ALMA MATER
Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies

Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
JICS 2024, 1: 42-52
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2024.1053.4

The Role of Baghdadi Jews in India's Freedom Movement

Sayan Lodh[6]

Abstract

The Baghdadi Jews were the last among three historical Jewish communities (the other two being Cochini and Bene Israel) to arrive in India between the 1790s and 1830s, with immigration continuing until the mid-twentieth century. They settled along the emerging colonial port cities of Bombay (now Mumbai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata). The Baghdadi Jewish community as a whole was pro-British and possessed a neutral and ambivalent attitude towards the Nationalist struggle in India. They tried in vain to regain the European status after losing it in 1885.

Since the late 1930s, many within the community gradually drifted towards the Indian national struggle, inspired by the inclusive ideas of M. K. Gandhi. However, their participation remained passive, and they never openly supported the freedom struggle at the community level. Nevertheless, there were a few Baghdadis, such as Hannah Sen, David Haskell Cohen, and Maurice Japheth, who actively participated in the movement in their individual capacities. David Cohen was one of the few Baghdadis to serve prison sentences for his involvement in communist activities. This paper aims to discuss such individual Baghdadi Jews who took part in India's nationalist movements, going against their community's general trend. Due to the shortage of materials, the research is primarily based on online sources.

Keywords: Baghdadi Jews, India, British colonialism, Nationalist struggle, Individual activism

Introduction

Indian Jewry is represented by three historical communities, and four newly emerging Judaizing movements.[7] The historical communities are the Cochinis of Cochin (now Kochi) in Kerala, the Bene Israel of Western India (Gujarat and Maharashtra), and the Baghdadis of Bombay (now Mumbai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata). Of these, the Bene Israel are the most Indianized group, even adopting the local Marathi language and culture. Documentary evidence, such as a circa 950 CE copper plate of Chera King Bhaskara Ravi I granting special privileges to the Cochini Jews of Cranganore, indicates the presence of Jews in India for about one thousand years. However, the legends of the Cochini and Bene Israel Jews date their

[6] PhD candidate, Presidency University, Department of History, Kolkata, slodh87@gmail.com, sayan.rs@presiuniv.ac.in, ORCID-No.: 0000-0003-1289-4497.

[7] The four groups are – the B'nei Menashe in North-East (concentrated in the states of Manipur and Mizoram), the B'nei Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh (Guntur district), the Chettiars of Tamil Nadu (Erode district), and the Noahides or B'nei Noah in Andhra Pradesh (Vishakhapatnam district). The former two claim descent from the lost Israelite tribes of Menasseh and Ephraim respectively. Among them, B'nei Menashe are the oldest (since 1940s), and Noahides are the most recent (2010s) community to embrace Judaism.

How to cite this article: Sayan, L. (2024). The Role of Baghdadi Jews in India's Freedom Movement. In: *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies 1:1*, 42–52. [Research Article]
Submitted: 06.05.2024
Accepted: 21.07.2024

This article is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

presence back to about two millennia. (Ray, 1996, p. 568) Very few Indians are aware of Jews due to their minuscule numbers and absence from academic discourse at all levels.[8]

The Baghdadi[9] were the most Anglicized and the least Indianized among the Jewish communities of India, being the last to arrive on Indian shores. They primarily arrived between the 1790s and 1830s. Though their migration continued until the mid-twentieth century with increased arrivals during the two World Wars. They were chiefly traders who arrived from different parts of West Asia (primarily under the Ottoman Empire) such as Aleppo, Baghdad, Damascus, Basra, etc. A few reasons for their migration were religious persecution (under Dawud Pasha, the Ottoman Governor of Iraq), floods in their native lands (Tigris and Euphrates in 1831), and the pursuit of a fresh future in the newly emerging colonial metropolises of Calcutta and Bombay. Escaping conscription (which the Ottomans made compulsory for adult males in 1909) and persecution (in Europe, and East and South-East Asia during the Second World War) were later reasons.

The Calcutta community was founded by Shalom Cohen in 1798, while the Bombay Baghdadis owe their origin to Jacob Soliman (early 1800s). However, the community was established on firm foundations by Moses Duek Cohen and Joseph Ezra in Calcutta, and David Sassoon in Bombay. They gradually established a thriving commercial and social network stretching from West to East Asia, extending across all the major colonial ports such as Aden, Basra, Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon (now Yangon), Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, which came to form 'Jewish Asia.' This intra-community network connecting families, partners, and friends allowed ideas, commodities, and people to freely traverse across Asia while at the same time staying within familiar surroundings.

The Baghdadis served as intermediaries and middlemen in the triangular trade in opium (and later other goods like tea, indigo, cotton) between India, China, and Britain that enriched Britain at the cost of the other two. Some families, like the Ezras of Calcutta and the Sassoons of Bombay, made enormous fortunes through this trade, aiding in the economic exploitation and colonization of India. They, in turn, re-invested their wealth in real estate, owning some of the prominent landmarks in Calcutta (Esplanade Mansions, Sri Aurobindo Bhaban, etc.) and Bombay (Sassoon Docks, Sassoon Library, etc.). Benefitting from British rule, the community as a whole maintained their pro-British apolitical stance until as late as the 1930s. However, a few personalities participated in the nationalist movement in their individual capacity, inspired by Mohandas Karamchand ('Mahatma') Gandhi's call. Gandhi advised small micro-minority communities such as the Jews to stand aside (from the nationalist struggle) "lest it be crushed between the giant conflicting forces of British imperialism, Congress nationalism and Muslim League separatism" (Roland, 2017, p. 106).

[8] Out of a population of about 1.2 billion (2011 census), Jews number about 5000. Of these only about 120 are Baghdadi Jews (20 in Kolkata, and remaining in Mumbai). Presidency University, Kolkata, is the only institute in South Asia offering courses on Jews, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. There were just 30,000 Jews in India during their peak in the 1940s, out of a total population of about 300 million.

[9] Although coming from various parts of the Middle East, they were known after the one of the major centers of trade and Judaism in the Middle East - Baghdad. Moreover, they generally followed the liturgy of Baghdad (Babylonian rituals).

Background: Failed attempt at being 'Europeans'

The Baghdadis were Jewish (of Sephardic heritage) by religion, but Arabic by culture when they arrived on Indian shores. Their everyday language was Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew script, with few Hebrew influences), while Hebrew was the language of socio-religious rituals. Since mid-nineteenth century, and by the early decades of twentieth century nearly all Baghdadis adopted English language, and European culture. Despite the Europeanization of their rituals, Hebrew continued to be the language of religious activities (although most members were unable to fully comprehend the language by twentieth century). The Maghen David Synagogue (one of the largest in Asia) in Kolkata externally resembles a church with a tall spire and a clock-tower. It is locally known as *Lal Girja* (Red Church) due to its external appearance. Thus, they transitioned to a Judaeo-British culture from a Judaeo-Arabic one over a period of one and a half century.

Their 'flexible-fluid' identity being constantly at crossroads of different civilizations and cultures, was molded according to the culture of the rulers in the lands of their residence with the Jewish core remaining constant. According to one of the respondents of Flower Elias and Judith Elias Cooper, identifying as 'Jewish' was the only way out as Indians were a 'conquered race' and the British never accepted Baghdadis as their own. The only discrimination they faced in India was at the hands of Christian missionaries in the elite educational institutions run by them (Elias and Cooper, 1974, pp. 207-208, 215). In India, they were sandwiched between the British and the Indians, interacting with both yet belonging to none. Hence, being both outsiders and insiders at once. Perceiving Britain 'as the agent of progress' the Baghdadis developed an 'imagined community of sentiments' tied together by trade, travel, kinship, and Jewish religion and beliefs (Silliman, 2022, pp. 30, 36).

Due to their numerical insignificance, the Baghdadis (besides other similar micro-minority communities) were patronized by the British to transform them into their loyalists. While initially recognized as 'Europeans,' the Baghdadis lost this status in 1885, never to regain it again despite their best efforts.[10] Joan Roland is of the opinion that prior to acquiring English language, the Baghdadis learnt Hindustani (a mixture of Hindi and Urdu languages) language for conversing with their Indian servants, and trading partners (Roland, 2019, p. 23). However, this was very rudimentary skills, as few were able to read or write the language (or any other Indian language for that matter) (Roland, 2017, p. 311).

From 1880s to 1930s the Baghdadis of Bombay and Calcutta tried in vain to reacquire the European status. The Baghdadis (especially the Bombay group) started to distance themselves from other Indian Jews primarily Bene Israel allegedly due to the latter's ritual impurity, and Indianized culture. In 1836, David Sassoon wrote a letter to the Governor of Bombay requesting for the erection of a partition wall in Bombay Jewish cemetery to separate the 'white Baghdadi' section from the 'darker native sections.' They failed to get exemption 'as Europeans' under Clause 13 of the Indian Arms Act that prohibited Indians from carrying arms in public. Perceiving themselves as a 'purely white race' the Baghdadis began to

[10] This was due to the other two Jewish communities of India (Cochini and Bene Israel) being almost indistinguishable from Indians. However, the Baghdadis alleged that this was due to their Jewish religion, as their competitors in trade, the Armenians (Christians) continued to be regarded as Europeans. A report of the Inspectorate of European Schools in Calcutta mentioned that in an inspection it was discovered that the Baghdadi students of Jewish Girls and Boys School were conversing amongst themselves in Hindustani, and not English.

discriminate against the Bene Israel leading to a couple of court cases in 1930s, which they lost after the colonial state intervened in favor of the Bene Israel. In the first case, the Baghdadis tried to deny the Bene Israel full ritual rights, right to vote, and stand for elections to the positions in the Baghdadi synagogue in Rangoon,[11] which was unsuccessful. In 1936 Allwyn Ezra (Chief Trustee of Sassoon J. David Fund) unsuccessfully tried to prevent the Bene Israel patients from getting admitted into the 11 beds reserved for Jews at Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy Hospital in Bombay. The revision of electoral rolls for Central, and Provincial (Bengal and Bombay) Legislatures between 1929 and 1935 removed the Baghdadis from the European group (comprising of 'all white races' domiciled in British India), and included them in Non-Mohammedan (largest group dominated by Hindus) category alongside other two Jewish communities of India (Roland, 2019, pp. 21, 24-26).

The Baghdadis finally understood their predicament in siding with the British, and gradually started to come closer with the other two Jewish communities in India to present a common Indian Jewish front from the 1930s. Despite their best efforts, the three communities could never agree on a common ground thwarting any further attempts till 1947. David Haskell Cohen wrote in *The Eastern Hebrew* in 1947, "Indian Jewry must unite so that it can be represented on the Indian Government, can assure the safeguarding of the rights of Jews in India and help Jews to play the part they should in India, as Indians, and not as foreigners" (Roland, 2019, p. 27-28). Bernard V. Jacob (grandson of B. N. Elias, one of the prominent industrialists of Calcutta) tried to form the 'All India Council' to bring the three Jewish communities under one umbrella to advise the Indian government on national and international matters related to Judaism. However, the body never materialized as the Bombay and Cochin community were not fully committed to the cause.

On the cusp of India's independence, a Calcutta Baghdadi Maurice Rassby tried to guide the community, "For us to become full-fledged Indian citizens will mean first and foremost complete allegiance to India as our mother country. We are Indians as much as we are Jews. Palestine will have to be our spiritual home just as Mecca is for the Muslims…. responsible to one power alone – the government of India" (Goswami, 2024). On 26th January, 1950,[12] special prayers were held at the Maghen David Synagogue, and a function was held at the Judean Club in Calcutta. The few Baghdadis who stayed back were reassured by the special protection granted to the minorities under the Indian constitution (Articles 15, 29, 30, 350A, 350B). Ellis David, a Baghdadi Jew from Mumbai asserted that nowhere in the world could Jews freely practice their religion, and thrive like they did in India since ancient times. They received equal rights just like other Indians. David said, "We are Indians only, we didn't think ourselves as foreigners" (Ellis David, personal communication, April 4, 2022).

[11] Burma was administered as part of British India till 1935. The small Baghdadi community in Rangoon owes its origins to the Jewish smugglers who operated from there smuggling opium and other contrabands from Calcutta to Chinse ports (such as Hong Kong and Shanghai) after it was outlawed in 1910s.

[12] Adoption of Indian constitution guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities for all citizens irrespective of differences.

Active Participants

The community remained firmly in the pro-British camp till late 1930s, though a few individuals became actively involved in the Indian nationalist movement. Later they gradually declared their pro-Indian sentiments in secrecy, although most shied away from active participation.

The Baghdadis became the trendsetters in the Indian film industry. At a time when even prostitutes shied away from acting in films, Baghdadi women (due to their liberal Anglicized upbringing) came forward. However, due to their inability to speak in any Indian languages most of their careers were cut short after the introduction of sound. Only a few such as Pramila (real name Esther Victoria Abraham), and Sulochana (real name Ruby Myers) could make successful comebacks and prolong their careers in the talkie era. The Jewish actors adopted Indian screennames to become identifiable with their audience. Sulochana (1907-1983) even promoted the Indian hand spun and handwoven cloth, khadi, which was being popularized among the masses. A dance sequence of Sulochana from the film Madhuri (1932) with synchronized sound effects was added to a short film on M. K. Gandhi inaugurating a khadi exhibition (Aafreedi, 2016, p. 21).

At a time when a majority of the Bombay Baghdadis maintained a clear distance from their Bene Israel co-religionists, Maurice David Japheth (1913-1976) shocked the community by marrying a Bene Israel woman. Inspired by him, a few more intermarriages took place later. He was a prominent journalist, who was known for his pro-Indian, and pro-Zionist feelings. Unlike most Baghdadis, Japheth perceived himself as Indian first, and Jew second. His meeting with Gandhi at Nagpur in 1935, changed him. He rose above the narrow sectarian differences of caste, and creed. Inspired by Gandhi, he started to preach a simple lifestyle, and pro-nationalist sentiments among his community members. A few influential Bombay Baghdadis such as Michael David, and Meyer Nissim (Head of Bombay Municipal Corporation) started to silently favor Indian nationalism being inspired by Japheth, but their actions were largely rhetorical, and concealed. In 1941, Japheth became the editor of *Jewish Advocate*, and got to interact with B. R. Ambedkar (a prominent leader of the depressed classes/scheduled castes). They arrived at a common ground comparing the sufferings of the scheduled castes (Dalits) of India to that of the Jews in ancient Egypt (Roland, 2017, pp. 176-177). Later he composed many books, and articles about Gandhi, Judaism, and India.

Hannah Sen (nee Guha) (1894-1957) was one of the women pioneers in the Baghdadi community of Calcutta. Daughter of Abhijit Guha (an influential Bengali Hindu lawyer who converted to Judaism), and Simcha Gubbay, Sen initially started her career as teacher in Jewish Girls School, Calcutta. Her sister Regina Guha, was one of the first female lawyers in India (who unsuccessfully fought for inclusion of women into the Calcutta Bar in 1915). Against the wishes of her father, she married a non-Jew Dr. Arun Sen, one of the most prominent physicians of Delhi. She worked for the enfranchisement, and education of women in both Britian and India, even delivering a speech in British Parliament. In 1929, she helped in forming the 'Indo-British Mutual Welfare League' in order to change the opinion of British women towards their Indian counterpart from one of 'patronage' to one based on 'equal' footing. She was closely associated with the Indian nationalist movement maintaining contacts with leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu. In the 1930s Naidu persuaded her to return to India to actively participate in it (Roland, 2019, pp. 26-27). She became one of the

founders of Lady Irwin College of Home Science in 1932, and served as its first principal till 1947. Under her leadership, the college became a bastion of Indian nationalist sentiments attracting students from across the country. Being a member of the Indian National Congress, she tried to inculcate a 'composite' national identity among the students who came from diverse religious, cultural, linguistic, and regional backgrounds. This led to the students developing nationalist sentiments, and getting involved in the freedom struggle. During the partition riots in 1947, Sen played an active part in safeguarding Muslim and Sikh girls within the hostel (whom she kept hidden in the basement for three weeks) from violent mobs, even at a great danger to her life. She ensured that other students learnt self-defense techniques to safeguard the campus (Silliman, 2022, pp. 161, 169-170, 282-283).

After independence, she worked actively with the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation to aid the women and children who got affected during the partition. She even represented India in international programs on women's issues such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women and at UNESCO. She later served as the President of the All India Women's Conference (1951-1952), and was elected to the first Rajya Sabha (1952-1957), the Upper House of Indian Parliament. In most of her images with other nationalist leaders, she is seen sporting a saree and is almost indistinguishable from other Indian women. Jael Silliman (in her 60s, and one of the youngest members of the Calcutta community) remarked that Hannah Sen represented the ease with which Jewish women could shift between the Anglicized world, and an Indian world (Silliman, 2019, pp. 173-174).

While most Baghdadi nationalists stood by Gandhian ideals, and Congress party, David Haskell Cohen from Calcutta was the exception. Profoundly impacted by the Bengal famine of 1942-1943 and Great Calcutta Killings of 1946, Cohen joined the Communist Party of India (CPI) alongside a handful of Jewish youth. They wanted 'to create a better world' being disturbed by the enormous poverty, starvation, and killings they witnessed in 1940s Calcutta. He represented CPI at many communist conferences across the world, and served as the Indian correspondent for Italian and French communist newspapers. Cohen engaged in relief work, and endeavored at spreading the propaganda of the party among the youth in Bengal, before fleeing to London in 1947 to evade arrest, where he worked alongside the British communists for a couple of years before returning to a post-colonial India. At a time when the CPI was banned, Cohen became the editor of the party mouthpiece, *Unity*, and CPI's journal, *New Age*, which aimed to unite young communists across India irrespective of their regional differences. For his association with the communist party, he was even briefly arrested in 1950 (Anonymous, 2020).

However, his trip to the Soviet Union and Poland as a communist journalist in 1956 disillusioned him about the difference between the theory and actual practice of communism. He wrote an article entitled "'Tactics' or Truth?" for *New Age* which he referred to as "a cry of pain because the Communists of whom I had such high hopes as a youth did not have standards or ethics as high as those expected of the children of the Torah!" (Roland, 2019, pp. 28-29). After this he resigned from the party, and went to work as a news editor with *The Indian Express* newspaper in Bombay. His resignation letter was translated into Chinese and Polish by the communists there. He felt a little dejected at giving up his mission of alleviating the masses out of poverty. Soon he lost his job due to the influence of American Consulate in Bombay, as he refused their offer to re-enter the communist party as an American spy. Finally,

he emigrated to London in 1958. Towards his later years in London, he engrossed himself in Jewish spirituality, and composing poetry.

Tale of a Jewish commoner from Calcutta

Besides the few Baghdadi elites, some commoners also developed nationalist sentiments, although their tale now stands mostly forgotten. Flower (Farha) Silliman (nee Abraham) (born in 1930) experienced a dual transition as a young woman in late 1940s New Delhi and Calcutta. The first was her shift from a Judaeo-British to a Judaeo-Indian identity that paralleled her mother Mary's transformation from Judaeo-Arabic to Judaeo-British one a few decades earlier. The second was that of India from a British colony to a post-colonial Republic. Like few other young people from her generation, she stayed back in post-1947 India to build new post-colonial state inspired by M. K. Gandhi's ideals of nationalism. Her daughter Jael Silliman mentioned that this dream of shaping a new India according to Gandhian ideas was shared by most of the young Jews who stayed back. They became loyal supporters of the Congress party, although none of them were active in politics. (Jael Silliman, personal communication, March 9, 2022) They were among the earliest Baghdadis to transition into an Indian identity, and freely traversed between both Anglicized and Indian cultural spheres.

The Japanese were knocking on the doors of India after their conquest of Burma in early 1940s, carrying out regular air raids in Calcutta. Many families in Calcutta fled to safer places. Flower (now in her 90s, and the eldest member of the Calcutta community) was sent to study in the Christian missionary run Bishop Cotton School in Nagpur. For the first time Flower (a teenager then) stepped out of the sheltered Jewish world,[13] and interacted with Christians (primarily Anglo-Indians)[14] whom she felt were comparatively liberal than her Jewish community. On her return to Calcutta, she witnessed the effects of the Bengal famine of 1942-1943 on the city, with people dying of hunger and starvation combined with outbreaks of several diseases such as lice, cholera, typhoid, etc. Then in 1946, she was sent to study Home Science at Lady Irwin College in New Delhi where for the first time she encountered Indians of different faith and culture which 'made her more Indian.' She wore Indian clothes such as sarees, and salwar-kameez, and ate Indian food (with her bare hands) disregarding Jewish dietary law *Kashrut*. (Flower Silliman, Interviewed by Rosen, 2017) She even travelled third-class in trains to visit the houses of her batchmates (who became her close friends) in the vicinity of Delhi, and drank tea from *kulhads* (earthen pots). She adopted an Indian identity, learnt a formal Hindi, and sang nationalist songs. Inspired by the Congress ideal of 'unity in diversity' Flower realized that being both Jewish, and Indian was possible,[15] and not conflicting as had been taught by community elders in Calcutta. When she alighted from the train at Howrah (a major railway station in Calcutta) after her return from Delhi, her mother Mary

[13] While the wealthy ones resided in the White (European) town in Park Street-Esplanade area, the middle and lower-classes lived in the Grey (mixed) town in central Calcutta – Bowbazar, Chattawalla Gully, Ezra Street and Pollock Street.

[14] The Indian constitution defines an Anglo-Indian as "a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is a native of India."

[15] Opposition to Indianness originated from a fear of marriage outside community, and the shame in associating with the 'ruled.' Hence, Indianness was perceived as a threat to their identity by the micro-minority Baghdadi community as they feared assimilation through marriage outside the community.

was speechless and angry on seeing her daughter wearing a white *salwar-kameez* (a traditional dress worn by Indian women) (Silliman, 2022, pp. 167-169).

Lady Irwin College established in 1932 became a hotbed of Indian nationalist activities being frequented by prominent women leaders such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu who figured prominently in college's activities. The college aimed to make women 'active participants or agents in their reform.' During her time in college, Flower met many stalwarts of Indian nationalist struggle such as Jawaharlal Nehru (from who she later received her graduation diploma in 1949), M. K. Gandhi, and Vallabhbhai Patel. Being inspired by them Flower grew interested in politics towards the fag end of the nationalist struggle. She freely mixed with other students coming from different regions of India. The atmosphere within the college was eclectic with festivals of all religions being celebrated with grandeur. The girls lived and ate together. Every morning assembly began with a prayer session of a different religion. When her turn came, Flower informed her batchmates about Jewish traditions, and read Hebrew prayers. Her brief encounter with Indian nationalism made Flower identity with India, her people, and their struggle. She was no longer 'an outsider' and a foreigner like her parents. She got elected as the President of the Lady Irwin College Students Union between 1948-1949, when nationalist sentiments were at an all-time high. Flower got closely associated with college politics that were tied to the larger national affairs. According to Jael Silliman, her mothers' experience highlights the fact that there were no opposition to Jews identifying as Indians, in fact they were welcomed (Silliman, 2022, p. 173).

Although the Baghdadis were never harmed physically, the communal violence preceding, and succeeding the 1947 partition scarred their psyche. Flower remembers staying indoors during the curfews in 1946 on many Saturdays. These curfews were imposed to control the gory violence in Calcutta which erupted in the aftermath of Calcutta Killings (August 16). Her brother accompanied by a Jewish friend (who was a soldier in British army) went along with their *dhobi* (washerman) to fetch their clothes from the *ghat* (washing place near the riverbank). The *dhobi* was insecure about venturing alone in the riot-torn city. On their way they encountered a mob about to murder a pregnant woman. They tried in vain to save her (Flower Silliman, Interviewed by Rosen, 2017).

On her return to her college in Delhi in September 1947, Flower witnessed a changed India, with refugees pouring in from Pakistan in trains, bullock carts, and even on foot. Some among them were her close friends, whose house she had visited last year. Now they had to leave everything as their homes fell on the Pakistani side of the Radcliffe line[16] and had to start from scratch in India. Hindu (Sikh in case of Punjab)-Muslim riots raged on across the country. Makeshift refugee camps were constructed in the vicinity of Lady Irwin College. The students were taught self-defense methods – wielding lathis (long sticks), and keeping acids, chili powder, and empty bottles on the roofs of their dormitories ready to hurled down during a mob attack. The college served as one of the focal points of 'Operation Chapati' whereby the students rolled chapatis (a form of Indian flatbread) to be supplied for the starving refuges in many camps across Delhi, and the border areas (Silliman, 2022, pp. 169-171).

[16] The Radcliffe line was drawn by a boundary commission headed by British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe in 1947 to bifurcate Punjab in the west, and Bengal in the east into Hindu (Sikh in case of Punjab) and Muslim majority provinces. This ultimately became the border between Indian and Pakistan (later also Bangladesh).

As independent India entered its first new year in 1948, M. K. Gandhi engaged in a fast unto death (that was to be his last) to prevent the Hindu-Muslim violence in Delhi, whereby he held regular prayer meetings at Birla House to promote amity. During many of these meetings, Flower went along with the college choir to sing. On January 30, the day of Gandhi's assassination, Flower decided to watch a BBC docudrama instead of attending the prayer meeting. Immediately after the drama began, it was stopped midway to announce Gandhi's death. Then she heard the experiences from her friends who had been to that prayer meeting on that fateful day. Had she gone on that day, Flower would have hallucinated for the rest of her life as she generally sat within 10 yards of Gandhi (Flower Silliman, Interviewed by Rosen, 2017).

Conclusion

The Baghdadi Jews arrived in India speaking Judaeo-Arabic, and left the country since the end of the Second World War speaking English (and not any Indian language). A few who felt more Indian stayed back and played their part in building a new India. Being a minuscule community, most of the Baghdadis were ambivalent towards the nationalist movement, with some even harboring pro-British sentiments until the late 1930s. The few individual examples mentioned in this essay were the exception rather than the norm. They went against the larger community opinion, actively working for the Indian nationalist struggle, while openly displaying their pro-Indian sentiments.

While the Hindus and Muslims possessed able leadership and strong grassroots-level organizations to mobilize masses for the cause of the nationalist struggle, the Jews lacked any such arrangement. The few Baghdadis who were actively engaged in the nationalist struggle had lucrative jobs or other ventures. Hence, they were not dependent on the community or the government for their sustenance. However, most Baghdadis were unable to openly take an anti-British and pro-Indian stance, as most of them were dependent upon the pro-British elite Baghdadis or the colonial British government for their employment. Although their participation was passive in most instances, it highlights the all-inclusive, plural nature of India's nationalist movement.

There is a dearth of materials on the contribution of Baghdadis (and Jews in the larger context) in the Indian nationalist struggle. Further research is required to unearth more information. Akin to the wide-ranging spectrum of the nationalist movement, the Baghdadi participation was varied. While most subscribed to the Congress party's and M. K. Gandhi's pluralistic secular nationalism, a few such as David Cohen were staunch communists. He was one of the few Jews in India to serve a jail sentence for his communist ideological activities. Maurice Japheth was a trailblazer who rose above narrow sectarian differences. Sulochana promoted Indian khadi cloth. Hannah Sen was a pioneer who worked for the empowerment and education of women and children. Besides the affluent, a few commoners such as Flower Silliman also developed nationalist pro-Indian sentiments in the 1940s through their interactions with Indians. Interestingly, the Baghdadis of Calcutta were more active than their Bombay counterparts. This may be attributed to two reasons. First, Calcutta and Bengal in a larger sense was the hotbed of nearly all strands of Indian nationalism. Second, in Bombay the

Bene Israel community[17] overshadowed the few Baghdadi nationalists through their activism, and even active participation since the 1920s.

Even as the country burned due to communal riots and violence in the aftermath of the partition in 1947, the Jews were left unharmed. India is perhaps one of the few countries in the world where the Jews have been able to maintain a peaceful existence since ancient times without any discrimination due to the absence of visible Antisemitism. Aline Cohen (a member of Calcutta community) mentioned that her husband's uncle sheltered the families of their servants in their house during the riots to safeguard them (Aline Cohen, personal communication, November 29, 2019).

It can be concluded that despite being a micro-minority, a few members of the Baghdadi community came forward to openly participate in the nationalist struggle, being inspired by Gandhian ideas. They were like droplets of water in the large ocean of Indian nationalism, who have now mostly been forgotten. The Jews at present are too few and have only recently been granted minority status in Gujarat (2016) and Maharashtra (2018), and yet to receive it in West Bengal, Kerala, and at the central government level. The Baghdadis are even fewer with 20 individuals in Kolkata and about 100 in Mumbai, with most of them being elderly. This paper has tried to bring forward a few instances of the contribution of the minuscule Baghdadi Jewish community in the Indian nationalist movement, which have been largely overlooked and hidden from the mainstream.

References

Aafreedi, N. J. (2016). The Jews of Bollywood: How Jews Established the World's Largest Film Industry. *Asian Jewish Life, 17,* 20-25. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310846190_The_Jews_of_Bollywood_How_Jews_Established_the_World%27s_Largest_Film_Industry

Anonymous. (N.A.). *David Haskell Cohen, Political. Recalling Jewish Calcutta*. Retrieved June 5, 2020 from http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/notable_members/david_h_cohen

Cohen, A. (2019). *Interviewed by the Present author at Jewish Girls School*, Kolkata on November 29.

David, E. (2022). *Interviewed by the present author through Telephonic conversation on April 4*.

Elias, F. and Cooper, J. E. (1974). *The Jews of Calcutta: The Autobiography of a Community, 1798-1972*. The Jewish Association of Calcutta.

[17] I. J. Samson, a Bombay lawyer, rejected a promotion to be member of the jury due to his nationalist beliefs. Inspired by Gandhi, he adopted Indian attire, vegetarianism, and advocated the *swadeshi* movement. The Erulkar brothers (David and Abraham) were involved in the Home Rule Movement. David, an advocate, was inspired by Bal Gangadhar Tilak's humility, while Abraham, a gastroenterologist, supported Gandhian movements and helped establish the National Medical College in Bombay. Despite supporting Gandhi's objectives, the Erulkars became disillusioned with his methods, and later drifted towards communism. Jacob B. Israel, a friend of David Erulkar, was anti-Congress and anti-Gandhian, believing that the Congress only represented the upper classes. I. A. Ezekiel, a journalist and communist, critiqued Gandhi's non-violent struggle in his book *Swaraj and Surrender*. Despite these varied stances, all these Bene Israel Jews from Bombay were united in their commitment to Indian nationalism and identity.

Goswami, A. B. (July 31, 2022). Jews and Parsis: Pain struggle, and success. *The Times of Israel*. https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/jews-and-parsis-pain-struggle-and-success/

Ray, D. (1996). Jews in Indian History after Independence. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 57*, 568-574, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44133361

Roland, J. G. (2019). Negotiating Identity in a Changing World: From British Colonialism to Indian independence. In: Weil, S. (Ed.). *The Baghdadi Jews in India: Maintaining Communities, Negotiating Identities and Creating Super-Diversity*. Routledge, 21-36.

Roland, J. G. (2017). *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*. Routledge.

Silliman, F. (2022). *Interviewed by Olivia Rosen* (May 16, 2017). Oral history Interview with Flower Silliman. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accession Number: 2017.168.2, RG Number: RG-50.978.0002, Retrieved March 21, from https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn562667

Silliman, J. (2019). Archival Cartographies: Multi-layering Calcutta's Baghdadi Jewish Histories. In: Weil, S. (Ed.). *The Baghdadi Jews in India: Maintaining Communities, Negotiating Identities and Creating Super-Diversity*. Routledge, 163-180.

Silliman, J. (2022). *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope*. Seagull Books.

Silliman, J (2022). *Interviewed by the present author through Telephonic Conversation on March 9*.