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Tolerance, integration and kosher curry

BY ZAKI COOPER

The vibrant Jewish communities of India have declined — but live on in the diaspora.

IT WAS not surprising this week that a new restaurant in Bombay called Hitler's Cross and decorated with posters of the Führer and Nazi swastikas would so outrage India's Jews that it was obliged to change its name.

More surprising for many people was the news that India has a Jewish community at all. Being a descendant of that community I am used to this surprise. Visitors to my grandmother on festive days are surprised by the scents of curry which fill the home instead of roast chicken, lockshen and pickled herring. What smells like an experiment in cross-cultural affairs is in fact a typical scene in a Jewish household from India.

My maternal grandmother was born in Calcutta in 1913 and emigrated to the UK after the war. Her life story is one thread in the fabric of a remarkable community. Though best-known as the spiritual domain of millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, India was once the home to a thriving Jewish community. At its height, between the world wars, the community numbered about 24,000, and was found mainly in Bombay, Calcutta and Cochin.

Though India's Jews were a relatively small community, their history and backgrounds were remarkably various. My own ancestors went to Calcutta from Iraq and Syria from 1798 onwards, seeking opportunities in trade and commerce. These "Baghdadi Jews", who settled mainly in Bombay and Calcutta, identified strongly with the ruling British in their lifestyle. They spoke English at home, learnt Shakespeare in schools and increasingly all wore Western-style clothing.

In contrast to the Baghdadis, the largest community in India was the Bene Israel in Bombay, who tended to adopt the language, customs and dress of their Hindu neighbours, while retaining Jewish traditions. The state of Kerala in the south was the home to the third community, the "Cochini" Jews. They first came to the region en masse in the early Middle Ages for trade — although there is some evidence that in fact Jewish merchants first visited India in Roman times.

These different communities, the Baghdadis, Bene Israel and Cochinis, may have been hundreds of miles apart and divided by their different histories, but they shared a desire to integrate into the societies of which they were part. Members of the Jewish community rose to prominent positions in the government, business, the judiciary and even the military. One of the most lionised was Major General Jack Jacobs, who led the Indian forces in the war of 1971 against Pakistan, which led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Religious life over hundreds of years centred around a number of ornate and beautiful synagogues in the chief cities. Many still stand and are visited by those eager to explore

their Jewish heritage. On a recent visit to the Magen David Synagogue in Calcutta, I discovered that it is now surrounded by a marketplace, whose traders treat the site with the reverence and respect that they accord to one of their own temples.

Another institution of the community still standing is Nahum's bakery in the heart of the New Market of Calcutta, which has supplied kosher patisserie and delicacies for several generations and became a favourite with many Bengalis.

As Jews mixed in wider society, there was the expected rate of out-marriage, but the community strove to maintain its religious identity. It observed the major festival days, and weddings and community functions were invariably adorned by a rich variety of kosher Indian foods. The community's reputation for hospitality has been confirmed by stories of visitors from the West arriving in India and finding themselves so well looked after that they were reluctant to return home.

One elderly relative told me of an English rabbi who stayed with her family for several weeks in Calcutta, and quickly became a great admirer of the community.

Another notable feature of the community was the absence of any persistent anti-Semitism. Jews in India enjoyed religious tolerance without the anti-Semitism that faced their brethren in other parts of the world and they did not leave India because of any persecution, but because they were lured by the prospect of living in a Jewish homeland after 2,000 years of Jewish exile. Others were nervous after the withdrawal of the British and the rise of Indian independence and decided to seek a new life elsewhere, often in the UK or Western countries such as the US and Australia.

Now there only about 5,500 Jews in India, 4,500 of them in Bombay, and the communities of Calcutta and Cochin have only a handful of people remaining: the Passover Seder service in Cochin in April was expected to be the last authentic one to take place there.

Meanwhile, the community in Bombay, supplemented by the tourist traffic, still has a few functioning synagogues. One of the ironies of the decline of the Indian Jewish community is that it has coincided with an influx of hedonistic young Israelis into the country, seeking relief from the pressures of life at home. It is estimated that there are 30,000 young Israelis in India at any given time.

The Indian Jewish diaspora in the UK maintains many of the cultural and religious customs of the community. In my family, conversations are sprinkled with Hindustani words, and our Sabbath meals often resemble the food at our local curry house. These traditions are proudly maintained — and in recent months a new Indian kosher restaurant has opened in London.

The illustrious history of the community has been used to promote ties between the Jewish and Hindu communities in the UK, with such initiatives as the formation of the Indian Jewish Association, which focuses on the shared values of the communities. A recent example was the reaction of the UK Jewish community to the Bombay bombings, which prompted expressions of solidarity and fundraising.

The Jewish community was never more than a drop in the vast ocean of a country with a population now of a billion, yet its contributions to India and the Jewish world went beyond its numbers. Those looking for a model of coexistence and integration would do well to examine the story of this diverse, vibrant and successful group, which lives on in diaspora communities around the world.