

A CHRONICLE OF CALCUTTA JEWRY

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Abstract

Studies conducted into minorities like the Jews serves the purpose of sensitizing one about the existence of communities other than one's own one, thereby promoting harmony and better understanding of other cultures. The Paper is titled 'A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry'. It lays stress on the beginning of the Jewish community in Calcutta with reference to the prominent Jewish families from the city. Most of the Jews in Calcutta were from the middle-east and came to be called as Baghdadi Jews. Initially they were influenced by Arabic culture, language and customs, but later they became Anglicized with English replacing Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew script) as their language. A few social evils residing among the Jews briefly discussed. Although, the Jews of our city never experienced direct consequences of the Holocaust, they contributed wholeheartedly to the Jewish Relief Fund that was set up by the Jewish Relief Association (JRA) to help the victims of the *Shoah*. The experience of a Jewish girl amidst the violence during the partition of India has been briefly touched upon. The reason for the exodus of Jews from Calcutta after Independence of India and the establishment of the State of Israel has also been discussed. The contribution of the Jews to the lifestyle of the city is described with case study on 'Nahoums', the famous Jewish bakery of the city. A brief discussion on an eminent Jew from Calcutta who distinguished himself in service to the nation – J.F.R. Jacob, popularly known as Jack by his fellow soldiers has been given. The amicable relations between the Jews and Muslims in Calcutta have also been briefly portrayed. The research concludes with the prospect of the Jews becoming a part of the City's history, peacefully resting in their cemeteries.

Keywords: Jews, Calcutta, India, Baghdadi, Holocaust

1 INTRODUCTION

"The Jews are bound to suffer and, in that suffering he enriches the human heritage."¹

Calcutta was home to a vibrant Jewish community at one time, who enriched the city socially, culturally, and economically. The Calcutta Jewry is a mixture and not a homogenous community comprising of both Ashkenazi or European Jews and Sephardi or Eastern and Iberian origin Jews. While most of the Jews of Calcutta are Baghdadi there was also a small minority of Cochin (Malabar) and Bene Israel Jews. The Jews arriving from places in the middle-east like Aleppo, Basra, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, to Calcutta in the 18th Century were classified as Baghdadi Jews. In the initial stages trade was the primary incentive for migration to Calcutta, later political and social unrest and religious persecution by the Ottoman Governor Dawud Pasha forced many Jews to seek refuge in Calcutta. Later many Baghdadis also came to India to escape military service which was made compulsory in the Ottoman Empire from 1909. Calcutta attracted people from different parts due to its strategic, geographic and commercial position as the Second City of the British Empire. The early Jewish settlers of Calcutta were mainly businessman and they traded in almost anything and everything – cotton, jute, spice, indigo, opium, lac and sesame oil.

¹ (Ray, 2001) Pg.- 1

The Baghdadis were Arabic Jews (Fig. 1), who later adopted European customs and clothes. They were the most-anglicised and least Indianized of Indian Jewry. The rich and elite Jews did not try to assimilate into the native population of India and maintained their own customs and practices throughout their stay. However, the common ones, easily established relations with locals, although they were closer to their Muslim neighbours due to similarities in their religious and cultural customs. On social occasions like circumcision and wedding, Arabic songs were sung alongside Hebrew ones. But they learnt a few Hindustani phrases into their vocabulary to help in their dealings with locals. They adopted the English to replace Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew script) as their first language in the 19th century. Their Hebrew names were also anglicized, but Hebrew continued to be language for prayers. The Baghdadis tried to acquire European status, but their efforts were in vain.



Fig. 1: A Baghdadi Jewish Family in traditional Arabic attire on left and European attire on right (Courtesy: Google Image)

The Jews never faced any sort of discrimination in India² and were respected. In its heyday during the Second World War there were about 6000 Jews in Calcutta. But with the Indian independence (1947) and the establishment of Israel (1948), their numbers started to decrease. Due to emigration to Israel and other parts of the world, the numbers sunk to 700 in 1969 and 54 in 1990's. Currently there are less than 20 Jews present in the city, most of them are octogenarian.

2 THE BEGINNING

Though the majority of the Jews of Calcutta were Baghdadis, the first Jew to settle in Calcutta was actually an Ashkenazi Jew from London, Lyon Prager. He came to the city in 1786 as a diamond merchant, but was appointed as Inspector and Purchaser of drugs by the Board of Trade of Fort William. His nephews Mark and Simon Prager came to the city to assist him in 1792.³ The Ashkenazim were followed by the Sephardim before the arrival of the Baghdadis.

Shalom ben Aharon ben Ovadya Ha-Cohen, the first Baghdadi Jew to make Calcutta his home in 1798, hailed from Aleppo. He was a diamond merchant working as Court Jeweller to various Princes like the ruler of Oudh and Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab. He employed Jews from Cochin and other distant cities and his business expanded into silk, muslin and indigo. He was joined by Simon Dwek Ha-Cohen and his son-in-law Moses Dwek Cohen. Moses Dwek Cohen organised the Jewish community in Calcutta. Moses's grandson, Elias Moses Dwek Cohen was the architect of the Magen David Synagogue (1884) and served it till 1927. He also helped in starting Calcutta's first Jewish school in 1881.

The most well-known Jewish family of Calcutta were the Ezras. Joseph Ezra reached Calcutta from Baghdad in 1821. Joseph's sons David and Nissim settled in Calcutta and engaged in trade and commerce, and real estates. David Joseph Ezra served as the Sheriff of Calcutta in 1879. He played a prominent role in the construction of the Beth El Synagogue (1856) along with another Jewish businessman Ezekiel Judah.

² (Cohen, 2019), Personal Interview

³ (Fischel, 1965) Pgs.: 19-20.

David's son, Elia David Joseph Ezra was appointed an Honorary Presidency Magistrate. In 1887, Mozelle Ezra, wife of Elia Ezra, established the Ezra Hospital near the Calcutta Medical College for providing medical facilities to the Jewish sick who needed hospitalisation. The hospital was also provided with a mortuary facility to conduct the last rites of poor Jews. Though initially established to provide cheap medical treatment to the poor and middle-class Jews, patients from other communities were also admitted. At present, the Ezra Hospital has been incorporated into the Calcutta Medical College and houses many departments. The Ezras also owned many prominent properties in Calcutta like the Ezra Mansions, Ezra Terrace and Chowringhee Mansions.

David Hakham Gubbay came from Baghdad to Calcutta. His nephew, Elias S. Gubbay, became a leading merchant of Calcutta and invested his wealth in real estate.

B.N. Elias founded the business house of B.N. Elias and Company and become one of India's wealthiest businessmen. The company had interests in jute, tea, tobacco, bone-crushing, dairying, advertising, printing and other spheres. The business was expanded by his sons, Nissim and Jack Elias, and further by his grandsons, Ben, Stafford, and Julian Elias.

3 SOCIAL EVILS

The Jewish Community in Calcutta was free from crimes like murder, robbery or house-breaking. But at the beginning of twentieth century some Jews were engaged in smuggling opium and other banned drugs from Calcutta to China via Rangoon. This led to the origin of a small Jewish colony in Burma. J.A. Cohen (alias J.A. Jacob) was one such smuggler who acted as the financier of a Jewish gang. Nishin, another Jew was arrested in June, 1912 along with 35 tolas (1 tola= 12 gram approximately) of opium and convicted. Moris Joseph, a Jew, acted as the agent of the smuggling gang in Rangoon. He was caught red-handed by the Excise department in February, 1914 along with 539 tolas of opium concealed in his box. He was sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment. Thus, the Baghdadis acted as proxies of the British in opium trade with China.

Another social evil in which the Jews engaged was prostitution. Though it was not rampant in Calcutta unlike Bombay. The main Jewish prostitutes in Calcutta were trafficked Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia. Most of the agents involved in this trafficking were also Jewish.⁴

4 EXPERIENCE DURING THE HOLOCAUST AND THE PARTITION OF INDIA

During the Holocaust, many Jews fled from Europe to different parts of the world to escape persecution. Many of them ended in at Calcutta. Throughout the history, there has never been any event of anti-Semitism or hatred towards the Jewish community in India. The Jews in India have never faced any sort of discrimination. The Jews from Calcutta wholeheartedly contributed to the Jewish Relief Fund and helped their co-religionists from Europe by providing them shelter in turbulent times. Some of them worked as volunteers for the Jewish Relief Association.

During World War II, the Jewish community in Calcutta reached their highest numbers due to arrival of Jews from Nazi Germany occupied Europe. Also, many Jewish soldiers fighting for the Allied armed forces arrived in the city. The three synagogues of the city were filled to their capacity during the Sabbath prayers. A few of the Jews who came to the city, stayed in Calcutta after independence of India and contributed to the development of the country. Some others married local Jewish women, who later left the city to live with their husbands in countries like the United States.

Rabindranath Tagore also welcomed some Jewish intellectuals who were driven out of Nazi Germany. Alex Aronson, a German Jew was appointed a lecturer in English at Visva Bharati University in 1937. Rabindranath Tagore also intervened later to save Aronson from being taken away for 'parole settlement'. Aronson also befriended Satyajit Ray who was an art student at that time. Later Dr. Aronson confessed that Santiniketan was more like a shelter from chaos and disintegration, than a teaching assignment. Alex Aronson also composed a book in tribute to Rabindranath Tagore – '*Rabindranath Through Western Eyes*'.⁵

The Second World War was immediately followed by the partition of India. During the Great Calcutta killings of 1946, the Jews were not harmed even as Calcutta burned. During the partition riots occurred across the country, but the Jews were left untouched. Many Jews even sheltered Hindus and Muslims in their houses to protect them from violent crowds. Mrs. Cohen recalls that her husband's Uncle hid a few locals in their house

⁴ (WikiVisually, 2019)

⁵ (Kämpchen, 2012)

during the riots in Calcutta.⁶

Flower Silliman, a Jew from Calcutta, was an eye witness to these riots during partition. An octogenarian, she is one of the oldest members of the tiny Jewish community in Calcutta. In one such incident, she recalls that she ran to save a pregnant woman from a knife wielding mob along with her younger brother, as She was confident that the mob wouldn't harm them. She further asserts the fact that Jews have never been discriminated in India and have even rose to high posts by the power of their talent and merit.⁷

5 THE EXODUS OF JEWS FROM CALCUTTA

The Jews living in Calcutta established a good rapport with their non-Jewish neighbours. They were urban in their lifestyle, habits and outlook. They were admitted to the Calcutta University, commercial houses and most exclusive British clubs and hospitals, on account of their contribution to the urban life of the city. The Jews in Calcutta maintained a higher standard of living than an average Indian.

The exodus of Indian Jews began after the formation of Israel in 1948. The Jews of Calcutta were westernized and identified themselves with the British, hence they felt themselves alien when India became independent in 1947. This was further enhanced by the License regime and socialist policies adopted by the Indian government to protect the Indian Rupee in the international market. These policies made the Jews insecure in their trade and business, which cast a shadow of gloom over their future. Many Jews with flourishing business left Calcutta, to live in tents in Israel. The dearth of marriageable men and women within their community, coupled with the vernacularisation of the Indian education system, also hastened this process. Moreover, the dream to settle and work for the development of their Promised Land, attracted many Jews to Israel. This was enhanced by the concept of Aliyah or 'the act of going up' (towards Jerusalem), which called for the immigration of Jews from different parts of the world to the Land of Israel. So, particularly the less affluent Jews left Calcutta and settled in Israel, whereas the affluent ones went to countries like US, Britain, Australia, etc. Jews from Calcutta were held in high esteem in Israel, due to their knowledge of English language.

The Cohens, Gubbays and Eliases who were prominent in the commercial life of Calcutta in the 19th and 20th Centuries, have migrated to Europe and America. Nahoums are the only Jewish family who are still continuing their business in the city.

6 A JEWISH BAKERY

Christmas in Calcutta or a visit to the New Market is incomplete without some delicacy from 'Nahoum & Sons', the iconic Jewish bakery of the city. The current shop (Fig. 2 and 3) in New Market was set up in 1926. The Calcutta Jewry has placed their reliance on Nahoums for their daily supply of confectionary and special cuisine for religious and social functions.

The bakery was established by Nahoum Israel Mordecai, a Baghdadi Jew who came to Calcutta in 1868. In the 1890's, he started a home delivery of bakery and confectionary items like makhbuz, hulwaie, plaited cheese, koleecha (coconut cookies), apam (bread pudding), luzeena (fudge), baklava, and bread. As business thrived, a small shop was set up in New Market in 1910 and the door-to-door service was discontinued. From 1920's, Nahoums became importers of European food items like English biscuits, English sweets and French mustards. Nahoums also started to cater to the clients outside of Calcutta, with their products travelling as far as Peshawar. The non-Jewish clientele of the shop also developed from this time.



Fig. 2: Interior of Nahoums Bakery (Courtesy: Google Image)

⁶ (Cohen, 2019), Personal Interview

⁷ (Dewan, 2016)



Fig. 3: Exterior of Nahoums Bakery at New Market (Courtesy: Google Image)

The Nahoums prepare their food items in the old Jewish style using all-natural ingredients. Dr. B. C. Roy recommended plaited cheese of Nahoums to his patients and invariably carried some for Jawaharlal Nehru during his visits to New Delhi. The 500 lbs wedding cake made by Nahoums has not found an equal in the annals of Indian Confectionary. With the closure of the last Kosher meat shop of Calcutta in 1958, the Nahoums discontinued making non-veg Jewish food.

The Nahoums are not able to cater to all as the demand for their confectionary items is much higher compared to the production. Quality is never let down due to strict supervision in making the items. The Nahoums shop serves as a meeting place for the elites of Calcutta and visitors from abroad both Jewish and non-Jewish. The Nahoums shop is currently run by the Fourth-generation descendants of Nahoum Israel, Isaac Nahoum.

7 A SOLDIER'S TALE

Very few from the Jewish community in Calcutta joined the defence services. Jack Farj Rafael Jacob was one such Jew who distinguished himself in Indian military service. Jacob was born in Calcutta on 2nd May, 1921 in a deeply religious family. Jacob joined the British Indian army in 1941 at the age of 19, against his father's wishes. He was inspired by the reports of the Holocaust of the Jews by Nazi Germany to join the army. In 1942, he was enlisted into the army as Jack Frederick Ralph Jacob (Fig. 4), nicknamed 'Jake'. During his army career spanning about 36 years from 1942 to 1978, he took part in many battles and wars. The most prominent among them being World War II, Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 and Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. After World War II, he graduated from artillery schools in England and United States, specializing in advanced artillery and missiles.



Fig. 4: J.F.R. Jacob (Courtesy: Google Image)

During World War II, Jacob took part in the Tunisia campaign against Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps and in the Burma campaign against the Imperial Japanese army. During the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, he commanded an infantry division in Rajasthan. He is most famous for his role in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, where he forced the surrender of the entire Pakistani Army in East Pakistan under the command of A.A.K.

Niazi. He was commended for his strategy that ultimately led to the capture of Dhaka and establishment of Bangladesh. After that he played a prominent role in bringing peace to the North-East. In 1978, he retired from the army as Lieutenant General J.F.R. Jacob.

After retirement he served as the Governor of Goa and Punjab. He was supporter of close ties between India and Israel. Jacob died on 13th January, 2016 at New Delhi and was laid to rest at the Jewish cemetery on Humayun Road.

J.F.R. Jacob wrote two books – ‘Surrender at Dacca: Birth of a Nation’ and ‘An Odyssey in War and Peace: An Autobiography Lt Gen. J.F.R. Jacob’. He also composed a manual on desert warfare for the Indian army.

In an interview in 2010, he said, “I am proud to be a Jew, but am Indian through and through. I was born in India and served her my whole life. This is where I want die.”⁸

8 CONCLUSION

The day is not far, when the last 20 Jewish residents of the city would perish into oblivion like their ancestors leaving only their schools, cemeteries and synagogues to tell their tales about the Jewish heritage of Calcutta. Another thing that will keep alive the Jewish heritage Calcutta is the Jewish food. Food items like *aloo makallah* (Fig. 5), best exemplify the combination of Jewish and Bengali cuisines.



Fig. 5: *Aloo Makallah*, Calcutta Jewish Fried Potatoes (Courtesy: Google Image)

There has been always a close relationship between the Jews and Muslims in India. This was partly due to similarity in their dietary laws – *Kosher* (Jews) and *Halal* (Muslims). The Jewish girls school now caters to non-Jewish students (Fig. 6), mainly Muslims. The three Jewish synagogue's- Magen David (one of the largest in Asia), Neveh Shalome, and Beth El are looked after by Muslim caretakers (Fig.7). The Jewish cemetery in Calcutta is also taken care of by mainly Muslims. The neighbourhoods in which the last Jews of Calcutta reside are predominantly Muslim. Calcutta is a city, where people (majority Hindu) line outside a Jewish bakery, to buy cakes prepared by mainly Muslim bakers to celebrate the Christian festival of Christmas. The enmity between Muslims and Jews in other parts of the world does not affect their amity and close bond in Calcutta.



Fig. 6: Students of Jewish Girls School (Courtesy: Google Image)

⁸ (Ginsburg, 2012)



Fig. 7: Caretakers of Jewish Synagogues in Kolkata (Courtesy: Google Image)

In the initial days, Indo-Israeli relations were cold, due to the factor of Arab oil and the largely pro-Palestinian sympathy among the Indian Muslims being the prime concerns. But relations improved from the 1990's, with the establishment of Israeli Embassy in New Delhi and Indian Embassy in Tel Aviv. However, the tragedy of the Calcutta Jewry is in the irony that the diplomatic, economic, military and cultural relations between India and Israel are improving, while the Jews of Calcutta are walking slowly towards their extinction.

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