

## JEWISH INDIA

Robert W. Case

According to history, the first Jews came to what is known as the State of Kerala, India as early as 700 BCE for trade. After the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem (AD 66-70), there was another influx of Jewish traders. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslims attacked the Jews under the pretext that they were tampering with the pepper trade. Most of the Jews fled to Cochin, under the protection of the Hindu Raja. He granted them a site for their own town, which acquired the name of “Jew Town” by which it is still known. There are three distinct groups of Jews in India: The Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews.

The Bene Israel (“children of Israel”) Jews claimed that they came from the north around 175 BCE, when they were shipwrecked off the west coast of India, lost all their books, but apparently remembered their prayers and oral history. Supposedly, there were seven Jewish Men and Seven Jewish women who survived. The community was discovered by missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They observed the Sabbath, circumcision, and many of the Jewish festivals, but they did not have Torah, could not read Hebrew, and were not aware of Chanukah!

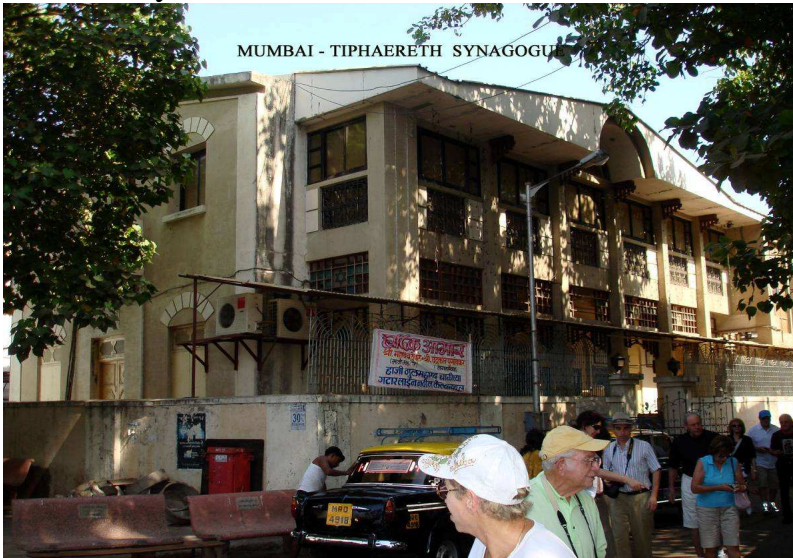
The Baghdadi Jews came to India because of religious persecution. Most were big merchants and successful businessmen. Many owned textile factories all over India. One of the most prominent of the Baghdadi Jews was David Sassoon (1792-1864). He started with a counting house (bank) but in the 1850's it was said that “whatever moves over sea or land bears the mark of Sassoon & Co.” He controlled the opium trade moving into China, Calcutta, Shanghai, and Canton. On the positive side, he was extremely philanthropic, donating libraries, building synagogues, schools, hospitals, and a convalescent home. His children and followers continued his philanthropic giving. I had the distinct pleasure of meeting one of his descendants, Samuel B. Sassoon, who lives in Singapore.

Today, the population of India is in excess of one billion people. At present, there are about 5,500 Jews remaining in India, of which 4,500 are located in Mumbai (Bombay), with the remainder scattered in the Delhi and Calcutta regions. Prior to World War II, there were 35,000 Jews, and after the war, most went to Israel, Singapore and Hong Kong. Anti-Semitism is practically non-existent.

Although Mumbai has ten synagogues, we only had time to visit three of them: The Tiphereth Israel, The Keneseth Eliyahu, and the Mogen David Synagogues.

### TIPHAERETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE

Tiphereth Israel Synagogue is one of the oldest synagogues in Mumbai. It was started in 1886 in a rented building, and is part of the Bene Israel community.



Docent telling  
our group  
About the  
Synagogue



## THE KNESSET ELIYAHU SYNAGOGUE

This synagogue was built by the Jewish Philanthropist, Jacob Sassoon. A grandson of David Sassoon in 1911. The synagogue is typically large, richly appointed, and modeled on a western style of architecture similar to what is found in Europe



Exterior Views of Kneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue



Interior Views of the Synagogue

## The Jews of Cochin

The oldest synagogue in India is the *Paradesi Synagogue*, built in 1568. In 1948, there were 4,000 Jews in Cochin. Today there are only 14. There is supposedly a “black synagogue” in Cochin, but no one had any idea of where it was.



Paradesi Synagogue

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