

## Chapter IV

### ECONOMIC LIFE: TRADE AND OTHER OCCUPATIONS

The Baghdadi Jewish immigrants in India were mostly traders and like the Armenians, constituted a "trade diaspora", to borrow Abner Cohen's famous phrase, to refer to a nation of "socially interdependent but specially dispersed communities." 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.<sup>42</sup> Family members were integral to his business: his younger brother Abraham was designated his commercial envoy to Bombay and other relatives were dispatched regularly to other trading centers like Muscat and Basra as his representatives.<sup>43</sup> Shalom Cohen made a considerable fortune in Calcutta. Whatever he touched turned into gold.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits Indian Frames Women's Narrative From A Diaspora of Hope*, Calcutta, Seagull, 2001, p.129

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> T.V. Parasuram *India's Jewish Heritage*, Sagar Publications, New Delhi 1982, p.94

The extent of his wealth could be gauged from the fact that he had loaned a sum of Rs.1500/-, a considerable sum in those days, to his landlord Stephen el Goorgi (i.e. Georgian).<sup>45</sup> 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 Company.<sup>46</sup> The pay of a cadet was seventeen-and-half rupees a month with free quarters.<sup>47</sup> 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. 18<sup>th</sup> century), it was equivalent to an annual salary of \$100,000 in the United States.<sup>48</sup>

Although the majority of settlers in Calcutta emigrated from Baghdad, it is Aleppo, which provides the distinction of providing the first in the person of Shalom Cohen.<sup>49</sup>

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

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<sup>45</sup> Isaac S. Abraham *A Short Account of the Jews of Calcutta*, Sen Daw & Co., Calcutta 1969, p.16

<sup>46</sup> *The Calcutta Review*, Vol.1, May-August, 1855, p.17

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>48</sup> T.V. Parasuram, *India's Jewish Heritage*, Sagar Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.95

<sup>49</sup> Dr. Zvi Yehuda, *The Jewish Community in Baghdad in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Neherdea*, Journal of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre, No.14, Autumn 2003, p.13

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<sup>50</sup>

By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> 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 centers at Mediterranean ports and took over the transit trade.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, the British formally declared Basra as the seat of the Agency of the East India Company and empowered the Agency to control the trading activity of the Company in the Persian Gulf.<sup>54</sup> This trade turned Basra into a regional and international trade center. Shiploads of Indian goods docked and unloaded, and convoys left for Baghdad, and thence to Aleppo, Izmir, Istanbul, Alexandria, London, Marseilles, Venice and Amsterdam.<sup>55</sup> Jews played such a vital role in the

<sup>50</sup> Dr.Zvi Yehuda, *The Jewish Community in Baghdad in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Nehardea*, Journal of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, No.14, Autumn 2003, p.13

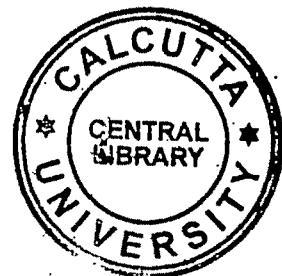
<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Dr.Zvi Yehuda, *The Jewish Community in Baghdad in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, op.cit, p.14



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 quarreled with the Jewish merchants there.<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> 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.

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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 plants.<sup>60a</sup>

The economic entrepreneurship of the Baghdadi Jews has to be placed in the broader context of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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

<sup>56</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol.4, p.87, Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem, 1971

<sup>57</sup> Joan G. Roland, *The Baghdadi Jews* in Slapak Orpa (ed) *The Jews of India A Story of Three Communities*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1995, p.37

<sup>58</sup> Joan G. Roland, *The Baghdadi Jews*, op.cit, p.37

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60a</sup> Ibid

of India.<sup>60b</sup> Formerly under the Mughal Government, Bengal proper, Bihar and Orissa constituted the Bengal *subah* (province). In 1751, Alivardi Khan, Nawab of Bengal, ceded Orissa to Raghuji Bhonsle, and thenceforward although the term Bengal *subah* 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.<sup>60c</sup> 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 *Diwani* 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 Patna 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 and Tennaserim 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". Such a description would be totally

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<sup>60b</sup> Guide to the Records in the State Archives of West Bengal Part I: 1758-1858, West Bengal State Archives (Hereafter WBSA), Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1977, p.1

<sup>60c</sup> Ibid

inappropriate for Bengal well before the arrival of the British. Many artisans worked for the distant markets.<sup>61</sup> Peasant cultivators too worked for money.<sup>62a</sup> There was an enormous volume of trade in agricultural produce throughout Bengal during the eighteenth century.<sup>62b</sup> 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 *aman* winter rice.<sup>63</sup> Revenue payments, except in Bihar were made in cash, which circulated very widely.<sup>64</sup> 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. 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.<sup>65a</sup> 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.<sup>65b</sup>

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).<sup>66</sup> There was a network of markets throughout the province. Great

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<sup>61</sup> P.J. Marshall, *Bengal the British Bridgehead: Eastern India 1740-1828*, New Cambridge History of India 2.2, Cambridge University Press (hereafter CUP), 1987, p.13

<sup>62a</sup> Ibid

<sup>62b</sup> P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p.34

<sup>63</sup> P.J. Marshall, *Bengal the British Bridgehead*, op.cit, p.13

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65a</sup> P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p.40

<sup>65b</sup> P.J. Marshall, *Bengal the British Bridgehead*, op.cit, p.13

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p.15

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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> They set up Jain temples at both places. A considerable community of Oswals (from Rajasthan) grew up at Murshidabad.<sup>69</sup>

Khattris from northern India were also important in the Bengal towns, as were so called Mughal merchants, Muslims from Iran and central Asia.<sup>70</sup>

Armenians were another group from Iran who settled in Bengal to trade. There were some Armenian merchants- Aga Seat, Cancheek, Aga Gregory.<sup>71</sup> The Jews were also another group who were drawn by the lucrative trade and commerce of Bengal.

When the first Baghdadi Jewish settler Shalom Cohen arrived in Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, the British had identified Calcutta as an important commercial center.<sup>72</sup> Jacob Saphir, the Jewish traveler who was in Calcutta in 1860, described the city as an "emporium of nations and a city of freedom and security."<sup>73</sup> Calcutta

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.15

<sup>68</sup> P.J.Marshall, *Bengal the British Bridgehead: Eastern India*, op.cit, p.15

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, Vol.1, KL Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1961, p.101

<sup>72</sup> Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits Indian Frames Women's Narrative from a Diaspora of Hope*, Calcutta, Seagull, 2001, p.15

<sup>73</sup> Jacob Saphir, *Eben Saphir II*, p.98 quoted in David Solomon Sassoon, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad*, Letchworth, 1949, p.212

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.<sup>74</sup> Its appeal was enhanced by its connection to both river and ocean traffic.<sup>75</sup> 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 environs. 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.<sup>76</sup> 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. Sesame oil, jute, cotton goods, sugar, spices, indigo, and lac, were all shipped out through the port of Calcutta to Eastern & Western destinations.<sup>77</sup> Calcutta (presently Kolkata) was a 'company town' of immense proportions.<sup>78</sup> Though late arrivals compared to the Portuguese

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<sup>74</sup> Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits Indian Frames*, op.cit. p.15  
<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 15  
<sup>76</sup> Ibid, pp. 15-16  
<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p.16

<sup>78</sup> Nick Robbins, *The Corporation That Changed the World How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2006, p.10



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.<sup>79</sup> Two years later, the Company acquired *zamindari* rights over the three adjacent villages of Sutanuti, Govindapur and Kolikata.<sup>80</sup> By the 1720s Bengal was contributing over half of the Company's imports from Asia, most of this coming via Calcutta.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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'.<sup>83a</sup> In 1790, there were fifteen Agency Houses in Calcutta, a majority of whom were British.<sup>83b</sup> British political and economic expansion in India which had been going on since 1757, completed its formative phase by 1833.<sup>83c</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> 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

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<sup>79</sup> Nick Robbins, *The Corporation That Changed the World*, op.cit. p.11

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83a</sup> Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta and the Currents of History 1690-1912*, in Sukanto Choudhury(ed) *Calcutta the Living City*, Vol.1, OUP, Calcutta 1990, p.32

<sup>83b</sup> Amalesh Tripathi, *Trade and Finance in the Bengal Presidency*, Orient Longman, Bombay, 1956, p.11

<sup>83c</sup> Ibid, p.252

<sup>84</sup> Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits Indian Frames Women's Narrative From A Diaspora of Hope*, Calcutta, Seagull, 2001, p.16

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.<sup>85a</sup> From the years 1757-1833, "Britain not only won the paramount political power in India but more than half of Bengal's external commerce."<sup>85b</sup> 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 130 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.<sup>86a</sup> 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.<sup>86b</sup> 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... (Ref: Ezekiel Musleah: *On the Banks of the Ganga*, Mass, 1975, p.40)

<sup>85a</sup> Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits Indian Frames Women's Narrative From A Diaspora of Hope*, Calcutta, Seagull, 2001, p.16

<sup>85b</sup> Amallesh Tripathi, *Trade and Finance*, op.cit, p.252

<sup>86a</sup> N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, Vol.1, KL Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1961, p.115

<sup>86b</sup> <http://www.a1b2c3.com/drugs/opi009.htm>( visited on 3.10.06)

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, 4546 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.<sup>87</sup> The Baghdadi Jews adopted the time-honoured business practice of buying cheap and selling dear. Thus, when Jews wanted to depress the (opium) market they boycotted the auction and picked up the products when the prices were lower.<sup>88</sup> The Marwaris, migrants from western India, were their only competitors.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> The cultivation (of indigo) was carried on from Dacca to Delhi.<sup>91</sup> There were 300 or 400 factories in Bengal, chiefly in Jessore, Krishnanagore and Tirhoot.<sup>92</sup> 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

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<sup>87</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta*, Christopher Publishing House, Massachusetts, 1975, p.40

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Romesh Dutt, *The Economic History of India*, Vol.1, p.184, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1989

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

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 members of the Jewish community, was expert in the indigo trade and his services were utilized by the East India Company.<sup>93</sup> Jewish traders also manufactured and exported silk, woolen 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 *muslin*, which had a ready market in Europe. A Jewish associate and later partner Isaac Sittehone made a trip to Kasimbazar, near Murshidabad (famous for silk), in 1800, and stayed there for long periods of time.<sup>94</sup> Cohen also carried on a profitable business with Dacca, famous for its *muslins*, with a non-Jewish associate from Aleppo, Fath Allah Hannah Asfar el-Halabi.<sup>95</sup>

Moses Duek Cohen continued the brisk trade in silk with Dacca started by his father-in-law Shalom Cohen.<sup>96</sup> 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.<sup>97</sup>

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 later half of the nineteenth century. He

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<sup>93</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta*, Christopher Publishing House, Massachusetts, 1975, p.22

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.22

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.22

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.23

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

immigrant from Baghdad, was one of the leading property owners in the city of Calcutta by the later half of the nineteenth century. 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 1849.<sup>98</sup> India in those days was a major exporter of food.<sup>99</sup> It was natural that when the Arabs wanted to trade with Calcutta, they turned to the Baghdadi Jews who spoke Arabic.<sup>100</sup> 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<sup>101</sup> 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.

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas A. Timberg, *Jews in India*, Vikas Publications, New Delhi, 1986, p. 29

<sup>99</sup> T.V. Parasuram, *India's Jewish Heritage*, Sagar Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.99

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Thomas A. Timberg, *Jews in India*, Vikas Publications, New Delhi, 1986, p. 33

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.<sup>102</sup> Abraham Joseph Hyeem sold imported shoes from London.<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

B.N. Elias and Co Ltd has today dwindled into insignificance, but it was once a force to reckon with. From humble beginnings, Benjamin Nissim Elias became the croesus of his community.<sup>105</sup> His Agarpara Jute Mill and National Tobacco Company led on to a wide spectrum of concerns-electricity supply, dairyfarming, 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.

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<sup>102</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta*, Christopher Publishing House, Massachusetts, 1975, p.50

<sup>103</sup> Ibid

<sup>104</sup> Cecil Roth, *The Sassoon Dynasty*, Robert Hale Ltd, London, 1941, pp 77-78 (See Appendix for a brief history of the Sassoons)

<sup>105</sup> See Appendix for a Short Biography of B.N. Elias

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.<sup>106</sup> Elias Joseph Musleah who lived at 17 Pollock street (1871-73), owned an import agency for upward of 15 years till 1880.<sup>107</sup> 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.<sup>108</sup> Jewish merchants traded initially in opium, then extended their interests to other indigenous trading products.<sup>109</sup> 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.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> T.V. Parasuram, *India's Jewish Heritage*, Sagar Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.105

<sup>107</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta*, Christopher Publishing House, Massachusetts, 1975, p.50

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga*, op.cit, p.51

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

While his commercial range spanned Europe and Asia, the plain of the river Ganges afforded the Jew a fertile approach.<sup>111</sup> 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.<sup>112</sup> 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.<sup>113</sup> 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.<sup>114</sup> 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.”<sup>115</sup>

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

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<sup>111</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta*, Christopher Publishing House, Massachusetts, 1975, p.50  
<sup>112</sup> Ibid  
<sup>113</sup> Ibid, pp 50-51  
<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p.48  
<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p.50



Hongkong.<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup> 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.<sup>118</sup> Another Calcutta family which ran a successful business in Singapore was that of Joseph Joshua Elias.<sup>119</sup> Having settled in Calcutta from Sham (Syria) in 1837 he prospered in the opium business that he had begun in Singapore twenty years earlier.<sup>120</sup> 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.<sup>121</sup> 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.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of the Jews in Calcutta*, Christopher Publishing House, Massachusetts, 1975, p.49

<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Ibid

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

<sup>122</sup> Ibid

Closer home to Calcutta, Burma (now Myanmar) was the center for Aaron Abraham Cohen.<sup>123</sup> He inaugurated a business at Moulmein, Burma, in 1874, with a capital of Rs. 40,000 and was noted for his philanthropy.<sup>124</sup> He died in Calcutta in 1887.<sup>125</sup> The firm of Cohen Bros., Rangoon, was owned by his children.<sup>126</sup> His eldest surviving son, Jacob Meir, was the leader of the Rangoon Jewry for several years.<sup>127</sup> 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".<sup>128a</sup>

To conclude, 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 post-colonial 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"<sup>128b</sup> and "yet maintain close contact and sociability"<sup>128c</sup> by virtue of their lived experience in a transnational world. Therein lies its significance.

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<sup>123</sup> Ezekiel Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga*, op.cit, p.49

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, pp49-50

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p.50

<sup>126</sup> Ibid

<sup>127</sup> Ibid

<sup>128a</sup> Interview with Mr. And Mrs. Solomon Twena, Kolkata, Calcutta Club, dated 1.2.07

<sup>128b</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians Introducing the Modern Diaspora*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2007, p.30

<sup>128c</sup> Ibid, p.111