

Far East

INDIA AND PAKISTAN

THERE were approximately 16,000 to 17,000 Jews in the native B'nai Israel community of India during 1949-50, out of a total of 25,000 Jews living in India. The largest community was in Bombay; other important Jewish communities were located in Karachi, Ahamdabat, and Punah.

Considered among the best craftsmen in India, the B'nai Israelites were known for their meticulous work in carpentry and building construction. With industry developing in Bombay, they were also turning to mechanical occupations where they excelled as electricians, turners, locksmiths, and technicians.

The B'nai Israelites were also well represented in the professions as physicians, lawyers, architects, engineers, teachers, and nurses. Two members of the B'nai Israel community had been appointed judges of the Supreme Court, and one was a former mayor of Bombay.

The Cochin Community

The 1,500 Jews who resided in Cochin, in the state of Trabankor in South India, constituted a separate group of Indian Jews. There were two chief groups among them: 700 brown-skinned Jews whose settlement in India went back to the period of the destruction of the Second Temple, and who were engaged in agriculture and fishing, and the white-skinned, whose forefathers had arrived in India after the expulsion of Jews from Spain in the fifteenth century. There was also a very small group of dark-skinned Jews, whose ancestors had been the slaves of the brown-skinned Jews and had been judaized in the course of time.

Civic and Political Status

The B'nai Israelites enjoyed complete civic freedom, and had never experienced religious intolerance or racial discrimination. With the division of India into two states on August 15, 1947, the majority of the B'nai Israel community resided in Hindustan, the remainder in the Sinah region of Pakistan that also included Karachi. In both states, they continued to enjoy the same civic freedom as theretofore.

Communal Organization

The B'nai Israel communities were organized on a democratic basis, each synagogue having its own community. Officers were elected by the community members at regular intervals. Each synagogue maintained a relief chest for the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned. Other welfare societies maintained such institutions as old age homes and orphanages. There was a central Jewish committee in which the groups of the B'nai Israel, Iraqi Jews, Cochin Jews, and European Jews were represented. Cochin was the center of the B'nai Israelite religious activity, and supplied rabbis and cantors to all the other B'nai Israel communities.

Jewish Education

There was a special B'nai Israel school, named after Sir Khaduri, which contained elementary and high-school divisions, and was attended by 600 boys and girls. In addition to traditional Jewish subjects, Hebrew was taught as a living language. Each of the B'nai Israelite synagogues also maintained a talmud torah where children were taught to read the prayer book.

Zionism

The B'nai Israelites were intimately familiar with Zionism and deeply impressed by the establishment of the state of Israel. The Habonim youth group was very active under the leadership of Albert Menasseh. Fifty members of Habonim had departed for Israel by July, 1950, and there established the communal settlement of Masadah in the Jordan Valley. Others were expected to follow.

The increased emigration movement led to an intensification of Zionist activities in Bombay, and the formation of a Western India Zionist Association, whose nearly 1,000 members constituted the largest single Zionist group in India.

Jewish life in India was chronicled in *India and Israel*, a monthly published in Bombay since 1948 and edited by F. W. Pollack.