

The Jews in India

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The different groups of Jews that have made their way to India over the centuries provide excellent evidence of the fulfilment of the prophecy of Deuteronomy 28:64 that they would be scattered throughout the earth.

DEUTERONOMY 28 is of immense importance in that it forms a foundation for the understanding of Bible prophecy and of Yahweh's purpose with Israel throughout history. The chapter tells beforehand of three dispersions of Israel from the Land. Verse 25 speaks of the dispersion of the ten tribes in 709 B.C. in the words, "and [thou] shalt be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth". Verse 36 says, "The LORD [Yahweh] shall bring thee, and thy king which thou shalt set over thee, unto a nation which neither thou nor thy fathers have known", and this refers to the Babylonian exile of Zedekiah and Judah after 536 B.C. The third scattering, subsequent to A.D. 70, is described in verse 64: "And the LORD [Yahweh] shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other".

Over the years the *Testimony* has published a number of short articles about Jews being resident in countries "from the one end of the earth even unto the other", so demonstrating the wonderful accuracy of these prophecies. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, in November 2008 drew attention to Jews resident there, and this article briefly examines the historical background of the Jews in India.¹

There appears to have been a number of distinct groups of Indian Jews, all with different historical backgrounds. However, on the whole over the centuries they have managed to co-exist peacefully within the host nation without losing their Jewish identity; but with India gaining her independence in 1947, and Israel likewise in 1948, many Indian Jews have now emigrated to Israel. That means that for some years the Jewish heritage in India has been in decline, and the historian Martin Gilbert estimated in 1991 that there were only around 6,000 Jews remaining there.²

Descendants of the tribe of Manasseh

There are one or two interesting legends extant in India, whereby some who claim to be Jewish

assert that they are descendants of the so-called lost ten tribes and emigrated there after 709 B.C. It is thought that they arrived in India after having spent a period in China, which ended when they were expelled. In the nine-

teenth century, Jewish emissaries from Palestine who were searching south and east Asia are thought to have investigated such claims, and in 2000 the *Jerusalem Post* reported that some communities in India believed that they were descendants of the tribe of Manasseh.³ In fact, some five hundred of these did emigrate to Israel from the Shinnlung tribes who live in the states of Mizoram and Manipur and in adjacent areas of Burma.

There are three other major groups of Jews from India that are better known. We will look at each of them in turn.

The Saturday Oilmen

Firstly, there are the Bene-Israel (the name means 'children of Israel'), who are reputed to be the descendants of immigrants from southern Arabia or Persia who came to India in the eighth century A.D., and/or the descendants of fourteen survivors from a shipwreck off the Konkan coast in 175 B.C. The latter immediately benefited from local hospitality and settled in the village of Naugaon. The local population called them 'Shanwar Teli', which means 'Saturday Oilmen', because they observed the sabbath and earned their living by oil-pressing. Again, there is a certain amount of circumstantial evidence advanced that they were descendants of the ten tribes, and, being of those northern tribes, did not call themselves Jews.

The Bene-Israel were discovered in the eighteenth century by a Jewish traveller, David Rahabi, and they flourished under British rule, with many of them moving to Bombay. Tudor Parfitt, senior academic at London University's School

1. Much of the information in this article has been taken from the book *India's Jewish Heritage*, edited by Shalva Weil, Marg Publications, Mumbai, ISBN 81-85026-58-0.
2. *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*, fifth edition, 1993, ISBN 0-415-13652-0.
3. For more details see "[Lost Jews in India](#)", Tony Benson, [Sept. 2000, p. 367](#).

of Oriental and African Studies, carried out DNA testing on the Bene-Israel, and this pointed to them being descendants of Israelite *Cohenim*, that is, of the priestly families descended from Aaron. There remain around 5,500 in India after many emigrated to Israel.

The Cochin Jews

A second group are the Cochin Jews, living on the Malabar coast of India. Their numbers have decreased from 2,400 in 1947 to only about 20 in 2002. Part of the city of Cochin is called 'Jew Town'. One theory is that they originated from King Solomon's merchantmen (1 Kgs. 9:26-28), and a certain amount of etymological evidence has been given in support of this possibility. For example, the Hebrew words for "apes", "peacocks" and "almug trees [sandalwood]" in 1 Kings 10:11,22 seem to be related to local Sanskrit and Tamil words.⁴



Street sign in Cochin.

Picture: © iStockphoto.com/Odelia Cohen

These Jews formed the Malabari (also known as 'black Jews') communities, but after Vasco da Gama's expedition, which reached India in 1498, many European Jews settled in Cochin and were known as the Paradesi (meaning 'separate') and also as 'white Jews'. The two groups did not intermarry or mix until the twentieth century. A notable member of this Cochin Paradesi community was one Ezekiel Rahabi (1641–1771), who was the principal merchant for the Dutch, and records show that he signed his memoranda in Hebrew long before the revival of that language (as a spoken language), mainly by Eliezer ben-Yehudah (1858–1922).

Baghdadi Jews in India

The third, and most prosperous, community of Jews in India were the Baghdadis, so called

because they emigrated from Iraq and Syria from the eighteenth century onwards after suffering persecution, and settled in Calcutta and Bombay. In 1832 the Prince of the Exilarch, David Sassoon (1792–1864),⁵ fled Baghdad, and continued his merchant activities, especially with China, generating much wealth. The Baghdadis were a thriving and prosperous community, and throughout the nineteenth century the Sassoon family built synagogues, hospitals, libraries and schools. These Jews of the Indian Raj had servants, summer residences, clubs and racehorses, but circumstances changed after Indian independence and life became more difficult. Many emigrated to Britain and other English-speaking countries, with a few going to Israel. Today there are fewer than 300 Jews of Iraqi origin in India.

The pre-advent and post-advent returns

Thus there remain only a comparatively small number of Jews in India, with many having taken the path of *aliyah** back to the Land because of their affinity with Israel. Others have been driven back to the Land by more recent unfavourable circumstances in the land of their exile. As it is written:

"Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD [Yahweh], that it shall no more be said, The LORD [Yahweh] liveth, That brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but, The LORD [Yahweh] liveth, That brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither He had driven them: and I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers. Behold, I will send for many fishers, saith the LORD [Yahweh], and they shall fish them; and after will I send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks.

4. There could, of course, be other reasons for these similarities, such as Hebrew being the original proto-language before Genesis 11:9. Indeed, some modern linguists now think that all the world's languages originate from a single language. Further, the Indo-European group of languages are known to share vocabulary and structure. For further information see "[One original language](#)", Tony Benson, [Apr. 2000, p. 137](#).

5. It is said that David Sassoon was able to trace his lineage back to King David.

* This is the Hebrew word the Jews use for returning to the Land, and means 'ascent'.—T.B.

For Mine eyes are upon all their ways: they are not hid from My face, neither is their iniquity hid from Mine eyes" (Jer. 16:14-17).

Perhaps we are now moving towards the conclusion of the pre-advent return of the Jews, and await the post-advent return (Isa. 11:11,12),⁶ when the Lord Jesus Christ will proclaim the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem, saying, "Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the

north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring My sons from far, and My daughters from the ends of the earth" (43:5,6). Perhaps it will be then that those residual Jews in the east, including India, will commence their *aliyah*, to be brought into the bond of the covenant.

6. J. Thomas, *Elpis Israel*, fourteenth edition, p. 441, The Christadelphian.