

Far East

INDIA

IN AUGUST 1947 the subcontinent of India attained freedom from Britain's 150-year rule and was divided into the twin dominions of India and Pakistan, the majority community in the former being Hindu (with a minority of 40,000,000 Moslems) and that in the latter being Moslem. Despite partition the flame of communal passion flared up, causing bloodshed and untold suffering, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, and conflict in Kashmir. Ten million persons became refugees in an exchange of population between the two countries, in which the tiny Jewish community was also affected.

On January 26, 1950, India became a sovereign independent republic governed by its own constitution, the result of three years labor by a constituent assembly whose president, Rajendra Prasad, became India's first President. The constitution draws much inspiration from the British parliamentary system and some from the United States Constitution. It provides for a democratic form of society, based on individual liberty and the rule of law, and governed by popularly elected representative assemblies. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru also conceived a formula by which India remained within the British Commonwealth of Nations, recognizing the King as "Head of the Commonwealth" and "a symbol of free association amongst its peoples." (Simultaneously, "British" was dropped from the Commonwealth title.)

From November 1951 to January 1952 free India's first general elections were conducted successfully on a scale unparalleled elsewhere, since under universal suffrage 170,000,000 Indians had the vote. The Indian National Congress had led the struggle for freedom. Headed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, it was voted into office for another five years with large majorities both in the House of the People and in the Council of State. The strongest opposition party in the new Parliament was the Communist Party. But the Communists elected far fewer members than the other opposition parties together and fell far short of the Congress. Congress or Congress-dominated ministries were installed in all but one of the twenty-seven states of the Indian Union.

Indo-Pakistan relations, seriously strained over the vexed Kashmir question, reached a crisis in 1951, when Pakistan Premier Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated. But his successor, Kwaja Nazimuddin, proved a moderating influence, and peace was maintained.

India's foreign policy is based on noninvolvement in the "Cold War," positive neutrality, and maintenance of world peace by strengthening the United Nations to enable India to become strong, prosperous, and independent. In April 1952 India's first Five Year Plan was inaugurated, with some help from

President Harry S. Truman's Point Four aid program of technical assistance to underdeveloped countries.

Jewish Population

Compared to India's 360,000,000 people the Indian Jewish community is indeed microscopic. The Jews came to India at various stages of her long history. Their number as of the 1951 official census is 24,800, and they are mostly centered in Bombay and Calcutta. The three main sections of the Indian Jewish community are the Bene-Israel, the Iraqi Jews, and the Cochin Jews of South India.

BENE-ISRAEL

By far the largest section are the Bene-Israel. They number about 16,000, most of them dwell in Bombay City and other parts of Bombay State such as Poona and Ahmedabad. The Bene-Israel came to India about 2,000 years ago. They were well received by the inhabitants and they prospered and grew in number. Throughout the long centuries of their stay they assimilated to a great extent with their neighbors in language and general appearance but retained certain essential features of the monotheistic Jewish religion. Although the nature of their religion differed from that of the surrounding inhabitants, they were quite free to practise it in the time-honored manner.

Many of their number took to military service, both in the armies of the Mahratta princes and the British-Indian rulers, and distinguished themselves in this sphere. Subsequently they gained employment in government services and many entered the professions of medicine, law, and teaching. At no time was there ever any bar placed on their entry into public service or the professions. They also had their own educational, health, and welfare institutions.

IRAQI SECTION

The second largest section of Indian Jewry is of Iraqi origin. This group has about 6,500 members, most of whom live in Bombay and Calcutta. The large majority of them came to India after David Sassoon, founder of the world-renowned House of Sassoon, landed in Bombay in 1832 from Iraq. He developed excellent trade relations between India and countries of the Near and Far East. Many of the Iraqi Jews who came in his wake engaged in similar trade and established private commercial firms. The small but growing Persian-Bokharan Jewish community which came to India, particularly Bombay, in World War II, did likewise.

MALABAR AND SOUTH INDIA GROUPS

The third section of Indian Jewry are the Jews of Malabar in South India, numbering about 1,700. Like the Bene-Israel the majority of them came to India many centuries ago and largely assimilated with their neighbors. A unique feature of their history is that they had a separate kingdom or autonomous district in Cranganore for a thousand years between the fourth and

trust funds, or by membership fees and donations. Generally speaking, the Hebrew pronunciation and order of service closely resemble that of the Baghdad or the Babylonian custom. The *darush* (sermon) and reading of *tehilim* (psalms) usually take place after Sabbath afternoon services. After the arrival in Bombay of David Sassoon, mentioned above, Jewish religious life received a fresh impetus.

Indian Jews have as yet no rabbi but this long-neglected want will probably be filled by Ezekiel Musleah, a young man from Calcutta who in 1952 graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The great majority of Indian Jews are moderately Orthodox but Liberal elements exist in the small Jewish Liberal Union (Bene-Israel) in Bombay who derive inspiration from the movement in England, and in the Young Peoples' Congregation (Iraqi) in Calcutta, which received its inspiration from Rabbi David J. Seligson of the United States, during World War II.

The moderately Orthodox Jews observe the Sabbath, all Jewish festivals, holidays, customs, daily prayers, circumcision, the dietary laws, etc. Inter-marriage with non-Jews seldom occurs. Jewish cemeteries are maintained in all cities where Jews reside, including the tiny community in New Delhi.

An interesting innovation in Bombay is the use of special bus and tram tickets for Jews on the Sabbath and holidays to enable them to travel without handling money, a practice that has been followed for more than thirty years. Its authority is based on the passage in the Talmudic Tractate Sabbath (Ch. 16) maintaining that what is used by the non-Jew (in this case, public vehicles) may be made use of by the Jew, and on the decision given by Haham Abdulla Somekh of Baghdad in the second volume of *Zivhe Tzedek*, permitting traveling by train within city limits. This is being subjected to various interpretations and further inquiry.

Zionism and Relations with Israel

The Zionist movement in India is over thirty years old. The Bombay Zionist Association in August 1950 took the initiative in convening the First All-India Zionist Conference. As a result of this the All-India Zionist Federation came into existence, including Zionist Associations in Calcutta, Poona, Ahmedabad, and Malabar (South India). There are no Zionist parties as such in India and rivalries exist on a personal, not party plane. Joint action is taken in regard to fund raising, *aliyah* (emigration to Israel), Zionist and Hebrew education, Jewish National Fund, and public relations. The few anti- and non-Zionist voices were silenced after the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948.

The United Israel Appeal Campaign conducted in February and March 1952 proved fairly successful, considered in terms of past campaigns and the present financial position of the large majority of Indian Jews.

Since 1949, nearly 3,000 Indian Jews have emigrated to Israel. In September 1950 the Jewish Agency opened an *aliyah* office in Bombay which concentrated on planning a mass migration from Malabar, whose Jews were keenest on emigrating to Israel. Plans were drawn up for disposing of the synagogues'

properties to finance their transport to and settlement in Israel. This desire for emigration sprang from an attachment to Zion based on a certain religious-cultural conviction and somewhat difficult economic conditions, and not from persecution or anti-Semitism.

While the majority of Indian emigrants remained in Israel, a small percentage, drawn largely from the Bene-Israel community, returned to India, financed by the Jewish Agency, because they were dissatisfied and unable to acclimatize themselves to the difficult conditions obtaining in Israel. They had originally entered *kibbutzim* (collective settlements) for which, however, they were not physically or professionally prepared. To what extent their charges of discrimination in respect to regular employment, housing, education, and medical attention were justified could not be ascertained without an impartial investigation. In 1946-47 a hachsharah (training) farm was opened near Alibag outside Bombay, but it was closed down due to lack of funds and the departure of the trainees to Israel. Percy S. Gourgey was the first Indian Jew to represent India at the twenty-third World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem in 1951.

On September 18, 1950, India accorded *de jure* and *de facto* recognition to Israel. This represented a considerable advance from its attitude in November 1947 when it voted against the United Nations' Partition Plan for separate Jewish and Arab States in Palestine and favored adoption of the United Nations' Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) minority plan for federation, of which it was the leading exponent. The first step towards exchange of diplomatic representatives was taken when Prime Minister Nehru invited Walter Eytan, Director General of Israel's Foreign Ministry, to New Delhi. The talks concluded between the two leaders held promise of an early exchange of diplomatic representatives.

Personalia

In January 1952 Lady Rachel Ezra, a granddaughter of David Sassoon, died in Calcutta, aged seventy-four. She was distinguished for her philanthropy and social service and achieved communal and national recognition in these spheres. Her late husband, Sir David Ezra, was a former Sheriff of Calcutta.

In June 1952 David Ezra Reuben was appointed Chief Judge of the Patna High Court.

In June 1952 two Indian Jews were included in the Indian water polo team participating in the World Olympic Games in Helsinki.

PERCY SASSOON GOURGEY