

The mystery of Lahore's Jews

Lahore
Daw 4
28.2.09

IN the walled city of Lahore, the phrase Baghdadadi Chor is still used for a shrewd businessman. The phrase 'Sanechar Talee' is now not used, but was till the 1940s, when Lahore's red light area had prostitutes known as 'yahoodi ke ladki'.

Very few of us know that Lahore, from the days of the Emperor Akbar, had a very small Jewish community, which soon established themselves as astute traders and money-lenders. By the time the British left, they were at their peak. At the turn of the 19th century, they were having a social impact on Lahore in that they began to control a major portion of the trade and financial sectors of Lahore. They, strangely, also had a solid grip on the prostitution business, which in those days, and even today in its own unique way, does exercise some control over the 'powers that be'. A few months before partition was announced, they all left Lahore and moved to Bombay (now Mumbai), where, 5,500 Jews still live. They are classified as 'Indian Jews' by Israel.

Who were these Jews and where did they come from? The sub-continent had legacy of three distinct Jews groups: the Bani Israel, the Cochins Jews and the White Jews from Europe. Each group practised important elements of Judaism and had active synagogues. The Sephardic rites predominate among Indian Jews. According to an account on Jews in the sub-continent, printed in 1903 states: "The Bani Israel ('Sons of Israel') live primarily in Bombay, Calcutta, Old Delhi, Ahmadabad and Lahore. The native language of the Bani Israel is Marathi, and most Punjabis mistake them for Gujarati Memons. The Cochins Jews of southern India speak Malayalam, while the White Jews came primarily with the British, and some also came from Europe during the days of the Sikhs".

Some research on the Jews of Lahore threw up an interesting observation by Bristow (page 195) who, while researching "Jews and White Slavery" says: "The Jewish prostitution business extended from Europe across the world, where it sometimes overlapped with French, Italian, Chinese, and other rings. In the Punjabi (Indian) capital of Lahore, Jewish pimps were in the habit of leaving their women penniless only to reappear after workers had accumulated some money." To verify this claim, I visited an old friend in Tehsil Bazaar inside the walled city,

who informs me that at the end of the First World War, Jewish money-lenders and pimps were a major force in Lahore. No person dared fool around with women 'owned' by a Jew, and no woman dared cheat a Jew.

According to a few old folk of the walled city, they had a place of worship in Tehsil Bazaar. I have tried my best to locate it, but have failed, save for some possibility that it may have been located in the Jain Manzil that still exists there. It would be interesting to dwell a bit on who were these Jews of Lahore.

The Bani Israel claim to be descended from Jews who escaped persecution in Galilee in the 2nd century BC. The Bani Israel resemble the non-Jewish Maratha people in appearance and customs, which indicates intermarriage between Jews and Indians. The Bani Israel, however, maintained the practices of Jewish dietary laws, circumcision and observation of the Sabbath as a day of rest.

The Bani Israel say their ancestors were oil pressers in the Galilee and they were descended from the survivors of a shipwreck. This could explain the term 'Sanechar Talee'. In the 18th century, they were "discovered" by Jewish traders from Baghdad, which explains the term 'Baghdadi Chor'. There are numerous reference to Jewish Arab traders in the Akbari Gate Serai, where the camel caravans arrived from the West. At that time the Bani Israel were practising just a few outward forms of Judaism (which is how they were recognised), but had no scholars of their own. Jewish teachers from Baghdad and Cochin taught them mainstream Judaism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Jewish merchants from Europe travelled to India in the mediaeval period for purposes of trade, but it is not clear whether they formed permanent settlements in South Asia. According to one research source: "The first reliable evidence of Jews living in India comes from the early 11th century. It is certain that the first Jewish settlements were centered along the western coast. Abraham Ibn Daud's 12th century reference to the Jews of India is unfortunately vague and we do not have further references to Indian Jews until several centuries later".

The first Jews in Cochin were the so-called "Black Jews," who spoke the Malayalam tongue. The "White Jews" settled later, coming to India from Holland and Spain. A notable settlement of Spanish

and Portuguese Jews starting in the 15th century was Goa, but this settlement eventually disappeared. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Cochin had an influx of Jewish settlers from the Middle East, North Africa and Spain.

The Jews of Cochin say that they came to Cranganore (south-west coast of India) after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. They had, in effect, their own principality for many centuries until a chieftainship dispute broke out between two brothers in the 15th century. In 1524, the ruler of Calicut attacked the Jews of Cranganore on the pretext that they were "tempering" with the pepper trade. Most Jews fled to Cochin and went under the protection of the Hindu Raja there. He granted them a site for their own town that later acquired the name "Jew Town", by which it is still known.

Unfortunately for the Jews of Cochin, the Portuguese occupied it in this same period and indulged in persecution of the Jews until the Dutch displaced them in 1660. The Dutch Protestants were tolerant and the Jews prospered. In 1795, Cochin passed under the British sphere of influence.

Major migrations in the 16th and 17th century created important settlements of Jews from Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia in northern India and Kashmir, with over 100 Jews moving to Lahore. By the late 18th century, Bombay had the largest Jewish community in India. Bani Israel Jews lived in Bombay, as did the Baghdadi and Iranian ones.

By the end of the 18th century, a third group of Indian Jews appears. They were the middle-eastern Jewish who came to India through trade. They established a network stretching from Aleppo to Baghdad and Basra to Surat and Bombay to Calcutta to Rangoon to Singapore to Hong Kong, and, eventually, as far as Kobe, Japan. There were strong family bonds among the traders in all these places.

Of all the Jews who came to Lahore, the Baghdadi ones were the most numerous, and they were mostly money-lenders and traders. Very soon, they entered other trading professions, gaining enough influence and confidence to enter the prostitution business. When the Raj folded, the Jews were the very first to leave, leaving behind mere words as threads from which one could piece together a story that is part of our history, and one day we will have to tell it. — MAJID SHEIKH