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The Baghdadi Jews of Kolkata and Entrepreneurship: A History of the Present.

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Abstract:

The Jewish community have had a conspicuous presence in the history of capitalism, both as symbol and as reality. They have been always associated with business and growth and wherever they went they prospered in trade and they were able to succeed in the harsh conditions of a capitalist environment where many failed. The Jewish community had a very subtle presence in the India. Whenever we talk about the business communities in India we generally mean the Parsi, Marwari and the Gujarati community, we never think about the Jews, but if we go back in history we will see the importance of the community and how they prospered in conditions where the other communities were wither driven out by the East India Company or they had a hard time building their base because of lack of capital. If we focus on the Baghdadi Jews of Kolkata they owned most of Esplanade and Ezra Street, they were mainly traders, but in Kolkata they prospered in real estate too. When the Jews first came to Kolkata they were thousands in number but in the present day their population had dwindled to double digits with merely 15-20 people.

The thesis discusses the importance of the community in India and their contribution to the colonial business of Kolkata, it focus on the early settlers in India and Kolkata specifically, the business they owned and the status of the community in the twenty first century.

Declaration:

I confirm that this thesis is entirely my own work and represents my own original research.

Signed:

Ananya Banerjee

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Chapter 1: Introduction.

This thesis provides a survey of the Jewish Community living in Kolkata, the timeline spans from the time they first came to India, that is, 1790 in Bombay till the present, which is 2019. The thesis mainly traces the economy of British India and the business transaction of the Jewish Community and their role in the economy. The timeline is of importance because India went through a major economic change after the East India Company colonized her. India shifted from a self sufficient village economy to a market based economy in a matter of few decades, this brought a major shift in the structure for India which the agriculturist were having difficulty adjusting to. By the mid eighteenth century Bengal had to a degree developed an integrated economy with marked regional specializations; some areas producing grain surpluses, others concentrating on certain cash crops or on particular lines of textiles (e.g. Dacca and Murshidabad). There was a network of markets throughout the province. Great wholesale markets had been established at strategic points on the rivers, such as that of Bhagawangola, on the Ganges near Murshidabad or Narayanganj near Dacca. The numerous large-scale markets were called ganj. Small-scale transaction took place at village hats, normally held on certain days of each week.

The merchant communities of Bengal were very diverse in origin. Bengal attracted many non-Bengali merchants. Gujratis and Rajasthanis were particularly prominent. They were naturally attracted to Murshidabad and Kasimbazar, Bengal's high quality silk belt. They set up Jain temples at both places. A considerable community of Oswals (from Rajasthan) grew up at Murshidabad. Khattris from northern India were also important In the Bengal towns, as were so called Mughal merchants, Muslims from Iran and central Asia, Armenians and Jews came for trade. Here is why the Jews become important for the thesis.

The Jewish community have had a conspicuous presence in the history of capitalism, both as symbol and as reality. They have been always associated with business and growth and wherever they went they prospered in trade and they were able to succeed in the harsh conditions of a capitalist environment where many failed. The Jewish community had a very subtle presence in the India. Whenever we talk about the business communities in India we generally mean the Parsi, Marwari and the Gujarati community, we never think about the Jews, but if we go back in history we will see the importance of the community and how they prospered in conditions where the other communities were wither driven out by the East India Company or they had a hard time building their base because of lack of capital. If we focus on the Baghdadi Jews of Kolkata they owned most of Esplanade and Ezra Street, they were mainly traders, but in Kolkata they prospered in real estate too. When the Jews first came to Kolkata they were thousands in number but in the present day their population had dwindled to double digits with merely 15-20 people.

It was Shalom ben Aaron ben Obadiah Ha-Kohen (Shalom Aaron Cohen), born in Aleppo in 1762, a descendant of an exile from Spain at the time of the Inquisition. He died in Kolkata in 1836. In 1789, he embarked on the first of his many voyages. This journey brought him from Aleppo to Baghdad, then to Hillah and finally to Basra, where one of his sisters was living. The very next year, he began what was to be his voyage of destiny, as it brought him for the

first time to his future homeland, India. He arrived at Bombay in September 1790, but soon moved to Surat where he took up his residence.

A jeweller by profession, he must have already been a rich man for his diary records show that he loaned a sum of Rs, 1,500, a considerable sum in those days, to his landlord, Stephen el Goorgi (i.e., Georgian). Shalom entered into a business alliance with Jacob ben Semah ben Nissim (Jacob Semah), a wealthy businessman who had emigrated from Baghdad, he married his sister in 1793. When he first came to Kolkata after visiting Cochin and Madras, he and his partner Jacob Semah set up a prosperous business, employing staff from even distant cities such as Cochin. Apart from the jewellery business, they established a thriving export and import trade with Baghdad, dealing in such commodities as silks, muslins and indigo.

The Baghdadi Jewish immigrants in India and were mostly traders and like the Armenians, constituted a “trade diaspora”. They provided links in a long chain of trading posts stretching from Shanghai to London. Their main items of trade included gems, rosewater, import of Arabian horses, spices, silk, Indigo etc.

The Jewish merchants had stakes in many plantations and primary products. They competed with other trading communities, especially the Armenians and Parsis in this phase of mercantile capitalism. Baghdadi Jews had long been part of the trading networks. British imperialism provided the conditions for the expansion of the networks to new areas of the world. These networks operated as ancillary to onwards and played an important part in India’s economy. Thus a string of Baghdadi Jewish communities thrived on the underside of the colonial enterprise.

The Baghdadi Jewish merchants made large fortunes in the opium trade in the first part of the nineteenth century. The modern era in the global opium trade began in 1773 when the British Governor-General of Bengal established a monopoly on the sale of opium. Over the next years, Britain actively promoted the export of Indian opium, defying the Chinese.

The Baghdadi Jews adopted the time-honoured business practice of buying cheap and selling at higher prices. Thus, when Jews wanted to depress the opium market, they boycotted the auction and picked up the products when the prices were lower. Another source of fabulous wealth for the Jews was the cultivation of indigo, sales and shipping. The importation of Indigo commenced from India about 1790, and had greatly increased by the next forty years as to supersede all other indigos. The cultivation of indigo was carried on from Dacca to Delhi. Another major merchant was Ezekiel Musleah, one of the most wealthy member of the Jewish community, he was an expert in the indigo trade and his expertise was utilized by the East India Company. Jewish traders also manufactured and exported silk, woollen and cotton products, and dealt in precious stones. Ezekiel Judah was also a leading trader in silk and indigo.

With the second quarter of the nineteenth century Jews began turning their attention eastwards for commercial prospects. They shuttled between Calcutta on one hand and Rangoon, Burma, Singapore, Malaya, and the Chinese cities of Shanghai, Penang and Hong Kong. Travel being very slow, a business trip to the Far East took between six and eight

months. For example, a trip to Singapore undertaken by Moses Moses Hakham Ezekiel extended in 1842 from January 20 until August 15. Eminently successful business in Singapore was the family of Meyer under the name Meyer Bros., - three brothers, Reuben who died aged 42 in Calcutta in 1885, Manasseh and Elias.

After India's independence many from the Jews community felt uncertain about their future in what they called the New India, they started migrating to other countries like Australia, Canada, China. Around 1948 Israel was formed that gave the community a hope of a land which they can call their own, many migrated there and now there are around 15-20 members of the community living in Kolkata who sometimes visit Israel for their family members living there.

The thesis is divided in to six chapters, the first is the introduction, where I have given an overview of the whole thesis, the second chapter is the History of Jews and Indo-Judaic Trade, this chapter gives an account of the trade relationship between India and the Jewish community. the chapter is divided into the two parts the first discusses the early settlers that came to India for trade and the second part discusses the trade, what were the basic items that the community mainly traded and how they community established their business in India.

The third chapter discusses colonial Kolkata and the business and Culture of the Jewish Community. This chapter looks into the important businesses of the community and also the Landmarks as many of the members like David Ezra owned many real estates in and around Esplanade and Ezra Street; Ezra Street was named after David Ezra and he along with Ezekiel Musleah build the Beth El Synagogue on Pollock Street. It was rebuilt and extended in 1886 by Elias Shalom Gubbay. Elias David Joseph Ezra built the Magen David Synagogue in memory of his father David Joseph Ezra in 1884. The chapter also focuses on the large scale businesses owned by non Baghdadi Jewish members like M.Walters & Co. owned by Max Wecksler, a Lithuanian Jewish watchmaker. The Hannahgraph Studio, a photographic studio owned by Pinhas Hallen, a white Jew from Cochin, etc.

Chapter four discuses some of the important members of the Jewish Community in Kolkata like Benjamin Nissim Elias, he owned many companies including the Agarpara Jute Mills, National Tobacco, Tobacco Leaf Company, Electric Supply, and had interests in dairy farming, fertilizer, real estate, bone mills, engineering and coal mining. David Joseph Ezra, a trader in indigo and silk and exported opium. He was also an agent for Arab ships arriving in Calcutta for Arab merchants from Muscat and Zanzibar importing dates and other produce from their countries in exchange for rice, sugar and other food items. Ezra Mir a pioneer in documentary film, Mir changed his birth name, Edwyn Myers, to Ezra Mir to make his name more Indian sounding. He first worked as a stage actor and moved to New York in 1924 to work in the film industry. He was first an actor and then started editing film. During this period he made Symbolesque, his first short film. It also mentions some of the prominent female members of the community who achieved great success in India like Rachel Duek Cohen who was the first lady doctor in the Jewish community. Many followed in her footsteps. She enrolled in Calcutta Medical College in 1892 for L.M. S and M.B courses and received a Government Scholarship of Rs. 20, and many more. Chapter five finally comes

full circle and gives an account of the remaining businesses owned by the community like Nahoum and Sons and some of the businesses that the Jews owned and it prospered under them and then changed hands to other communities like the Armenians. Lastly we have the concluding chapter which gives details analysis of the thesis and the theoretical groundwork and answers the research questions.

To do this research work the methodology that was used was that of a archival research. An archive simply put is an organization that collects the records of individuals, families, or other organizations. My data was collected from the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University and the archival website Recalling Jewish Calcutta <http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/> . Archival research is research involving primary sources held in an archive, or a Special Collections library, or other repository. Archival sources can be manuscripts, documents, records (including electronic records), objects, sound and audiovisual materials, or other materials. My work also include field work, my samples were selected on the basis of area sampling. Area Sampling is a method of sampling used when there is no complete frame of reference available. The area under investigation is divided into small sub-areas which are sampled at random or according to a restricted process of stratified sampling. As the Jewish community is mainly based in and around Esplanade, Kyd Street, Sudder Street and Ezra Street these were the places that were of relevance. I have mainly collected the field data from the various businesses that were or are still part of the Jewish community. My role in this research work was to go through all the archival data with great concentration for the research work to progress. The detailed description of the works that I studied, apart from the archival data are mentioned in the remaining chapters.

There might be some limitations in archival studies like the data may not directly respond to the research question as we are mainly dealing with pre recorded clips and texts, so we may have to re-coded the data to answer a new question. Also, the data may not, at times, offer the richness of other forms of data collection, such as interviews. One of the major problems that I had to face was the overwhelming amount of data that was present as in this type of research as a researcher we have no control over how the data was collected and what type of controls for extraneous variables were put in place. But this type of research is helpful in a qualitative research and in researches in which we could not ethically assign participants to groups; it is also good and researching trends within a population. Archival research can be challenging at times, but it can also be tremendously rewarding we may not find exactly what we are looking for, but we may also find much more than we expected.

The type of study that has been done here is more of a qualitative research than a quantitative one, a qualitative research is mainly aimed at acquiring a in depth understanding of a specific event rather than a understanding it from the surface, it also aims to provide an explicit image of the structure and the patterns that are found among the participants, there is no room for manipulation of variables it gives one the room for the meaning to emerge from the participants. It gives a better understanding of the data through a firsthand experience. In this type research the data collection is mainly acquired through observation as it is useful for generating in-depth description of the events that are being studied. It falls mainly in the context of discovery than verification. It is basically an archival research, an ideal instrument

to address established issues in a very different manner. In qualitative research the analysis usually starts from the very beginning from the time the data is being collected, it's a cyclical rather than a linear process. My data as said before was collected from the secondary data like archival website that was created by the Jewish Community members and it documents the history of the community in details.

Chapter 2: History of Jews and Indo-Judaic Trade.

History and tradition give us an inkling that the people known as "The Hebrews" in the days of their success, originated from their patriarch Abraham, who came from "Ur of the Chaldees" or Babylonia. Dissatisfied with the way of life around them led him with a large number of followers to migrate to the land of Canaan or what is presently known as Israel, where he established himself.

This is a very brief sketch of the general history of the Jews till their exile to and release from Babylonia; we may also note that not all the Jews released chose to leave their settled mode of life in Babylonia to make the arduous trip back to Judaea or Israel. Many of them stayed back and prospered, and in due course were treated well. They were allowed to build houses, have servants and enter into business. They also occupied the highest posts in the state as the later story of Daniel seems to indicate¹. Some of the Jews in that land were the wealthiest caravan merchants, the most skilled artisans, the most successful farmers, cattle breeders and land-owners. So when the question of giving all that came up many chose to remain behind.

The Jewish community have had a conspicuous presence in the history of capitalism, both as symbol and as reality. Yet the relationship of the Jews to capitalism has received less attention than its importance demands.

Academicians and historians tend to focus on the history of a particular nation or region—while the Jewish community were scattered across national and regional boundaries. For the Jews, their success in economy has long been a source of both pride and embarrassment. This chapter will delve deeper into the Indo-Judaic trade relations and the early settlers of Kolkata.

The Early Migrants:

Although the majority of the settlers in Kolkata emigrated from Baghdad, it is Aleppo which holds the distinction of providing the first. It was Shalom ben Aaron ben Obadiah Ha-Kohen (Shalom Aaron Cohen), born in Aleppo in 1762, a descendant of an exile from Spain at the time of the Inquisition. He died in Kolkata in 1836. For an account of his remarkable life, we are dependent on his personal diary which is now in the possession of Mr. D. S. Sassoon of England². In 1789, he embarked on the first of his many voyages. This journey brought him from Aleppo to Baghdad, then to Hillah and finally to Basra, where one of his sisters was living. The very next year, he began what was to be his voyage of destiny, as it brought him for the first time to his future homeland, India. He arrived at Bombay in September 1790, but soon moved to Surat where he took up his residence.

A jeweller by profession, he must have already been a rich man for his diary records show that he loaned a sum of Rs, 1,500, a considerable sum in those days, to his landlord, Stephen

¹ Silliman, Jael. Jewish Portraits Indian Frames Women's Narrative From A Diaspora of Hope, Calcutta, Seagull, 2001.

² Shalom Aaron Cohen as told by Sally Solomon in Hooghly Tales, Archive.

el Goorgi (i.e., Georgian). The loan was given without interest but entitled him to live rent-free in the house which he later acquired for Rs. 20,000.³

Shalom entered into a business alliance with Jacob ben Semah ben Nissim (Jacob Semah), a wealthy businessman who had emigrated from Baghdad, he married his sister in 1793. This was Shalom Cohen's second marriage. His first wife had refused to leave Aleppo and stayed back⁴. In 1795, he journeyed to Baghdad via Muscat and Basra, and there he met his first wife who then agreed to accompany him back to Surat, two Shohatim⁵, Jacob Sittenhon and Moses ibn Zbeida, also accompanied him to India. During this period Shalom Cohen made frequent voyages to Baghdad, Basra and other places in Mesopotamia.

The next chapter in his life commenced in 1797 when he first came to Kolkata after visiting Cochin and Madras. In Kolkata he and his partner Jacob Semah set up a prosperous business, employing staff from even distant cities such as Cochin. Apart from the jewellery business, they established a thriving export and import trade with Baghdad, dealing in such commodities as silks, muslins and indigo. However, his partnership with Jacob Semah terminated after a business disagreement after which an arbitration court ordered Jacob Semah to pay Rs. 60,000 to Shalom Cohen, the verdict being confirmed by the English Court⁶.

By this time, Shalom Cohen had become a very wealthy man and was able to indulge in the luxury of holidaying at Chinsurah, on the outskirts of Kolkata, with his wives. Even so, he continued to expand his business, and in 1816, made a trip to Lucknow via Benares by boat and carriage. At Lucknow, he was received by the Ruler of Oudh, Vizier Ghazi el Din Haider, who conferred on him the title of Court Jeweller, a position which carried a salary of Rs, 2,000 per month⁷. He lived with his wives at Lucknow till 1819, during which period they stayed in the house of the British Resident.

In April of that year, he returned to Kolkata via Cawnpur, Faizabad and Munhidabad. The extent of his wealth and status can be gauged from the fact that his group of advisors consisted of 30 Spahis (soldiers), 25 Chokras (oddboys), 7 carriages, 7 palanquins, 60 bearers, 23 changis (sweepers) and 10 personal servants.

In 1829, he made another visit to Lucknow, where his former protector had been succeeded by his son, Suleiman Jab Nasir Din Haider bin Padishahi Anwad. During this visit too, he was honoured by the British Resident who invited him to breakfast and to a Christmas party. It is reported that, in addition to being Court Jeweller at Lucknow, an identical title was conferred on him by Maharajah Ranjeet Singh of Punjab⁸.

³ Abraham, Isaac S. A Short Account of the Jews of Calcutta, Sen Daw & Co., Calcutta 1969, p. 16

⁴ Shalom Aaron Cohen as told by Sally Solomon in Hooghly Tales, Archive

⁵ Shohet or plural Shohatim is a person officially licensed by rabbinic authority as slaughterer of animals and poultry for use as food in accordance with Jewish laws, according to the Jewish Culture.

⁶ Abraham, Issac S. A Short Account of the Jews of Calcutta, Sen Daw & Co., Calcutta 1969, p. 16

⁷ Abraham, Issac S. A Short Account of the Jews of Calcutta, Sen Daw & Co., Calcutta 1969, p. 16

⁸ Shalom Aaron Cohen as told by Sally Solomon in Hooghly Tales, Archive

In 1830, he had the distinction of being received in audience by the Governor-General of India, Lord Willam Cavendish Bentinck. His diary reveals him to be a learned man, interested in such diverse subjects as Astronomy, Philosophy and Poetry. He also had a fine sense of humour. When he died, he was buried in the cemetery which he himself offered to the community. At that time there was no particular name given to the cemetery, which was on a plot of land located at 45 Narkeldanga Main Road, Calcutta. Mr. E. M. D. Cohen took a leading role in organising its affairs for many years as also Mr. I. S. Musleah. Many years later, the Jewish Burial Board was formed with elected office bearers and Messrs. D. J. Cohen and I. S. Musleah worked very hard as Honorary Secretaries of this institution. It was not until 1951 that the "Oseh Haised Board" was registered. This was headed by Lady Rachel Ezra as the President, and Mr. J. R. Jacob, E. J. Samuel, E. F. E. Moses, E. Mulseah, R. AbIaham, J. E. jacob, A. E. J. Abraham, E. D. Ezra and W. Starkmann were the office bearers⁹.

So far, approximately 4,000 people are buried in this cemetery and a new plot was purchased adjoining the old plot to ensure its continuity for many more years.



Fig 1: The Jewish Cemetery in Narkeldanga

The Traders:

The Baghdadi Jewish immigrants in India and were mostly traders and like the Armenians, constituted a “trade diaspora”, to borrow Abner Cohen’s famous phrase, to refer to a nation

⁹ Shalom Aaron Cohen as told by Sally Solomon in Hooghly Tales, Archive.

of “socially interdependent but specially dispersed communities.”¹⁰ They provided links in a long chain of trading posts stretching from Shanghai to London. Their main items of trade included gems, rosewater, import of Arabian horses, spices, silk, Indigo etc.

Shalom Cohen, the first Jewish settler in Calcutta carried on an import and export trade with Bombay and Baghdad in diamonds, silks, indigo and Dacca cloth (muslin). As his business flourished, he brought in other Jews from Aleppo and Cochin to assist him in his commercial ventures. Family members were integral to business: his younger brother Abraham was designated his commercial envoy to Bombay and other relatives were dispatched regularly to other trading centres like Muscat and Basra as his representatives Shalom Cohen made a considerable fortune in Kolkata. Whatever he touched turned into gold. It’s interesting to note in this context that when Sir John Shore arrived in India as a writer in 1769, his salary was eight rupees a month and this too in the Secret and Political Department of the English East India Company¹¹. The pay of a cadet was seventeen-and-half rupees a month with free quarters When Shalom Cohen received a monthly salary of Rs.2000/- from the Nawab of Lucknow for a period of 3 months, it was roughly equivalent to 222 dollars in the early eighties of the twentieth century, but in terms of the purchasing power of the rupee in those days (i.e. 18th century), it was equivalent to an annual salary of \$100,000 in the United States. Although the majority of settlers in Kolkata emigrated from Baghdad, it is Aleppo, which provides the distinction of providing the first in the person of Shalom Cohen.

The Aleppo Jews had been long engaged in spiritual and commercial activities of Basra and Baghdad. The Far Eastern immigration of the Aleppo Jews was motivated by several factors. Among these were:

- The desire of the Spanish Jews in Aleppo to free themselves from the restrictions of the Levant British Company and the refusal of the British Levant Co. and the French traders to allow them to practice International trade under their patronage.
- This British and French attitude of non-cooperation prevented the Spanish Jews in Aleppo from entering into the Levant trade.

By the mid 18th century the financial position of the Aleppo Jews deteriorated even more with the rise of the influence of the Syrian Christians on international trade when they established commercial centres at Mediterranean ports and took over the transit trade. The domination by the English East India Company of the trade lanes from the Far East to Iraq encouraged Jewish Spanish, traders to settle in Baghdad, Basra and trade centers in the Far East, including India. They did so in order to exploit the new trade opportunities. Unlike the Levant Co. that insisted on monopoly, the British East India Company whose trading domain included the Far East (India, China), Persia, Basra and Baghdad, allowed Jews free trade, used their help in its transactions and went so far as to grant them British patronage. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the British formally declared Basra as the seat of the

¹⁰ Silliman, Jael. Jewish Portraits Indian Frames Women's Narrative From A Diaspora of Hope, Calcutta, Seagull, 2001.

¹¹ The Calcutta Review, Vol.I, May-August, 1855, p.17

agency of the East India Company and empowered the. Agency to control the trading activity of the Company in the Persian Gulf, this trade turned Basra into a regional and international trade center. Shiploads of Indian goods docked and unloaded, and convoys left for Baghdad, and then to Aleppo, Ezjiir, Istanbul, Alexandria, London, Marseilles, Venice and Amsterdam. Jews played such a vital role in the commercial life of Basra that in 1793 the representative of the English East India Company was forced to live in Kuwait for nearly two years, because he had quarrelled with the Jewish merchants there. The Persian Gulf port of Basra began to serve as a trading center of the English East India Company in 1760 and it was from Basra and Baghdad that many Jews who played an important role in the English commerce in the region gradually moved on to India. At first they settled in the thriving west coast port of Surat. By the end of the eighteenth century, close to a hundred Jews from Aleppo, Baghdad and Basra made up the Arabic-speaking Jewish merchant colony of Surat. As the Presidencies of Calcutta and Bombay developed, Surat's importance as a port declined, and the Jewish merchants living there moved to the fast-growing commercial centers. Encouraged by the British prominent Iraqi families-such as the Sassoons, Eliases, Gubbays, Kadouries, Musleahs and Abrahams prospered as merchants or as middlemen for the large cotton, jute and tobacco processing plants¹².

The economic entrepreneurship of the Baghdadi Jews has to be placed in the broader context of the 18th century Bengal economy and its wide ramifications. The present state of West Bengal originated from the partition of Bengal in August 1947, in connection with the transfer of power by the British Government to the then Government of India.

Formerly under the Mughal Government, Bengal proper, Bihar and Orissa constituted the Bengal sabha¹³. In 1751, Alivardi Khan, Nawab of Bengal, ceded Orissa to Raghuji Bhonsle, and thenceforward although the tem Bengal sabha continued to be applied to the three provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, yet for all practical purposes Mughal rule remained confined to Bengal and Bihar. The early settlements of the East India Company in Bengal at first worked in close subordination to Fort St George, Madras until Calcutta became the headquarters in 1690. The Old Fort William was constructed in 1710. In 1765, the Diwan of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was conferred in perpetuity on the East India Company by the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, the Company "stood forth as the Diwan" for the collection of the Emperor's share of the land revenue. In 1774 the Presidency of Fort William was given jurisdiction over the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay. The Centre of British power was transferred from Madras to Calcutta and the latter became the seat of the supreme Government of India. At first, all the north eastern factories of the East India Company from Balasore on the Orissa coast to Patria in the heart of Bihar belonged to the "Bengal Establishment" which later on included the whole of the Company's possessions in northern and north-eastern India. Thus Bengal for a long time (at least up to 1836) comprised a considerable portion of northern India extending up to Arakan (present day Rakhine in

¹² Roland, Joan G., The Baghdadi Jews in Slapak Orpa (ed) The Jews of India A Story of Three Communities, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1995, p37

¹³ Land Settlement of Bengal with Special Reference to 24-Parganas;
https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/183472/6/06_chapter%20%201.pdf

Myanmar) and Tennaserim(present day Taninthryi Region in Myanmar) in the east and Delhi, Ajmer and Berar in the west historians have dismissed the notion that pre-colonial India was a society of largely self sufficient villages characterized by what Karl Marx described as “Asiatic mode of Production”¹⁴. Such a description would be totally inappropriate for Bengal well before the arrival of the British. Many artisans worked for the distant markets. Peasant cultivators too worked for money. There was an enormous volume of trade in agricultural produce throughout Bengal during the eighteenth century. Crops such as cotton, sugarcane, mulberry and oil seeds were obviously for the most part cash crops. So too was a considerable part of the rice crop, especially the winter rice.¹⁵

Revenue payments, except in Bihar were made in cash, which circulated very widely. Credit was widely available. By the eighteenth century, Bengal, like certain other parts of India, had what has been called a fairly advanced system of mercantile credit. At its apex was the great banking house of the Jagat Seths at Murshidabad.¹⁶ The Seths ran a huge business lending very large sums to the Nawabs, the British, the French and the Dutch Companies, and to individual Europeans. The vigour of the indigenous credit and banking system is suggested by the fact that in the early nineteenth century, British banking came to some extent to depend on it.

By the mid eighteenth century Bengal had to a degree developed an integrated economy with marked regional specializations; some areas producing grain surpluses, others concentrating on certain cash crops or on particular lines of textiles (e.g. Dacca and Murshidabad). There was a network of markets throughout the province. Great wholesale markets had been established at strategic points on the rivers, such as that of Bhagawangola, on the Ganges near Murshidabad or Narayanganj near Dacca. The numerous large-scale markets were called ganj. Small-scale transaction took place at village hats, normally held on certain days of each week.

The merchant communities of Bengal were very diverse in origin. Bengal attracted many non-Bengali merchants. Gujratis and Rajasthanis were particularly prominent. They were naturally attracted to Murshidabad and Kasimbazar, Bengal's high quality silk belt. They set up Jain temples at both places. A considerable community of Oswals (from Rajasthan) grew up at Murshidabad. Khattris from northern India were also important In the Bengal towns, as were so called Mughal merchants, Muslims from Iran and central Asia. Armenians were another group from Iran who settled in Bengal to trade. There were some Armenian merchants like Aga Seat, Cancheek, Aga Gregory.

The Jews were also another group who were drawn by the lucrative trade and commerce of Bengal. When the first Baghdadi Jewish settler arrived in Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, the British had identified Calcutta as an important commercial center. Jacob Saphir,

¹⁴ Rahman, Taimur. Marx and Engels on the Asiatic Mode of Production in India.

<https://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv13n2/asiatic.htm>

¹⁵ Marshall. P.J, Bengal the British Bridge head Eastern India 1740-1828, New Cambridge History of India 2.2, Cambridge University Press (hereafter CUP), 198743.13

¹⁶ Marshall. P.J, Bengal the British Bridge head Eastern India 1740-1828, New Cambridge History of India 2.2, Cambridge University Press (hereafter CUP), 198743.13

the Jewish traveller who was in Calcutta in 1860, described the city as an “emporium of nations and a city of freedom and security.”¹⁷ Calcutta was the nerve center of the British Empire and traders from many parts of the world, including Armenians, Greeks, Portuguese and Baghdadi Jews were drawn to this colonial port city. Its appeal was enhanced by its connection to both river and ocean traffic. Beginning in 1853, the British constructed a railroad to connect Calcutta with other strategic military and trading locations. The railroads served as the commercial and military arteries of the Raj that not only provided for a unified market of cheap machine produced industrial products from England, but also facilitated the deployment of troops to quell disturbances. The British established the key economic institutions, such as the Customs House, the Stock Exchange, the commercial banks, and later the railroad network, which were essential for trade to flourish in Calcutta and its surroundings. Needless to say, these economic and bureaucratic structures facilitated trade, while the ramparts of Fort William on the banks of the river Hooghly afforded Calcutta’s merchants political protection and security in their business enterprises. Calcutta was close to many important raw materials—silks and muslin from Dacca, as well as cash crops that grew in the rural areas of Bengal and Bihar. Sesam, oil, jute, cotton goods, sugar, spices, indigo, and lac¹⁸, were all shipped out through the port of Calcutta to Eastern and Western destinations. Calcutta (presently Kolkata) was a ‘company town’ of immense proportions. Though late arrivals compared to the Portuguese and the Dutch, the English East India Company quickly established a new base in Calcutta. The first battlements of what became known as the Fort William were erected in 1696. Two years later, the Company acquired zamindari rights over the three adjacent villages of Sutanuti, Govindapur and Kolkata. By the 1720s Bengal was contributing over half of the Company’s imports from Asia, most of this coming via Calcutta. Many Indians were attracted by the prosperity the city offered, and by the middle of the eighteenth century, Calcutta had over 120,000 inhabitants, of which just 250 were Company officials. According to Pradip Sinha’s Marxist analysis, Calcutta ‘grew as a typical colonial city, linking the hinterland of the primary production with the plantation and mining enclaves, and exporting the entire product in the interests of an externally oriented imperial economy. In 1790, there were fifteen Agency Houses in Calcutta, a majority of who were British. British political and economic expansion in India which had been going on since 1757 completed its formative phase by 1833.

The Jewish merchants had stakes in many plantations and primary products. They competed with other trading communities, especially the Armenians and Parsis in this phase of mercantile capitalism. Baghdadi Jews had long been part of the trading networks. British imperialism provided the conditions for the expansion of the networks to new areas of the world. These networks operated as ancillary to onwads and played an important part in India’s economy. Thus a string of Baghdadi Jewish communities thrived on the underside of the colonial enterprise. From the years 1757-1833, “Britain not only won the paramount

¹⁷ Jacob Saphir, *Eben Saphir* II, p.98 quoted in David Solomon Sassoon, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad*, Letchworth, 1949, pg 212

¹⁸ Lac is the hardened resin secreted by the tiny lac insect which thrives on the cell sap of certain host plants. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313692577_Lac_Crop_Harvesting_and_Processing

political power in India but more than half of Bengal's external commerce."¹⁹ The groundwork for Jewish commercial activities in Bengal had thus been firmly laid.

The Baghdadi Jewish merchants made large fortunes in the opium trade in the first part of the nineteenth century. The modern era in the global opium trade began in 1773 when the British Governor-General of Bengal established a monopoly on the sale of opium. Over the next years, Britain actively promoted the export of Indian opium, defying Chinese drug laws and fighting two wars to open China's drug market for its merchants. The eastern trade of Calcutta consisted mainly of opium valued at about (Rs) 30 lakhs. Under the British, Indian opium became a major global commodity, giving this modern commerce a scale and organization that distinguishes it from earlier forms. When the East India Company conquered Bengal, it took control of a well-established opium industry involving peasant producers, merchants, and long-distance traders. In his authoritative account of the Calcutta Jewish community, Rabbi Ezekiel Musleah notes the role of the Jews in the opium trade; the opium trade was dominated by the Jews. The Indian farmer sold all his opium to the British Government of India, which auctioned it to the highest bidder.²⁰ Thus purchased, it was exported privately to Penang, Hong Kong Shanghai and Singapore mainly in Chinese boats. Even the shipping of opium was almost entirely in Chinese hands. In January 1888, for example, were exported, 2870 being through Jewish merchants-David Sassoon 1220 chests, Elia Shalome Gubbay 1445 chests, Elia David Joseph Ezra & Co. 580 chests, Meyer Brothers 475 chests and Saleh Manasseh 150 chests.

The Baghdadi Jews adopted the time-honoured business practice of buying cheap and selling at higher prices. Thus, when Jews wanted to depress the opium market, they boycotted the auction and picked up the products when the prices were lower. The Marwaris, migrants from western India, were their only competitors. When the opium trade declined and was banned by the British in the early twentieth century, Jewish traders invested in cotton and jute products as export staples. Another source of fabulous wealth for the Jews was the cultivation of indigo, sales and shipping. The importation of Indigo commenced from India about 1790, and had greatly increased by the next forty years as to supersede all other indigos. The cultivation of indigo was carried on from Dacca to Delhi. There were 300 or 400 factories in Bengal, chiefly in Jessore, Krishnanagore and Tirhoot. What caused the great and sudden prosperity of the indigo trade in Bengal was the destruction of Santo Domingo (Haiti), which had supplied nearly all the world with indigo prior to the French Revolution, and closed down with the revolt of the black leader Toussaint L'Ouverture. The indigo factories were all destroyed during that rebellion. Ezekiel Musleah, one of the most wealthy member of the Jewish community, was expert in the indigo trade and his expertise was utilized by the East India Company. Jewish traders also manufactured and exported silk, woollen and cotton products, and dealt in precious stones. Ezekiel Judah was a leading trader in silk and indigo. Shalom Cohen's attention was attracted by the rich dividends that accrued from the lucrative trade in silks and which had a ready market of muslin, in Europe. A Jewish associate and

¹⁹ Jacob Saphir, Eben Saphir II, p.98 quoted in David Solomon Sassoon, A History of the Jews in Baghdad, Letchworth, 1949, p.212

²⁰ Musleah, Ezekiel. On the Banks of the Ganga, Mass, 1975, p.40

later partner Isaac Sittehone made a trip to Kasimbazar, near Murshidabad (famous for silk), in 1800, and stayed there for long periods of time. Cohen also carried on a profitable business with Dacca, famous for its muslins, non-Jewish associate from Aleppo; Fath Allah Hannah Asfar el- Halab Moses Duek Cohen continued the brisk trade in silk with Dacca started by his father-in-law Shalom Cohen²¹. After the latter's departure to Lucknow, Moses Duek entered into a business partnership with a Muslim merchant, set out for Dacca and stayed there with his wife almost throughout Shalom Cohen's sojourn in Lucknow.

From the nineteenth century onwards, Baghdadi Jews were very much active in the real estate business. David Joseph Ezra, an immigrant from Baghdad, was one of the leading property owners in the city of Calcutta by the latter half of the nineteenth century. He immigrated from Baghdad and was one of the leading property owners in the city of Calcutta. He carried on a trade of indigo and silk with Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus and other places and exported opium to Hong Kong on a large scale. He was also an agent to Arab ships arriving in Calcutta and for Arab merchants of Muscat and Zanzibar importing dates and other produce of their country, and in exchange exporting rice, sugar and other articles of food. The famous Jewish traveller Jacob Saphir mentions Joseph as the leader of the Community in 1849²². India in those days was a major exporter of food, it was natural that when the Arabs wanted to trade with Calcutta, they turned to the Baghdadi Jews who spoke Arabic. David Joseph Ezra invested the profits of his business in prime real estate and was credited with such fine architectural works as the Esplanade Mansion, Ezra Mansion and Chowringhee Mansion. The Ezra Street is named after him. When he died (1882), he was the biggest property holder and left his business and estate to his eldest son Elias David Ezra. Broadly speaking, the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta were not a land-based community. As their businesses flourished, they moved into a wide range of other commercial enterprises. Several were active on the Stock Exchange and as large urban landowners. Jews were listed among the Stock Holders of the Union Bank. In the case of landlords, they rented their houses from their original owners and then sublet them according to convenience. E.M.D. Cohen, the Rabbi of Maghen David Synagogue was himself a prosperous landlord. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when trade with the west became faster and freer (by virtue of improved communication facilities and increased security), local Jews followed David Sassoon and Co in 1887 in setting up commission agencies in London: Silliman Ezekiel in general stores and Y.Yaari, originally with David Sassoon in London, striking out on their own. Abraham Joseph Hyeem sold imported shoes from London. Mention may also be made of large Jewish firms such as David Sassoons'; M.A.Sassons'; Curlenders' and B.N. Elias's (the largest Jewish firm in India) which functioned parallel to the European firms. On the outskirts of Calcutta, the Sassoons had a vast agricultural estate, the Port Canning and Land Improvement Company worked by 15,000 ryots (agriculturists) from which a good part of the population of Western India, including the employees of Sassoon mills in Bombay, ultimately received their food.²³ B.N. Elias and Co Ltd has today dwindled into insignificance, but it was once a force to

²¹ Shalom Aaron Cohen as told by Sally Solomon in Hooghly Tales, Archive.

²² Jacob Saphir, Eben Saphir II, p.98 quoted in David Solomon Sassoon, A History of the Jews in Baghdad, Letchworth, 1949, pJ212

²³ David Sassoon, Archive.

reckon with. From humble beginnings, Benjamin Nissim Elias became the all helpful leader of his community. His Agarpara Jute Mill and National Tobacco Company led on to a wide spectrum of concerns-electricity supply, dairy farming, fertilizers, real-estate, insurance, engineering and coal mining. At a different level, there was a scattering of shops owned by Jews both in Calcutta and to a certain extent in the suburbs. These included retail wine shops, general stores and a handful of other shops in the New Market area. One of the most popular shops was that of Nahoums. It was almost a legend In the Calcutta Jewish community. It has been a community space for a long period of time. There were a fair number of small Jewish tradesmen-grocers, confectioners, furnishers, opticians or trade brokers. Elias Joseph Musleah who lived at 17 Pollock street (1871-73), owned an import agency for upward of 15 years till 1880.²⁴ He did business with London, Paris, Marseilles in a variety of goods, primarily wines, perfumes and toys, for which he found a ready market in Rangoon, Dinapore, Bombay and of course, Calcutta. Jewish merchants traded initially in opium .then extended their interests to other indigenous trading products. Though many tried their hand at each trading center, a single Jewish family often attained outstanding success at each one and by association assumed the designation of the place. Mordechai Abraham Cohen was connected with Bhagalpore, Samuel Dwek with Dinapore, Raphael Moses (Ashkenazi) with Ghazipore and Ezekiel Saleh Ezekiel Moses with Gorakhpore. While his commercial range spanned Europe and Asia, the plain of the river Ganges afforded the Jew a fertile approach. Trade with the key cities of the river became a common preoccupation and the strategic position of each of these places made them attractive objectives. Railways were introduced in India in 1853, but it took between two and three decades to connect the main cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Much of the internal trade was therefore done through the waterways, the greatest expanse of which was occupied by the Ganges and its tributaries. Trade between Baghdad and India in the mid-nineteenth century was almost entirely in Jewish control, though there were some Arabians, Persians and Europeans to contend with. European Jews made a bid at opening trade channels with fellow Jews in India. The following advertisement appeared in the Paerah, the Judeo-Arabic journal in 1879- "The undersigned offers himself as Agent and Commercial Informer for Austria-Hungary, Germany, Switzerland. Write in English, French or Hebrew, Address Moses Williams, University of Vienna, Austria."²⁵

With the second quarter of the nineteenth century Jews began turning their attention eastwards for commercial prospects. They shuttled between Calcutta on one hand and Rangoon, Burma, Singapore, Malaya, and the Chinese cities of Shanghai, Penang and Hongkong. Travel being very slow, a business trip to the Far East took between six and eight months. For example, a trip to Singapore undertaken by Moses Moses Hakham Ezekiel extended in 1842 from January 20 until August 15. Eminently successful business in Singapore was the family of Meyer under the name Meyer Bros., - three brothers, Reuben who died aged 42 in Calcutta in 1885, Manasseh and Elias. ²⁶

²⁴ Benjamin Ellias. Archive.

²⁵ Archive.

²⁶ Archive.

Another Calcutta family which ran a successful business in Singapore was that of Joseph Joshua Elias. Having settled in Calcutta from Sham (Syria) in 1837 he prospered in the opium business that- he had begun in Singapore twenty years earlier. Saleh Manasseh Saleh who emigrated from Baghdad in 1862 and died in Calcutta in 1894 married Esther, daughter of Aaron Abraham Cohen; he also flourished in the opium businesses Singapore and returned to Calcutta in 1885. Owners of a beautiful park in Howrah, a suburb of Calcutta, the Belilios family, led by Raphael Belilios made Hong Kong their home in 1861. Closer home to Calcutta, Burma (now Myanmar) was the center for Aaron Abraham Cohen. He inaugurated a business at Moulmein, Burma, in 1874, with a capital of Rs. 40,000 and was noted for his philanthropy. He died in Calcutta in 1887. The firm of Cohen Bros., Rangoon, was owned by his children. His eldest surviving son, Jacob Meir, was the leader of the Rangoon Jewry for several years. Besides established businessmen, there was also the instance of Jewish peddlers or Boxwallahs, recently arrived immigrants from Baghdad, who went from house to house selling toys, sweets, utensils, old clothes and jewellery. This is what a respondent, the great-grandson of Shalom Ovadya Twena, had to say: "I come from a family of boxwallahs"²⁷. The Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta had played an important role in the commercial life of the city. By their activities, Calcutta's trading horizons spread far and wide and became more than just a clearing house for colonial products. Like the pre and the postcolonial South Asian Diaspora, the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta had the "courage, energy, a vision of broader horizons....to make the decision to move thousands of miles" and "yet maintain close contact and sociability", ²⁸by virtue of their lived experience in a transnational world. Therein lays its significance.

²⁷ Interview with Mr. And Mrs. Solomon Twena, Kolkata, Calcutta Club, dated 1.2.07. Archive

²⁸ Brown, Judith M. *Global South Asians Introducing the Modern Diaspora*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2007, p.30.

Chapter 3: Colonial Kolkata and the Business and Culture of the Jewish Community.

Joan G. Roland mentioned that the new approaches to colonial and imperial studies and the emergence of post colonialist and subaltern schools suggested that the challenges faced by a even a microscopic minority section of a society while negotiating its status within the empire and the Indian environment can shed light on what it is meant to be a “native subject”.²⁹

So by understanding how the economy and culture of Calcutta especially around Esplanade we can get a minute idea of why Calcutta became such an important port for various business transactions not only for the British but almost a major portion of South East Asia.

Important Businesses of the Jewish Community:

Business outside of Kolkata included The Agarpara Jute Mills at Kamarhati, The National Tobacco Company, also at Kamarhati, and The Norton Buildings, at 1 and 2 Old Courthouse Street.³⁰

Agarpara Jute Mills covers a wide swath of land next to Barrackpore Trunk Road, and opposite it is the whitewashed factory of the National Tobacco Company. It used to manufacture the once-popular cigarette brand No. 10, and now Regent is the only brand of cigarettes it produces. Vishal market, a mall, has come up within its compound, part of which is used as a parking lot for trucks. All this and a lot more once belonged to a Calcutta Jew named B.N. Elias, who had built his business empire practically from nothing.

Some of the other companies owned by the BNE group were, beside the jute mill and the tobacco company, Great Pyramid Insurance Company, four-five electric companies (small units), Alpine Dairy, an advertising company, a bone mill in Belehata and many years later, Raniganj coalfield. It also possessed a lot of real estate — Mayfair estate comprising seven bungalows where mostly Europeans and company directors lived. The Elias family lived in Albert Road. Gherda’s boss, J.R. (Jacob Reuben) Jacob, who was in charge of some smaller units, was married into the Elias family.

The jute mill has been taken over by the Sardas. All the four three-storied staff quarters, save one, inside the compound stretching practically from one bus stop to another, are whitewashed. The doors and windows are painted light blue. Although the whitewash looked fresh enough, the buildings had seen better days. There are trees and shrubbery all around and the actual mill can be seen in the distance. A driveway leads to the single-storied bungalow of the then CEO, Ajoy Maity.

The Tea and Coffee Trading Company by Solomon Bekhor:

The shop was called Tea & Coffee Trading Company, 15H Lindsay Street.

²⁹ Roland, Joan G. *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, University Press of New England. 1989.

³⁰ Archive

The Proprietor was J.S.Bekhor. The shop was more of an institution; “our coffee and tea was second to none and our customers would not go anywhere else. Amongst our customers were Sir David & Lady Ezra, I remember they had a Rolls Royce and a Sikh driver, in the days of the Raj, my father knew virtually every British, and Continental customer, my father spoke fluent French as he was educated at a French University in Bagdad. We were often invited to French warships for tea as the Captains often visited our shop. We supplied coffee & tea to all the big Hotels, like Firpo, Grand Hotel, Great Eastern Hotel and even the Bata Shoe Co. at Bataganar.

My father knew the Commissioner of Police and they lived next door to Sir David Ezra and his wife started The Girl Guide Movement and my three sisters, Bertine, Seemah and Rachel joined the movement.

Another interesting story, we for about 2 years were living above our shop at 15A Lindsay Mansions, the actress Merle Oberon lived in the same flat before us. There is a book called Merle by Charles Higham and Roy Moseley and on pg 15 you will see that she lived in 15A Lindsay Mansions. My father and mother came to Calcutta in the early 20s when the shop was opened and it closed about 1958.”³¹

Landmarks:

This is a representation of some of the landmark buildings of Jewish Calcutta, among which are:

The house of Lady Ezra, 3 Kyd Street, an iconic landmark in the city of Calcutta, once a site for lavish parties, and a private zoo, it now houses the Central Drugs Laboratory.

Riverside, which was owned by B N Elias and Company, it is a beautiful bungalow with sprawling grounds on the banks of the river. Originally it was lent out to other business CEO’s as a weekend home, but later was reserved by members of the Jewish community as a get away with family and friends and was used for Bar Mitzvahs³² and other parties. It had a beautiful large living room which could be used for balls and parties, a swimming pool with a water slide, tennis courts, and croquet and a dolls house that was big enough for children to play in.

Another major landmark building and business was the Fairlawn Hotel, a family-run hotel on Sudder Street.

Large Scale Businesses and Commercial Enterprises:

This is in no way a complete list of businesses that the Jews were involved in, but it does list some of the major businesses they owned.

Opium Trade:

³¹ Archive

³² Archive

Jewish merchants in the first part of the 19th century made their fortunes in the buying and shipping of opium. The large Jewish merchants in this enterprise included:

David Sassoon

Elia Shalome Gubbay

Elia David Joseph Ezra

Meyer Brothers (also very successful business men in Singapore)

Saleh Manasseh (also successful in Singapore)

Aaron Abraham Cohen (business in Moulmein, Burma and flourished)

Jewish firms, with the decline of the opium trade, invested in cotton and jute as export staples, and in the cultivation, shipping and sale of indigo. The Jewish traders also manufactured and exported silk, cotton and woollen products.

Real Estate:

The Jews were very involved in real estate business and Sir David Ezra became, by the latter part of the 19th century one of the leading property owners of the City.

Large Business Houses or Families:

David Sassoon who also owned the Port Canning and Land Improvement Company that was worked by 15,000 agriculturists who sent food to Western India including the employees of the Sassoon mills in Bombay.

M. A Sassoon

Curlenders

Raphael Belillos (made Hong Kong their home in 1861)

B.N.Elias and Company:

B.N.Elias owned many businesses. These included: National Tobacco including a grading station in Guntur; Agarpara Jute Mills; Great Insurance Pyramid Company, Raniganj Coal Field, as well as real estate and engineering concerns. Oriental Electric and Engineering Company and Alpine Dairy also belonged to them.

Nissim Elias trained his son younger son Stafford Elias to supervise the jute mill. Ben, the elder one, worked in the tobacco factory.³³

During the 40's B.N.Elias hired several European refugees who worked in their various enterprises and brought new skills with them. For example, in order to supply and preserve more food rations for the British army Mr. Braun Barnett designed and they built a

³³ Archive

dehydration plant for potato and other vegetables that was very successful. He also established a large electrically powered saw mill to make cigarette cases for the growing output of cigarettes. During the war years several other industries were added such as metal buttons for army uniforms and lamps. Mr. Miklos Rayk, a refugee from Hungary organized looms for the webbing of parachute harnesses. Several of their wives find employment too as governesses and housekeepers for the wealthier Jewish families. Thus there was a colony of about 80 Jewish and other European refugees living and working in Agrapara through the war years³⁴.

Other Jewish Businesses and Professionals in Kolkata, Notes by Sanoo Twena:

E. Meyer & Co.

Legend has it he and his brother Menasseh, later of Singapore, started as hawkers in the Strand. Both became multi-millionaires. "I believe that Elias made his fortune in a speculation on the revaluation of the rupee in 1917. Menasseh had a multi storey property in Lower Chitpore Road, and before I left Calcutta in the 1960's, I saw, looking from Lalbazaar/Bowbazaar corner, his name inscribed in big letters at the top. After his death, E.Meyer's widow established the Talmud Torah School in his memory."³⁵

Brokers:

D.A.Silliman;

A.J. Shellim & Co;

Joe Benjamin was a partner in a firm of gunny brokers

Albert David and Co owned by Bertie Judah (large pharmaceutical Company)

Hotel:

"I believe that there was a Jewish interest in the Great Eastern Hotel of a man named Josephson, who may also have been a jeweller of standing. My mother's diamond engagement ring was purchased from him."

Professionals:

Dr Judah, Ear Nose & Throat Specialist. He was the son-in-law of Elias Meyer.

Victor Moses & Co. Solicitors, of 6 Old Post Office Street; he died some years ago, but the firm is more flourishing than what it was in his time.

"I believe that that there was at one time a Finance member of the Viceroy's Council named Ralph Gubbay, who may have been from Calcutta. Legend has it that there was a change in a

³⁴ Archive

³⁵ As narrated by Sanoo Twena. Archive

Finance Bill, made after a telephone discussion that took place between Sir Victor and Ralph Gubbay, resulting in its amendment.”

Hairdressing Salon:

Margaret Walkers was a hair dressing salon owned by Florence and Moses Judah. The establishment was bought from a British woman. Florence trained under her and then bought the business when she married. It was located on the ground floor of Stephen’s Court on Park Street.

Printers:

“My grandfather, Isaac Ezekiel Jacob established Mercantile Stationers Syndicate.

My great grandfather, Hacham Shelomo Twena, and his son Moshe, purchased the Hebrew Press owned by E.M.D.Cohen the long serving Hazan of the Maghen David. Apart from publishing the volumes of the commentaries on the Tanach, he published a weekly, called theMaggid Mesharim in the Judeo-Arabic spoken by the congregation, from 1890-1901.”

Shum Howard, Aaron Harazi, Studio Nash, worked at Harrison Trading owned by Aaron Morris (Shumah).

Jewish refugees, doctors who practised in Calcutta: Dr. Lantos – a skin specialist, Dr. Neu, and Dr. Handel.

Pianists Lizel Starey, Lizel Braun.

Jewish-owned businesses by Jews outside the Baghdadi Community by Charles Solomon:

“I used to work in M.Walters & Co. (owned by Max Wecksler, a Lithuanian Jewish watchmaker whose wife was Sarah nee Ferris) just beside Boseck from 1952 to 1955. A Lithuanian Jew, Fred Parry, would sit there and he was an authority on precious stones and would value them for a fee. Parry was also the leading trader of valuable fine art paintings before World War 2 but his huge and valuable collection that was stored during the war in a warehouse belonging to the Grand Hotel was attacked by white ants and destroyed.”³⁶

Max Wecksler was an outstanding Swiss trained watchmaker and inventor. He was a world's first to design the stainless steel watch, have it produced in his name by Pierce in Switzerland and sold them in his shop in Calcutta. He invented plastic protectors for wristwatches against sweat that had a big sale in Calcutta.

Next to Bekhor's Coffee business stood the Hannahgraph Studio, a photographic studio owned by Pinhas Hallen, a white Jew from Cochin. The Herman family, who are buried on the far left of the Jewish Cemetery in Narkeldanga, were wealthy Jews from Russia. Rachel Herman's Calcutta home was left to Dr B.C.Roy and became the headquarters of the

³⁶ As told by Charles Solomon. Archive.

Congress Party in Calcutta. Rachel was very observant and travelled with a Schohet employed full time by her. It was she that financed Bertie Judah to start a Pharmaceutical company Albert David in Calcutta. She was the patron of Dr B.C.Roy the first Chief Minister of West Bengal, helped pay for his education as he was like a son to her.

The only Old Age Home for Jews in Calcutta was a German Ashkenazi one but when World War 1 started it was shut down.

Notable Contribution to the community:

Ezra House and Gubbay House in Alipore Zoological Gardens:

These are two buildings donated by the Ezra family and the Gubbay family. Elia David Joseph Ezra provided an enclosure for large animals (Ezra House) and Elia Shalome Gubbay bore the cost of a building for monkeys. The Ezra House still has its plaque and now houses the giraffes. The plaque for Gubbay House, however, is gone, and the buildings houses the apes.

Ezra Hospital:

Elia Ezra was pained by the health-related difficulties felt by the poor members of the Jewish community. He also sought to provide a hospital for Jews that would have the necessary dietary facilities for Jewish patients. He had planned to build a hospital in a Jewish neighborhood on the site of three buildings on 34 – 36 Ezra Street. He was not able to fulfill his wish as he died in 1886, but his widow, Mozelle Ezra, originally from the Sassoon family, and a great philanthropist in her own right, fulfilled his wish.

Mackintosh and Burn, who had built the Maghen David, were contracted to build the hospital. It was completed before Elia Ezra's first death anniversary and was named after him. It was located not at Ezra Street, but in a place closer to the other hospitals in the City.

Its Italian style architecture is in the style of the Maghen David synagogue. It has two floors with the upper floor constructed for women and children. The flooring is grey and white marble and was done by Jewish contractors Garhe and Co. Large covered balconies that are twelve feet wide, and also made of marble, flank the rooms. The kitchen was to provide Kosher food.

Over the door on the first floor were hung portraits of Mrs. Mozelle Ezra and Elia that were painted on porcelain.

The hospital was opened in 1881. Lady Dufferin, the guest of honor, was presented with a magnificent gold key studded with gems as a memento.

The hospital property belonged to the Ezra-s till it was given to the Government in 1926.

The Elias Meyer Free School and Talmud Torah by Flower Silliman:

The school for boys was formed as a response to the prosletysing of Jewish children who were being taught in Christian mission schools. The Jewish Girls' School and the Jewish Boys' School were opened in 1841 at 40 Ezra Street. While sharing premises, the building for boys and girls were separate. Later the Jewish Girls' School moved to Pollock Street and then to Park Street in the 1950's. The Boys' School premises have shifted to four locations since it was founded. It currently stands in 45 Bowbazar Street in a three-storey building.

Elias David Joseph Ezra supervised the school in its early years. The expenses for running the school, which included the provision of tuition, clothing and lunch, were largely paid for by subscribers and were called the Elias Benevolent Institution. In 1907 the school subscribers and committee entrusted the management and running of the school to Ezra Arakie and was renamed the Jewish Free School and Talmud Torah. Arakie guided the school for over three decades. In 1909, 45, Bow Bazar Street was rented to house the school. Under the able leadership of Elias Meyer who served as President and Mr. Arakie as principal, the school grew considerably. By 1919 the grounds were rented on a ten-year lease and finally a three storey building was constructed which houses the school to this day. When Elias Meyer died in London in 1925, his widow created a Trust Fund of Rs 576,500 and the school was named the Elias Meyer Boy's School and Talmud Torah.

After Mr. Arakie died, many members of the community worked in the school as principals, teachers and secretaries. Saul Ezra taught till he emigrated to Israel, and Moses Elias served as Principal and Secretary of the School for many years. Norman and David Nahoum were also Secretaries for many years.

From its inception the Talmud Torah School emphasized the study of the Torah. It sought to make its students fluent in Hebrew and Sharah, (an Arabic translation of Hebrew). The boys would attend service 3 to 4 times a day in the Neveh Shalome Synagogue. This emphasis on religion and reading of the prayers left less time for academic studies. The girls in the Jewish Girls School were less encumbered by these duties and outshone the boys in the Cambridge Exams. The girls left school and married young and found jobs as nurses, doctors, secretaries, teachers, hair dressers or dress-makers, whereas the boys usually found jobs in Jewish business houses such as B.N. Elias, E D Sassoon or David Sassoon. A few worked in the Railways, the Police or in the Docks (Customs). As the boys were well versed in Hebrew they led the congregation as Hazans (Cantors). At the latter part of the twentieth century, a teacher called Simon Moses who was crippled from Polio and was assigned as a Hebrew teacher. He lived on the premises and was affectionately called "Morah" (teacher). He was very well loved and fondly remembered by his students and this is reflected in his tombstone at the cemetery in Narkeldanga.

Today the school has lost all its Jewish traditions and heritage as there have not been Jewish students for a long time. The standard of education has fallen and the handful of Jews left in Calcutta is working hard to improve the school and make improvements in education.³⁷

In addition to tuition, the school provided its students with clothes, shoes and lunch, and was called.

List of Jewish Owned Buildings:

- 11 Camac Street
- 26 Chittaranjan Avenue, Silas Building
- Nahoums Shop, 2 and 4 Hartford Lane (maybe 3 Hartford Lane)
- 2 Hungerford Street
- 4 and 8 Loudon Street
- 16/1 Loudon Street
- 3 Madge Lane, Judean Club (building now Treasure Island, near New Market)
- 3 Moira Street
- 6/1 Moira Street
- 9 Theater Road, currently Axis bank, the palatial bungalows of Mr and Mrs. Curlender
- 1 Wilkie Road
- 9 Wood Street
- Bengal Club, Sir David Ezra
- Ezra Mansions, Old Court House Street
- Ezra Terrace
- Florence Mansions, at the corner of Marquis and Free School Street
- Life Insurance Building on Chowringhee Road, near Metro Cinema
- Mayfair Estates, B N Elias, company bungalows of B.N Elias and Co. (National Tobacco Company)
- Palace Court, Kyd Street, owned by the Jacob family

The Jews of Calcutta lived mainly in areas like Burrabazar, Kolutola, Mochipara, Ezra Street and their businesses were established around Esplanade where still we can see some of the businesses still present some still owned by the Jewish community and some has been transferred to other business communities.

Kolkata Jews especially the wealthy and the middle class had a great deal of leisure time due to the availability of domestic help. In addition to large family gatherings and the community events, the members of the community also enjoyed a variety of outdoor activities including various sports. Hockey was one of the absolute favourite and the most popular pastime among both boys and girls and the community fielded teams for both. Badminton was also very popular, many young people were in the Girl and Boy Scouts and there were camps to Mudapore and Gopalpur that were organized from the 30's to the 50's.

³⁷ As told by Flower Silliman. Archive

Going to the races was also very popular despite the major race day being on Shabbath. Jewish bookies would go from house-to-house to take pre-Sabbath bets. Many did attend the races on Saturdays. Several wealthy Jews, men and women, owned race horses and were actively involved in the racing scene in Calcutta. Mrs. Susan Sopher's horse, Winged Tiger won the Viceroy Cup in 1945 with the odds at 35/1.³⁸ Aslan Manasseh was for many years the Stewart of the Calcutta Royal Turf Club. There were Jewish trainers and jockeys and the popular racebook The Turf that started in the 1940's and lasted till 1981 was published by the Elite press owned by Mrs. Lily Einy and Ezra S. Ezra.³⁹ (Ezra was originally a lawyer who switched to publishing the race book.) Haskell David was an amateur rider who became a champion rider and trainer. Jews also raced in Tollygune (for amateurs) as well as in the race courses in Darjeeling and Shillong.⁴⁰

A favourite place for the community to go on holiday was Mudapore, Bihar which was a small country town where they could relax and enjoy the fresh air, the rich milk, the ravines and the countryside. Some members of the community rented houses but a few of the wealthier members owned homes in Mudapore. B N Elias owned Field View, a rambling bungalow, as a holiday home. Shamrock and Anchorage were two of the holiday homes that were popular among the community, as were homes across from the maidan across from the Dak Bunglaow. There were often enough Jews visiting in Mudapore for Saturday morning prayer services to be held.

Gopalpur on sea was another favourite place to holiday for both Jews and members of the Anglo Indian community. B.N Elias owned a cottage Brighton Villa and many members of the community stayed there, and others rented other cottages on the beach. Swimming in the ocean as well as climbing the sand dunes near the backwaters were favourite pastimes. As many families stayed for several weeks at a time they would bring their supplies from Calcutta to the sea-side fishing village.

Darjeeling, up in the Himalayas was also a resort that the community loved to visit. They would travel to Darjeeling by train, as they did to Gopalpur and Mudapore, but the added attraction Darjeeling held was the toy train that ran between Siliguri and Darjeeling.

Closer home, across the Hooghly was the B N Elias holiday home Riverside. The beautiful bungalow and lawns on the river, the swimming pool, tennis and croquet made it a grand place to spend the day. B N Elias was very generous with the community and opened the home to friends and members of the community.

The Judean Club started in 1929, with Lady Ezra its first President. The Club sought to provide a social and cultural center for young Jewish people. It was first housed on Kyd Street but was moved to 3 Madge Lane in the 1930's. Today on those premises of our social club stands a mall called Treasure Island.

³⁸ Archive

³⁹ Archive

⁴⁰ <http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/search>

The Club had a large hall that was used for functions and dancing, and had a lounge or reading room which was used for community meetings. There was also a billiard room, a bar and a card room. One sat down with friends on the long covered verandah to drink and eat snacks served from the kosher kitchen.

The Judean Club, in the heart of the residential area of the Jewish community in the 30's through the 1960's, was a popular rendezvous for old and young. The Club held regular programs such as Purim, Hanukkah, and other parties where community members assembled to socialize and celebrate. The annual Simchat Torah Ball⁴¹ was one of the most special occasions the Club organized. At this Ball a Simchat Torah Queen was chosen. Everyone looked forward to this event and a lot of betting went on for favourites – yes we were a community that loved betting and gambling and never passed up an opportunity! (Remember horse racing was a community sport1)

The card room attracted Poker, Bridge and rummy players. Though most of the players were men there were some women who played cards too. Miss Ramah Luddy was often at the Poker Table playing a hand. Many a Calcutta billiard player learned to play billiards at the Club.

The sounds of Backgammon (Towli), counters clicking on the wooden board, could be heard all along the verandah. Both old and young men loved to play Towli. Carom was another favourite game played at the club.

Committee meetings for the Macabee, Sports Club, the Young People's Congregation and other groups met at the Club to discuss their business and other community affairs. Ramah Luddy started two study circles there on post biblical history and Jewish literature. There were also prominent speakers who delivered lectures to the community.

During World War II Jewish soldiers in the British and American forces came to the Club and they were permitted to observe High Holidays in the building.

The Judean Club offered a range of facilities in a pleasant atmosphere in a central location for the Jewish community to enjoy. Calcutta, a City of Clubs, is still well known for its Club culture and most communities still have a thriving club presence. The Judean Club is no longer one of them. As the community dwindled it closed in the 1970's due to a lack of members

⁴¹ A ball organized on the Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah (Jewish religious scripture) readings, and the beginning of a new cycle.

Chapter 4: Important Members of the Jewish Community.

Jews were associated with trade and with the lending of money long before the rise of a recognizably modern capitalism in the seventeenth century. It helps to account for the fact of disproportionate Jewish success under conditions of modern capitalism. There were many prominent members of Jewish community who gained major importance in colonial Kolkata and the economy of the community.

The major contributors to the business and social development of Kolkata were,

Benjamin Nissim Elias:

B.N.Elias was the largest Jewish firm in India named after the founder Benjamin Nissim Elias. B.N.Elias owned many companies including the Agarpara Jute Mills, National Tobacco, Tobacco Leaf Company, Electric Supply, and had interests in dairy farming, fertilizer, real estate, bone mills, engineering and coal mining. The B.N.Elias Company was run by his sons and grandsons. Stafford Elias, the younger son of Nissim Elias, was trained by his father to supervise the jute mill. Ben, the elder one, worked in the tobacco factory.

Elias started his business as a small trader, and due to his financial genius, became one of India's greatest and wealthiest businessmen, rivalling the Sassoons, Tatas and Birlas. He started trading in the jute and gunny markets, and went from there to create a vast business empire. He was the founder and managing director of Messrs. B. N. Elias & Co., Ltd., National Tobacco Company of India Ltd., Empire Bone Mills Ltd., Mayfair Estates Ltd., and Proprietor of Midnapore Electric Supply, Krishnagore Electric Supply, Oriental and Engineering Co., Alpine Dairy and the Nabadwip Electric Supply. He was also the Senior Director of the Agarpara (Jute) Co. Ltd. for several years. His vast business enterprise employed many Calcutta Jews.⁴²

He was affectionately called Benu and took a great interest in community affairs⁴³. He built the Maghen Aboth Synagogue, especially for the poor. He was the honorary treasurer of the Jewish Girls School and Jeshurun Free School, and established a hostel for poor and orphaned Jewish girls. He was known for his wide range of other charities, and it is said that nobody who ever asked him for help was ever refused.

One block past the massive red brick Calcutta Police Station, at 1 and 2 Old Courthouse Street, stand Norton Buildings, former headquarters of B.N.Elias and Company and former home of the Jewish Association of Calcutta. Many Jews were employed by B.N.Elias and their companies. During the War years many European Jews were employed by B.N.Elias and other Jewish businesses and families.

B.N.Elias and Co. was bought by the Goenkas (RPG) in the early 1970's.⁴⁴

⁴²B. N. Ellias. Archive

⁴³ B.N. Ellias. Archive

⁴⁴ B. N. Ellias Archive

David Joseph Ezra:

Ezra was a trader in indigo and silk and exported opium. He was also an agent for Arab ships arriving in Calcutta for Arab merchants from Muscat and Zanzibar importing dates and other produce from their countries in exchange for rice, sugar and other food items.

David Joseph Ezra invested his profits in prime real estate. His buildings included Esplanade, Ezra and Chowringhee Mansions, and Ezra Terrace. Ezra Street is named after him.

He died in 1882 as the largest property owner in the City, leaving his estate to his eldest son Elias David Ezra who also invested in real estate⁴⁵. He put in a large sum of money to build the Maghen David synagogue in honour of his father.

Elias David Ezra was a philanthropist and community leader. His wife, Mozelle, was the daughter of the great philanthropist Sir David Sassoon of Bombay and sister of Edward Sassoon, MP. Her marriage united these two families. She established the Ezra Hospital in the Medical College Complex for the community in 1887, and was known for the numerous charities she supported.

Jospeh Elias Ezra, the eldest son married a grand-daughter of Sir David Sassoon. He was well known in the business world of Calcutta and was Municipal Commissioner (1886 – 1896) and the First Jewish Sheriff of Calcutta (1888 – 1889). Both his sons became Sheriffs of the City.

Sir David Ezra was knighted, and addition to Sheriff of the City was Director of the Reserve bank and Bengal Veterinary College and many other industrial organizations. He served as President of the Asiatic Society⁴⁶. His residence at 3 Kyd Street was one of the finest in the City. The building was palatial and the spacious grounds included a private zoo as Sir David was a great lover of animals. His home was next only to the official residence of the Commissioner of Police that lent prestige to the area.

Ezra Cup:

Ezra Cup, the first ever polo trophy in the world, is named after Sir David Ezra, a leading Jewish business tycoon in Calcutta who patronized the sport in the city. The first Ezra Cup was held in 1880. As part of its 150 years celebration, the Calcutta Polo Club organized Ezra World Cup at the Pat Williamson Ground, Kolkata from 18–25 December 2011. It has been doing so since 2006 when the polo was revived in Kolkata by Calcutta Polo Club president Keshav Bangur.⁴⁷

Calcutta Polo Club is in its 150th year making it the oldest polo club in the world still in existence, and the hosts made the 2011 season a treat to remember. Kolkata is also home to the oldest polo ground in the world still in use; Pat Williamson, most suited for the Ezra Cup- also the oldest polo trophy in the world.

⁴⁵ David Ezra. Archive

⁴⁶ David Ezra. Archive

⁴⁷ David Ezra. Archive

After years of neglect the Calcutta Polo Club was put in cold storage by the army in 1998 through a resolution and the season was revived in 2006, at the initiative of Keshav Bangur.



Sir David Ezra, a former leader of the community (and also Sheriff of Calcutta in 1926). The photograph was taken in that year or perhaps a little earlier, when he was about 55 years old.

Fig 2: Sir David Ezra

David Haskell Cohen:

Cohen started his life out active in Jewish causes. The torment of the Bengal Famine profoundly impacted him and he sought to build a better world. To do so he, among other young Jewish men, became an active member of the Communist Party of India. He was the editor of Unity, a Communist party magazine that sought to unite its leadership and its ranks through the arts.

He worked in Delhi at the Party headquarters and represented the Party of India in many venues across the world. A trip to the Soviet Union left him deeply disillusioned with the practice of Communism. He wrote “Tactics or Truth” which “was 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.....After the article was published, I handed in to the general Secretary’s office a formal letter of resignation, the first time, I believe, that such a letter had been written. I then turned my back on the organization...”⁴⁸

On leaving the Party he worked for Indian Express as News Editor in Bombay. As a journalist his career spanned London and New Delhi and he worked for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, The Times of India, PTI/Reuters, The Indian Express (as News Editor) and as a correspondent for L’Humanite.

David eventually settled in London in 1958 where he worked as a copywriter for several advertising agencies till he formed his own agency, Cohen and Company, in Mayfair. He moved to Israel in 1995.

His life came full circle from being a young idealist committed to Communist ideals when in his later life he turned to Jewish spirituality. He has written Angels, Snakes and Ladders: Memoirs of a Jew from British India, Yonaty Publishing, Israel 2013, and Chosen People and Other Poems, Yonaty 2002.

D J Cohen:

D J Cohen was the Vice President of the Calcutta Jewish Association; he was a Presidency Magistrate and was elected to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1921 from the Calcutta South Central Non-Muhammadan constituency. He was defeated in 1923. He was nominated to the Legislative Council by the Governor in 1923 and 1926. He was a leader in Jewish community affairs.

David Mordecai:

David Mordecai (or “D. Mordecai”, as he chose to copyright his photographs) was born in Kolkata, India in 1909, to Isaac and Esther Mordecai, also born in India, but of Bagdadi (and possibly Portuguese) ancestry. Although the family business was the flourishing line of condiments under the name of Daw Sen & Company, David’s interests were to lie elsewhere.

⁴⁸ Cohen, David Haskell. Angels, Snakes and Ladders: Memoirs, Yonati, 2003. pg. 235 – 235

In 1935 he started the Deluxe Art Studio which specialized in portraits. Later he set up the Anna Art Press on the premises of Daw Sen, his family's condiment factory. Bata Shoe Company gave him his first assignment that was followed by a large commission from the Bengal Nagpur Railways for photo imprinted photos. Mordechai had as many as 100 employees and had his own automatic printing machines. He produced Calcutta's first corporate calendars and wall posters. He mostly had corporate clients and even experimented with images on bone China.

E M D Cohen:

E M D Cohen was the Hazan of the Neveh Shalome and Maghen David synagogues for fifty years, serving as Hazan at the Maghen David from 1884. He was also the Honorary Secretary of the Jewish Girls School and the Maghen David synagogue.

He started the third and somewhat important printing press that published the Paerah which was a very popular paper in the Jewish community.

The four page paper, known as The Jewish Gazette was known the world over and quoted in the Jewish Press in Europe. The paper contained a calendar for the week, announcements of births, circumcisions and marriages, trade advertisements of Jewish merchants and arrival and departure dates between Calcutta and other cities in India and beyond. The editorials dealt with topics of interest to the Jewish community such as evaluations and comments on the Jewish schools or synagogues or other items relating to world Jewry.

E M D Cohen was a prosperous landlord.

Ellis Joshua (Josh):

Ellis's family was evacuated from Rangoon in 1942, and managed to get himself a job as the Kitchen Order Ticket Writer at the salary of Rs 50 a month. Josh very quickly worked his way up to the manager's office and was responsible for organizing the theme nights on Saturday and Sunday nights for which Prince's was famous. Prince's was known for bringing some of the top artists around the world to the fabled club, and it was Josh's idea to have printed leaflets to announce the performing artists.

Josh later partnered with his friend Om Puri to buy Trainca in 1959 when Trinca and Flury parted ways. The original Flury's & Trinca, was a tea room on Park Street that was started in 1926 and run by two Swiss gentlemen. In 1936 Trinka bought Trincas across the Road from them as another tea room. Josh and Puri reinvented Trinca's as a restaurant and night club. Puri had worked with Josh at Oberoi's and the two brought the knowledge of Calcutta's famed night life to their new enterprise to make it the most happening spot in Calcutta.⁴⁹

Trincas grew a national reputation for its live music and some of India's best artists performed there. From famous crooners Molly and Eve in the early 1960s to diva Usha Uthup in the 1970s, Trincas has been a launching pad for many artists. Usha often recounts

⁴⁹ Ellis Joshua. Archive

how it was Josh who first noticed Usha Uthup, the Malyali girl singing Western music in a traditional sari, and hired her for the nightclub where she performed to rave audiences. Trincas also promoted Western music bands such as Chris Perry, Trojans, Flintstone, Savages, Beat Four and Checkered Tricycle.

Ezra Mir (fl. 1924–1993):

Pioneer in documentary film, Mir changed his birth name, Edwyn Myers, to Ezra Mir to make his name more Indian sounding. He first worked as a stage actor and moved to New York in 1924 to work in the film industry. He was first an actor and then started editing film. During this period he made *Symbolesque*, his first short film (1929).

He returned to India in 1931 and joined Imperial Film Company, which was set up by Ardeshir Irani in 1926. At Imperial, Mir directed *Noorjehan* (1931). He soon left Imperial for Sagar Film Company where Mir directed films like *Zarina* (1932) and other Parsee Theatre derived films.⁵⁰

Mir then joined Madan Theatres in 1934-5 where he made many films till Madan Theaters closed down in the late 30s. Mir traveled to Europe for a study tour and returned to India to make perhaps his most well-known films, *Rickshawala* (1938) for Ranjit Movietone in Bombay and *Sitara* (1939), made at Everest Pics.

After making several more films Mir joined the Film Advisory Board in 1940. The Film Advisory Board, established in 1940, was the first example of direct state documentary film production in India. Mir worked as Chief Producer for them till 1946, producing over 170 films. The Information Films of India produced war propaganda documentaries and the Indian News Parade, the ancestor to Films Division's Indian News Review.

Mir moved on to India Film Enterprises and then to Films Division in 1951, becoming its Chief Producer in 1956 continuing till 1961. Mir was also the founding president of IDPA, the Indian Documentary Producers Association in 1956 and the Producer-In-Charge of Children's Film Society from 1962 - 1964. From 1940 onwards, once he entered the field of documentary filmmaking, Mir was responsible in various capacities as script-writer, cameraman, editor, director and producer for over 700 films! Of these over 400 were in his tenure at Films Division. Some of the well-known films are *Pamposh* (1954), *Do You Know?* (1958), *This Our India* (1961) and *Raju aur Gangaram* (1964).

Ezra Mir was honoured by the Government of India with the Padmashri in 1970. He passed away in Mumbai on 7th March, 1993.

Gerry Judah:

Gerry Judah's maternal and paternal grandparents came from Baghdad to settle in the already established Baghdadi Jewish community in India and Burma. His mother was born in

⁵⁰ Ezra Mir. Archive

Calcutta and his father in Rangoon. Gerry Judah was born in 1951 in Calcutta and grew up in West Bengal before his family moved to London when he was ten years old.⁵¹

As a boy, the dramatic landscapes of India and the ornate architecture of its temples, mosques and synagogues with their theatrical rituals had a profound effect on Judah's developing psyche. These theatrical elements were to resurface in his own later work. Austere London, still in its post-war drab, was a shock to the young boy, and he chose to spend as much time as possible in his bedroom conjuring up with pencils and paper imaginary landscapes, architectural fantasies and futuristic cars, leading him to want to become an artist.

Judah left Whitefield Secondary Modern School, London in 1969 and worked in a number of jobs: from kitchen porter (Blooms Restaurant, Golders Green, London) to architectural draughtsman (T.P Bennett and Son - London, Richard Seifert and Partners - London and Douglas Scott, the designer of the Routemaster bus). After this he went on to study Foundation Art and Design at Barnet College of Art (1970–1972) before obtaining a degree in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London (1972–1975) and studying sculpture as a postgraduate at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London (1975–1977). After college, Judah set up his studio in Shaftesbury Avenue, the theatre centre in the West End of London. There, he began to work on large sculptures. Needing still to earn his keep and finance his work, he took casual work round the corner in many theatres as a stage hand and scenic artist. This included work at the Royal Opera House, English National Opera, Royal Festival Ballet, London Contemporary Dance, Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet, Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre.

Taken with the public nature of this work Judah decided to find settings for his own art in more public arenas than the rarefied spaces of conventional galleries. He began to build a reputation for innovative design, working in film, television, theatre, museums and public spaces. He created settings for the BBC, British Museum, Museum of Mankind, Natural History Museum, Imperial War Museum, Museum of Tolerance, Paul McCartney, Michael Jackson, Robert Plant and Jimmy Page, The Who and many other performers. He has also created sculptures for Ferrari, Porsche, Audi, Jaguar, Mercedes-Benz, Renault, Ford, Rolls-Royce, Honda, Toyota, Land Rover, Alfa Romeo and Lotus at the annual Goodwood Festival of Speed and bridges in London and Cambridge. Amongst a number of commissions from public museums and institutions, Judah was asked by the Imperial War Museum in London to create a large model of the selection ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau for the Holocaust Exhibition opened by Queen Elizabeth II. Extensive research and numerous visits to Auschwitz led him to produce work that encouraged his art into yet a new direction. Returning to his fine art beginnings he began to make art born of his reflections on historical and contemporary events creating a body of large three-dimensional paintings exploring the devastations of war and the ravages man has made upon the environment caused by recent conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East with solo exhibitions: *Frontiers* at the Timber Yard - London in 2005, *Angels* at the Royal Institute of British Architects - London in 2006 and the *British High Commission - Delhi* in 2007, *Motherlands* at the Louise T Blouin

⁵¹ Gerry Judah. Archive

Foundation - London in 2007, Country at Wolverhampton Art Gallery - Wolverhampton 2009, Babylon at Flowers East Gallery - London in 2009, Country at the Fitzroy Gallery - New York in 2010, The Crusader at the Imperial War Museum North - Manchester in 2011, Bengal as part of Tipping Point at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery - Wolverhampton in 2013 and two sculptures in St Paul's Cathedral - London commemorating 100 years since the beginning of World War 1.

Hacham Twena:

Hacham Twena was the most learned religious scholar from the Calcutta community. He was born in Baghdad (1885) and trained in the yeshiva beth Zilka, headed by Rabbi Abdullah Somekh. Somekh's nephew Yeheskel Ben Yohosua Gubbay was a prominent businessman in Bombay related to the Sassoon family. At the request of Gubbay for a rabbi, Somekh choose his student Twena. Twent spent a year and a half in Bombay and then moved to Calcutta.

Hacham Twena was first employed to teach Talmud in J E D Ezra's benevolent institution, and he sold religious articles to support himself. He also performed ritual slaughter of poultry, taught Hebrew and conducted services first at the Neveh Shalome synagogue and later at the Maghen David synagogue. He branched out to establish his own synagogue in Blackburn Lane where he administered primarily to the poor in the community for daily and shabbath services. He preached in Arabic, and ran a printing press to publish his own prolific writings in Arabic and Hebrew.

There are several legends about the learned rabbi who died in 1913. It is said that 7 years before he died he became seriously ill and the community was very afraid that he would die. One member of the community said that whatever is left of his one life he would give half those years to Hacham Twena. Seven years later both men died.

A scholar and man of great learning, he left behind a library of 400 books.

Maurice Shellim:

Maurice Arthur Shellim was born on 12 February, 1915 in Shanghai of Iraqi Jewish origin. He spent most of his childhood and working life in Calcutta; he was a scion of both the British and the Sephardic Jewish communities, a frequent figure at the races, Bengal Club and other local haunts.

Maurice went to boarding school in Darjeeling and in the 30s was sent to London where he trained as a doctor at Guys Hospital but along with his peer group they were never given a graduation ceremony due to the war. In the second world war he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, keeping an extensive diary which tells of his experiences in Italy after the Allied Landing. After he was demobbed he returned to Calcutta setting up in general medical practice, and was the doctor for the crew of BOAC (now British Airways); he was also President of the Geographical Association.

Maurice's most important contribution to Calcutta was his involvement in the Park Street Cemetery opened in 1767 it is where many British families were buried. He organised the cleaning of it and raised funds by giving donors a lane named after them. In 1986 he published, for the British Association for Cemeteries of South Asia, "On progress in restoring 'The Great Cemetery'", a project to which he devoted a considerable amount of time; and he wrote a booklet giving the names and dates and map detailing the many who were buried there. Another of his passions was music: he was an accomplished pianist, and composed a song deeply evocative of the inter-war period.

Maurice eventually settled in London as did the rest of his immediate family, but on his frequent visits to Calcutta he worked as a locum in the practice he had set up. He was a true gentleman, wonderful raconteur, full of wit and humour; he was invariably invited to dinner when an important dignitary was visiting: Prince Charles later with Mrs Parker Bowles, the Maharaja of Burdwan, and the Queen. He died in London in 2009 at the age of 94 but his heart and soul was always in Calcutta.

Samuel Solomon:

Samuel Salomon, educated in the UK joined the Indian Civil Service in 1927. He was posted to Bihar and Orissa, serving until 1947. He campaigned energetically to bring to an end the people's widespread addiction to opium. In 1935, he was made Publicity Officer to the Bihar government's case for its impending constitutional reforms. He also became in 1943 an Additional Secretary in charge of the public relations side of the war effort.

He immigrated to the UK where he dedicated himself to scholarly pursuits and translated the works of Grillparzer from German to English, and the works of Moliere, Corneille, and Racine from French to English as well as other translations from French to English. His works were published by Random House.

Shalome Obadiah Ha-Cohen:

Founder of the Calcutta Jewish community arrived in Calcutta on August 4, 1798 from Aleppo, Syria via Surat as a trader. He and his retinue took up residence in Murghihatta.

Shalome Cohen traded in gems, rosewater, and import of Arabian horses, spices, silks and Indigo. He was a court jeweler to the Nawab of Awadh and also traveled to Punjab to the Court of Maharaj Ranjit Sing.

Calcutta traditions say that he was asked to value the Kohinoor diamond. On seeing the precious jewel Ha-Cohen told the King that the diamond had no value. When asked to explain himself he said that the diamond had no value because it would either be given as a gift or taken with bloodshed.

When Shalome died his son-in-law MOSES DUEK COHEN assumed the leadership of the growing community. Moses Duek Cohen was involved in purchasing the land for both the Neveh Shalome synagogue and the Beth El. At this time, in the 1830's the community numbered about 600 people.

Jewish Women Pioneers:

Rachel Duek Cohen:

Rachel Duek Cohen was the first lady doctor in the Jewish community. Many followed in her footsteps. She enrolled in Calcutta Medical College in 1892 for L.M. S and M.B courses and received a Government Scholarship of Rs. 20. She was attached to the Jewish Baby Welcome Clinic started by the Jewish Women's League and worked for poor and destitute children. She immigrated to the UK in the 1930's.

Tabitha Solomon:

Tabitha was among the first women in India to qualify as a dentist. Born in 1901 she qualified in 1928. She assisted Dr. R. Ahmed with the Calcutta Dental Journal and started a dental clinic in the Chittarnjan Seva Savan Hospital and served in the Dufferin Hospital. She served in both these institutions in an honorary capacity.

She served on several Jewish community committees including WIZO, welfare, Calcutta Jewish Association as also a multicultural Calcutta Women's Committee.

Regina Guha:

Regina Guha, on completion of her Law degree, applied to be a pleader at the Calcutta Bar in 1915. Her application went to the High Court of Calcutta where a four-judge bench had to determine whether "persons" admitted as "pleaders" included women. The Chief Justice and four other judges refused her enrolment on the grounds that they had "no escape from the position that the Legislature in this country never contemplated the admission of women to the rank of Legal Practitioners. (In Regina Guha (1916) 21 CWN 74 the Calcutta High Court") Her bid was followed in 1922 in Sudhangshu Bala Hazara (1922) ILR 1 Patna 104, where the Patna High Court held that women otherwise qualified were not entitled to be enrolled as Vakil or Pleader. The Allahabad High Court took the lead by enrolling Miss, Cornelia Sorabji as the first Indian lady Vakil of Allahabad High Court on August 24, 1921 by a decision of the English Committee of the Court (as the Administrative Committee was then called), consisting of Chief Justice Sir Grim Wood Meers. To remove the doubts Legal Practitioners (Women) Act, 1923 declared that notwithstanding the Letters Patent of any High Court no woman shall be disqualified to be enrolled as legal practitioners. Thus Regina Guha played a pioneering law for women in the law in India

Stella Benjamin:

She received her Master's degree from Calcutta University, taught at the Jewish Girls School and joined the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. She was the first woman to hold an executive position there. She immigrated to England in the 1950's.

Rachel Ashkenazi:

She was the first woman lawyer in the community to practice in the High Court. She pleaded for Muslim women in Purdah.

Ramah Luddy:

Abraham Ezra Rahamim Luddy (1872 – 1935) married Mozelle Cohen (1872 – 1935) and they had four children of which Ramah was the eldest. She finished school in Calcutta and went to college in England and returned with a Master's degree in Education. She became the principal of the Jewish Girls School from 1929 – 1963. She was responsible for making the Jewish Girls School a premiere educational institution.

Chapter 5: The Present Business of the Jewish Community.

Many years have passed since Sahlom Cohen came to India for trade, the number of Jewish members living in Kolkata has dwindled from six to seven thousand to double digits and many of them have moved back to Israel or to other countries. The businesses associated with them have also waned; this chapter will only discuss the two most famous businesses associated with the Jewish in the 21st century.

Nahoum and Sons:

Nahoum and Sons is still one of the most famous and preferred bakeries present in Esplanade. The bakery was founded by Nahoum Israel Mordecai, a Baghdadi Jew, in the year 1902. Mordecai began his bakery business with a door-to-door model, and his products captured the attention of the colonial rulers. After Israel, his son Elias took over and then David Nahoum took the reins.

It wasn't until 1916 however, that the eponymous store Nahoum and Sons was established in the New Market area⁵². Till date, the store runs from the same location in Hogg Market specifically, and even its teakwood furniture, old-fashioned glass displays and flooring haven't changed from their classic versions. While many new bakeries are set in a very European style; Nahoum and Sons have stuck to their Jewish heritage and their traditional recipes.

People in Kolkata have been visiting this place almost on every occasion and for many it has become a part of their childhood and many visits the store out of nostalgia. In spite of dubious names and old-fashioned recipes, Nahoum's has never lacked for takers. Originally patronised by the colonial rulers, a local legend says that Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, once declared the baker's fruit cake to be the best he had ever tasted.⁵³

Since its inception, the bakery has been a family-based business and prides itself on retaining their employees for decades. In 2013, when David Nahoum, the well-loved, third-generation owner of the store passed away, loyalists wondered if the store would finally shut its doors as David did not have any children, but the bakery has continued to operate thanks to other members of the Nahoum family and the dedicated staff.

The emergence of malls and new eateries around the city has seen dropping footfalls at the store over the years. The store's consistency is one of its hallmarks and as any local resident will tell you, the cakes and puffs have truly retained their original taste. The store is filled with colourful displays of cakes, rum balls and decadent cream-filled cakes. But the real crowd gathers during winter, when people line up in front of the store, on the days before Christmas, to get their fill of Yuletide treats.

⁵² Nahoum's. Archive

⁵³ Nahoum's. Archive

In a city that walks in the fine line between the old and new, it is not surprising that the people of Kolkata, of all ages continue to visit Nahoum's, driven simply by the taste of nostalgia.



Fig 3: Nahoum's date of establishment



Fig 4: Nahoum and Sons



Fig 5: Nahoum with the employees

Fairlawn Hotel Pvt. Ltd:

Fairlawn Hotel has been a very popular place among many people famous or common tourists, it was a family run business which was later declared as a heritage building (grade I, II and IIA) by the Municipal Corporation of Kolkata.

The Land on which the hotel stands was first purchased by a European Mr. William Ford from Sheikh Ramjam and Bhonay on 27th May 1981. The building had existed on this site since 1783. The street was originally named after Ford; there being no other houses and continued so until it became Sadar (pronounced Sudder) after the Sadar Appellate Court House was built. The building was constructed shortly after the land was purchased and this we know from the deeds which state that a "Pukka" building had been built by Mr Ford.⁵⁴ The word Pukka (proper) denotes that it was built of bricks. Bengalis were only allowed to build from coconut palm and mud by the ruling Nawabs.

The Building passed to a Mr. George Chisholm in 1801, Chisholm dies in 1812, when it passed into the hands of Captain Sir James Mount, late to Sir George Mount through the 1830s and back to Chisholm in the 1840's, 50's and 60's. Sir David Ezra inherited it on 24th December 1873 and it remained in Jewish hands until fairly recent years.

The possession of the building has followed the following succession:

1801 - Mr. George Chisholm (died in residence)

⁵⁴ Archive

1812 - Captain Sir James Mount and Sir George Mount

1840 - The Chisholm family

1873 - Sir David Ezra

1900 - Miss Clarke and Miss Barrett

1936 - Mrs. Rosie Sarkies

1962 - Mr. Ted and Mrs Violet Smith (nee Sarkies & Mrs Jennifer Fowler)

1969 - Mr. Ted and Violet Smith (nee Sarkies)

1997 - Mrs. Violet Smith & Mrs Jennifer Fowler

2005 - Mrs. Jennifer Ann Fowler

2018 - Elgin Hotels & Resorts

Mrs Jennifer Ann Fowler one of the owners of the establishment shared that Kyd Street and Sudder Street housed many influential Jewish and Armenian families in the 1800's during which the British and both communities traded extensively between Bengal- which at that time included Burma, Bangladesh, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and all the hill territories- Hong Kong and China.

Many of Britain's contemporary Earls, Viscounts, and Barons smuggled opium into China and textiles and tea into India on the return trips. Not much is known about the Chisholms. However, the Mounts were a nautical family. They were allegedly involved in smuggling opium, textiles and tea with China during their return journey to India. Many of British Earls, Barons and Viscounts can trace their beginnings to these kinds of activities. Job (pronounced Jobe) Charnock once said that "it will always be possible for a man to make his fortune in Calcutta" and many did. During the Second World War, it was requisitioned for Canadian Air force personnel. For two years it was known as "Canada House". During this time it served as a family quarters of an Air force Major Melvyn Douglas.

Fairlawn have had a host of celebrity guests the longest staying guests were the Kendal (Bragg) family, their daughter, famous British actress Felicity Kendal. The family owned a travelling Shakespearean theatre company known as Shakespeareana. The company performed in various places all around India. Some of the performances were also put up in the upstairs Lounge of Fairlawn. Geoffrey Kendal and his wife Laura Liddel stayed in this hotel for nearly 30 years from time to time whenever they were in Kolkata. Felicity left India at the age of 20. Their eldest daughter Jennifer was married to the Indian Cinema Superstar Shashi Kapoor of the Kapoor family. The hotel still maintains the "Shashi Kapoor Room" where the couple had their honeymoon.

During the 1950's a famous professional wrestler known as 'King Kong' stayed in the hotel. He ended up breaking several furnitures around the hotel. One of the world's most reputed

and respected travel writer, the late Eric Newby and his wife Wanda Skof had stayed here a number of times. Patrick Swayze and the Cast of the 'City of Joy' also stayed in this hotel. Fairlawn was also featured in the movie. The famous journalist and writer, Tiziano Terzani had organised his son's wedding here in 1997.

Some of the famous guests who have spent a slice of their life here:

Ishmail Merchant and James Ivory - Director and Producer

Tom Stoppard - British Playwright and Screenwriter

Patrick Swayze - American Actor

Tiziano Terzani and family - Italian Journalist and Writer

Julie Christie - British Actress

Sting - British Musician

Dominique Lapierre and his wife Dominique - French Author

Clive Anderson - British Television Actor

Late Norman Hutchinson and Gloria his wife - Royal Artist

Julian Barrow - Landscape Artist

Dan Cruikshank - British Art Historian

Ian Hislop - British Journalist and Writer

Gunter Grass - German Novelist

Felicity Kendal - British Film and Theatre Actress

Michael Palin - British Film and Television Actor

In 1994, the ownership of the hotel was converted into a Private Limited company with Ted and Violet Smith as Directors. Ted died at the age of 83 years in November, 2002. Violet Smith also passed away in September, 2014 at the age of 93. Then her daughter, Mrs. Jennifer Fowler took care of the hotel operations. She used to stay in Kolkata for several months along with her husband, John. In February, 2018 the hotel became a part of The Elgin Hotels & Resorts Group.



Fig 6: Fairlawn Hotel at Sudder Street



Fig 7: Fairlawn Established at 1876



Fig 8: Violet Smith

Nahoum and Sons still remains a Jewish establishment where as Fairlawn has shifted many hands till today and currently falls under big bureaucratic establishment, but the legacy of the Jewish community still remains along with it.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The study of the Jewish community became important to me because they had a very subtle presence in the transition period of Indian economy. They came to India around a time when India was struggling to build its economy as a colony and there were many other communities along with them like the Parsis, Armenians and some Indian communities like the Marwaris, and Gujaratis, while the Indian merchant communities have thrived till date the merchant communities that came from other countries did not achieve as much success as the Jews had in India and Kolkata. Their work was very obscured and subtle and we still find the trace of it in the history and architecture of the city.

The Jewish community had a very deep relation with Capitalism and have had a conspicuous presence in the history of capitalism, both as symbol and as a reality. Yet the relationship of the Jews to capitalism has received less attention than its importance demands. Academicians and historians tend to focus on the history of a particular nation or region—while the Jewish community were scattered across national and regional boundaries. From this study one we can see that the community was dispersed vastly for trade and commerce Jews from different regions like Aleppo, Baghdad and Syria came to India and conducted commerce all over the world, they had business ties with China India, many parts of Europe. Even after the world war when they decided to move back to Israel, not all followed many dispersed to China, Australia and Canada for better prospects and some stayed back to India. For the Jews, their success in economy has long been a source of both pride and embarrassment.

For centuries, Jewish economic success has led anti-Semites to criticize and treat capitalism as a form of Jewish domination and exploitation, or they equated Jewish success to stereotypical qualities of the Jews themselves. For economists and economic historians, the extent to which modern capitalism has been fashioned by pre-modern cultural conceptions and predispositions is a source of confusion. In the current times, economists have added the concept of “human capital”, which meant the characteristics that make for economic success. But they prefer to think of it in terms of quantifiable criteria’s such as years of schooling. To the extent that human capital involves character traits and varieties of know-how that are not provided by formal education, it becomes methodologically difficult to point out. Jews have always been well educated but education does not necessarily teach us to excel in business almost everywhere in the world. They had a particular knack for business and they achieved success in almost every kind of economic structure.

For many nationalists, the fact that modern nationalism reaped fateful results for the Jews as the Jews were particularly good at capitalism, itself was a source of embarrassment for them. In addition, the way in which modern, non-Jewish intellectuals thought about capitalism was often related to how they thought about Jews. Those evaluations in turn affected the ways in which Jews thought about themselves, about their economic role and their position in society. Jewish intellectuals such as Moses Mendelssohn was well aware of this connection, and linked their case for civil equality for the Jews with arguments about the positive function of the economic activities in which Jews were engaged. Joseph Schumpeter called the “creative

destruction” that was part and parcel of capitalist dynamism⁵⁵. Added to this source of collective conscience was the fact that the development of capitalism went hand in hand with the rise of the modern nation state, which, in much of the old world, took the form of an ethnic nationalism that defined Jews as outside the national community. And that in turn led a small but salient minority of Jews to embrace Communism, the most radical form of anti-capitalism.

And finally, it led a growing portion of Jewry to conclude that in an age of capitalism and nationalism, Jews needed a nation-state of their own when social scientists set out to explain the relationship of the Jews to capitalism, they frequently make use of the notion of Jews as a “diasporic merchant minority.” That concept provides an indispensable though ultimately unsatisfactory framework for understanding the relationship between Jews and modern capitalism. Yet the category of diasporic merchant minority is by itself inadequate to grasp the significance of the Jews in Christian Europe. For the Jews were permitted to engage in other wise stigmatized economic activities, especially the lending of money at interest, because of their peculiar place in Christian theology, which might be considered as one of the reasons for their success.

For Christianity, the Jew was the Other, but he was the Other within, both in the sense that Jews lived in the midst of Christians and that the Jews’ Book was part of the core narrative of Christian history. Thus the Jews had a cultural significance, a radioactive charge that was not characteristic of merchant minorities elsewhere. This is what Weber was discussing in *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber first observes a correlation between being Protestant and being engaged in business, and he explored religion as a potential cause of the modern economic conditions. He argues that the modern spirit of capitalism sees profit as an end in itself, and pursuing profit as virtuous. We can see the similar trend in the Jewish Community also.

The association of the Jews with the lending of money at interest was only possible because they were beyond the community of the saved. And the association of money with a theologically stigmatized minority cast an aura of suspicion around money and moneymaking. But the Jews’ pre-modern commercial experience, together with their emphasis on literacy, inclined them to do exceedingly well in modern capitalist societies, where success increasingly depended on commercial wisdom and book-learning.

The attempt of European states to modernize—which meant becoming literate, capitalist societies—gave rise to ethnic nationalism, which once again conceived of the Jews as outsiders. In the face of their increasing exclusion from the ethnically defined community of the nation, Jews responded in three ways; firstly they migrated to countries in which nationalism was defined liberally, rather than by religious or ethnic criteria. While some hoped for complete assimilation and amalgamation, by and large Jews sought to acculturate to the host society without complete assimilation. In India also we see that the community was very close and they never really mixed with the Indian community. They kept their

⁵⁵ Muller. Jerry Z. *Capitalism and the Jews*, Princeton University Press. 2010.

space, it's not like they only went to work and came home, Kolkata Jews especially the wealthy and the middle class had a great deal of leisure time due to the availability of domestic help. In addition to large family gatherings and the community events, the members of the community also enjoyed a variety of outdoor activities including various sports. Hockey was one of the absolute favourite and the most popular pastime among both boys and girls and the community fielded teams for both. Badminton was also very popular, many young people were in the Girl and Boy Scouts and there were camps to Mudapore and Gopalpur that were organized from the 30's to the 50's.

Going to the races was also very popular despite the major race day being on Shabbath. Jewish bookies would go from house-to-house to take pre-Sabbath bets. A favourite place for the community to go on holiday was Mudapore, Bihar which was a small country town where they could relax and enjoy the fresh air, the rich milk, the ravines and the countryside. Some members of the community rented houses but a few of the wealthier members owned homes in Mudapore. B N Elias owned Field View, a rambling bungalow, as a holiday home.

Jews repeatedly discovered that liberalizing and welcoming political cultures could turn illiberal and hostile. The Jewish Diaspora (while hoping for the restoration of the homeland) tried to accommodate itself to its host land societies by adhering to their laws, not fighting against the surrounding society, and depending upon the indifference, if not kindness, of neighbours in the host lands. The second response of Jews was therefore to embrace socialist movements that promised to end invidious distinctions based on origin. Most socialists attributed the hold of anti-Semitism to capitalism itself, so that eliminating capitalism was understood as a formula for eliminating anti-Semitism. The third major response, by Jews who remained committed to some form of Jewish continuity, was Zionism Lilienblum⁵⁶ claimed that cosmopolitans and ethnic nationalists, capitalists and socialists, freethinkers and orthodox Christians would all find reasons to despise the Jews. For each ideological group, finding that there were Jews in the opposite camp, proceeded to identify its social or national enemy with the Jews in general.

In the Zionist analysis, the Jews would continue to be defined as “other”—when they were capitalists and when they were socialists, when they were assimilationist and when they were nationalist, when they were religious and when they were secular. The only solution was for the Jews to have a state of their own and that became one of the reasons that led to the formation of Israel around 1948.

History or the past of a nation state becomes very important in the understanding of the present; this is one of the reason why history plays a very important part. That is why to get a better understanding of the economy of Kolkata or India I felt it was important to look into the past. As Joan Roland said “New approaches to imperial studies as well as the emergence

⁵⁶ The principal common goal of Zionism was to establish a homeland for the Jewish people. There were various ideologies of Zionism that was present for the freedom of Jews all over the world among them was Practical Zionism. Known in Hebrew as Tzionut Ma'asit, Practical Zionism was led by Moshe Leib Lilienblum (that is why Zionism Lilienblum) and Leon Pinsker and molded by the Hovevei Zion organization. This approach opined that firstly there is a need in practical terms to implement Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, Aliyah, and settlement of the land, as soon as possible, even if a charter over the Land is not obtained.

of the post colonialist and subaltern schools suggest that the challenges faced by even a microscopic minority as it negotiated its status within the British and Indian environments can shed some light on what it meant to be a ‘native subject’.⁵⁷ The Jewish experience in some minute way might help to re construct and create an understanding of both the colonizer and the colonized.

When we look at the colonial Kolkata, the economic entrepreneurship of the Baghdadi Jews has to be placed in the broader context of the 18th century Bengal economy and its wide ramifications. The present state of West Bengal originated from the partition of Bengal in August 1947, in connection with the transfer of power by the British Government to the then Government of India.

Formerly under the Mughal Government, Bengal proper, Bihar and Orissa constituted the Bengal sabha. In 1751, Alivardi Khan, Nawab of Bengal, ceded Orissa to Raghuji Bhonsle, and thenceforward although the term Bengal sabha continued to be applied to the three provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, yet for all practical purposes Mughal rule remained confined to Bengal and Bihar. The early settlements of the East India Company in Bengal at first worked in close subordination to Fort St George, Madras until Calcutta became the headquarters in 1690. The Old Fort William was constructed in 1710. In 1765, the Diwan of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was conferred in perpetuity on the East India Company by the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, the Company “stood forth as the Diwan” for the collection of the Emperor’s share of the land revenue. In 1774 the Presidency of Fort William was given jurisdiction over the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay. The Centre of British power was transferred from Madras to Calcutta and the latter became the seat of the supreme Government of India. At first, all the north eastern factories of the East India Company from Balasore on the Orissa coast to Patria in the heart of Bihar belonged to the “Bengal Establishment” which later on included the whole of the Company’s possessions in northern and north-eastern India. Thus Bengal for a long time (at least up to 1836) comprised a considerable portion of northern India extending up to Arakan (present day Rakhine in Myanmar) and Tennaserim(present day Taninthryi Region in Myanmar) in the east and Delhi, Ajmer and Berar in the west historians have dismissed the notion that pre-colonial India was a society of largely self sufficient villages characterized by what Karl Marx described as “Asiatic mode of Production”⁵⁸. Such a description would be totally inappropriate for Bengal well before the arrival of the British. Many artisans worked for the distant markets. Peasant cultivators too worked for money. There was an enormous volume of trade in agricultural produce throughout Bengal during the eighteenth century. By the mid eighteenth century Bengal had to a degree developed an integrated economy with marked regional specializations; some areas producing grain surpluses, others concentrating on certain cash crops or on particular lines of textiles (e.g. Dacca and Murshidabad). There was a network of markets throughout the province.

⁵⁷ Roland, Joan G. *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, University Press of New England. 1989.

⁵⁸ Rahman, Taimur. *Marx and Engels on the Asiatic Mode of Production in India*.
<https://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv13n2/asiatic.htm>

The merchant communities of Bengal were very diverse in origin. Bengal attracted many non-Bengali merchants. Gujratis and Rajasthanis were particularly prominent. They were naturally attracted to Murshidabad and Kasimbazar, Bengal's high quality silk belt. They set up Jain temples at both places. A considerable community of Oswals (from Rajasthan) grew up at Murshidabad. Khattris from northern India were also important in the Bengal towns, as were so called Mughal merchants, Muslims from Iran and central Asia. Armenians were another group from Iran who settled in Bengal to trade. There were some Armenian merchants like Aga Seat, Cancheek, Aga Gregory.

The Jews were also another group who were drawn by the lucrative trade and commerce of Bengal. When the first Baghdadi Jewish settler arrived in Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, the British had identified Calcutta as an important commercial center. Calcutta was the nerve centre of the British Empire and traders from many parts of the world, including Armenians, Greeks, Portuguese and Baghdadi Jews were drawn to this colonial port city. Its appeal was enhanced by its connection to both river and ocean traffic. The Jews worked very closely with the Company but they never fully became a part of the company neither of India. They gained many important positions including in the military but their major control remained in the business sector and that never changed.

Partha Chatterjee mentions that the professional historian and history was pitted against 'partisan historians' and archaeologists who had some academic credentials or accreditations. This domain of the popular, which had hitherto been considered both illegitimate and vulgar, forced historians to revise the basis of the discipline and practise of history⁵⁹, which might be one of the reasons that when we try to study the history of India we get to see overwhelming amount of data on partition and the colonizers and the Indian communities of that time, but the other small communities who were a massive influence in the society, we never got to study them, they remained in the background and achieved success.

Economic History of an area is least affected by the ideology and sectarian argument becomes the most amenable to scholars. That is why it becomes possible to conduct a somewhat unbiased study.

⁵⁹ Chatterjee, Partha and Ghosh, Anjan. *History and the Present*, Permanent Black. 2015.

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