

## Jerusalem Letter

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# THE LAST JEWS IN INDIA AND BURMA

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*End of the Indian Diaspora / Jews of Cochin / The Bene Israel / Mughal Courtiers / Portuguese Marranos / Baghdadi Jews / Jews in Burma / India's Ashkenazim / Tribal Jews / Issues Facing Indian Jewry Today*

## The End of the Indian Diaspora

One Shabbat in July 1987, for the first time since the synagogue was built 419 years ago, there was no minyan in the fabled Paradesi Synagogue of Cochin. Since the beginning of 1987, the population of Jew Town, once about 300, has diminished from 33 to 29 due to immigration to Israel. Similar forlorn scenarios are being repeated throughout India.

The one remaining Jewish family in North Parur, Kerala, bravely keeps the synagogue's ner tamid (eternal light) burning and gathers each Shabbat for informal prayers. In Puna's best known landmark, the Ohel David Synagogue built by David Sassoon, the Sefer Torah is no longer read for lack of a hazan. In "the grandest synagogue in the East," the Maghen David of Calcutta, a few old Jews of Baghdadi extraction gather weekly; sometimes there is a minyan, sometimes not. The roof leaks badly at Bombay's Maghen David and there is no one to see to its repair. Only two Sifrei Torah remain in Rangoon's Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue where there were once 126 scrolls.

Of the more than 25,000 Jews in India at independence, perhaps 5-6,000 remain, and many of them are highly assimilated Bene Israel in Bombay. Jewish life has become all but impossible. The vast community matza bakeries of Bombay and Calcutta have been all but silenced. The glorious Jewish community of Cochin has now been reduced to a few old homes along

Synagogue Lane, and many of the unique observances of the Cochins can no longer be continued. The Director of the Bombay office of the Jewish Agency lives in Israel; there is not enough for him to do in India to warrant full-time residence.

In this exotic corner of the diaspora, a realm in which Jews lived for millennia in freedom and dignity, bathed in the affection of their Hindu brethren, India was the most hospitable of homes, a nation which has been host for six distinct Jewish communities: the ancient and celebrated Cochinites, the once-forgotten Bene Israel, the courtiers of the Mughal emperors, Portuguese Marranos, the commercially and industrially prominent Baghdadis, the scattered Ashkenazim, and today's tribal Jews of the far northeast.

## **The Jews of Cochin**

The oldest Indian Jewish community is in the southwesternmost state, Kerala, centered in the quaint port city of Cochin. They have been in India for at least 1,000 years; medieval Muslim and Jewish travelers wrote of their high status and favor of the Maharajahs. More likely, they have been there nearly 2,000 years, perhaps from the destruction of the Second Temple as their tradition holds. The third-century Bishop of Caesaria, Eusebius, wrote of an Aramaic copy of the Gospel of St. Matthew which had been seen in India a hundred years before him. The earliest settlements may even have dated from King Solomon's time, since such luxury items as ivory, peacocks and linen were imported from India during his reign.

At the time of independence, there were seven active synagogues in the princely State of Cochin and one in the State of Travancore: three in Cochin, two in Ernakulam, and one each in Parur, Chendamangalam and Mala.

Today there is a regular minyan only in the Paradesi Synagogue of Cochin. The 1568 synagogue, the oldest in the British Commonwealth, is beautifully maintained, even if the community's cemetery has deteriorated. Plans have been made for the Archaeological Survey of India to convert the synagogue into a museum when the remaining few Jews have gone. The Thekumbagam Synagogue (1647), about 100 meters south along Synagogue Lane, was demolished in the early 1970s, and the Kadavumbagam (1539), several hundred meters farther south, is a warehouse.

Ernakulam now has three Jewish families -- the Eliases, Nehemias and Abrahams -- about 20 people all told; there were once about 1,000. The Kadavumbagam Synagogue (1200) is in reasonably good repair. It was closed in 1972 and is now a flower nursery; its spirit lives on at Moshav Nevatim, near

Beersheba, where its Sifrei Torah -- including one with a solid gold case -- have been installed. The Thekumbagam Synagogue (1580) is a Jewish-owned poultry farm.

The Simon family clings tenaciously to its beloved synagogue (originally built in 1164, rebuilt in 1616) in the town of North Parur, where once around 1,000 Jews lived. Esther Simon tends the ner tamid in the dilapidated building, and the family recites prayers there each Shabbat. For Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, relatives from nearby Alwaye join them and form a minyan. Said Esther Simon, matriarch of the family, "We have only three things now: the house, this synagogue and the cemetery. It's very difficult to live here now."

The nearby towns of Mala and Chendamangalam have no Jews left; both synagogues are terribly run down. The Mala Synagogue (1597) was donated to the town council of elders for use as a community center by the Jewish community when they moved to Israel en masse in 1952. In Chendamangalam, the 1614 synagogue stands empty, its magnificent carved, wooden ark -- an unsurpassed example of Kerala Jewish art -- silently decaying, its prayer books strewn about, and a fine parchment Torah scroll awaiting rescue from oblivion.

Sattu Koder is the scholarly, octogenerian leader of the community and President of the South India Jewish Association. The 29 Jews of the Paradesi community and perhaps another 30 scattered throughout Kerala are all that remain of the 2,500 prior to mass aliya.

## **The Bene Israel**

Second in antiquity but by far the largest community is the Bene Israel of Bombay and environs. These were the most "Hinduized" of India's Jews. Cut off from world Jewry for centuries, they forgot their Hebrew -- except for the Shema -- and adopted such Hindu practices as abstention from meat-eating and banning widow remarriage. They did not recognize the term "Jew" and formed the shanwar teli or "Saturday oil-presser" caste, so-called because of their abjuring work on Shabbat. They held firmly to the vestiges of Jewish observance, however, and practiced circumcision on the eighth day, kept kashrut and celebrated most Jewish festivals in dimly-remembered forms for uncounted and uncountable centuries.

As Bombay grew into a major industrial and commercial center during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Bene Israel moved there from the neighboring countryside of the Konkan coast. With a tradition of military and government service, they settled in such diverse cities as Puna, the monsoon

capital of the old Bombay Presidency; Ahmedabad, India's second leading textile center in Gujerat state; Karachi, the Sindh's leading seaport, now in Pakistan; Delhi, the capital since 1912; Calcutta, the old capital and home to thousands of Baghdadi Jewish industrialists and traders; and Rangoon, a major seaport, now capital of Burma. In each of these cities, they built synagogues and have left a distinguished mark of service to Indian society.

Before aliya to Israel, there were 20,000 Bene Israel in India; now there are 4-5,000, mostly in Bombay, with communities in Puna, Ahmedabad, and New Delhi, and individuals scattered throughout India.

Jewish life in Bombay is rooted in its synagogues: Shaar ha-Rahamim (1796); Shaare Rason (1840); Tifereth Israel (1886); Etz Haeem Prayer Hall (1888); Maghen Hassidim (1904); Kurla Bene Israel Prayer Hall (1946); and India's only Reform congregation, Rodef Shalom (1925). Nearby is Shaar Hashamaim in Thane (1879). Around the Konkan region are Maghen Aboth in Alibag (1842); Beth El in Panvel (1849); and Beth Ha-Elohim in Pen (1863).

There is a proliferation of Jewish organizations in Bombay -- on paper at least. Most really do not function. For example, the Jewish Club does little more than sponsor card games for its largely non-Jewish membership. However, ORT maintains schools for 125 boys in Mazagaon and 80 girls in Worli, and its energetic young director, Ralph Jhirad, makes it a community focal point. The unofficial spokespersons for the community include Professor Nissim Ezekiel, the celebrated poet; Moses Sultoon, trustee of the Sassoon Trusts; Sophy Kelly, headmistress of the Hill Grange School; I.S. Abraham, senior Times of India writer; and attorney Shellim Samuel. The Consulate of Israel is also present.

Puna is the most active of the satellite Bene Israel communities. We do not know the origin of the settlement; Bene Israel were soldiers for the Puna-based armies of Shivaji, the great Maratha leader of the seventeenth century. The first known Bene Israel of Puna was Subedar Abraham David Charikar, who was appointed Superintendent of Police in 1863. A prayer hall was established fifteen years later, and the Succath Shelomo Synagogue was built in 1921. With about 150 members, the synagogue is active, especially on Friday nights, and a warm Jewish spirit fills the modest building. The community has an active Jewish Welfare Association (founded 1971), a small Jewish library, a Puna Jewish Youth Group and a modest newsletter, Mikhtav Shelanu. Hebrew and Jewish education is offered at the synagogue's Sunday school, the teacher being Professor S.B. David of the biology department of Puna University. There is an old Jewish neighborhood near the synagogue, Rasta Peth and Nana Peth, but community members who can afford it prefer more spacious homes scattered throughout the expansive city. Despite the demise of the traditional Jewish neighborhood, the Puna community remains cohesive and

active.

Ahmedabad, in Gujerat state, is India's second textile city, located to the north of Bombay. It, too, attracted Bene Israel civil servants, military personnel, railway workers and traders as early as 1848 when Dr. Abraham Benjamin Erulkar, who had been assigned to the government hospital, settled there with his family, converting his home into a prayer hall in 1850. The community built the art deco-style Maghen Abraham Synagogue in 1934. Located opposite a Zoroastrian temple in a poor, Muslim section of town, the synagogue is architecturally striking but neglected. Prayer services are held twice on Shabbat and on festivals. Once numbering more than 2,000, the 300 Jews who remain in Ahmedabad are spread around the city. many are involved in education, especially much sought-after English medium education. According to R.M. Best, headmaster of the Best Schools, the preeminence of Jewish-run schools in Ahmedabad emerged since Indian independence and was part of the general trend towards indigenization of Indian institutions. Prior to independence, English-medium education was firmly in Christian missionary hands. Whether run by foreigners or Indians, Christian missions have always been suspect in India as tools of foreign domination. However, many Indians were -- and are -- caught in the conflict between seeking the best education for their children and avoiding alien religious indoctrination. Jews began to move into the education field soon after independence, and Hindu, Jaina and Muslim students flocked to them. Gradually, standards at the seven Jewish-run schools of Ahmedabad matched those at the mission schools and today the missionaries have been displaced by Jews.

Early in the twentieth century, Bene Israel moved to the new British capital at New Delhi. While there had been Persian-speaking Jews in Delhi during Mughal times, and the tomb of one of them -- Sarmad, near the Juma Masjid, is a significant Muslim pilgrimage site -- there is no evidence that they overlapped the arrival of the Bene Israel. In 1956 the community built the modest Judah Hyam Prayer Hall; before that time prayers were said in a rented house in the Bara Tooti section of town. The New Delhi community has always been small, and even today a minyan is regularly obtained only with the participation of Jewish diplomats and tourists. There is an active Jewish Welfare Board and a Centre for Jewish and Inter-Faith Studies, which has published some pamphlets on Indian Judaism and holds classes in Hebrew and Jewish studies. It is also a venue for various community organizations, Jewish and non-Jewish. There are about eight Bene Israel families in New Delhi today; nevertheless, the Jewish community there is active and visible and here are services in the synagogue every Friday evening and on holy days and festivals.

Ezra Kolet, President of the Indian Council of Jewry, is the leader of the New Delhi community, the community's hazan and frequent liaison between India's Jews and the government of India. For years he has attempted to move the

Indian bureaucracy to grant visas to Israeli citizens of Indian origin with a minimum of delay, a thankless task which has met with moderate success at best. A retired senior civil servant and accomplished violinist, Kolet founded the Delhi Symphony Orchestra in 1964.

## **Mughal Courtiers**

Persian speaking Jews from Afghanistan and Iran came with the Ghaznavad, Ghori and Mughal invasions of Mahmud (11th century), Muhammad (12th century) and Babur (16th century). The most obscure of Indian Jews, they were traders and courtiers of the Mughals. Jewish advisors at the Court of Akbar the Great in Agra played a significant role in Akbar's liberal religious policies and built a synagogue there. In Delhi, one Jew was tutor to the Crown Prince, Dara Shukah; the teacher and student were later assassinated by Aurangzeb when he usurped the throne. Jews traded freely in Kashmir, the Punjab, and throughout the Mughal Empire.

## **Portuguese Marranos**

It is likely that no one will ever know the extent to which Marranos, principally from Portugal, settled in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it is clear that some did, accompanying the Portuguese colonizing and trading fleets. The earliest Jewish, or at least Marrano, settlements in Bombay date from Portuguese times in the mid-sixteenth century. Unfortunately, by the very nature of their situation, they left us traces and are known to us only through scattered references.

## **Baghdadi Jews**

Arabic-speaking Jews came to India as traders in the wake of the Portuguese, Dutch and British. These "Baghdadis," as they came to be known, especially the Sassoons of Bombay and the Ezras of Calcutta, eventually established manufacturing and commercial houses of fabulous wealth.

They first settled in Surat, in the Sindh, during the seventeenth century, where there were 95 Jewish families and a synagogue soon thereafter. However, as Bombay rose to replace Surat as west India's leading port and commercial

center, Jewish attention was directed there. The Syrian Suleiman ibn Ya'qub was the first prominent Arabic-speaking Jewish businessman of the city, his activities spanning the period from 1795 to 1833. However, it was the arrival of the Baghdadi merchant, industrialist and financier David Sassoon (1792-1864) in 1833 that heralded the remarkable sojourn of the Baghdadi Jewish community of Bombay. The Sassoon family, "the Rothschilds of the East," played a major role in the industrialization of Bombay, and Jews provided the city with three of its mayors, professors in its university and producers and stars for its film industry.

During its heyday, Bombay had several Jewish newspapers (in Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew, Marathi and English), a Jewish publishing industry, Zionist and community organizations. The Sassoons built two beautiful synagogues to serve the Baghdadi community: Maghen David (1863) in Byculla and Keneseth Eliyahu (1883) in Fort, both of which usually manage to obtain a Shabbat minyan today. By 1950 there were nearly 20,000 Jews in Bombay, but immigration to Israel, America, Britain, Australia and Canada have drastically reduced those numbers. Of the Baghdadi community, around 200 remain.

As did many upper-class Bombayites, David Sassoon established a summer home in Puna, a hill town 120 miles east which served as capital of the Bombay Presidency during the monsoon. The best-known landmark in Puna is the 90-foot tower of the red brick Ohel David Synagogue (1863), known locally as Lal Deval, "red temple." Sassoon's impressive mausoleum is found in the synagogue's courtyard. Only a handful of Baghdadis remain in Puna, mostly middle-class merchants living in the Cantonment area. The magnificent synagogue more often than not fails to attain a minyan, even on Shabbat, and no member of the community is qualified to read the Torah.

The Calcutta community was founded by Shalom Obaidah ha-Kohen (1762-1836), who arrived there from Surat in 1798. His commercial interests took him from the Punjab to Dacca across the great Gangetic plain of northern India, and small Jewish trading outposts -- often including a prayer hall and a cemetery -- sprang up in his footsteps from Lucknow to Darjeeling. The fortunes of the Baghdadi families began with the opium trade to China and gradually reached all phases of industry and commerce. The leadership of Calcutta Jewry was held by the Cohen and Ezra families, the latter ranking among the city's most prominent industrial and commercial houses.

The city has three synagogues located within a few paces of each other in China Bazar: Neveh Shalom (1831), Beth El (1856) and the magnificent Maghen David (1884). The three obtain a minyan on a rotating basis, using paid congregants. Two small synagogues, since closed, were founded in 1897 and 1924 in the fashionable Park Street area as Jews moved there from China Bazar. Calcutta has had Jewish schools, a religious court, a matza board, charitable and burial associations, a Jewish hospital, several newspapers, a

publisher since 1840 and Zionist groups.

Calcutta has had three Jewish sheriffs, and Jews have provided Bengal's first female attorney, several scholars -- both secular and religious -- and journalists, writers, musicians and sportsmen. The most famous Calcutta Jew of recent times is Lt.-Gen. Jack Frederick Ralph Jacob who commanded Indian forces on the eastern front during the 1971 war which led to the establishment of Bangladesh. Before the Second World War there were 3,800 Jews in Calcutta, a number which grew to more than 5,000 with the influx of Jewish refugees from Rangoon; now there are around 120. Jewish visitors are welcomed by the Nahoum family -- one need only drop by at Nahoum's Bakery in New Market.

## **Jews in Burma**

Bene Israel and even some Cochinim followed the trail of prosperity to Calcutta and even beyond, to Rangoon, where another major Jewish community grew up. The first Jew known to settle in Burma was one Solomon Gabirol, probably a Bene Israel, who served as a commissar in King Alaungpaya's army. The community itself dates from the early nineteenth century when Baghdadis from Calcutta pursued their opium-based fortunes eastward, stopping in Rangoon en route to Singapore, Jakarta, Bangkok, Saigon, Manila, Tokyo, Hongkong and Shanghai.

It was not until the 1870s, however, that a sufficient number of Jews was concentrated in Rangoon to form a proper community, and they built the beautiful Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue in 1896. The community once had 126 Sifrei Torah, a Talmud Torah, a Zionist group and numerous charitable and communal organizations. A second synagogue, Beth El, was opened in 1932, and some 700 graves are found in the well-kept cemetery on 91st Street. Satellite communities developed in Mandalay (where there remain a few Jews and a cemetery), Maymo, Moulmein, Bassein, Akyab and Toungyi. Bassein even had a Jewish mayor, a Mr. Raphael, as did Rangoon, one David Sopher during the 1930s.

The community was virtually destroyed when the Japanese, suspicious of Jews as potential British sympathizers, conquered Burma, driving most of Burma's 1,200 Jews to Calcutta. About 500 returned after the war, and Burmese Judaism enjoyed a brief flowering after independence and the establishment of cordial Israeli-Burmese relations, which were based on the warm friendship between Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and U Nu. When Ne Win launched a successful coup in 1962, the position of minorities in Burma

generally deteriorated, as did the nation's economy, and most Jews left.

Today there are but a handful of Jews and half-Jews in Rangoon. The synagogue is beautifully maintained through the efforts of Jack Samuels, the community's leader, even though the last regular Shabbat service was held as far back as 1965. While open for all festivals, a minyan is obtained only with assistance from Israeli, American and Canadian diplomats and tourists during the High Holy days. Sadly, the Burmese interlude for Jews has already passed into history.

## **India's Ashkenazim**

The Ashkenazim were the smallest and shortest-lived group of Jews in India. Never forming separate communities, Ashkenazi contributions to India were made by individuals such as Walter Mordechai Haffkine (1860-1930), the developer of the anti-cholera vaccine. A medical research institute bearing his name flourishes in Bombay today. As temporary home to about 2,000 refugees from Nazi Germany, India benefitted from an influx of Jewish physicians who attached themselves to the various communities of their co-religionists in India's major cities.

## **Tribal Jews**

The most mysterious of India's Jews are also the most controversial. Several Chin-kuki tribal groups in the northeastern Indian states of Manipur, Mizoram, Assam and Nagaland, the western Burmese Chin state and Bangladesh's Chittagong hill tracts claim to be descendents of the tribe of Menashe. According to them, they came from China and lost their religion during centuries of wanderings through remote Asia. A curious religious revival has emerged among them involving dreams and revelations about their history and a return to their "true identity." Living in remote and conflict-ridden tribal areas, they are as inaccessible as they are tantalizing.

There are an estimated 4,300 Jewish tribals in India, with more in Burma and Bangladesh. No one knows quite what to make of these tribals, animists until the last generation, nor what to do about their claims to Jewish identity and their aspiration to immigrate to Israel. Several groups, especially Jerusalem-based Amishav, have made efforts to reintroduce them to Jewish observance, and some have undergone Orthodox conversion. The Israeli ambassador to Burma, Itiel Pann, is sympathetic to their cause, but the Israel government

recently denied visitor visas to a delegation of Indian tribals.

## **Issues Facing Indian Jewry Today**

The most significant issue confronting India's Jews is the poor relationship between India and Israel. India extended diplomatic recognition to Israel in the early 1950s and allowed Israel to establish a consulate in Bombay. But relations never developed to the expected exchange of ambassadors. Indeed, a pro-Arab policy has become so embedded in the Indian government that not even the sympathetic Janatha government led by Morarji Desai in the late 1970s was able to reverse this trend.

Indian Jews feel ambivalent; they want foreign Jews to appreciate that India's policies are not antisemitic, but reflect such factors as the importance of the Arab world for India's foreign trade, the political views of its 80,000,000 Muslim citizens, and its aspirations to Third World leadership. On the other hand, the Indian bureaucracy can be remarkably petty in its day-to-day operations, often to the detriment of Jewish concerns. For example, Israelis of Indian origin have a difficult time obtaining visas to visit their homeland.

Indian Jews are well aware that their government's anti-Israel policies do not reflect popular sentiment, especially among the Hindu majority. For example, when the Israeli tennis team were refused visas to participate in the Davis Cup competitions in New Delhi in 1987, a groundswell of pro-Israel opinion emerged in the press, leading India to relent and allow the match to be held, although this year India has announced that it will not send its team for a scheduled Davis Cup round in Tel Aviv.

Indian Jews are closely following the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in such organizations as the Shiv Sena of Maharashtra, the Janatha Party and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Many see in these movements allies; they reason that while a secular Indian government has been hostile to Zionism, perhaps a more Hindu one would not be -- and these organizations propose precisely to "Hinduize" India. The affinities between Hindus and Jews go beyond their shared perception of a Muslim adversary, and while secularism has been in the interest of Jews in most nations of exile, it may be that the Indian case is a notable exception.

An issue which concerns foreign Jews visiting India is the rescue of prayer books, ritual objects and Torah scrolls which are being ravaged by a tropical climate and neglect. Books which are salvageable should be brought to Israel where they could be put to use; others should be buried. Many Indian ritual objects, carved arks especially, are unique in the Jewish world. Deserted

synagogues contain unenumerated treasures which shall soon be lost forever unless their rescue is prompt.

Another issue concerns the Jewish status of the tribals. Until recently, they were welcomed as quasi-Jews for training by ORT, but for whatever reasons a new policy has been adopted, one which treats them like any other Gentiles. While the question of their Jewish ancestry, in all likelihood, will never be resolved, it remains to be determined how to interpret their claims and whether to make a serious effort to afford them with the conversion they desire, along with prayer books, prayer shawls, Sifrei Torah and, ultimately, immigration to Israel. The Indian press, incidentally, treats Israel's refusing them visas as an instance of Israeli racism and anti-Indianism.

The Bene Israel community of Bombay is faced with the question of assimilation. There are no specific data, but estimates of intermarriage run to about 50 percent. Often the Gentile spouse is converted by a committee of Bene Israel elders, but the status of these conversions is questionable. Related to this issue is the generally poor state of Jewish education among the Bene Israel. They had been more or less dependent upon Cochanim -- and to a lesser degree, Baghdadis -- as teachers, shohatim and hazanim. Now they perform many of these functions themselves, but knowledge and facilities are sparse. The twin questions of assimilation and education, aspects of the generally increasing secularization of Indian society, threaten the continued existence of the community.

Our generation will likely witness the extinction of Indian Jewry. This makes study and collecting imperative. There is much to be learned from an ancient Jewish community which never experienced persecution. For one thing, the commonly-held view of Zionism as simple a response to persecution is called into question by the case of India, where Zionism was embraced despite the affection and hospitality of the host nation. For another, the independent Jewish principality at Cranganore lies buried beneath a thin layer of earth, awaiting archaeological examination. There remain manuscripts in Jewish homes throughout India containing a wealth of poetry, hymns, and Kabbalistic tracts which have never been analyzed or studied, just as there are Jewish artifacts desperately in need of rescue and transfer to museums in Israel and America.

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