

Speech by Mrs Jo Cohen, Representative of the Kolkata Jewish Community

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am honored to have been asked to speak on this occasion, a truly momentous one for the Jewish community in Calcutta. We are today but a tiny droplet in the enormous melting-pot of communities that is Calcutta, but in our 200-plus years of residence I believe that we have made a not inconsiderable contribution to the city that is our home.

Who are the Jews ?

The history of the Jews in India is a long one. Jewish refugees from Roman oppression are said to have settled in Cranganore, in South India, in the first century of the Christian era, that is nearly 2,000 years ago. Since then Jews have come to these shores at different times for a variety of reasons, the chief of which were safety and trade.

Logic and logistics, and the winds of political change in Baghdad and elsewhere in the Middle East, combined to bring Jewish traders to the west coast of India during the 18th century, in much the same manner as those other great trading communities, the Armenians and the Parsis. In fact we are told that it was an Armenian friend, Stephen al Goorji, who first persuaded Shalom ben Aaron ben Obadiah Ha-Cohen, more usually known as Shalom Cohen, to try his luck farther east.

Shalom Cohen arrived in Calcutta on 1st August 1798, 108 years after Job Charnock. He first rented a house in Canning Street known as Aloo Godam, which no longer exists. Soon after his arrival he brought his wife and children to Calcutta, and rented a spacious garden house in Canning Street.

Calcutta was a central point in the trading network that stretched from Shanghai in the far East to Alexandria on the shores of the Mediterranean, and thence into Europe. Shalom Cohen's export business in Murshidabad silk, Dacca muslin, pepper and spices, indigo, saltpetre, precious stones, gold and silver, rice and coffee, thrived and his family prospered. He died in 1836 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Narkeldanga which we still use today. This had been established on land gifted by a friend of Shalom Cohen's in 1812, when a visitor from Palestine died in Calcutta and the community had no place to bury him. The story goes that Shalom Cohen went to his friend, who was a wealthy Muslim landowner, and told him of the difficulty, whereupon his friend offered him a piece of land in Narkeldanga. Unwilling to take something for nothing, Shalom Cohen is said to have pulled a ruby ring off his finger and insisted that the zamindar accept it in exchange.

A typical Jewish trading family in Calcutta might have a brother, son or son-in-law in Mumbai, another in Rangoon, Singapore or Hong Kong, a cousin in Aden or Karachi and another kinsman in Alexandria; the bonds of trade were knit closer by those of kindred. As trade in opium and indigo developed, Jewish families spread into Bihar and the U.P.; my own husband's maternal grandmother lived in Gorakhpur, and family legend says that she used to read the Koran Sharif in Arabic to her Moslem neighbors' womenfolk, and expound on it in the local deshwali dialect.

With trade and prosperity and a burgeoning community came the need for synagogues and schools, which bore fruit in the form of Maghen David, Beth-El and Neveh Shalome, the Jewish Girls' School and the Elias Meyer Free School and Talmud Torah. There is also the Ezra Hospital, and many other buildings in the city. These are the concrete - or brick and surkhi - edifices which stand today as memorials to a community on the verge of vanishing, which thanks to Jael Silliman and her team now has an archive on the Internet, accessible to all those whose families had their roots in this city, as well as to anyone who may be interested in learning about our 200-year sojourn.

A number of books have been written about the Jewish community in Calcutta, some of them wide-ranging and scholarly, backed by years of research, while others are memoirs penned by people harking back in nostalgic vein to the halcyon years when the community was at its peak, numbering some 5,000 around the time of the Second World War. At this time there are only about 20 or 25 of us left, and we buried the oldest member of the community, Aaron Harazi, just over a week ago; he was 97.

An interview with Aaron forms part of the website that is being formally launched today. What Jael and her team have achieved is in an entirely different dimension from any record that may have been compiled before: an audio-visual, easily accessible archive, almost tactile in its elaborate detail. I am quite sure that members of the Calcutta Diaspora in other parts of the globe will derive great pleasure and comfort from this labor of love, which will enable them to share with their children and grandchildren so many aspects of the lives they used to lead and such a wealth of information about our history. It is truly said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and Jael has given us many, many pictures to enjoy. The Jewish community owes her and her team deep gratitude and sincere appreciation.

Thank you.

A.M. Cohen

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