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Even at its peak, the Jewish population of India numbered no more than 30,000, a tiny minority in a land that is now home to over 1.3 billion people. Yet somehow, one of the country's smallest religious minorities has left its mark on both Indian and Jewish culture. Here are some of the remarkable Jews of India from "the Rothschild of the East" to an early Bollywood star and a "Jewish king."

JOSEPH RABBAN (DATES UNKNOWN)

Very little can be said for certain about Joseph Rabban except that many in the Cochin Jewish community – and Jews elsewhere – revered him as a king. Rabban was an important Jewish merchant and leader in the Cochin region. In 379 according to tradition – and perhaps 600 years later according to contemporary academic research – the region's ruler, Bhaskara Ravi Varma granted Rabban and his family a series of rights and privileges which were recorded on copper plates. One phrase, written in ancient Tamil, is especially disputed. According to Cochin tradition, it anoints Rabbah and his descendants as the "Kings" of the city of Cranganore and its surrounds "for as long as the world and moon exist." Scholars provide an alternative interpretation: that Rabbah was not made king but the equivalent of a feudal nobleman, was admitted to a merchant guild, and granted an elevated ritual status. When he called out, those from lower castes had to run from his presence. He was entitled to ride an elephant and to collect and be exempted from certain taxes.

Regardless of their precise position, Rabban and his descendants led the Jewish community in Cochin for many generations and Rabban became a mythic figure in the Jewish world. A 14th-century Spanish rabbi wrote that he traveled to India to see "an Israel King. Him, I saw with my own eyes." Cochin Jews would, in wedding songs, refer to Rabban as their king and the founder of the community, and handsome grooms were compared to Rabban. The copper plates became a sacred treasure for Cochin Jews and there were fierce debates within the community over who were the true descendants of Rabban and the rightful guardians of the plates. The copper plates today sit in the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin.

DAVID SASSOON (1792-1864)

David Sassoon, the "Rothschild of the East," established a global trading dynasty including in opium. Sassoon was born in Baghdad to a wealthy Sephardi family. Like his father, he served as treasurer to Baghdad's rulers until a dispute with the powerful Dawud Pasha sent Sassoon to Persia and then, in 1832, to Bombay (modern Mumbai).

Sassoon's Bombay business initially revolved around textiles and land but it was the opium trade that made him fabulously rich. Sassoon exported Indian opium and yarn to China in exchange for silver, tea, and silk which were then sold in Britain where, alongside vast amounts of cash, he acquired manufactured cotton and other items to sell in India. Profits from this triangular trade were used to buy more opium and to finance other



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enterprises, including Sassoon's seventeen Bombay textile mills. His eight sons represented and extended the family's business interests in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Canton, and London.

Sassoon's wealth and generosity attracted other Jews to Bombay and he was the leader and main benefactor of the city's Baghdadi Jewish community. Religiously Orthodox, he funded schools and hospitals, provided charity and employment, and built synagogues in Bombay and Pune. Despite speaking neither Indian languages nor English, he became a central part of Bombay's civic elite, and the city's vast wetland docks and its central library are named after him. His close ties with India's British rulers saw him become a naturalized British citizen and helped cement the Baghdadi Jewish community's connections with that country. He died in Pune in 1864. Many of his family subsequently relocated to England where his grandson Sir Edward married into the Rothschild family and became a Member of Parliament. Another of his many well-known descendants was the war poet Siegfried Sassoon.

FLORA SASSOON (1859-1936)

The businesswoman, scholar of Judaism, and socialite Flora (Farha) Sassoon was said "to walk like a queen, talk like a sage and entertain like an Oriental potentate." Her family came from the highest echelons of Bombay's Baghdadi Jewish community. Her mother was a granddaughter of the legendary tycoon David Sassoon. Her father was a businessman. Flora, who was fluent in six languages by age 17, was educated by private tutors and in Bombay's elite Catholic schools while her parents brought leading rabbis from Baghdad to India to instruct her and her siblings in Jewish texts.

In 1876, she married her great-uncle, Solomon Sassoon (the son of David Sassoon) who headed the family's vast Bombay business interests including its many cotton mills. Flora involved herself closely in the family business and when her husband died in 1894, she took control herself. A generous philanthropist, she played a prominent role in public affairs, including funding major campaigns against cholera and purdah (female seclusion). Unusually for a strictly Orthodox woman of her time, she was also recognized as a religious scholar and leader. An expert in Sephardi doctrine and religious law, she authored an article on the biblical commentator Rashi, and read from the Torah scroll when visiting her family's Orthodox synagogue in Baghdad.

In 1901, Sassoon moved to England where she gained fame for hosting grand (and strictly kosher) banquets attended by the elite of British society. She traveled frequently, always bringing with her a minyan (prayer quorum) and kosher chefs and butchers. When she died in 1936, she was described by Britain's Chief Rabbi as "a living well of Torah, of piety, of goodness and charity."

DR ELIJAH MOSES RAJPURKER (1873-1957)

Elijah Moses Rajpurker, medical doctor, public health activist, and the only Jewish mayor of Bombay (modern Mumbai), was from the city's Bene Israel Jewish community. Bene Israel members began to enter into higher education around the turn of the 20th century. Rajpurker qualified as a doctor, opening a medical clinic in Dongri, an area of Bombay. He came to prominence for his treatment of sufferers of the bubonic



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plague epidemic that had from the 1890s killed over 12 million Indians. The British authorities initially took a draconian and counter-productive approach, using military officers and others to forcibly destroy houses and isolate sufferers. By the 1920s, less coercive and more culturally-appropriate techniques were being used. Rajpurker became known for his work with a wide cross-section of the population, including the destitute.

He entered public life to continue his public health activities. As a municipal councilor he played a significant role in creating cemeteries and crematorium to prevent the spread of the plague, including the establishment of a Jewish cemetery. In 1937-1938, he served as Bombay's mayor. While wealthy members of the Baghdadi Jewish community such as the Sassoon family had long played a significant part in Bombay's civic life, Rajpurker's election reflected Bene Israel's growing professionalization and prominence. It was also a sign of how Bene Israel had long been accepted by the wider Indian population. While mayor, Rajpurker helped establish the King George V Memorial Infirmary that still today provides medical care and shelter for the poor. The infirmary, cemeteries, and other institutions he championed are located in an area which was renamed in his honor as the Dr. E. Moses Road. He was also a Jewish communal leader.

JERUSA JHIRAD (1891-1984)

Dr. Jerusha Jhirad, India's first female physician, was born in Bombay and was part of India's largest Jewish community, the Bene Israel. Her medical career was inspired by a childhood incident when her sister received life-saving treatment from a British doctor at Bombay's Cama Hospital for Women and Children. By age 11, Jhirad was working towards her ambition of studying medicine in England as a precursor to working at Cama. She obtained a series of educational scholarships before becoming the first Indian woman to receive government support to study in the United Kingdom. She arrived in 1914 and eventually received a MD in Obstetrics and Gynaecology from the University of London.

Remarkably for an Indian, she served in London hospitals during this period, World War I having taken many local doctors away. She returned to India and after eight years serving in hospitals around the country, was finally offered a post at Cama. She would spend the rest of her career there, serving as the hospital's superintendent and making major advancements in terms of hospital hygiene, gynaecological services, and medical access for women and children from Bombay's slums. President of India's Gynaecological and Obstetrics Society, she also played a significant role in Indian medical education, and in promoting the cause of women doctors.

Jhirad was also an innovator in Jewish communal life. In 1913, she founded the Stree Mandal (Women Association), which among other activities, provided secular and religious classes for Bene Israel girls with limited formal education. In 1925, she and Lily Montagu – president of the World Union of Progressive Judaism and sister of the Britain's Secretary of State for India Edwin Montagu – established Bombay's first Reform synagogue. Jhirad was honored by both the British Raj and the independent Indian Government for her services to health and was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri in 1966. A still more exclusive award came when the International Astronomical Union named a crater on the planet Venus after her.



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RUBY MYERS (1907-1983)

While the Jewish contribution to Hollywood is well known, Jews also helped establish what became Bollywood, the film industry of Bombay (today's Mumbai). One of the earliest stars of India's film industry was Ruby Myers. She had no acting experience and was working as a telephone operator when she was "discovered" by the head of a film studio. It was generally culturally unacceptable for Hindu or Muslim women to appear onscreen or onstage, and Myers, from Bombay's Baghdadi Jewish community, was also initially reluctant to be connected with the acting profession. But she relented, and quickly became a silent movie star, appearing in a series of hits in the 1920s. While usually playing romantic or glamorous parts, in the 1927 film *Wildcat of Bombay* she showed greater range appearing as eight wildly different characters.

The coming of the "talkies" – films with synchronized dialogue – forced her to take a break to master the Hindi language but by the early 1930s Myers was again India's highest-paid actress, had opened her own film house, and was paired on and off-screen with "India's John Barrymore" D. Billimoria. The end of their relationship in 1939 marked the end of her time as a star. She played supporting roles in a few later films and in 1973 received the Dada Saheb Phalke Award for her lifetime contribution to Indian cinema. By the time she died in Mumbai in 1983, the city was producing more films than its American counterpart.

ANISH KAPOOR (1954-)

Sir Anish Kapoor, one of the world's leading sculptors, was born in Bombay (Mumbai). His mother was from the city's Baghdadi Jewish community, his grandfather was cantor at Pune's synagogue, and his father was a secular Hindu and a hydrographer. In 1971, the sixteen-year-old Kapoor left India for Israel, living on Kibbutz Gan Shmuel for two years. There he decided to become an artist, moving to London where he continues to live. After art school and a long period in psychoanalysis which he regards as crucial to his career, his early works featured bright monochromes and geometric forms.

Few artists made their careers through sculpture in the late 1970s and Kapoor derived most of his income from teaching. But by the late 1980s, Kapoor was beginning to be recognized as a major international artist and gaining widespread praise for his installations which revolved around light reflections and exploring the relationship between matter and voids. In 1991 he won the prestigious Turner Prize and began creating spectacular, large-scale, public sculptures, including a ten-storey high installation entitled *Marsyas* in London's Tate Modern. His *Cloud Gate*, a 110-ton stainless steel and mirror sculpture shaped like a bean in Millennium Park, has become a much-visited feature of Chicago's public art. He designed *Orbital Tower*, a centrepiece of London's Olympic Park and was knighted in 2013. A self-described "anti-phallic artist," his work often evokes the female body.

A social activist as well as artist, he has created works criticizing Britain's planned exit from the European Union and has clashed with the NRA in America about their use of the *Cloud Gate* in promotional videos. He has created a number of Jewish and Holocaust-themed works and in 2017 was awarded Israel's Genesis Prize, donating the \$1 million prize to assisting Syrian refugees.