

Report to the London Bet Din on the Calcutta Jewish Community (1965)

By Rabbi Daniel Sperber

Note from Rabbi Sperber

When I was studying in Yeshivot in Jerusalem in the late 1950s, early 1960s, I would take off a month or two and "go east," hitchhiking each time further east, via Turkey, Persia (now Iran), Pakistan (southern route), Afghanistan (northern route), India, Nepal, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), etc. During this time I crisscrossed India, north to south, east to west. Later after finishing my B.A. in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, and before beginning my doctorate in Ancient History and Hebrew Studies at University College London, I found I had a "time-gap." Happily, I was requested to go to India by the British rabbinate, to serve as a rabbi and deal with various problems facing the Indian Jewish community, such as divorces between spouses separated by continents, conversions of Malay wives to Indian Jewish (mainly Baghdadi) husbands, checking and repairing mikvaot, transferring funds from Indian Jewish foundations to Indian Jewish communities in the Sterling area, etc.

I first arrived in Bombay with Dayan Swift, a member of the London Bet Din. We were there together for some two weeks, both in Bombay and Calcutta, solved what we could solve, and then, after I had been "broken in," I stayed on in Calcutta to serve as a temporary rabbi. There I stayed for quite a while at the house of the late Bertie Meier, the CEO of the B.N. Elias Co., a wealthy and very generous individual. When I returned to London, I wrote the following report for the London Bet Din. My journey had been funded by the late Rabbi Solomon David Sasoon.

It was in those days that I developed a sort of spiritual kinship for India. In subsequent years I had occasion to visit India in various capacities. More recently, as member of the Israeli rabbinate's interfaith team, I went to New Delhi to attend the first Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit in 2007 and met there with many leading swamis and Acariaks. What followed this meeting was an ongoing dialogue with Hindu religious leaders, and several meetings in Jerusalem and New Delhi, and as a result I am close to completing a volume on "The Halachic Status of Judaism."

Population, etc.

The population of the Calcutta Jewish Community numbers ± 500 (probably -500 by now—1963). It comprises for the most part second- or third- generation Indian Jews of Iraqi (Baghdadi) origin. There are however a certain number of Burmese-born Jews (from Rangoon and Aciab in the main) and also some from Singapore. These too are ultimately of Baghdadi or Chalebi (Aleppo, Syria) origin. The whole community is only about 130 years old and up to 12 years ago numbered approximately 5,000. The rapid diminution in numbers of the community over the last decade, resulting in the present 10% "remained," has been due to two main causes: (1) the progressive deterioration of Indian economic affairs since their independence (1947) and all its cognate effects upon social order, and (2) the increasing attraction of the State of Israel since the advent of her own independence in 1948. The emigration of Calcutta Jews from India has been to England, Israel, Australia, Canada, and the United States probably in that order of popularity.

At the present moment the composition of the population is approximately: 30% (c. 150) up to the age of 22, probably about 60% over the age of 45, and only 10% of the intervening age level, 22-45. The relationship of the sexes is about two females to every male in the youngest age group (to 22 years old), perhaps as many as three females to

every one male in the second age group (22-45) and probably five females to four males in the oldest age group. The reason for the disproportionate ratios in favor of women in the first two age levels is due to the patterns of emigration. Thus young able-bodied men tend to leave the country to find work abroad more readily than the girls. The Jewish Agency (Aliyah dept.) accepts for immigration to Israel people up to the age of 45 as a rule. That means that late middle-aged parents remain behind, and in very many cases, daughters likewise remain behind to look after the parents. These and other such considerations account for the peculiarities in the make-up of the population.

The majority of the population is poor, and only three or four families can now be said to be wealthy. (The wealthier class moved out some time ago, primarily into Sterling Area countries.) The wage-earners in this poorer class are petty traders, hawkers (in the markets, etc.), lowly clerics, or simple manual laborers in factories (jute mills, etc.). From the wages they receive they can certainly not put away any money in savings, and in all too many cases neither can they support their large families properly. In such cases they have the right to benefit from the various Jewish charitable funds, from which they receive monthly allowances or annual gifts (see below section on "Institutions, Organizations, etc."). For such people the prospect of going to Israel, receiving a flat, job, education, etc., is a great attraction. This means that in the future the pattern of emigration will shift so that Israel and not (as is still the case) England will be first in emigrational popularity.

The present rate of emigration is from 12-20 persons per month. This would at first seem to suggest that within less than half a decade there should be hardly a Jew left in Calcutta. However, this will probably not be the case. First, Indian foreign currency restrictions are such as to discourage leaving the country. Second, England's immigration laws will limit immigration to this country. Third, the large number of over 45 year olds will probably not be accepted by the Jewish Agency for immigration to Israel unless they can financially provide for themselves. But in most cases they cannot. Furthermore Indian currency restrictions will hardly allow those of moderate means who might at some time have been able to support themselves, to do so now. Thus the pattern of population decrease will probably be a rapid fall within the next three years to about +250 and then a gradual dwindling due in the main to natural causes. This pattern might, however, be changed if the Jewish charities could somehow be used to finance the emigration of the remaining few.

Due to the pattern of the distribution of sex groups and age levels, there are very few marriages and very few births (there were two brit milas in the last year). Thus there is virtually no natural increase in population to offset the loss thereof. But where there is a population increase it is amongst the poorest classes.

Institutions, Organizations, etc.

Education. Calcutta has two Jewish schools, one for boys and one for girls. The boys' school is called the Elias Meyer Free School and Talmud Torah. At the moment it has about 90 pupils, only a third of whom (c. 32) are Jewish. It also has a hostel for poor Jewish boys, which has at the moment eight boarders. The school caters for the full age span of 5-18, and it has a natural capacity of well over 200. Due to the present paucity of pupils there exists the peculiar situation where one pupil may constitute a whole class. Under such circumstances educational standards necessarily suffer in all subjects, and the standard of Hebrew and Jewish religious knowledge (taught very informally but quite successfully by an old crippled gentleman) is consequently very low. The Jewish children (non-paying pupils) are all of poor families, and this too does not contribute to raising the general level of the school. The headmaster is Jewish, and intelligent, but not overpopular with prominent members of the community and this likewise has its ill effects upon the school. Non-Jewish children are all paying members, hence of better families, and this fact to (unfortunately only) a small extent offsets the general drop in the social and cultural level of the school. At

the present moment the school is getting less and less Jewish pupils and more and more non-Jewish ones. It is woefully dingy and dilapidated and is not of the type to attract teachers of the best kind.

The girls' school is in somewhat better circumstances. It is called Jewish Girls' School and Jeshurun Free School and is in fact an amalgamation (for all but some purely administrative purposes) of two formerly separate institutions contained in its present name. It has 164 pupils (ages 5-18), 64 of whom are Jewish (or half-Jewish; likewise in the boys' school—see below). The Jeshurun Free School was formerly for poor Jewish children only, but now all Jewish children may be (if necessary) non-paying, whereas all non-Jewish children are paying members (hence of a higher social level, etc.). There is a Jewish Girls' Hostel adjacent to the school in the same compound, which is in fact wholly independent of the school, having its own matron, budget, funds, etc., and which at the moment houses 22 (Jewish) boarders, all non-paying. The headmistress is an intelligent, friendly, and understanding Hindu lady. Hebrew and Jewish religious knowledge are taught to all Jewish girls by a fine elderly lady of limited knowledge. Here again the tendency is to a rapid decrease in Jewish members and a reciprocal increase in non-Jewish members. The school has a capacity considerably above its present membership (well over 200).

Both schools are partly state aided and hence come under the aegis of state educational legislation and supervision. They have to accept non-Jewish pupils, and at the moment limit their number by demanding high fees (which right they have). In the case of the girls' school there has recently been an added complication, namely that according to a newly passed law, the headmaster/mistress of a school must be a member of the Board of Governors and/or Trustees of that school. For a Jewish school to have a non-Jew as a (powerful and active) member of its administrative board (a board that among other things dictates policies to limit non-Jewish members and so forth) must be at times awkward, to say the least.

The disparity in numbers between the boys' and girls' school has already been explained in the section entitled Population, etc. Here a further point of considerable importance should be made: There are, in both schools, far more children of the up-to-12 age group than of the older type. On the other hand among the older girls there are less who are the result of mixed marriages. In both schools, however, fully two-thirds of all Jewish children are born of mixed-marriages (of Jewish or non-Jewish, converted or unconverted mothers). The child of an unconverted mother or father is granted admittance to both schools, but to neither hostel.

The standard of Hebrew and Jewish religious knowledge in both schools is woefully low. The eldest pupils (15-18 years old) could not pass the Indian equivalent of the Hebrew O Level. Nor indeed are they taught to that level, that is, the educational aim is to a standard far lower than the O Level. The children can speak a (very) little and read a little Hebrew, know some bible stories, and something about the festivals. The children who know more than that can pray in a synagogue, etc., and have acquired this knowledge outside the school (at home).

Synagogues. There are at the moment in Calcutta four functioning synagogues: Magen David, Nevei Shalom, Bethel, and Shaarei Ratzon. (There was yet another—the Magen Avot—but that was closed some years ago.) On an average these synagogues get about 10-15 worshippers on a Shabbat, some of whom are paid "minyan men." Officially, they all have a daily morning service (through the paid "minyan men") but in practice only Shaarei Ratzon does. The latter [Shaarei Ratzon], gets a Shabbat attendance of 15-20 persons (in the monsoon season, and more in the clement periods) and 7-15 women as well. Bethel has the only Mikvah in Calcutta; and it is kosher although little used. Magen David has a real regular income, which will go up considerably in two years' time when certain projects (building, renting, etc.) will be completed. Bethel Synagogue supports itself and has a little left over for charities. Bethel and Magen David have regular "chazzanim,"

while in Shaarei Ratzon the duties are divided up among various selected (Sabbath-observing) members. Magen David and Bethel also have charitable funds that are distributed at various times (see below).

The overall majority of synagogue-goers are religious people, but not necessarily "Shomeri Shabbat." Thus Sabbath-morning prayers start very early in the morning, so that people should be able to get to work on time. But they will all come again to Mincha, and say their Tehilim, (those that can read them).

Charities and Misc. Institutions. There are a number of charities functioning that cover a large part of the present community. The Jewish Women's League distributes some 2,000 rupees (=£100 approximately) per month to some 52 names (some representing individuals, some families). (Mrs. Simha Lanyado is the main trustee and distributor.) The Rama and Benjamin Elias Trust, distributes 1,870 rupees per month (approximately £93) to more or less the same number of names and to the same names. (B.N. Elias and Co. meaning in this case, A.F. Meyer, is the main trustee and distributor.) Magen David Synagogue distributes a certain sum per month (Mr. Jack David is trustee), while Bethel Synagogue distributes charities twice a year (Gala Gubbay and Elias Meyer are trustees). Every trust is either with the Official Trustee West Bengal or the Treasurer of Charitable Endowments, Central Government. The result is that the government does not allow the capital to be untouched (even reinvested), and only the interest accrued is utilized. Needless to say, the government does not allow any of the capital to be taken out of the country or to be recanalized to other ends, for example, Jewish education, etc.

There is a Jewish Hospital, the Ezra Hospital, which though government controlled is run on a Jewish fund, and has four beds specifically and permanently reserved for the Jewish sick. It grants free treatment for Jews, as does the Jewish Clinic (run incidentally by the burial board), which supplies free medicines and other such services. Poor mothers are also given six months' free milk for their babies.

The Jewish Burial Board is an organization wholly independent of the synagogue, etc. As a rule people do not pay toward it in their own lifetime, but rather the family arranges matters after death. The prices are very flexible, to allow full facilities even for the poorest.

The central governing authority of the community is the Jewish Association, which among other things registers births, marriages, and deaths. All other organizations are represented on its committee.

There is a Jewish Youth Club (Maccabi) that uses the premises of the Jewish Girls' School for its meeting place. It comprises two main age-groups, 6-11 and 14-20. Needless to say, these two groups can hardly mix properly, and on the other hand there are too few people to organize two separate sets of club activities. This is partly the reason for its gradual decline in popularity and success as an instrument of education. Now its main activities are games and sports (basketball, table tennis). They have no Hebrew or Jewish religious educational schemes among their various activities and indeed can find no one to make practical any such schemes. However, they were very open to suggestions of including cultural activities within their program and the main problem is finding someone to implement them.

There is one Jewish Club for older people, but this has rapidly deteriorated into a drinking and gambling joint, where the minority are Jews, and then not of the best type.

All these organizations, institutions, charitable trusts, etc., are evidence of a once-thriving, highly organized, and socially conscious community, which is now rapidly dwindling in numbers and declining in standards. Thus, there is now no rabbi, no mohel, no Hebrew teacher (other than the ones in the boys' and girls' schools, who have very limited knowledge), only two chazzanim, etc. There are two shochtim (for fowl, see the below section on Religious Problems), an old man (whose hands already shake a little), and his son. In the case of a mila, a mohel must be brought from Bombay (2½ days' journey by train), and the mila is rarely on the eighth day. The community is keenly interested in Hebrew and things Jewish. Thus I gave shiyurim, derushim on Shabbat, and Hebrew lessons