

Website: [www.jewishcalcutta.in](http://www.jewishcalcutta.in)

## **Recalling Jewish Calcutta Inauguration 01 September 2014**

A report by Jo Cohen

The website developed by Jael Silliman and her team, with inputs from the Jewish community in Kolkata and contributions from members of the Calcutta Diaspora worldwide, was officially launched at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 1 September 2014.

The event - entitled "Recalling Jewish Calcutta" - was held in the Portrait Gallery at 6.00 p.m., and in spite of rainy weather and political rallies combining to disrupt traffic, the hall was packed. I should think there were considerably more than the 150 that it was intended to accommodate.

Mr. Raju Raman compe'red the evening, and Mr. Adam Grotsky, Executive Director of USIEF, was the first speaker. He was followed by Mr. G.M. Kapur of INTACH, Prof. Amlan Dasgupta of Jadavpur University, and from the Kolkata Jewish community, myself. As a Fulbright scholar Jael is provided with support from the Jadavpur Univ. for the digitalization, with funds from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust. USIEF will provide further support to extend the archive substantive content. INTACH provided moral support. The project is enthusiastically supported by students of the School of Cultural Texts and Records at JU, many of whom put in long hours of work to get the website up and running.

Jael herself has subsisted with the subject matter for more than two years, and displayed her familiarity of the contents in a lively presentation to an appreciative audience. She presented selected slides with a brief description, its subject and relevance, with brief and often amusing anecdotes. Last of all, she displayed two posters from the 30 that are part of the website. The posters themselves are works of art and will be on exhibit, scheduled for the end of September 2014, in the women's gallery of Beth-El Synagogue.

Concluding were a few questions from the audience. One in particular caused considerable amusement, as the questioner wanted to know why, when the Bene Israel community in Mumbai, Pune and Ahmadabad had adopted Maharashtrian surnames, the Baghdadi community in Kolkata had not taken Bengali surnames! Jael did explain that the Kolkata Jews who settled in the days of British Empire adopted English or Anglicized surnames for convenience. Another questioner wanted to know why there is no restaurant in Kolkata where one can order Jewish dishes like the much-loved "aloo makala"! (I must admit, I have often wished myself that some kind entrepreneur would set up such a restaurant.) Alas, most of the old cooks who excelled in this cuisine - our Sami Ahmed included - have gone to that great "kitchen" in the sky, where no doubt they still argue over the rival merits of their memsahib' recipes for mahashas or chitanni!

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