



## AN OVERVIEW OF THE MIGRATION OF MICRO RELIGIONS PERTAINING TO INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*INDIA is the only country where not only many religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism have originated but also, it is the home of a large number of other religions like Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Baha'i. With respect to the number of followers of various religions in India, they can be classified as Major, Minor and Micro religions. Hinduism and Islam are the major religions of the country (each followed by more than 10% of the population). Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are followed by considerable population of the country (more than 0.4% and less than 3%); hence they can be termed as minor religions. Rest religions which have a share of less than 0.4% of the Indian population and can be termed as micro religions. The article focuses on the spatial and temporal dimensions of these micro religions which have been traced not only with respect to migration but also their language and culture. The micro religions which have originated in the country and have not practiced any sought of migration, have not been considered. Most of these micro religions immigrated to India from Persia, in order to save from persecution of the followers of these religions in their homeland.*

### INTRODUCTION:

India has been the land of diversity since Ancient times; this diversity is reflected in the large number of religions, races, languages, cultures etc. found in the country. India has the largest number of followers of 5 religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and Baha'i faith). The article 25 and 26 of the constitution of India provide freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion also with the freedom to manage religious affairs. Ethos's like these are the reflection of India's liberal, equal and accommodating nature followed over the course of centuries towards various immigrants and sections of the society.



## JEWS IN INDIA

The Jew population in India is a heterogeneous one, having distinct origins. The Jewish immigrants to India are from various pockets of Asia and have settled in different pockets of the country having different languages and culture.

There are mainly 4 major branches of the Jewish population in India. They are:

### MALABAR JEWS

Cochin Jews also called Malabar Jews are the oldest group of [Jews in India](#), with roots claimed to the time of [King Solomon](#) i.e. 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Various waves of Jewish immigrants have immigrated to the Malabar, mainly for trade or as forced refugees. They are known to have developed a new dialect called "[Judeo-Malayalam](#)", a dialect of [Malayalam](#) language.

### SEPHARDI JEWS

The Alhambra Decree ordered the expulsion of practicing Jews from the kingdoms of Castile and [Aragon](#) in 1492. As a result, few families of [Sephardic Jews](#) eventually made their way to Cochin in the 16th century. They came to be known as the [Paradesi Jews](#) (or Foreign Jews). They were called Foreigners as they were white in color. The European Jews maintained some trade connections to Europe and their language skills were useful. Although the Sephardim spoke [Ladino](#) (i.e. Judeo-Spanish), in India they learned Judeo-Malayalam from the Malabar Jews.

### BAGHDADI JEWS

In the late 19th century, a few Arabic speaking Jews, who were later called as [Baghdadi](#)/ Iraqi Jews also immigrated to Southern India, and became a part of the Paradesi Jew community. The majority of this community got later settled in Kolkata. These [Jewish](#) immigrants were from Iraq and some of them were of Syrian and Yemenite origin. This community feared persecution due to religious conversions in their homelands and hence they migrated to India.

They came mostly by the sea to the western coast of the country and then few of them migrated to new trade centers like Kolkata (the capital of British India), Surat and Mumbai. Baghdad Jewish Arabic is the [Arabic dialect](#) spoken by the [Jews](#) of Baghdad and other towns of Southern [Iraq](#).



Some prominent businessmen like David Sassoon (a leading trader of [cotton](#) and [opium](#) in [China](#)) became the leader of the Jewish community in Mumbai after this community immigrated there. The Jewish community had cordial relationships with both the local Indians and the English.

## PERSIAN JEWS

Persian speaking Jews closely related to Baghdadi Jews from Afghanistan and Iran came with the invasions of Ghaznavad, Ghor and the Mughals.

## SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF JEWS IN INDIA

### MALABAR (KOCHI & CALICUT)

They are the 1<sup>st</sup> recognized Jews who migrated into India. The subsequent immigrations were the Sephardi and Baghdadi Jews.

### TAMIL NADU JEWS

The Jews settled in Chennai were mostly Sephardi Jews, soon after the foundation of the city in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them were coral merchants of Portuguese origin from Leghorn, the Caribbean, London, and Amsterdam and belonged to families like De Castro, Franco or Porto.

### KOLKATA JEWS

The Jews in Kolkata are [Baghdadi](#) Jews who immigrated to the city in the colonial period of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once the community had over 6000 members in the city in the early half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### BENE MENASHE

The [Bene Menashe](#) community consists of approximately 7,000 members of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribe, which lives in the northeast Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram, near the border of [Myanmar](#). For generations they kept Jewish traditions alive, claiming to be descendents of the [Tribe of Manasseh](#), one of the 10 lost tribes of Israel that were exiled by the [Assyrians](#) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. and have since disappeared. In the 19th century, the tribe's members were converted to Christianity, but in the 1970's, some of the them began practicing [Judaism](#) again and set themselves apart from the rest of the tribe.



## TELUGU JEWS

The Bene Ephraim or the Telugu Jews have recorded observance of Judaism and considered themselves to be the descendants of Ephraim (one of the 10 lost tribes of Israel) like that of the Bene Menashe. About fifty families around Kottareddipalem and Ongole have begun to practice Judaism lately.

## INTER STATE MIGRATION OF BENE ISRAEL

The Bene Israel who were formerly known in India as the "Native Jew Caste", are a historic community of [Jews](#) in [India](#). The native language of the Bene Israel is Judeo-Marathi. They arrived in India nearly 2,100 years ago after a shipwreck stranded seven Jewish families from Judea at Navagaon near Alibag, just south of Mumbai. In the 19th century, when the people were taught about normative (Ashkenazi/Sephardi) Judaism, they tended to migrate from villages in the [Konkan](#) area to the cities like [Mumbai](#), [Pune](#), [Ahmedabad](#) and [Kolkata](#) in India and [Karachi](#) in today's [Pakistan](#). The branch of Bene Israel which resided in Karachi immigrated to the western coast of India and Israel, post the partition of India (in 1947) and with the creation of Israel (in 1948).

## BAHA'I FAITH

After the introduction of this new religion in present day Iran, supporters of Siyyid `Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz (Báb) were persecuted. They propagated this religion in many pockets of the world. Early settlers came to India in later half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were successful as general merchants and commission agents. India is the home of the largest Baha'i population in the world. There are less than 2 million followers of this religion in the country but most of them are converts and the original descendants of the Irani immigrants are about 1% of their total population. The native language of original descendents in India is English.

## ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism or Mazdayasna is one of the world's oldest religions. India is the home of the largest Zoroastrian population in the world. There are two Zoroastrian communities in the country- the Parsi and the Irani.



## PARSI

Parsi are the earliest [Zoroastrian](#) community which settled in India. They migrated from Persia to [Gujarat](#) and [Sindh](#) between the 8th and the 10th century A.D. The reason of their migration being to avoid persecution by the Muslim conquest of Persia. According to the Qissa-i-Sanjan (a tale of the journey of the Parsis from Iran to India), the immigrants were granted permission to stay by the local ruler, on the conditions that they adopt the local language ([Gujarati](#)), local clothing and they henceforth cease to bear arms. The refugees accepted the conditions and founded the settlement of [Sanjan](#), which is said to have been named after the city of their origin ([Sanjan](#), near [Merv](#), in modern Turkmenistan). There have been subsequent waves of Zoroastrian immigrants in the country for the next 100 years. The native language of Parsi community is Gujarati today.

## IRANI

Iranis are the immigrants who arrived in the subcontinent during the 19th and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from Iran. The reason of this migration being the religious persecution of the Zoroastrians. The descendants of the immigrants remain culturally and linguistically closer to the [Zoroastrians of Iran](#), particularly the [Yazd](#) and [Kerman](#). Irani is the generic surname for the community, though there are other surnames also depending on their hometowns like Yezdani, Khosravi, Faroodi, and Jafrabadi.

## SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE IMMIGRATION OF ZOROSTRIANS

### PARSI:

They migrated from Greater Khorasan (present day Khorasan province of Iran and parts of Afghanistan, [Tajikistan](#), [Turkmenistan](#) and [Uzbekistan](#)) to Gujarat and Sindh.

### IRANI:

They migrated from Iran to the west-coast of India, specially to the states of Gujarat and [Maharashtra](#). They are mostly concentrated in [Mumbai](#) and its suburbs.



## TAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM

There have been no major immigrants from China until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Majority of them belonged to the Hakka Chinese community; they got mostly settled in Kolkata. A few people among them were the practitioners of Taoism and Confucianism. Their numbers are expected to be less than 200 today. The predominant Hakka dialect of these communities is Meixian.

## EMIGRATION OF MICRO RELIGIONS FROM INDIA

### JEWS

With the creation of Israel in 1948, the Jewish community immigrated to the new country within a span of few years. The Pardesi Jewish (mostly descendants of the Sephardi community) migrated to Israel and other European countries as well. The reason of immigration to Israel being the citizenship offered to the Jews with certain minor conditions.

## TAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM

The Sino-India war of 1962 took a toll on the lives of Chinese community in India, as they had to face great discrimination and torture. This made many Chinese to emigrate from India to new destinations like Canada, Taiwan and European countries.

## CONCLUSION:

Migration due to religious reasons has been practiced from centuries. As migration is due to both Pull and Push factors, religious migration is no exception to these two factors:

**Pull migration:** Desire of Propagation of a religion in new Regions

**Push migration:** Persecution of the followers of the minority religions in their homelands

India has witnessed both the forms of religious migrations. The migration of the followers of micro religions falls in the category of push migration. Apart from Baha'i faith, other micro religions have never tried to convert nor even propagate their religion in India and this is one of the reason for their relatively tiny size in India. The exception being Jews, who mostly immigrated to Israel after its creation. The country has provided people of all faith to propagate and practice their religions with full freedom. The people from micro religions, though less in number, have proven their mettle in various walks of life. Today not only many business houses belong to these Indians but they have contributed a great deal in shaping the country. They have added richness to the diverse cultural heritage of the country.



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