World Directory of Minorities

Jews of India

Profile

There are three main Jewish communities in India, each of different origin and with different characteristics: the Cochinis, the Bene Israel and the Baghdadis. None has faced persecution, but they are all declining in numbers due to emigration to Israel and other countries. Cochin Jews maintained trading and religious links with Middle Eastern Jewish communities but, although they numbered 2,500 in 1948, emigration to Israel has reduced their numbers to a handful. In 1951 there were 20,000 Bene Israel, but by the 2006 there are no more than 5,000. There are only a few hundred Baghdadi Jews remaining.

In the latter twentieth century, some indigenous groups in the north-east of India have claimed to be Jewish. These belong to the Shinlung ethnic groups, usually called Kuki in India and Chin in Burma. They number around 7,000, although their claims for recognition remains contested. They claim to be the descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel and to have maintained Jewish practices until their conversion to Christianity in the last century. These ‘Manipur Jews' have established a number of synagogues and have gained thousands of converts. Some observers have seen this conversion as a way of escaping the constraints of the caste system.

Historical context

Malayalam-speaking Jews from the city of Cochin in Kerala claim to have arrived in the subcontinent after the destruction of the Temple, although the earliest documentary evidence dates from the ninth century. They are divided into three endogamous groups (a community in which the members generally marry within the group): White Jews, a mixture of indigenous Indian Jews and Middle Eastern and European Jews; Black Jews, who are in most ways indistinguishable from local Indians; and Meshuhrarim, descendants of Indian slaves who were attached to both groups.

Bene Israel lived for centuries on the Konkan coast and, later, in Bombay, isolated from Jews elsewhere but maintaining some Jewish religious practices. From the nineteenth century onwards they made efforts to bring their customs into line with Orthodox Jewish practices.

Compared to Cochin Jews and Bene Israel, Baghdadi Jews are relatively recent settlers in India. Originally from Baghdad, Aleppo, Yemen and Basra, they settled in Calcutta and Bombay in the early nineteenth century, when British rule was already established in India. As white non-Indians, the Baghdadis enjoyed special status and much prosperity under the British, but after independence most left for Israel or other countries, and by the 1990s probably no more than 300-400 remain in India.

Current issues

The Indian Jewish has attempted to maintain its strictly Jewish identity. Inter-faith (between Jews and other religions) marriage still remains a rarity. The Jews of India nevertheless pressure of assimilation an

integration into the mainstream of the Indian society. There also claims of neglect and discrimination, particularly in relation to religious practices. Jews also suffer occasional bursts of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism in India has surfaced through the threats or rhetoric of Islamic organisations such as Lashker-e-Toiba, who have declared Jews and Hindus to be enemies of Islam. The foreign policy of Israel and the recent incursions into Lebanon during August 2006 led to considerable nervousness amongst the Indian Jews.