmatization, for instance—breaking down words to their root forms—is something that’s still developing. I’d love to contribute, maybe even by helping develop learning apps that are more practical than what’s currently out there.”

India-related programmes can currently be studied at three Israeli universities: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, and the University of Haifa. At the Hebrew University, the India–Indonesia section offers full BA and MA programmes in Indian studies. BA students are required to take introductory courses on both India and Indonesia but may choose to focus their electives on one of the two. The programme encourages students to develop a regional perspective, exploring India–Indonesia connections through Indian Ocean trade, religious exchange, and migration. At the MA level, students may focus on South Asia, Indonesia, or their interconnections. BA students pursue a double major, combining Indian studies with another department such as business administration, psychology, comparative religion, or history. MA students specialize in one field only. The section offers three main languages—Sanskrit, Hindi, and Indonesian—from which students choose one. In addition, Tibetan, Pali (in the Buddhist studies track), and Tamil are offered, though not necessarily every year. At the University of Haifa, students enrol in Asian Studies programmes at BA, MA, and PhD levels, while at Tel Aviv University, the corresponding programmes are offered within the Department of East Asian Studies. In both cases, students may choose to focus on a specific region or language—for example, India and one of the several Indian

languages taught at these institutions. Among these three universities, at the University of Haifa, the study programmes and scholars have been focussing in particular on modern Asia for more than 20 years. As mentioned in the first part of this essay, a newer programme at Bar-Ilan University now also offers some India-related courses.

About half of the students I interviewed come from yoga or Buddhist backgrounds and seek deeper engagement with Indian philosophy. Many now teach yoga philosophy themselves. Others are drawn through curiosity about language, history, or intercultural experience. Their interests may include diplomacy, business, or linguistics. These students tend to follow traditional academic paths, sometimes sparked by travel or cultural encounters. Overall satisfaction with the programmes is high—most of the students I interviewed expressed genuine appreciation for their studies. At the same time and perhaps unsurprisingly, those with a clearer sense of their future path often voiced frustration over the lack of specialized courses that would support their goals. A common concern was the limited number of offerings on modern India. These general patterns take on distinct shape in the personal journeys of individual students.

Yoav's story, for example, begins with the classic allure of travel but evolves into a deeper academic commitment. Yoav's journey started as that of a 'typical Israeli tourist'—young, adventurous, and seeking a laid-back, affordable destination. He travelled to India and quickly fell in love with the country and its people. He began learning Hindi and described himself as "feeling at home in India". A pivotal moment came when he met a woman from the Netherlands studying South Asian studies at university. Realizing that India could be studied academically changed everything. Inspired by her knowledge of scripts, languages, and cultures, he decided to pursue a similar path. Yoav's passion is language. He studied Hindi for a year and returned to India with a new perspective, which he describes as life-changing. While he initially wanted to study medicine, he now combines Indian studies with psychology. He is preparing to go on a semester-long student exchange to Heidelberg University, which offers one of the most comprehensive South Asia programmes in Germany.

Unlike North America or Europe, Israel has few BA or MA students of Indian origin. However, as a country of repatriates, it is home to Indian Jewish communities such as the Cochin Jews, Bene Israel, and Bnei Menashe. Roughly 5 percent of my students at the Hebrew University since 2011 have had Indian Jewish heritage. Nitzan, who combines Indian studies with linguistics, is one such student. Her interest began during a family vacation to China, where cultural unfamiliarity sparked a fascination with the wider world. She light heartedly told me, "I remember when I returned home, I couldn't stop telling people that there is a world outside. We need to meet it! It is so strange that we don't know anything about it." When her sister later travelled to India, Nitzan decided to do the same. Though she travelled more extensively in East Asia, India left a stronger personal impression. Her

maternal grandparents were from Cochin, making the journey feel like a homecoming. She regrets not listening more attentively to her grandmother's stories. When deciding what to study, she consulted her uncle (not of Indian origin), who encouraged her: "It's your roots, and it's also a developing economy." She was drawn to linguistics and wanted to study a language completely unfamiliar to her. She is also interested in business and international exchange. Over time, she developed a deep appreciation for yoga—not as sport, but as a philosophy. She told me, "I like that in India the soul comes before the body. I used to think it was just me who felt this way. I'm glad to know that many others do too—it means I'm not that bizarre or ridiculous." Nitzan's grandmother used to tell her that, when she returned to Cochin many years after emigrating to Israel, her old friends and neighbours were still puzzled: Why had they left? They used to live so well together. Her grandmother spoke of a life that was not rich in money, but rich in nature, community, and connection. Only now, as Nitzan studies India, does she realize that the Cochin Jewish community she grew up in was a little piece of India in Israel. On her last trip to India, she found the synagogue her grandmother had described. It was still intact. A Jewish man was tending to it. Is he the only one left? Is the synagogue the reason he stays? She hopes to find answers on future trips.

In addition to spiritual and philosophical motivations, some students are drawn to Indian studies with a forward-looking view of India as an emerging global partner. With India's growing economic influence, students express interest in combining cultural understanding with practical fields such as business, diplomacy, and development work. One such student is Noam, who sees his Hindi studies as a strategic step toward becoming a cultural and economic intermediary:

Studying a language helps you understand how its speakers think. That's why I believe learning Hindi is a way for me to better understand the mindset and behaviour of Hindi-speaking people. Why India? Because it's fertile ground—not just for Israel, but for the world—to engage with and learn from. After India closed itself off from much of the world in the mid-twentieth century, collaboration with other countries was limited. But I feel that in recent years, things have started to shift. Israel is developing stronger ties with India, and India itself is working to transition from a passive presence in the global market to a more active player. This transformation enables the growth of industries like high-tech, especially in areas like chip design and software development. India is now one of the world's leading destinations for tech outsourcing, particularly in healthcare. In Israel, however, India is still not fully appreciated for what it is. People don't realize the extent of its global significance. There are so many opportunities, and I often feel I'd like to serve as a kind of bridge or middleman between the two countries. In Israel, people know very little about India—and in India, too, Israel is a small and distant country that many know little about, especially in terms of business. Our government is investing heavily in building this relationship—through the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—but the private sector hasn't yet caught up. I'd say it hasn't even reached 30 percent of its potential. There's a lot of room for growth, and I see this as a

great opportunity for me personally. And beyond all that, I really am deeply interested in India—I genuinely love this country.

Other students speak of the need for “conscious travel”—encounters that are respectful, informed, and reciprocal. There is also interest in contributing to mutual cultural education—through translation, curriculum development, or educational tourism. The pathways may begin with yoga mats or Bollywood films, but they often lead to classrooms, libraries, and field sites. In tracing these trajectories, we gain insight not only into how Israelis engage with India but also into the evolving nature of cultural learning in a globalized world.

## Conclusion

The stories and perspectives presented in this essay reveal a rich and varied landscape of engagement with India—shaped by a love of languages, personal quests for meaning, intellectual curiosity, and cross-cultural connection. From the scholars who built the foundations of the discipline under the shadows of exile and postwar reconstruction to today’s students who seek to combine their academic interests with future careers in teaching, counselling, or international cooperation, the motivations for studying India in Israel are as diverse as they are compelling. Importantly, the exchange of knowledge between cultures has often preceded the formal establishment of diplomatic relations or state-sponsored partnerships. As the cases discussed here illustrate, Indian studies in Israel emerged and thrived even before India and Israel existed in their present forms as modern states, and well before official diplomatic ties were established. Regional studies have long served as channels for informal diplomacy—fostering cultural understanding, academic exchange, and shared intellectual exploration. In this sense, global travel and transnational curiosity generate knowledge, while regional studies offer the tools to contextualize and translate that knowledge across borders.

In recent years, academic programmes in Indian studies—like those focused on China, Japan, and other regions—have witnessed a decline in student enrolment. This is not a uniquely Israeli phenomenon, nor one limited to regional studies. It reflects a broader transformation in the global academic environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated these shifts, further disrupting academic continuity, international mobility, and long-term educational planning. At the same time, disciplines within the humanities—and especially those that require long-term linguistic and cultural investment—face mounting pressure from both ideological critiques and economic rationalizations. Yet precisely because of these pressures, the perspective offered by such studies may be more essential than ever. Regional studies provide historical depth, contextual understanding, and the capacity to engage seriously with ways of thinking and living different from one’s own. They encourage looking at others not as ‘the other’, but in a differentiated and balanced way that resists stereotypes and simplifications. Indian studies in Israel, as explored here, exemplify how such engagement remains not only relevant but potentially

transformative—for individuals and for the academic and cultural institutions they inhabit. Far from being relics of a colonial past, regional studies today function as spaces of dialogue, critical reflection, and intercultural learning. As global interest in the humanities continues to wane, these spaces become increasingly vital. It is our hope that the experiences shared in this essay contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of the field—and of those who choose, often against the current, to dedicate themselves to it.

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