

History of the Jews of India

The total Jewish population of India grew rapidly from 12,040 in 1881 and reached its peak in the 1930s. Indeed in the 1931 census it was recorded at just over 24,000. However this thriving Indian Jewish community was depleted by the onset of Indian Independence in 1947 and the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948. Thereafter, the Indian Jewish community went into rapid decline with the bulk of Jews of Indian origin emigrating to Israel, while others moved to the West. By the early 1970s less than 6,000 Jews remained in India. This figure has further deteriorated and only a handful of Jews remain scattered across India.

The Jews of India fall into three distinct communities: the Jews of Cochin, the Bene Israel and the Baghdadi Jews.

It is thought that the **Cochini Jews of the Malabar Coast (Kerala state)** in southern India originated from a country in the Middle East, perhaps Syria, Egypt, Iraq or Yemen. The Cochini Jews were divided into two communities: First the White Jews, who were descended from those European and Middle Eastern Jews who migrated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The White Jews not only affirmed their original and genuine Jewish status, but held that the principality at Cranganore was granted to their ancestors. Second the so-called Black Jews or Malabarais, who regarded themselves as descendants of the original settlers, but they might have been members of the local indigenous population who had converted. The two communities insisted that they were always against inter-marriage and worshipped in their own synagogues. Some of the White Jews worked in the business of one enterprising family is the community (spice trade) and others were professionals, while the Black Jews were mostly petty traders, buying and selling small articles like fruit and fowl.

The **Bene Israel Jews** claimed an ancient origin but gradually commenced their influx into Bombay in the eighteenth century, mostly coming from the Konkan coast, south of Bombay City. The Bene Israel community has always been the largest Jewish group in India. They adopted the customs and dress of their Muslim and Hindu neighbours, speaking the local language Marathi and in the process forsaking some Jewish practices. Nonetheless they retained easy important Jewish traditions, such as circumcision, the dietary laws and abstention from work on the Sabbath¹. A few Bene Israel rose to high positions in the army and in the navy of the local ruler and a number succeeded in giving up oil-pressing for agriculture. The Bone Israel were divided into two groupings, the Gora or White Bene Israel and the Kala or Black Bene Israel, who generally did not inter-marry.

It was not until the early nineteenth century that a small number of Jews from Iraq, Syria and Iran, escaping persecution, settled in the coastal cities of Bombay and Calcutta, many of whom engaged in commerce and later manufacturing to form the nucleus of the **Baghdadi community**. Although active in the civic life of India, they were hardly influenced by the Indian way of life, identifying mainly with the British rulers of India. They were associated with the consolidation of British empire and the maintenance of British rule in India. Hence they sons relinquished Arabic and embraced English as their new language. The economic base of the major Baghdadi communities were large concerns involved in cotton, jute and tobacco processing, notably the renowned Sassoon firm based in Bombay and B.N. Elias in Calcutta.
