From "Boundary" to "Beyond": Indian Baghdadi Jewish Identity in *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*

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Abstract
Settled mainly in Calcutta, the Baghdadi Jews of India are a small minority within the Indian Jewish community, with a history of over two centuries in the country. Having arrived in a colonial India, the Baghdadis were shrewd in strategically maintaining close community ties as well as keeping themselves away from colonization and colonized Indians. Unlike the two other diasporic Jewish communities in India, the Cochinis and the Bene Israelis, the Baghdadis arrived with a prejudice against India and considered it sacrilegious to mix with the indigenous culture. But their cultural identity underwent a transition from a rigid homogenized one to a multicultural one simultaneously with India's journey towards independence. The present paper traces and interprets this transition using Homi Bhabha's concepts of the "boundary" and the "beyond" by analyzing the personal narrative, *"Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope"* of Jael Silliman, a Baghdadi Jew of Calcutta.

Keywords: Jews of India, diaspora, minority studies

Introduction

Jael Silliman, a Baghdadi Jew born in Calcutta is an author, scholar and women's rights activist settled, currently, in the USA. Silliman has published two books in the Indian Jewish context, the personal narrative *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (2001) and the novel *The Man with Many Hats* (2013). Her other major publications are *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice* (2004) and *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender, and Criminalization* (2002). The text, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames,* is in the form of a memoir with critical and scholarly observations by the author who traces the identity of the Baghdadi Jews in the pre-independence and the post-independence India through the narratives of four women belonging to four generations. Silliman moves from general to particular and back in her narration as she gives an overall social history of the community from eighteenth century to the twentieth century and the interplay of the social with the personal history of the four women which is by the concluding chapter generalized with the community's identity.

This paper traces the journey of the Baghdadi Jewish identity in India from the fixed "boundaries" of their ethnic heritage to the "beyond" (both "boundary" and "beyond" in Bhabhaian terms) by accepting an Indian Jewish identity as depicted by Jael Silliman in her personal narrative. The concept is central to the question of the community's identity as it resisted any interaction with the Indian culture for about hundred and fifty years on account of hierarchical boundaries. Having arrived in India during the colonial era, the Baghdadis imbibed

the colonial ideals of superior race and considered anything Indian as blasphemous to their Jewish identity. Through four generations of women- Silliman's maternal great-grandmother, Farha who came to Calcutta in her early teens in the mid-1890s, Silliman's maternal grandmother, Mary, who was born in 1901 in Calcutta, Silliman's mother, Flower, born in 1930 and Jael herself born in 1955, Silliman elaborates on how the ideology has changed and how the Baghdadis have come to occupy the "beyond" space. The fact that all the four narratives have women characters at the centre is all the more important as the transition is most evident in their case on account of the degree of mobility and exposure. Before I analyze the text, I wish to trace briefly the history of the Baghdadi Jews in India.

Baghdadi Jewish Community in India

The history of Baghdadi Jews in India dates back to 1798 with the single family of Shalome Cohen, a jeweler from Aleppo, Syria, who landed at the port of Surat, Gujarat for trade and settlement. He was soon followed by more merchants from Syria, Yemen and Iraq, and they changed their place of settlement from Surat to Bombay and later to Calcutta seeking better prospects in the trade of tea, jute, cotton and opium. Some of them moved further east to Rangoon, Shanghai and Singapore. They are referred today by two names in India, the 'Baghdadis'- on account of the fact that majority of them were from that place; and the other name is the 'Calcutta Jews,' as majority of them had once settled in Calcutta. The community at its peak, in the early 1940s, numbered over three thousand in the city, although what remains today is not even thirty. (Musleah, 1975:17-20)

The Baghdadis brought to India with them the culture of the Arab countries in the colonial era, but when they settled, they did not mix with the indigenous population or the culture of India, instead chose an Anglicized identity. They supported the British in their colonial cause and inturn benefitted in trade. After the independence, the most Anglicized among them moved to Western countries; the Zionists moved to Israel while a small section stayed back and for the first time adopted an Indian identity. In spite of the symbiotic relations shared between the two, the British never gave equal status to these Arab Jews, whom they looked down upon racially. As Silliman notes, "Neither British nor Indian, the Baghdadi Jews clung tenaciously to their Jewish identity" (Silliman, 2001:18). As a result, when India gained independence, the Baghdadis felt the urgency to define themselves beyond their Jewishness, which was unacceptable to many and this resulted in their mass exodus from the newly formed nation of India. But in the midst of all this confusion, some Baghdadis made a choice to stay back and embraced an Indian identity. Jael Silliman's parents were among the few who did not leave India on account of fear of a possible anti-Semitism or an identity crisis in the country.

Theoretical Frameworks

Homi K Bhabha in the introduction to his seminal text, *The Location of Culture* (1994), says that culture is located in the "realm of the *beyond*" (1994:1). To describe the concept he relies on Martin Heidegger's definition of the term 'boundary' that, it is "not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*" (1994: 6). By drawing a boundary line around a culture enhancing its differences from other cultures, that culture begins its "*presencing*" as a homogenized entity. Such a boundary, Bhabha fears, lead to the idea of identity as a "pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition" (1994: 2). In a postcolonial world a homogenized identity can only be attained "through

the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood" (1994: 5). He remarks that boundaries are created in order to differentiate one culture from another, but the act is highly political as the differences are enhanced in order to establish a hierarchy. For example, the West laid emphasis on their colour in order to distinguish between Black, Brown and *the* White. He calls such cultural boundaries, "*the grounds of cultural comparativism*" (1994: 5). Therefore to understand culture in the present, one must not look inside the "borderline" of culture but at the "beyond", where "beyond" is as "interstitial" "in-between" space, located at the "borderline" between the two or more cultural boundaries where they interact. "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994: 4). Thus Bhabha sees the "beyond" space as the site where cultural differences can be enunciated without a hierarchical basis.

The visual imagery that Heidegger uses in his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," from which Bhabha takes the definition of "boundary," is that of a bridge that crosses over two banks of a river. Heidegger says, "Always and ever differently, the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to the other banks . . . The bridge *gathers* as a passage that crosses" (1977: 354). In Bhabhaian terms, the bridge becomes the metaphor for the "beyond" space.

Analysis

The first narrative in the text is that of Jael Silliman's great-grandmother Farha who came to Calcutta at the age of 15, to be married off to a small-scale business man, Saleh, in 1890s, a century after the first Baghdadi Jewish settlement in India. Belonging to a typical Baghdadi Jewish family, Farha and her husband still wore the traditional Arabic dress, spoke Arabic language and lived a Judeo-Arabic life like every other Jewish family in Calcutta at that time. She had also widely travelled, having accompanied her husband in most of his business trips to places like Rangoon, Singapore and Shanghai. Although she had travelled much in geographical terms, her contact with the outside world was limited only to the Baghdadi Jews in those places who were either her husband's business alliances or relatives. Her sole encounter with a non-Jewish world was through her Indian servants with whom she maintained a 'colonial' relation. As a result, the community's identity at that time remained aloof from the physical space they occupied. Silliman remarks, "Farha's story highlights the 'deterritorialized' nature of the community, in which identity was delinked from territory. Its members moved fluidly across borders and large geographical spaces but were able to maintain strong boundaries and real communities even as they moved" (2001: 50). Silliman's title to Farha's story as 'Crossing Borders, Maintaining Boundaries,' is indicative of this deterritorialization.

Farha's and the many generations that preceded hers lived in a ghettoized Baghdadi Jewish community, a natural phenomenon among diasporic minorities, which is referred to as "sedentariness" by Khachig Toloyan. He described it as a tendency of a diaspora to live in a clearly delineated locality and "to develop locally situated branches of diaspora institutions, towards which considerable loyalty is displayed; that loyalty becomes for several generations a defining manifestation of identity" (1991: 3). This sedentariness is a result of a fear of any intrusion of the foreign and is passed on from generation to generation. While the Calcutta Jews considered the Indian culture an intrusion, the West was quite appealing to them. The elites in the Baghdadi community moved in the British circles and began "mimicking" Western lifestyle. The masses

soon followed the lead and by the time Farha reached her thirties Silliman notes a transition of their identity from "Judeo-Arabic" to "Judeo-British," (Silliman, 50) which becomes the lived reality of her grandmother, Mary's time.

Mary, the daughter-in-law of Farha and the grandmother of Silliman becomes the central character of the second narrative. Born in 1901 into a devout Jewish family in Calcutta, Mary represents a generation that looked up to the West as its model. She went to the Jewish Girl's School- an institution of the sedentariness, which had by then "run on decidedly British lines." The school with its English medium and British curriculum aimed to impart the Victorian values to its all-Jewish pupils. By the time her generation graduated from school, Westernization of the Calcutta Jews was complete.

The Westernized Mary had a taste for British romances, Western music, horse racing and she was addicted to the American silent movies and her sister Matty were also fascinated by the British royal family whom they followed through news-reels and the British press. Silliman remarks that "this fascination with the British royal family continued into their old age and was an expression of their identification with Britain and the Empire." (2001: 67)

The Jews of Calcutta in the 1930s saw the political upheaval in India with many movements and unions come into being as the tension between the Muslims and the Hindus peaked. Although, these events shook the entire nation, the Jews remained aloof as mere observers. During this time the only open space where the Jewish encountered the Indian was in the big screen of Bollywood in the silent movie era. Baghdadi Jewish actresses Ruby Meyers, with the screen name Sulochana, and Florence Ezekiel, with the screen name Nadira, were among the first female actors in Bollywood.

Mary stepped outside the Jewish world for the first time in 1940s when she began home tutoring women of the elite Indian families in Calcutta in Western mannerisms and etiquettes. But this encounter with the Indian day-to-day life had little effect on her cultural identity. Silliman notes, "Mary never even considered wearing Indian clothing. Wearing Indian clothes was seen as a shameful betrayal in the Jewish community, tantamount to identifying with India and Indianness. Yet Mary was quite comfortable in Hindustani and eating Indian food at home—more private acts which did not mark her publically" (2001: 78-79). For Mary's generation of women, with all the Western education, Victorian values and life style from the start, anything Indian posed a threat to their strongly held Jewish superiority. Being a community that defined itself solely on its religion and no longer with a geographic location to call as 'home,' it was important to make sure nothing stained that identity.

After the Indian independence, Mary traveled to Australia, England and Israel, in search of 'home.' Susanne Schwalgin in her essay 'Why Locality Matters: Diaspora Consciousness and Sedentariness in the Armenian Diaspora in Greece' states, "diasporas are perceived as prototypes of communities with transnational networks" (2004: 73). The Jews too had stronger transnational ties than with the culture of their settlement. In both Australia and England, Mary lived in "transnational" communities but her search for the true "home" did not end. Like every Jew, Mary considered Israel her 'spiritual home,' and yearned for it. But like every Jew who had fantasized the Biblical Israel, Mary was disillusioned with the strangeness of the Ashkenazi Jewish life predominant in the 'Chosen land' which was quite different from the Baghdadi traditions. Schwalgin further says, "the self-definition of many diasporas is based on essentializing notions of unequivocally territorialized identity, for example through identification with an imagined homeland or nation-state" (2004: 73). In the case of the Baghdadi Jews, home meant both Baghdad, their land of origin and Israel, the spiritual homeland. The Islamic invasion of Iraq had

completely wiped out Jewish life there and dispersed the community, and in the case of Israel, the difference of ritualistic practices, Modern Hebrew and everyday life alienated her from her perceived notions of the Holy Land. Thus there arose a contradiction between the perceived and the real as described by Gupta and Ferguson in the following line, "displaced people cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places and communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality" (1992: 11). Mary's disillusion stems from this very contradiction between the 'imagined' and the 'actual.'

For Mary's, Farha's and all the generations of Baghdadi Jews that preceded them, identity was clearly demarcated within the boundary of a Jewish community. In his book *Symbolic Construction of Community Identity* (1992), Anthony Cohen explains the idea behind creating the boundary. He says,

> By definition, the boundary marks the beginning and end of a community. But why is such marking necessary? The simple answer is that the boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction. Boundaries are marked because communities interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished. (12)

Thus Cohen identifies boundary as a political line drawn virtually with the purpose of distinguishing one's community identity with the other communities with which they come into contact with. The idea is explicit in the case of Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta who maintained strict boundaries between what was Indian and what was Baghdadi Jewish on account of their racial prejudice against India. Mary's generation, on the other hand, saw an attempt to blur the boundary between the West and that of theirs, this again on racial grounds. In both cases, cultural hierarchy becomes the decisive factor in what is to be taken and what to be discarded, and anything Indian was discarded as it was considered sacrilegious to the superior Jewish Identity.

The crossing of "boundary" to enter the "beyond" space took place in the generation that followed Mary's, which belonged to Flower, her daughter and the author's mother. Flower was born in 1930 in Calcutta into a Westernized Jewish community. She grew up with all the Western ideals and Victorian propriety that her mother lived with and her interests in Hollywood, Western music and horse race reflects the same. She went to the Jewish Girl's School like her mother, grandmother and every other non-elite girls of her community. Life of her generation wouldn't have been any different from the previous ones had it not been for the two crucial political events that sent tremors across the world. First, the World War II and then the Indian independence brought Flower face to face with an India that neither she nor her ancestors knew.

In 1943, during the World War II, the Japanese conducted air raid in Calcutta and as situation worsened, Flower was sent to Nagpur, though reluctantly, to do her schooling in Bishop Cotton, a Christian missionary school. The only year that she spent there exposed her to indigenous people of India belonging to different religions and with very different social norms. "This firsthand experience of another way of life broadened her outlook tremendously" (Silliman, 2001:114) Flower returned to Calcutta with a new-found respect for the Indian culture and wanted to explore it more. Her wish to escape from "a claustrophobic Jewish community environment" (118) came in 1946 when she left for Delhi to do bachelors in home science from Lady Irwin College.

The college was committed to nationalist struggle and Flower recollects the frequent visits of national heroes like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Patel and others to her college. She

was now fervently committed to the freedom struggle of India. The college introduced a system celebrating the multiculturalism of India called 'composite nationality,' by which the students were encouraged to have a "social intermingling between different religions, creeds, and classes" (2001: 120). She took active part in celebrating religious festivals of all religions that were represented on the campus and also in shielding her Muslim college mates from the Sikh mobs in the aftermath of the Partition. She celebrated the Indian independence with the nation and mourned Mahatma Gandhi's assassination with it. She was so sincerely dedicated to the nationalist activities of the college that she became the President of the Students Union in her final year. Flower had by now started wearing salwar kameez, learnt formal Hindi and ate Indian food with hands. This was the time the hierarchical relation between the Jewish and the Indian communities dissipated and merged as one to make her 'the Indian Jewish.' Silliman notes,

> She [Flower] realized for the very first time that 'being Indian could encompass being Jewish.' For the very first time she found a way to proclaim her Indianness and her Jewishness and not have these two identities conflict with one another. It was a revelation to her and directly contradicted what she had learned in the Jewish community, where Indianness was seen as a threat to Jewish identity. (120)

Back in Calcutta, many Jews were apprehensive of their future in India without the British rule, which had resulted in their mass exodus in the very first decade that followed. They are now settled in England, Israel, Australia, Canada and the USA. After the Indian independence, the Baghdadi Jews of India were offered British citizenship, a status the Baghdadis craved for, for more than half a century. The Jews who stayed back had the choice, but decided to remain and assimilated in the Indian culture. In 1942, there were nearly four thousand Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta, but after Indian independence, the number came down to less than thousand and this remaining population for the first time made a choice to adopt an Indian Jewish identity. Ezekiel Musleah considers "the near dissolution of Indian Jewry" a "voluntary" (13) act and not an imposed one.

Conclusion

This is exactly the point where Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'beyond' comes into play. The Calcutta Jews perceived themselves inferior to the British and superior to the Indian. Their attempt at following the West was mere "mimicry" as the hierarchy did not break. But when the Indian and the Jewish culture merged, it happened at the "beyond space", because the Jews were rid of their racial prejudice against the Indian people and culture. This is stressed upon by the fourth narrative of Jael Silliman, the author and her daughter Flower. Her generation had an indigenous upbringing from the start and also saw many intermarriages. The post-independence Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta can be seen as Jewish in religious practice, Western in lifestyle and Indian in spirit. Their journey from the rigid boundary of Baghdadi Jewish identity to a multicultural postcolonial identity was complete in post-independence India, but the question remains as to what was the cause for the initial prejudice and what led to its termination.

Norman Nahoum, the grandson of Nahoum Ibn Israel, the founder of the famous Jewish confectionary, 'The Nahoum and Sons Bakery,' Calcutta, in an interview with Nathan Katz wonders, "What happens when you start loving people your own religion teaches you to abhor?" (Katz, 159). Nahoum belongs to the generation of Flower, Silliman's mother and this statement clearly explains the ideological change. Katz identified the Hindu custom of idolatry as the greatest threat to the identity of Judaism which became the deciding borderline between the

Jewish and the Indian culture. According to the Bible, when God chose Abraham as the Father of His people, he was instructed to leave behind idolatry and worship the God of the Heaven. Idolatry was considered barbaric by the Jews and hence as Katz identified it could be the reason for racial prejudice. But at the same time, the other two diasporic Jewish communities, the Cochinis who came to India two thousand years ago and settled in Kerala, and the Bene Israelis who came thousand years ago and settled in Maharashtra got assimilated into the respective cultures without any prejudice. Hence my observation is that the Cochinis and the Bene Israelis came to India in the pre-colonial era and when the Baghdadis came they saw the native population was being oppressed by the British colonizers. Being merchants by profession, the only way they could flourish in the country was by taking sides with the British, because to become Indianised meant to be colonized. Thus both religious and socio-economic reasons lead to the Baghdadi Jewish prejudice against India and its culture.

To conclude, the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta maintained strict cultural "boundary" for one-and-a-half century in order to evade colonialism. The Baghdadis being a minuscule community could not afford to be colonized. The ghettoization of the community and their "deterritorialization" can be seen as strategic measures taken by the earliest settlers to ensure the community's socio-economic well-being and the preservation of the cultural identity. But in a free India, the Baghdadis had the free choice to enter the "beyond space," to embrace a multicultural identity that is at once Jewish, Arabic, Western and Indian.

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