

The Lesser- Known History of Jewish Diaspora in India

Srijit Saha¹

¹Independent Research Scholar

Department of History

Presidency University

Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Email: srijit.saha13@gmail.com

Abstract: Jews have had a connection with India, dating back 2,000 years, also an important micro-minority community in India, reflecting the country's diverse social fabric. This community contributed immensely to India in terms of economy, architecture, art, etc., which are lesser known to us. This paper provides an overview of existing Jewish communities in India, including the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews, as well as lesser-known groups like the Bnei Menashe and Bene Ephraim. The Bene Israel's history and decline, the Cochin Jews' trade contributions and internal dynamics, and the Baghdadi Jews' impact and education initiatives are examined. Exploring the lesser-known history of the Jewish diaspora in India provides valuable insights into social history. This investigation uncovers the significant yet often overlooked contributions of Jewish communities, revealing how their unique experiences and interactions have shaped and transformed their identity and their placement in the social landscape of India. Are the Jews a homogenous micro-minority category, or is there exists heterogeneity is answered at last.

Keywords: Bene Israel, Baghdadi Jews, Cochin Jews, Diaspora, Trade etc.

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Introduction

In this paper, I will shed some light on the various Jewish communities of India, their participation, contribution, demography, and their situations during the Colonial & Post-Independent India. Pioneer studies on the Jewish community of India were carried out over the last forty years by Walter Fischel, the most prominent historian of the Jews in India, and David Mandelbaum and Schifra Strizower, social anthropologists, who have laid the groundwork for all future investigations.¹ It is believed, that the Bible was the first

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mentioned document of references to Jews, apart from migration into India, the mention of the Persian monarch Xerxes, relating to the Jews dispersed throughout the 127 provinces of his Empire.²

The earliest known Jewish communities which came to India were the Bene Israelis, and Cochin Jews of Malabar. During the Colonial periods, India experienced the arrival of the Baghdadi Jews, and they left a huge impact on Indian society in various spheres.³ In 1947-1948, the total Jewish population never exceeded 30,000 in a country which at the time had over 300,000,000 people.⁴ In Pre-Independent India, the Jews, especially the Bene Israel and the Baghdadi Jews, had occupied a privileged position under the patronage of the British.⁵ Under British rule, Indian Jews were encouraged to develop and express an ethnic identity that could not be confined within the traditional caste framework. This promotion of a distinct identity allowed them to differentiate themselves from the prevailing social categories. The economic opportunities provided by the British and their access to education had placed the Indian Jews in an advantageous position.⁶

Till now, the recorded history, most Jews remained loyal to the British. Their role in the nationalist movement is yet to be explored. The ethnicization of the Jewish identity and the Zionist movement in India deflected the Indian Jews from active participation in the Indian nationalist movement. Abraham Erulkar, an eminent Jewish doctor in Bombay, who had attended to Mahatma Gandhi during many of his fasts, assisted Gandhi's well-being. The post-partition riots, state formation, and the nature of archives have likely contributed to this area's lack of exploration. However, it holds potential for future research and exploration.

There was also a wave Jews, who came to India from Central Europe during World War II and settled here for few times.⁷ The relationship with the host society and the authorities has witnessed numerous interactions and has gone through different stages with different forms, which I am going to explore in this paper. Some prominent names of Jews of Indian descent are Lieutenant General JFR Jacob, Nissim Ezekiel, Ruby Myers, Leela Samson, Abraham Barak Salem, etc. The role of the Jewish community in India's freedom movement remains largely unexplored in historical research.

A Brief Overview

Three major Jewish communities were prevalent and mostly talked about. They are the Jews of Cochin or the Cochin Jews, Bene Israel or the descendants of Israel, and the community of the Baghdadi Jews. Apart from them, there was a wave of Sephardi Jews, who came from such lands as Iraq, Syria, and Turkey- as well as much smaller groups from Yemen and Germany to Cochin.⁸ Because of their skin colour, the Sephardi Jews were also coming to be known as the *Paradesi Jews*. There are also 2 other Jewish communities in India, one is in the North-Eastern states of Manipur and Mizoram, better known as the Bnei Menashe, claimed to be one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, and the other one is the Bene Ephraim community of the Andhra Pradesh. Thus, Jews have a thick presence in India, not in terms of population, but in terms of their presence in various states, and their contributions.

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The Bene Israel Community of India

The classic work on the 19th century history of the Bene Israel community is done by Hayeem S. Kehimkar, and the more recent work is done by Benjamin J. Israel.⁹ The most important communal organization for the Bene Israel is the synagogue, since religion, of course, forms the core of their identity as Jews. Bene Israel officer Samuel Divekar established the first Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay in 1796. The Bene Israel built more than twenty synagogues and prayer halls in Maharashtra and elsewhere.¹⁰

The most numerous among the Jewish settlers in India were the Marathi-speaking Jews, known as Bene Israel (the children of Israel). The Bene Israel community has settled for centuries in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. At their maximum strength in 1951, they numbered about 20,000, as reported in the census report, but by 1971, it gradually decreased to about 5,500. It was mainly because of their emigration to Israel, but partly in small numbers to English-speaking countries.¹¹

H. S. Kehimkar's book, *The History of the Bene-Israel of India*, is sometimes described by Bene Israel as their "sourcebook."¹² In this book, the author recounts how the ancestors of the Bene Israel set sail from Palestine during King Nebuchadnezzar's reign and were shipwrecked off the coast of India in 175 BCE. This account is repeated in different forms by other Bene Israel authors, such as Jacob B. Israel and M. Ezekiel, with embellishments by R. Reuben, who connects the shipwreck of the Bene Israel with the Chitpavan Brahmins.¹³

Cochin Jewish Community of India

A copper plate dating from the middle of the 9th century, recording a grant by a local ruler to Syrian Christians mentions a guild of Jews as custodians of a church and its land along with a guild of Christians and bears three signatures of witnesses in Hebrew script.¹⁴ This indicates that Jewish residents were present in Malabar well before 900 CE.

In Cochin, there were two communities of Jews, one was the *Paradesi* Jews, or the White Jews and the other was the 'Black' Jews who claimed to be the descendants of the famous Joseph Rabban.¹⁵ Both White and Black Jews claim to be the original settlers, but the White Jews only arrived in Cochin after the 16th century. Using their wealth and influence, they eventually established dominance.

The original settlement of the Jews of Cochin was in Cranganore, which came under the rule of the Zamorin of Calicut in the 14th century.¹⁶ They also played a significant role in the pepper and timber trades due to their international connections. In 1566, after attacks by the Moors and Portuguese, the Jews fled to Cochin and its surroundings under the protection of the Rajah of Cochin, who provided them with a site for the *Paradesi* Synagogue. The

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Paradesi Jews helped both the Dutch and British in their trade-related works, but the British didn't involve too much in their trade work.¹⁷ The period of Dutch prominence, 1665-1795 often known as the Golden Age for the White Jews. However, the Black Jews shared a little of this prominence and prosperity. Both communities adopted Malayalam as their mother tongue, but never lost hold on Hebrew. Later, the white Jews adopted English as their mother tongue, but the black Jews adhered to Malayalam.¹⁸

Baghdadi Jewish Community of India

The Baghdadis were the latest arrivals among the Jews who made their homes in India. The first settlers were Shalom ben Aaron ben Obadiah Ha-Kohen. He was a native of Aleppo in Syria and not Baghdad. He arrived in Bombay in September 1790, but moved to Surat. In 1797, Ha-Kohen moved to Calcutta, where he built up a very prosperous business.¹⁹

The Baghdadi community in Bombay originally came from Surat. In the early 19th century, some Baghdadis migrated from Surat to Bombay and established their homes there. It was after the celebrated David Sassoon of Baghdad, who, in the year 1832, came to India and the Baghdadi community established itself in Bombay with a strong foothold.²⁰

In Calcutta, the Baghdadis found themselves the only settled Jews, and they had to establish their synagogue (1823) and cemetery. In Bombay, on the other hand, the Baghdadis found the Bene Israel already settled with a functioning synagogue and a cemetery. Though in many ways the Bene Israel must have appeared strange to them. Baghdadis worshipped for a while in the Bene Israel synagogue and buried their dead in the Bene Israel cemetery. Soon, however, they began worshipping in their own prayer halls.²¹ Both in Calcutta and Bombay, a certain number of Baghdadis became extremely wealthy. The Sassoons in Bombay and the Ezras in Calcutta were the most prominent.²²

In terms of education, the Baghdadis in Bombay were well-informed. The Sassoons ensured that Baghdadi children received free education by providing for their schooling at the David Sassoon School. In Calcutta, the Baghdadi community was not as alert in the matter of education as the Bombay Baghdadis.²³ Gradually, with time, the younger generation of the Baghdadi Jews became more familiar with English and adopted English as their mother tongue.²⁴

The Baghdadi community consistently sought to distinguish themselves from the native people of India and their fellow Bene Israel community, maintaining a separate identity. This separation contributed to their animosity toward the Mutiny of 1857. Today,

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though a few hundred Baghdadis have chosen to stay on in Bombay and Calcutta as Indian citizens.²⁵

Indian Judaizing Movements

The Bnei Menashe is a small community observing Judaism that has evolved within the constellation of Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes. These tribes are located in North-East India and neighbouring areas of Myanmar and Bangladesh, particularly in the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram, and in the Chin State of Myanmar. These tribes claim themselves to be the descendants of the lost biblical tribe of Manasseh. So, they used the term Bnei Menashe or the “Children of Manasseh”.²⁶

The Bene Ephraim community emerged in the late 1980s in coastal Andhra from a group of Christianized Madiga ‘untouchables’, who linked themselves to the ancient Kingdom of Israel through a fictive narrative. The movement of the Bene Ephraim highlights the interplay between the particularistic and the universalistic tendencies in Judaism.²⁷

Jewish Status in Post-Independent India

The census figures of India included 3,153 Jews in the various states of the native rulers, and 19,327 living in what was then British India, making a total of 22,480 Jews.²⁸ The distinction between native states and British India became obsolete after the partition of August 15, 1947.²⁹ It is estimated that about 500 Jews voluntarily left Pakistan for India by the middle of 1948.³⁰ However, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 has influenced the Jewish population in India in two divergent trends.³¹ In September 1950, India granted de jure recognition to Israel.³² Thus, the Jews in India are as secure citizens, they must, with the rest of the population, await a general consolidation of their native country’s affairs.³³

Conclusion

India’s Jewish communities, comprising the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, Baghdadi Jews, and various Judaizing movements, have made significant contributions to the country’s socio-political history. In this paper, I argued, that Bene Israel, primarily Marathi-speaking, represents the largest group of Jewish settlers in India. In Cochin, the Jewish presence is marked by two distinct communities: the *Paradesi* (White) Jews, and the Black Jews. The Baghdadi Jews, who originally migrated from Surat, established a significant presence in Bombay. The Bnei Menashe, a small group within the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes of North-East India, and the Bene Ephraim, emerging from Christianized Madiga ‘untouchables’ in coastal Andhra Pradesh further illustrates the diverse ways, in which Jewish identity has evolved in

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India. The central argument is that Jewish identity is heterogeneous, encompassing a diverse range of communities within the broader category of Jews.

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