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# Architecture as Social History: Jewish Built Heritage in Bombay and the Konkan

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## ABSTRACT

Two distinct Jewish communities flourished in Bombay and the Konkan separated by their time of arrival and their social status- the Bene Israel and the Baghdadi Jews. Both built places of worship and in case of the latter many public buildings. Much of this built heritage survives today even though the population has dwindled due to outward migration. This paper attempts to examine the Jewish architectural heritage in Bombay and the Konkan with an aim to recreate their social and economic history and contribution to public life. In that, two attributes emerge which mark their presence in the social milieu of their times- syncretism and philanthropy. These are indicative of the architecture's ability to communicate social characteristics. In the present time, how the same is perceived and sometime transformed by the community is also indicative of the changed social scenario.



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## Introduction

Amongst the Jewish communities in India, the three most predominant are the Bene Israel, the Baghdadi Jews and the Cochin Jews. The Bene Israel and the Baghdadi Jews were mainly based in Bombay.<sup>1</sup> They also inhabited Poona

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and Calcutta in small pockets, and, in the case of the Bene Israel, in many small towns along the Konkan Coast in Maharashtra. The third community, the Cochin Jews were based further south on the Malabar Coast in Kerala.

Romila Thapar (2003, p.368) writes about 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century copper-plate charters of the Cheras (a kingdom in Kerala) that granted land to Jewish traders such as Joseph Rabban, as the earliest evidence of a Jewish community settling in India. The Jews of Cochin came to India seeking trade. Thapar recounts Cairo Geniza records of around 1000 AD, where many letters pertaining to business were written by Jewish traders active in commerce with India. Indians were partners or representatives of the Jewish merchants, and some of the latter spent time in India and married locally (pp. 368-369). The Bene Israel is the Marathi speaking native community in Bombay and surrounding region believed to have landed here in a shipwreck at

unverifiable time while the Baghdadi Jews were the Arabic speaking migrants who first arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for trade purposes. The latter two communities and their built heritage form the focus of this paper.

All three, Bene Israel, Baghdadi and Cochin Jews developed their distinct religious and social customs, while co-existing with and being influenced by other local communities. They also built a number of places of worship and other public buildings, many of which survive today, even though their population has declined due to emigration. This paper attempts to examine the architecture of the Beni Israel and the Baghdadi Jews in and around Bombay with an aim to recreate their social and economic history and contribution to public life. What emerges when we view built heritage of a community with a social lens is that it indicates certain attributes of their communal and public life, showing that not only architecture has a social purpose but also that it is shaped by people and their values.

## The Religious Built Heritage of the Jews in Bombay and the Konkan

Both, the Bene Israel and the Baghdadi Jews built several synagogues, prayer halls and cemeteries in and around Bombay. Most of the examples that remain are from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their places of worship and burial are fairly generic, with common features and iconography related to ritual, devotion and tradition. Thus, a synagogue is a prayer hall normally located in fairly dense parts of the city or towns, usually close to Jewish *mohallahs* or quarters. Here, the Torah is read every week round the year. The word 'Torah' usually translates as 'law' or 'teaching' and consists of



Figure 1: Inside a Synagogue- A typical interior space with Hechal and Bimah. Magen Hassidim at Agripada and Shaar Haraahamim at Mandvi, Bombay.

the five books of the Hebrew Bible (Sherratt & Hawkin, 1972, p. 24). The essence of the Torah is encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, which according to belief were delivered to

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Moses in the form of two stone tablets. These texts are explained to the faithful by scholars who apply its stories and instructions to contemporary Jewish living.

As are commonly observed, the two essential architectural features inside a synagogue are the Hechal and the Bimah (van Voolen, 2004, p. 12).

Hechal is an arched niche directed towards Jerusalem and Bimah is a platform. In the Hechal is placed the Ark – the holiest of objects in a synagogue – a container of handwritten parchment scrolls of the Torah. Each scroll is carefully dressed in protective textile and decorated with silver. Thus, the Hechal is a synagogue's sacred space and the niche is usually draped over with a curtain above which a burning oil lamp is suspended. During the Sabbath prayer, the Ark is opened, the scrolls are removed and ceremonially taken to the Bimah, where they are unrolled and read from.

The Bimah is a platform from which the Chazan or a minister leads the prayer and reads from Torah. The Rabbi, known as *Kazi* in the Konkan, gives the sermon or teaches from the Torah. The Bimah is often situated in the middle of the prayer hall, in a free-standing manner and is edged by a carved wooden railing. Seating is arranged on either side of the Bimah so that the whole congregation

may see the Ark. On a mezzanine, there is usually a separate gallery for women, which may run on one or three sides of the hall and is supported on pillars. This makes the central space of the prayer hall twice as high sometimes soaring to the roof, and more commonly ending at a boarded, ornamented ceiling of timber (**Figure 1**).

Most synagogues in and around Bombay follow these basic norms. What changes from place to place are the size, scale, style and manner of construction. In general, Baghdadi synagogues are larger and monumental in scale, richly constructed in European Revival styles and display grand interiors of rich materials. Bene Israel synagogues, on the other hand, are usually modest, non-monumental, constructed largely in timber frame with a tiled timber roof not unlike the domestic architecture of the locality. Their interiors have carved timber details and coloured glass lamps, and these create a sacred environment. The Bene Israel and Baghdadi synagogues not only indicate two distinct architectural traditions but also highlight the social distinctions (and histories) of the two Jewish communities predominant in Bombay.

### **The Bene Israel: Origins**

The Bene Israel (Children of Israel) have, even before the the rise of Bombay, been integral to community life on the west coast of the Konkan, mingling with Muslims and Hindus, with Parsees and Jains who also had communities in the coastal villages and port towns. Their origins are apocryphal. The commonly accepted story is that at some unclear date in the past a group of sea travellers who followed the books of the Old Testament were shipwrecked near Navgaon in

the erstwhile Kolaba (now Raigad) District, south of Bombay.<sup>2</sup> This group then settled around the area of their misfortune, and over time, their descendants flourished, adopting the profession of oil pressing and farming.

According to Edwardes (1909) the Bene Israel “multiplied and spread themselves throughout the coast-hamlets of the Kolaba District, forgetting in the process of years most of their traditional customs, excepting the hereditary observance of the Sabbath, the rite of circumcision, and the memory of the prophet Elijah and the Day of Atonement.” (pp. 247-248). They practiced their religion in isolation from the developments in Judaism in the rest of the world, not having a copy of the five holy books of Pentateuch and only much later receiving “the Hebrew liturgy from the Arabian Jews visiting Bombay.” (Wilson, 1874, p. 322). Thus, as Jews, the Bene Israel are distinct in terms of practices, rituals and traditions; adapting into the community life of the Konkan and adopting several traditions of other religions around them as their own. These distinguishing features were seen in contrast much later by the Jews of Cochin. “...they found the Bene Israel at Rajapuri when they first came to India, and their distinct position among the various native races taken with their partial adoption of Hindu usages points to a very ancient occupation.” (Nairne, 1894, p. 7). According to John Wilson (1874), the Bene Israel “till lately viewed the designation of Yehudi or Jew, as one of reproach.” (p. 322).

### **Bene Israel Society**

The Bene Israel of the Konkan were popularly referred to as ‘*Shaniwar Telis*’ or Saturday Oil Pressers, because of their profession and their practice of observing Saturdays as Sabbath.

This appellation differentiates them from the ‘*Shukrawar Telis*’ or Muslim Oil Pressers who observe Friday as a day of special prayer, and the ‘*Somwar Telis*’ or Hindu Oil Pressers for whom Monday is a day of ritual and fasting. Thus, in contrasting them from their neighbors of other religions they in fact become indistinguishable in the commonality of profession and location. This contrast as convergence is a feature of the Bene Israel that can be extended to almost all aspects of their social lives and practices.

Over time, the Bene Israel adopted the dress, food and other social customs of both Hindu and Muslim communities. Like them, they spoke Konkani and Marathi, which were the languages of everyday use. Hebrew would remain the language of prayer, but would be understood by only a few. Like other Konkani, they derived last names or family names like Ashtekar, Shahapurkar, Rajapurkar or Penkar etc. from places in the Konkan that they inhabited. John Wilson recounts a practice of giving both Jewish (Hebrew) as well as local names to the newborn (p. 322). The Hebrew name was conferred on the occasion of circumcision; and a local name about a month after birth. Local names like Abaji, Bapuji, Tanaji for men and Sonabai, Ambai, Bainabai for women are fairly common, as are Ezekiel, Binyamin or Samuel and Esther, Sarah or Ruth.

In common with Hindu and Muslim women in the Konkan, Bene Israel ladies wore nine-yard sarees; while married women wore the ‘*mangalsutra*’ as an auspicious article of jewelry. Social and even religious customs were syncretic with those of the Hindus and Muslims – with betrothal and wedding rituals like the ‘*sakharpuda*’ and the ‘*mehndi*’. Like the

Muslims, they refer to the prophet Elijah as ‘Han Nabi Eliyahoo’, celebrate his festival as ‘*Hannabi Eliyahoocho Oorus*’ and partake of ‘*malida*’- a sweet delicacy of beaten rice mixed with grated coconut, sugar, cardamom and other fragrant

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spices and dry fruit. The period of fasting is called ‘*Ramzan*’; a rabbi is a ‘*Kazi*’. Even the synagogue is, variously, ‘*masheed* (masjid/mosque)’ or ‘*deool*’. As will be seen later, Konkani synagogues share much in common architecturally with Konkani temples and mosques.

### **The Bene Israel in Bombay**

There is a mention in the Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island (1909) of a gravestone excavated at an old Bene Israel cemetery on the Parel road to prove that the community was present in Bombay prior to 1776. A document of 1800 by one Samuel Nissim Kazi states that they first arrived on the island in 1749. The Bene Israel settled in Bombay because of the possibility of military service under the British and due to the demand for skilled labour, such as carpentry and masonry, which was created by the expansion of the town towards the middle of the eighteenth century (pp. 247-248). From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, English education became prevalent particularly among residents of Bombay and Thana, leading to their entry into many other professions.



Figure 2: The Bene Israel Cemetery at Navgaon, grave stones inscribed in Hebrew and Marathi and a detail of the memorial listing the synagogues on a map.

The architectural imprint of the Bene-Israel in Bombay can be dated to 1796 when Samaji Hasaji Divekar (Samuel Ezekiel), a commandant with the British troops who fought Tipu Sultan in Mysore. He built a synagogue (Shaar Harahamim) in Mandvi in South Bombay as thanksgiving, so it is said, for his safe return. The street in Mandvi on which it is located is named ‘Samuel Street’. An adjoining street is named after his brother Issaji. After the fire of 1803, several of Bombay’s erstwhile communities were settled in enclaves around the fort. Minority communities had their own enclaves. By 1812, Maria Graham documents Bombay’s population containing “upwards of two hundred thousand inhabitants. The Europeans are as nothing in this number; the Parsees from six to eight thousand, the Musalmans nearly the same number, and the remainder are Portuguese and Hindoos, with the exception about three or four thousand Jews.” (Kosambi, 2000, p. 15). The neighborhoods of Mandvi and Umerkhadi in the vicinity of what is now Masjid Bunder Station on the suburban train line once had a large habitation of the Bene Israel (Dwivedi & Mehrotra, 2002, p. 56). The name of the station does not refer to a mosque but to the Shaar Harahamim synagogue, an ‘Israeli *masheed*’.

## Bene Israel Synagogues

The earliest Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay is the Shaar Harahamim (Gate of Mercy/ *Dayenche Dwaar*). A trilingual plaque in the synagogue (in Marathi, English and Hebrew) records its history thus: ‘This synagogue (*Masheed*) was built by Samuel Ezekiel Divekar commandant sixth battalion in 1796 AC which being smaller was enlarged and re-erected at the expense of the Bene Israel community. Dedicated (*sanskaar*) on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1860.’ A commemorative plaque at the Navgaon cemetery (Figure 2) where a memorial has been erected in memory of the community’s apocryphal landing at the Navgaon coast lists the existing Bene Israel synagogues in Bombay and the Konkan, indicated here chronologically from their year of consecration.

### In Bombay

- 1796 - Shaar Harahamim (Gate of Mercy), Mandvi
- 1840 - Shaare Rason Synagogue, Tantanpura Street
- 1886 - Tifereth Israel Synagogue, Jacob Circle
- 1888 - Etz Haeem Prayer Hall, Umerkhadi
- 1904 - Magen Hassidim Synagogue, Agripada
- 1925 - Rodef Shalom Synagogue, Byculla
- 1948 - Bene-Israel Prayer Hall, Kurla West



Figure 3: The Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada, Bombay

### In the Konkan

- 1842 - Beth El Synagogue, Revdanda
- 1848 - Magen Aboth Synagogue, Alibaug
- 1849 - Beth El Synagogue, Panvel
- 1849 - Keneseth Israel Synagogue, Mangaon Tehsil
- 1863 - Beth Ha Elohim Synagogue, Pen
- 1869 - Shaare Shalom Synagogue, Murud Janjira (closed)
- 1878 - Shaar Hashamaim Synagogue, Thane (rebuilt in modern style recently)
- 1882 - Ambepur Synagogue, Ambepur (closed)
- 1882 - Beth- El Synagogue, Ashtami, Roha (closed)
- 1896 - Or-Le Israel Synagogue, Navgaon (closed)

In and around Bombay, the architecture of the Bene Israel prayer halls can be categorized as 'Konkan Town style' and 'City Style'. The Shaar Harahamim (Gate of Mercy) in Samuel Street reflects the 'City Style' with an urbane styling of pilasters and roof parapet; while the Magen Hassidim at Agripada has Art Deco features typical of

Bombay. Both display an urban character in harmony with the neighborhoods that they are located in. Interestingly, the interiors of both 'City style' and 'Konkan Town style' synagogues are largely self-similar, differing mostly in terms of scale and finishes (Figure 3, 4).

The Synagogues in Konkan such as in Revdanda or Panvel display the 'Konkan Town Style'. The architecture of these Konkani synagogues, on the outside, makes no significant gestures of religious usage. A few icons like the Star of David, or a menorah, or a name board, indicate that a Jewish place of worship lies within. The Beth-El synagogue in Panvel is a good example of the 'Konkan Town style'- typically coastal, domestic in scale, merging completely with the tiled roofed townscape. Panvel had a substantial community of the Bene Israel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, now largely depleted. However, a synagogue and cemetery are still in use today and a more detailed look at them allow for a weaving of language, custom and worship into a typically Bene Israeli fabric of integration and syncretism.



Figure 4: The Beth-El Synagogue, Panvel

The Beth-El Synagogue in Panvel is locally known by the generic name 'Israeli Masheed'. Consecrated in 1849, it is located in the Bazar Peth, the main commercial street of the town. On the outside the synagogue sits squarely on the street, its building line matches those of neighboring town houses and shop fronts. Outside, basket weavers work at their craft, largely unaffected by worshippers, who although not substantial in number are quite regular. It is not uncommon to see a large bus parked outside the synagogue, from which alight visitors from Israel on a pilgrimage of Konkan's places of Jewish interest. The Beth-El is considered particularly auspicious and worshipping in Panvel is de rigueur.

The Beth-El has a front yard accessed by a gateway from the street that leads sideways to a small square timber porch. The main prayer hall is rectangular in plan with a mezzanine gallery for women above the entrance, supported on two round timber posts. The central space of the prayer hall rises to the boarded ceiling and is centered upon the Bimah, the raised ornamental timber platform.

On the far wall is the Hechal for the cabinet that houses the Ark. From the boarded wooden ceiling are suspended several Belgian glass

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lamps. The Beth-El is built in timber frame with thick infill walls and deep set fenestration in every bay. The hipped roof is of timber frame, tiled on the exterior.

Not very far from the Beth-El in Panvel is a water body- a rectangular *talav* (tank) with ghats on three sides, known as Israel Talav or Vishrale Talav. This talav was built in 1862 by one Sheth Karamshi Hansraj (Campbell, 1882, p. 14), who donated an adjoining patch of land to the Bene Israel community for their cemetery; hence the name of the talav.<sup>3</sup> This burial ground, in use even today, is scattered with several old tomb stones. The site is in very poor condition, one of neglect amidst overgrowth and debris.





Figure 5: Mosque at Owe, Ramdas Maruti Temple at Panvel, Beth-El Synagogue, Revdanda



Figure 6: Beth-El Synagogue and Jami Mosque at Revdanda

Newer graves are clustered in a small area cleared of scrub. Each grave is bounded by steel railings. Nearly all of these tombstones bear inscriptions in Marathi, Hebrew and English. The older ones have inscriptions in Hebrew and Marathi. English inscriptions have a later provenance. Jewish names precede Marathi surnames, like ‘Bension Solomon Bhoparkar’ or ‘Sassoon M. Khandalkar’ followed by the occupation of the deceased, their various trades or important positions held in the town. One of the older graves is that of Doctor Aaron Samson Ashtamekar, Health Officer, Municipal Commissioner, Panvel; b. 1856, d. 1894. This indicates the participation of the community in the public life.

What is revealing in Bene Israel cemeteries is the occasional epitaph, almost always in Marathi that allows for a deeper understanding of the social milieu of the departed. In the Panvel cemetery, the grave stone of one Benjamin Aaron Chincholkar (Mechanic) bears a poem carved into the stone on its reverse side. The poem is signed by his wife (*‘dharma patni’*) Ruby-bai Benjamin Chincholkar. She begins the poem by calling out to him- *‘Priya Pati’* (Dear Husband). In her paeon, Ruby-bai compares her husband Benjamin with *‘Ek-vachani Ram’* (the lord Rama, who was true to his promise), with the purity of *‘gangajal’* (waters of the Ganges), and seeks blessings *‘Ishwar charani’* (at the feet of the Lord) to be reunited with him *‘saat janmi’* (over the next seven births).

The practice of showering flowery panegyrics in Marathi on the deceased is observed in other Bene Israel cemeteries too. Yet another epitaph in the Thane cemetery is carved on the gravestone of one Reuben Yakob Charikar (died 1946) in colloquial Marathi. It is a poignant couplet that reads “*Geli Jyoti Vizuniya/ mag phunka phunka tyala kiti.*”—translated as ‘the flame is stubbed out/ why huff and puff at it now?’ This is a rather fatalistic take on life and death. In Thane, on the grave of one Sileman Binyamin Navgharkar (Guruji) (1928-1995), the Marathi epitaph is in praise of a pious life dedicated to teaching, for which the deceased would forever be eulogised. There is a gentle irony here- the followers of a monotheistic religion of Semitic origin using Hindu religious invocations like Ram, Gangajal, Devpuja or seeking serial rebirths. Of course, the use of such references is solely due to the use of Marathi as the language one thinks and dreams in. Unselfconsciously then, the language becomes a vehicle for cross-acculturation.

On synagogues too, one can find plaques and inscriptions. These plaques are tri-lingual indicators of name of the synagogue and the date of construction. On the occasion of refurbishment, the details of repair and (long) lists of donors who facilitated them are spelt out. It is common to find prayer books and the Ten Commandments in Hebrew with Marathi translation (*‘Vachane’*), as only few of the congregation may have a working knowledge of Hebrew.

Synagogues like the Beth-El in Panvel belong to a typology of sacred architecture in the Konkan which is both ubiquitous, pervasive and cuts across religious lines. Privately or community-built Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, Jain or

Beni Israel places of worship are all identified by a ‘non-monumental, non-iconic, domestic character’ (Dalvi & Dalvi, 2007, pp. 112-113). This typology emerges out of locally available building materials, building/craft practices of timber framed constructions, and responds to the climate of the Konkan. These buildings are truly non-iconic, giving out no overt symbols of faith. One could be easily mistaken for another. It is only in the interior spaces that the accoutrements of religious ritual show the places to be what they really are- temples, mosques, agiyaris, derasars or synagogues (Figure 5, 6). These modest structures stand as functional objects for active reverence, not as iconic image builders for any particular community. This indicates a remarkable cosmopolitanism seen in the development of the Konkan society over the last two hundred years, with an interchangeability of surnames, clothes, food habits and rituals, and the all-pervasive use of Konkani-inflected Marathi as the language of public discourse (p. 115).

### The Baghdadi Jews

Baghdadi Jews migrated from Iraq and Syria to Bombay (and to Calcutta) in the 18th and early 19th century. They came, mostly as traders, in search for better economic prospects in the emerging port cities of the East India Company. The origins of the Baghdadi Jews in Bombay date back to 1730, when Joseph Semah moved to Bombay from Surat (Weil, 2002, p.19). This time frame coincides with the first wave of settlement of the port of Bombay, when the British, finding a better harbor, moved their major stakes from Surat to Bombay.

Of the Baghdadis, the most illustrious was David Sassoon (1792-1864) who arrived in



Figure 7: David Sassoon Library and Reading Hall at Kala Ghoda, Bombay



Figure 8: Entrance and Clock-Tower at Sassoon Dock, Bombay

Bombay in 1832 from Baghdad. He was the patriarch of the Sassoon family and founded the Sassoon mercantile empire. The Sassoon family was one among the significant business families in Bombay who contributed greatly to the development of the Bombay city by way of philanthropy, being patrons to and establishing public institutions that made the ‘*Urbs Prima in Indis*’. These institutions benefitted the city

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at large. The Baghdadis identified and aligned themselves with the British and viewed themselves as non-natives. There are instances where they would even distance themselves from the Bene Israel (Robbins and Sohoni,

2017). They referred to themselves as ‘Jewish Merchants of Arabia, inhabitants and residents

**The building projects of the Sassoon family exhibit a preference of architectural style that aligned with prevailing fashions in architecture of the Colonial rulers.**

in Bombay’ (Lentin, 2002, p. 27). The Sassoons had community and trade links with other colonial cities in Asia and a branch in London itself. They lived the high life in Bombay and were international in outlook.

Significant architecture and public works built with the family patronage can be attributed to three generations of Sassoons: David, his son Albert and grandson Jacob, who was the son of Elias Sassoon, head of the breakaway company M/s E.D. Sassoon & Co. Later, Sir Sassoon David, although not directly from the family, also contributed significantly. The patronage of the Sassoon

family shown below (from Sifra Lentin, 2002) demonstrates the breath of the contributions they would make to the urban image of the city of Bombay in the late 19th century.

### **Contributions of David Sassoon**

**1861** - The Magen David Synagogue with clock tower in Byculla.

**1864** - The Clock Tower at the entrance to the Victoria Gardens (presently Jijamata Udyan).

**1870** - The David Sassoon Library and Reading Hall (started as David Sassoon Mechanic Institute).

Family home in Byculla (presently the Masina Hospital).

Statue of Prince Albert, Consort of Queen Victoria at the Victoria and Albert Museum (presently Bhau Daji Lad Museum in the Jijamata Udyan).

Marble statue of David Sassoon by Thomas Woolner, R.A. in the entrance Hall of the David Sassoon Library.

### **Contributions of Albert Sassoon**

**1874** - The Sassoon Cotton and Weaving Co., Ltd., at Mazagaon.

This was the first Sassoon cotton mill. (The Sassoons went on to become the largest mill owners in India).

**1875** - The Sassoon Docks at Colaba- Bombay's first wet dock.

The Clock Tower on the gateway to the Sassoon Docks.

**1879** - The bronze equestrian statue of King Edward VII by Sir Joseph Edgar Boehms, which commemorated his visit to Bombay as the Prince of Wales (known as

Kala Ghoda, now located at the Jijamata Udyan).

The Elphinstone Technical High School, known as the Sassoon Building (presently the Ewart building on M G Road).

### **Contributions of Jacob Sassoon**

**1884** - The Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue at Fort in memory of his father Elias.

**1924** - Jacob Sassoon was the largest individual donor for building the Gateway of India, to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary at the Apollo Bunder in 1911.

**1925** - The largest donor towards the Royal Institute of Science, Bombay.

### **Contribution of Sir Sassoon David**

**1911** - A bronze statue of the Prince of Wales (later George V) by George Wade to the Prince of Wales Museum (presently the Chhatrapati Shivaji Vaastu Sangrahalaya).

The Sassoons wound up their business interests in India by the time of its independence. Around this time, many Baghdadi Jews emigrated to England or to the newly formed state of Israel.

### **The Sassoons as Patrons**

The building projects of the Sassoon family exhibit a preference of architectural style that aligned with prevailing fashions in architecture of the Colonial rulers. During the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British imported the notions of style from the 'home country' in their preference for the neo-Classical or neo-Renaissance features that included pediments, moldings and columns, semi-circular arches



*Figure 9: Clock Tower at Victoria Gardens (Now Jija Mata Udyan), Bucculla, Bombay.*

with emphasized key stones, pilastered bays with rhythmic openings revealed with stucco bands and embellishments, rustications of corners, balustered parapets and so on. Later, particularly after the appointment of Sir Bartle Frere as the Governor of Bombay, a scheme for urban development was presented. Frere demolished the now obsolete fort walls and unveiled his famous 'Frere's Plan'- a comprehensive vision for a modern city (London, 2002, p. 25). This was a Victorian vision of public, civic and administrative buildings in the neo-Gothic style which was now practiced in England as a 'national style'. Frere and his architects advocated the 'Gothic' style for Bombay's public buildings, but one tempered by local conditions, materials and ornament. This also

coincided with Bombay's rise as mercantile power due to the opening of Suez Canal, an increased trade with China and the cotton boom due to the American Civil War. Frere's plan resulted in creation of cityscape with grandeur, coherence and craftsmanship.

The mercantile elite of the city, the wealthy Indian families, pitched in with endowments and patronage. The David Sassoon Library was one among such projects and had an excellent location in the Frere Town Development. Fuller built this building based upon the plans of Scott, McClelland & Co (London, 2002, p. 58). Designed in the neo-Gothic style, it displayed polygonal masonry at the base upon which are revealed pointed arches in contrasting sandstone. The façade also has neo-Gothic

pediments, turrets and a clock tower. The interiors are rich with very fine timber furniture and fittings and Minton flooring tiles.

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the free-standing ornate tower near the entrance of the Victoria Gardens. A clock features prominently in the tower built upon the gate for the Sassoon Docks at Colaba. A clock is incorporated in the crocketed neo-Gothic pediment of the David Sassoon Library. The designs of these towers have Classical, Renaissance and Palladian features and ornament (Figure 9). The British built clock towers in most colonial towns in India as a symbol of imposed order and punctuality over an otherwise unruly native population. The elite merchant patrons of Bombay, particularly the Sassoons (the other example being Premchand Roychand and the iconic Rajabai Tower) also helped propagate this notion as a sign of their identification with the ruling elite and as benefactors of the locals. Today, these

clock towers are handsome landmarks in the cityscape and useful keepers of time for a city that never stops (Figure 9).

The other remarkable feature of Sassoon patronage was their commissioning of renowned British artists for making statues of the aristocracy and of themselves (Figure 10). In the Victoria and Albert Museum (now Bhau Daji Lad Museum), the marble statue of Prince Albert has Hebrew inscriptions at the base and is on the same axis with a marble bust of David Sassoon. The bronze equestrian statue of King Edward VII, erected at a public square (the original 'Kala Ghoda' - now removed and relocated), had one of the panels on the plinth depicting the Prince being welcomed by Edward Sassoon, son of Albert Sassoon, emphasizing their association with the rulers. The identification of their mercantile empire as 'English' was furthered by the donation of a bronze of the Prince of Wales for display at the museum named after him. Jacob Sassoon gave the large endowment towards building the Gateway of India to commemorate the visit of the new king and consort. Commissioning of public art in this way appropriates public space in the city, with the Sassoons occupying several prime locations with the most visibility. This worked both ways; by bringing themselves to the notice of the rulers they also gained the appreciation and awe of the subject populations of which they too were a part.

### **Baghdadi Synagogues**

The Baghdadis followed a more orthodox form of religious practice. The two synagogues built by the Sassoons in Bombay, the Magen David and Keneseth Eliyahoo, serve as sacred and ritual spaces for the Baghdadi Jew community.



**Figure 10:** Statues of Prince Albert and Sir David Sassoon at the Bhau Daji Lad Museum and the original 'Kala Ghoda' statue of King Edward VII- now housed in the Jija Mata Udyan, Bombay.

Both these sanctuaries are grand in size, scale and opulent in use of material and decoration. Stylistically, they are neo-Classical and neo-Renaissance, thus perfectly in sync with other public buildings in the colonial cityscape. The Sassoons would no doubt have wanted to erect their synagogues as major urban landmarks that would rival the grandeur of the Christian churches in the city built by the British. The most monumental in scale was the Ohel-David synagogue (1867) they built, not in Bombay but in Poona, which resembles nothing less than a Gothic Cathedral. Even today, it forms a landmark and place maker for the neighborhood and is referred to as 'Lal Deval' or Red Temple.

The Magen David Synagogue is the largest Jewish prayer hall in Bombay, built in bold Renaissance style, characterized by a tall portico supported by a grand column order and a tall clock tower. The interior space is

characterized by sheer volume with thick masonry piers supporting large round arches revealed by stucco moldings (**Figure 11**).

The Keneseth Eliyahoo is neo-Renaissance, with an urban aspect reminding one of Florentine palazzos (**Figure 12**). Its nave like prayer hall is raised on a piano nobile, leaving the heavily rusticated ground storey for ancillary functions. The Hechal is prominently projected on the exterior framed by a grand semicircular arch topped with a classical pediment that rises above the ornamental roof balustrade. The rest of the structure has pilastered bays with two levels of arched fenestration. Each bay is lavishly embellished with masonry and stucco details. In contrast, the interior of the hall has slender cast iron columns supporting the women's mezzanine and finely carved iron brackets and trusses that support the sloped roof. The centre piece of the interior is the Hechal with its grand arch supported on two

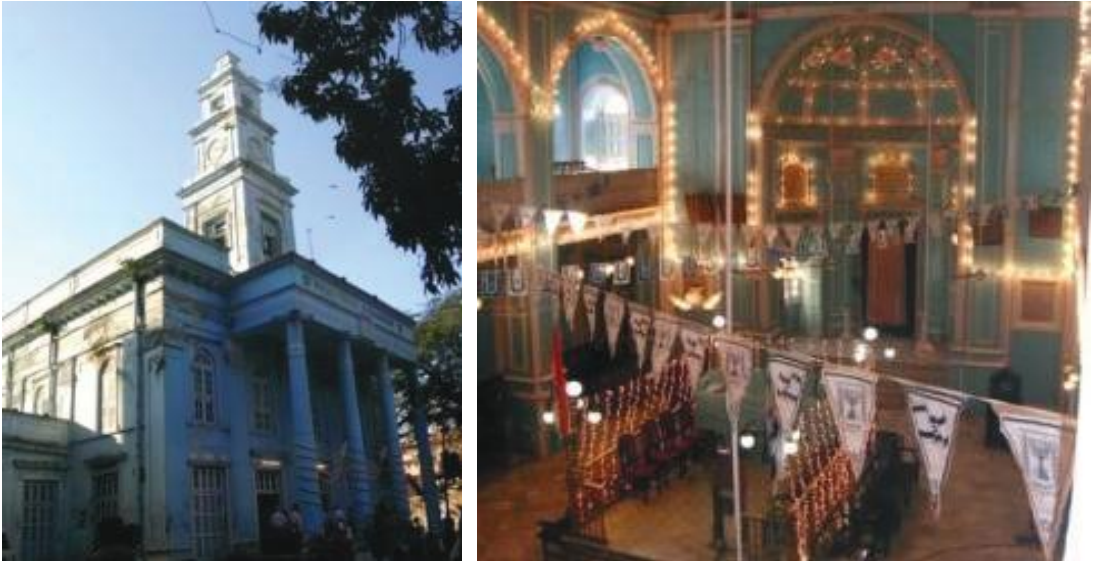


Figure 11: The Magen David Synagogue, Byculla, Bombay

tiers of classical double columns framing an exquisite stained-glass window above the Ark

**Two attributes signify the Jewish presence on the West Coast of India and their built heritage- syncretism and philanthropy. At two different points in time, separated by several hundred years, two Jewish communities flourished in Bombay and the Konkan Coast. They belonged to different social classes and their architecture convey respective attribute of their social presence.**

cabinet. Metal railings adorn the balcony and the Bimah, glass lamps are suspended from the tall ceiling, the floor has geometrically patterned Minton tile flooring upon which are several pieces of well crafted wooden furniture. All this come together in a grand, brightly lit space, making this probably the most

spectacular of Bombay's synagogues.

### **Social Significance of Architecture**

Two attributes signify the Jewish presence on the West Coast of India and their built heritage- syncretism and philanthropy. At two different points in time, separated by several hundred years, two Jewish communities flourished in Bombay and the Konkan Coast. They belonged to different social classes and their architecture convey respective attribute of their social presence.

The first Jews, the Bene Israel, originate in a myth of a shipwreck, separated from their homeland by vast oceans; they chose to make a home out of the Konkan and successfully assimilated themselves with the common folk already inhabiting the land- Hindus and Muslims, mostly. They adopted customs, names, language and lifestyle and lived and built like everyone else. Their religious architecture is a testimony to a larger





Figure 12: The Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue, Kala Ghoda, Bombay

co-existence of communities in the region, indicating a syncretic milieu. The Judaic praxis of these survivors would remain unique and unevolved even as Jews in other parts of the world faced the various vicissitudes of history. They became part of the unselfconscious cosmopolitanism of the Konkan, residing cheek by jowl with Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and Jains, religiously distinct but socially one with the polyglot of Bombay and the Konkan.

The Baghdadi Jews established themselves on the western coast as traders. From among them would later rise captains of industry, city fathers and wealthy urban families, who were known for their philanthropy and a propensity to build urban institutions. Their rise paralleled the consolidation of Bombay as first city of the British Empire. Baghdadi Jewish families like the Sassoons would, along with the Jeejeebhoyes, the Shankershets, the Rogays,

the Roychands and the Jehangirs formed the economic and social backbone of the metropolis in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Future of the Jewish Built Heritage

The community of Jews in the western part of India was small to start with, although their presence in some areas was significant. Over the past century there has been attrition in terms of population. Upon the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, many from both communities migrated to Israel. Many chose other parts of the developed world to emigrate to after India became independent. The built heritage of the Jews that remains with us today is mostly religious and partly institutional. The two Jewish communities built several synagogues, but at completely different scales and contexts. The Baghdadi Jews built to rival the monumentality of churches being built in Bombay by the colonial ruler. The community is almost non-existent today but the two

synagogues are listed heritage buildings and in reasonably good state of upkeep.

The Bene Israel build their prayer halls at an altogether more domestic scale, using timber and masonry construction. Today, the decline in the number of the faithful has led to many of them both in Bombay and the Konkan into disuse and disrepair. Some of the more active synagogues have recently undergone reconstruction and have lost the erstwhile

**Some of the more active synagogues have recently undergone reconstruction and have lost the erstwhile domestic character. This is symptomatic of a sense of dissatisfaction with modest and externally undifferentiated places of worship among all Konkani sub-communities, and a desire for seeking distinct religious identity in the monumental extravagance.**

domestic character. This is symptomatic of a sense of dissatisfaction with modest and externally undifferentiated places of worship among all Konkani sub-communities, and a desire for seeking distinct religious identity in the monumental extravagance. In the recent years, there has been an increase in incoming religious tourism from Israel and a greater self-awareness among the surviving Jewish community in Mumbai and the surrounding region, leading to a desire to pull down the modest structures and rebuild in a vaguely grandiose style. The synagogue in Thane is a case in point and for the one in Panvel, similar plans are drawn out. Such dismantling of domestic scaled self-similar sacred architecture

described earlier is seen in Konkan across communities – Hindus, Muslims and the Jews. Desire for change in favour of iconic is emanating from within the communities and it signals the breakdown of the cohesive, syncretic social fabric. The newer material forms indicate a certain fragmentation of identities. Architecture then and now bear signification of social dynamics. ■

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#### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> This paper retains the names of the cities by which they were officially referred to in the time period under study.

<sup>2</sup> According to Haem Samuel Kehimkar (b.1830), founder of the Israelite School and the Bene-Israel Benevolent Society in Bombay who wrote the first insider account of the community's *history in his book, History of Bene-Israel in India* (1897), the Bene Israel originated in the province of Galilee in Palestine and left their mother country before 175 BCE- the time of invasion of Antiochus Epiphanes. This view remains within the community till today, however, archaeological or historical evidence is lacking. There are accounts by visitors from the 10th century onwards that indicate their presence in coastal towns.

<sup>3</sup> These sites were identified as significant and worthy of conservation in the "Navi Mumbai Heritage Project" carried out by the Pillai's College of Architecture Research Cell, led by Smita Dalvi. This listing was sponsored by the MMRDA Heritage Conservation Committee.

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