



Prayer meeting at the Tifereth Israel synagogue in Bombay: free from discrimination

#### INDIAN JEWS

# Caught In The Crossfire

INDIAN foreign policy has always suffered from contradictory tugs and pulls, and last month the Government exposed its tendency to over-react to global developments. Israeli Consul Yousuf Hasseen earned his expulsion with an outspoken interview with Bombay's Sunday Observer (INDIA TODAY, July 31). But the subsequent announcement by Foreign Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao that India was studying the closure of the consulate is less easy to justify. It has also evoked a nervous reaction from India's miniscule Jewish community, whose principal contact with Israel has been the Bombay consulate. INDIA TODAY Correspondents CHANDER UDAY SINGH in Bombay, CHAITANYA KALBAG in New Delhi, SREEDHAR PILLAI in Cochin and SUMANTA SEN in Calcutta filed reports on the state of Indian Jews from which the following story is written.

INDIAN Jews are in turmoil. Beset with uncertainty over last month's official pronouncements on Israel, they are worried that the expulsion of Consul Yousuf Hasseen and the threat to shut down the consulate altogether will rebound on them. Sam Abraham, a Bombay executive who doubles as secretary of the Central Jewish Board of India (CJBI), says many of his fellow Jews do not support what the Israeli consul did. "For 2,000 years we have lived in peace and harmony," he says, "what Hasseen said might jeopardise our position here." Adds another prominent member of the community in Bombay, "It is not fair to confuse Hasseen's actions with the need for a consulate. We have refused to accept at least one senior US diplomat because of his alleged CIA links, but this doesn't mean we close down their embassy."

Anxious not to say anything that might be misunderstood the Jews are nevertheless upset that the consulate may close down. Asks community leader S.S. Koder, 75, in Cochin: "If India is so upset by Israel's invasion of Lebanon, why wasn't the Soviet embassy in Delhi closed down when the Russians invaded Afghanistan?"

The episode is not without irony. For, unlike in so many other countries where Jews were forced to opt for Israel because of anti-Semitism, they faced not the slightest discrimination in India through centuries of existence. "Politically," says Ezra Kolet, president of the Jewish Welfare Association in Delhi, "we are totally loyal to India. But Israel has been a deeply emotional magnet." For the Jews, Israel represents the heroic culmination of a long and tragic history of persecution and bigotry. And, it has drawn

from India legions of young people yielding to sentiment, religion and economic opportunity in the "Promised Land". From about 40,000 at the time of Independence, they number about 8,000 now, and the numbers are not increasing.

There is doubt about when exactly the first Jews came to India. The bulk of the community today consists of the Bene Israel (or Children of Israel) who number around 7,500 and are mostly settled in Bombay. Then there are the Cochini or Malabari Jews, whose enclave in Cochin today is a ghost of the old days, and whose inhabitants total only 46. Calcutta has around 140 Baghdadi or Iraqi Jews, and Delhi has only seven or eight families.

The Bene Israel believe that their ancestors came to the Konkan coast around 175 B.C., fleeing from Galilee where Greek over-



Entrance to the Cochin synagogue (left) and Sam Abraham with a Jewish priest reading from the Torah: strong emotional magnet

lord Antiochus Epiphanes was oppressing the remnants of Israel's Lost Ten Tribes. The Cochin Jews traditionally trace their origins to 70 A.D., when Roman emperor Titus destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Calcutta's Baghdadi Jews in fact trace their origins to Baghdad and Basra in Iraq, Aleppo in Syria, and Yemen. The first settler in this category was Shalom ben Aaron ben Obadiah Ha-Kohen, who came to Bombay from Aleppo in September 1790, and moved to Calcutta in 1797 to build up a prosperous business.

The Baghdadi Jews even today are the most prosperous members of the community. In pre-1947 India, at least two families, the Kaduris and the Sassoons, ranked among the richest in the land. Sir David Sassoon's family left behind an industrial empire that includes the Sassoon Docks, the Raymond and India United Mills, and numerous hospitals, libraries, schools, synagogues and charitable institutions. Even well-known Bombay landmark Flora Fountain was named after his wife Lady Flora Sassoon. But there are differences among the various Jewish sects. The Baghdadis look down upon the Bene Israel, believing that the latter are not truly descended from the original Hebrew tribes, and have excluded them from sharing in or receiving the benefits of their charities.

**Lifeless:** Cochin's once-bustling Jew Street is now devoid of life; the only sight of an evening is old Jewish women sitting in the verandahs of their red-tiled houses, exchanging gossip about relatives in Israel. In recent years, parents of marriageable Jewish girls in Cochin have found that there is an acute shortage of boys. Says Koder, who owns a

string of departmental stores and whose family accounts for one-third of the Cochins: "We are finding it difficult to run our only functioning synagogue. There are only 10 men left over the age of 13." The Cochins had to stop eating mutton and beef six years ago when their last Jewish butcher, Shoheth, migrated to Israel and they were deprived of *kosher* meat. Today, they have to fly *kosher* meat down from Bombay, and are perturbed that even their chicken butcher is planning to leave for Israel.

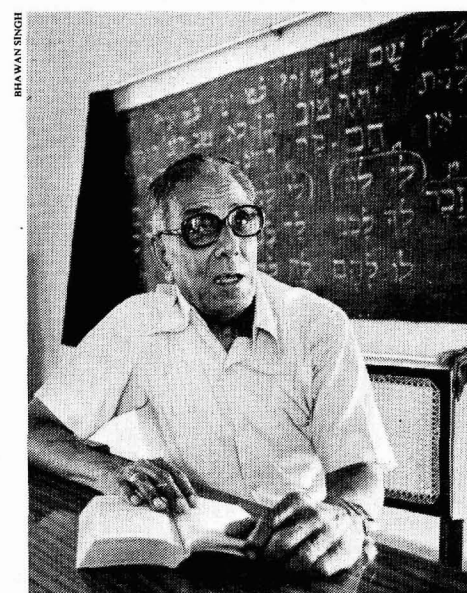
In Calcutta, there are almost no young Jews left: the average age today is around 55, and the community consists of ageing people

who spend their evenings reading letters from relatives scattered all over the world. Most of them look forward to being buried beside their ancestors in the graveyard at Narkeldanga, a favourite Naxalite hide-out in the early 1970s.

The Calcutta Jews never really considered themselves Indians, and until the turn of the century spoke only in Arabic. The end of World War II saw a massive exodus from India; many Jewish girls married British and American soldiers and went away with them. Most Calcutta Jews migrated to Europe, Canada, and the US, and only recently have some of them, faced with discrimination in the United Kingdom, moved to Israel. Says Ellis Abraham, news editor of *The Statesman*: "We are very close to our families and naturally many parents left Calcutta to join their children who had settled abroad."

The Baghdadi Jews are very reluctant to comment on India's policies, *vis-à-vis* Israel, but they too are conscious that as a dwindling community, the closure of the consulate in Bombay would increase their loneliness. The wealthier Calcuttan Jews, like the Sassoons and the B.N. Elias family, have all moved abroad. Even the respected Rabbi Musleah, one of the last priests in the country, is now in the US, and today the richly decorated Eastern-style synagogue on Canning Street, surrounded by the din and bustle of commerce, attracts few worshippers.

The Jews' amicable co-existence with other communities is evident from the locations of their synagogues. Of the eight synagogues in Cochin, Cranganore and Ernakulam, only the Pardesi Synagogue in



Kolet: "We are totally loyal to India"

Mattancherry near Cochin functions today, and it is sandwiched between two mosques. In Bombay, most of the 11 synagogues are situated in predominantly Muslim areas like Dongri, Saat Rasta, and in Catholic Byculla.

**No Tension:** Nowhere has there been the slightest tension between the Jews, who anyway maintain extremely low profiles, and other communities. Even in the semi-rural townships in Kolaba district, like Pen, Alibag, Poynad, Panvel, Janjira and Cheoul, the Jews have lived peacefully for centuries. The Bene Israel, in fact, speak Marathi, and because many of them practised the trade of oil-pressing, and observe the Jewish Sabbath on Saturdays, they are called the *Shanwar-telis* (literally, Saturday oil-pressers).

Although reluctant to be quoted, most of the leading Indian Jews are of the opinion that the Israeli action in Lebanon stems from a deep-rooted instinct for preservation. "Because of its history," says Delhi journalist Jessica Jacob, "Israel may be behaving very aggressively and belligerently. But, intellectually speaking, I would tend to think that India should not burn its boats as far as Israel is concerned. We are surrendering our option to use persuasion and mediation, to play a larger role."

Many Indian Jews like Jacob have married outside their communities and even drifted away from their religious moorings, but the fact that they belong to the Sephardic



The oldest Torah in India at Cochin



Jewish cemetery in Cochin: dwindling numbers

(Spanish-Portuguese) stock has implied that many of them continue to be very orthodox religiously. Kolet points out that a Jewish boy has to read from the Torah (the Jewish holy book) in Hebrew at the time of his *bar mitzvah*, and so the links with that ancient language, too, are preserved.

Economically, it is advantageous for Indian Jews to migrate to Israel. Although a white-collar community with a very high rate of literacy, the Bene Israel in particular are not affluent. The migrant to Israel, on the other hand, is guaranteed housing, employment as soon as he learns Hebrew, and a 50 per cent discount on all "hardware" purchases like cars, refrigerators, television sets.

The Jewish Agency, which runs immigration offices the world over, operates out of a small office in the premises of Bombay's Jewish Club, helping process would-be immigrants, applications, helping them take orientation courses, and even conducting vocational and technical classes. But Indian Jews often find themselves being discriminated against in the Promised Land. In a white paper to the World Jewish Congress, the CBI reports: "The discrimination towards Indian Jews in Israel... has assumed alarming proportions. Opportunities in education and housing are denied or deliberately delayed, with the result that there is constant friction between the Indian Jews and the authorities."

**Shock:** The storm brewed by Yousuf Hasseen, therefore, has come all the more as a shock to the Jews. What the *Times of India* editorially labelled "the vile and vicious conduct of the Israeli consul" has been perceived to have been a frank and blunt, if undiplomatic, expression of Jewish feelings. As Narasimha Rao demanded in the plenary session of the Non-Aligned Coordinating Bureau's extraordinary meeting in Nicosia on July 16, India is officially pressing for the isolation of Israel and is sending medicine and other aid to the beleaguered Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) guerrillas in West Beirut.

The paradoxes of the situation emerged when it was reported from Beirut that the Indian Ambassador, B.P. Agarwal, had fled to the 'safety' of Israeli-controlled East Beirut. Some of Delhi's Jews, for instance, pointed out that as late as July 23, the PLO Ambassador in Delhi Faisal Aweidah had strongly attacked Israeli intransigence in Lebanon, and warned of a "new wave of international terrorism". Aweidah justified the terrorism as "revenge", but then revenge, like the term "freedom of speech", has many connotations. By reacting so violently, the Government has only pushed the Jewish community into a defensive corner and given up any claim to fair-mindedness.