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Communication:
Emergence of Kolkata as a Centre of Jewish Studies in India

Navras J. Aafreedi

Although Kolkata has neither the largest concentration of Jews in India nor the highest number of synagogues and Jewish schools, yet it has more scholars of Indian Jews than any other city in the world. During the last few years more works on Indian Jews have been published by scholars from Kolkata than from anywhere else. During the last couple of years more scholarly events focused on Jews have taken place in Kolkata than at any other place in India. Kolkata has also emerged as the only city in perhaps all of Asia, if we do not take into account Israel and China, to have an undergraduate course in Global Jewish History and a postgraduate course in Holocaust Studies, both offered by the Department of History at Presidency University there.

Calcutta, as Kolkata was formerly called, developed as a metropolis under the British, and served them as the first capital of their Indian colony, before the capital was shifted to the more centrally located, Delhi. Between the decades of 1790s and 1830s a large number of Jews from a number of Middle Eastern countries settled in Kolkata; their number reaching as high as ten thousand just before the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948. They came to Kolkata both in search of greener economic pastures and safety and security, and came to be known by the umbrella term Baghdadi. Today their population has dwindled to merely twenty-two individuals, as a result of mass exodus to Israel, United Kingdom and Australia. Jael Silliman in her sixties is the youngest member of Kolkata Jewry. After enjoying an academic career of several years as a tenure track Associate Professor of Women's Studies at Iowa University in the US, she is now settled for good in her hometown, Kolkata. Although several books on Jews in Kolkata have been published, yet it is her *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (2001), which has come to be acknowledged as the best of them all. She is also the author of a couple of novels that depict Baghdadi Jewish life in Kolkata, *The Man with Many Hats* (2013) and *The Teak Almirah* (2016). In addition to the several books that Silliman has written, she has also produced a digital archive on the Jews of Calcutta, which has received rave reviews in leading publications across the world, like *The New York Times*, *the BBC*, *TIME*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Business Standard*, *The Times of India*, *The Telegraph*, *Outlook*, *The Hindu Business Line*, etc.

Assistant Professor of History at City College, Kolkata, Kaustav Chakrabarti is the author of *Glimpses into the Jewish Life of Calcutta 1798-1948*, Kolkata

(2015), which embodies his doctoral thesis, and *A Brief Introduction to the Rise and Rhythm of Zionism*, Kolkata. He has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, on an Israel Government Scholarship, for the academic session 2005-06. He submitted his M.Phil. dissertation on the history of the Jews of Calcutta at the University of Calcutta. A strong proponent of stronger Indo-Israel ties, Chakrabarti has published several articles on Jews, Israel and Zionism.

Priya Singh is another scholar who has published extensively on Zionism and Israel's foreign policy. She serves a research centre in Kolkata, Asia in Global Affairs, as its Associate Director.

Kolkata based independent scholar, Dalia Ray is the author of *The Jewish Heritage of Calcutta* (Kolkata, 2001) and *The Jews of India* (Kolkata, 2016), and several research papers, like "Jews in Indian History after Independence", published in the proceedings of the Indian National Congress, Volume 57 (1996),¹ and "Cochin Jews in Calcutta", published in the diamond jubilee volume (Volume 60) of the proceedings of the Indian National Congress in 1999.²

On March 15, 2017, Jael Silliman and Kaustav Chakrabarti, the two scholars mentioned above, were brought together with Ian Zachariah at a panel at the Department of History, Presidency University, to discuss the Jewish Contributions to Calcutta. The discussion was moderated by Navras J Aafreedi, an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Presidency University. Just a fortnight before this event he had convened an international multidisciplinary Holocaust focused conference at Presidency University, Kolkata, held on February 27 and 28, 2017. It was entitled: "Prevention of Mass Violence and Promotion of Tolerance: Lessons from History". The conference attracted some of the most eminent scholars from the fields of Holocaust Studies and Interfaith Studies, like Charles Ehrlich, Reuven Firestone, Edward Mortimer, Dina Porat, David Rosen, Stephanie Rotem, Suzanne Rutland, and Sarva-Daman Singh, et cetera. Just two weeks before this conference he had organized an international multidisciplinary conference on South Asia, which had a couple of presentations from the field of Indo-Judaic Studies. Jael Silliman presented a paper on Jewish Women Pioneers from Calcutta and Margit Franz presented a paper on Jewish Refugees in Calcutta during the Holocaust.

Silliman pointed out in her presentation that much of the written history of Baghdadi Jews in India is from a male perspective, focused on "male leaders who played dominant roles in both the colonial project and within the community," and that the Baghdadi Jewish community is mostly known for its

trading enterprises. She told us how in the archive on the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta she had “featured the numerous other professional and political engagements of Baghdadi Jewish men and women which demands a revision of the many roles that men and women played in India’s development.” Her paper highlighted the role that the Guha sisters – Regina and Hannah – played in law and politics. The other pioneering activities of Calcutta’s Baghdadi Jews were also discussed in the context of nation building in the twentieth century.

Margit Franz gave an overview of the general political, economic and social conditions of exile in British India from 1938 to 1945, with a particular focus on Jewish refugees in Calcutta. In particular, the architects Hans Glas and Victor Lurje, the educationist and musician Elise Braun, the pianist Liesl Stary and the physician Edmund Ronald were briefly portrayed. Her presentation also shed light on initiatives of the Bata company to generate escape options for their Central European workers at risk to be transferred to the companies overseas centres, like Batanagar in India.

The conference also had a presentation by the eminent Jewish artist Gerry Judah. Now based in London, Judah was born in a Baghdadi Jewish family in Kolkata. Israeli scholar Menashe Anzi also presented a paper at the conference. Its title was: “From Agra to San’a: Indian Muslim Literature in Yemen”.

Since Aafreedi joined Presidency University in June 2016, he has managed to get a number of eminent scholars to the university to give lectures on Jewish themes. The list includes Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Indiana University), Yulia Egorova (Durham University), Shimon Lev (Hadassah College), Anna Guttman (Lakehead University), and Heinz Werner Wessler (Uppsala University) among many others. Rosenfeld was a Scholar-in-Residence at the Department of History, Presidency University from October 29 to November 3, 2017, during which he gave a series of lectures on the Holocaust and Antisemitism. In a lecture on October 19, 2016, Shimon Lev spoke on the “Representation of Tagore in Jewish Literature”. Yulia Egorova gave a lecture on February 9, 2017, on Jewish-Muslim relations in the twenty-first century. She presented a case study of the United Kingdom, where most of the Muslims are of South Asian origin. On April 10, 2017, Heinz Werner Wessler gave an interesting talk, entitled “Mutual Misunderstandings? Gandhi, Bose and Nazi Germany”. Anna Guttman, in a lecture she gave on July 19, 2017, under the title, “‘There and Not There’: Imagining Indian Jewish History”, argued that Indian Jewish literature challenges national and communal histories, both Indian and Jewish, offering in their place global and cosmopolitan visions of identity, community, and history.

Besides the above-mentioned lectures on Jewish themes, a photographic exhibition on Anne Frank was also held at Presidency University. It was on

display from January to March 2017 in commemoration of the bicentenary of the institution.

Navras J. Aafreedi is the author of *Jews, Judaizing Movements and the Traditions of Israelite Descent in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2016) among many other publications in the field of Indo-Judaic Studies. He aspires to introduce an MA Programme in Jewish Studies in India and establish a Centre of Jewish Studies in the country.

On December 17, 2017, two of Kolkata's three synagogues, Beth El, built in 1856, and Maghen David, built in 1884, were rededicated after the completion of their restoration work. The restoration project was undertaken by the Society for Heritage Conservation and Preservation. A commemorative brochure was also released on the occasion. Besides the messages from the presidents and secretaries of the synagogues, it has messages from Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Nissim Moses, Honorary President and Avener Isaac, Chairman of the Indian Jewish Heritage Center, and David Harris, Chief Executive Officer of the American Jewish Committee.

The very next day, December 18, 2017, a panel discussion on "Revisiting Calcutta's Diasporic Communities" was held at the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata, in association with the American Jewish Committee Asia Pacific Institute, at which Navras J. Aafreedi spoke on the Baghdadi Jewish Community of Kolkata.

From February 14 to 16, 2018, an international conference, "In Global Transit: Jewish Migrants from Hitler's Europe in Asia, Africa, and Beyond" was held at Loreto College, Kolkata, under the joint auspices of Max Weber Stiftung, German Historical Institutes in London and Washington, DC, and its India Branch Office in Delhi. The three-day-conference had five panels, divided thematically as: Refugee Identities in Colonial India, Local Interactions and Anti-Semitism, Knowledge, State Power, and Non-governmental networks and organizations during and after the Holocaust. Each panel had a couple of presentations, except the last one (the one on non-governmental networks and organizations during and after the Holocaust), which had three. There was also a roundtable on "Jewish Refugee History Outside the University: Archives, Collections and Exhibitions."

As part of the panel dedicated to Refugee Identities in Colonial India, Maria Framke (Universität Rostock) gave a presentation entitled, "India a safe haven for Jewish refugees? Exploring the entangled web of Indian anti-fascism, anti-colonialism and humanitarian solidarity in the interwar period". While Pragya

Kaul (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) as part of the same panel presented a paper entitled, “Between Colonizer and Colonized: Nationalism, the War, and Refugee Identity Formation in British India”.

Under the panel dedicated to Local Interactions and Anti-Semitism, Floral Roberts (Universitat Tubingen) spoke on Jews in wartime Central Asia: migrants, locals, and the spectre of anti-Semitism”, while Atina Grossman (Cooper Union) presented a paper entitled, “Trauma, Privilege, and Adventure in Transit: Jewish Refugees in Iran and India”.

The panel on Knowledge had a presentation from Sebastian Musch (Hochschule fur Judische Studien Heidelberg) on “Jewish Migrants from Germany to British Ceylon and their Networks of Knowledge, 1933-1950” and one by Swen Steinberg (TU Dresden) on “Destinations in Asia and Africa in Newspapers and Journals of the German Political Exile”.

The panel on State Power was comprised of presentations by Susanne Heim (Institut fur Zeitgeschichte Munchen-Berlin) on “Resettling Jews” and Gerhard Wolf (University of Sussex) on “Fantasies of Settlement and Civilization”.

The last panel, which was dedicated to Non-governmental networks and organizations during and after the Holocaust had three presentations unlike any other preceding panel at the conference. Both Sarah Haggmann (University of Basel) and Tobias Brinkmann (Penn State University) focused on Shanghai. While Haggmann spoke on relief organizations in Shanghai during the Second World War, Brinkmann shed light on the fate of Jewish refugees in Shanghai and other Treaty Ports after the end of the war. Margit Franz (Universitat Graz) gave a presentation on the experiences of Central European Exiles in the Partition of India.

An exhibition, “The City as Refuge: Jewish Calcutta and refugees from Hitler’s Europe” also took place alongside the conference. A brochure documenting the exhibition, with the same title as that of the exhibition, was also released on the occasion. It is written and edited by Indira Sengupta, who hails from Kolkata, and Joseph Cronin.

On March 20, 2018, Kolkata saw the launch of Israeli scholar Shimon Lev’s latest book, *From Lithuania to Santiniketan: Schlomith Flaum & Rabindranath Tagore*, published by the Lithuanian Embassy in New Delhi. The event took place at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations building in Kolkata under the joint auspices of the Lithuanian and Israeli embassies in India. The embassies were represented by Lithuanian and Israeli ambassadors to India, Laimonas Talat-Kelpsa and Daniel Carmon respectively at the book launch. There was

panel discussion on the subject with Shimon Lev, the author of the book, Uma Das Gupta, historian and a biographer of Tagore, Hari Vasudevan, historian from the University of Calcutta and Faina Kukliansky, Chair of Lithuanian Jewish Community. The chief guest at the event was Bratya Basu, Minister of Information Technology & Electronics, Government of West Bengal.

One only hopes and wishes that Jewish Studies continue to thrive in Kolkata, which enjoys the reputation of being the intellectual nerve centre of India, at a much more accelerated pace.

¹ Pp. 568-574

² Pp. 872-876