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Silliman, Jael. *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope*. New Edition. London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books (Kindle Edition), 2022.

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Most of the previous works on Calcutta's (now Kolkata) micro-minority Baghdadi Jewish community have primarily viewed them through the eyes of elites (men in most cases). The work *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* by Jael Silliman shifts the focus towards the women. Through the eyes of four generations of women in her middle-class maternal family, Silliman narrates the fascinating socio-cultural history of the community's sojourn in Calcutta in this biographical-cum-auto ethnographical account. The book narrates how the commoners (particularly the women) within the community 'dwelled in travelling' despite being scattered across what Silliman calls the 'Jewish Asia' that comprised a multi-centred circuit stretching from Basra in the West to Shanghai in the East. In this circuit, each centre occupied a key role in the exchange of ideas, goods, and even people.

In the 'Introduction,' Silliman provides a brief background and overview of the three centuries old Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta – their arrival since 1790s, thriving, rich-poor divide, Anglicization, and finally exodus since mid-1940s. The exploitative role played by the elite Jews as agents of the British colonial power, in the economic colonisation of India is explained with examples. This made them a fortune, which they later invested in real estate, and industries. Silliman borrows concepts from other scholars to better explain and situate her points – Arjun Appadurai's 'diaspora of hope,' Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities,' among others. The present state of the community with only 20 members, is summed up by Silliman's observation - "The Jewish presence has been written over by contemporary India and is only visible to those in search of it." (39)

Silliman's great-grandmother Farha, who arrived in Calcutta as a young bride in the mid-1890s, remained exclusively within the domestic Baghdadi sphere, irrespective of her geographic location, retaining her Judaeo-Arabic identity. Hailing from a mercantile family, Farha was more outgoing and extrovert, who lived life to the fullest. She never fully took to European culture, and spoke with her grandchildren in Hindustani mixed with some English words. Silliman's

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grandmother Miriam (who Anglicised her name to Mary) stepped into the British sphere, adopting a Judaeo-British identity while retaining her Jewishness. In the early 20th century, she trained as a teacher to support her family, even teaching Marwari women. Silliman's mother Flower was the first to step into the Indian sphere during her time in Lady Irwin college in New Delhi in the 1940s, which made her identify with Indian nationalism. Flower even learnt a formal version of Hindi, ate Indian foods with bare hands disregarding *Kashrut*, and even travelled in third-class compartment of trains alongside her batchmates-friends to recognise the real India. Jael, born in the mid-1950s in Calcutta with a depleting Jewish community, became the first to consider herself 'unambivalently Indian,' freely mixing with people from all faiths, and identifying with the larger South Asian diaspora when abroad. While her Indian identity remained unquestioned in India, Jael was taken aback when it was challenged by one of her progressive Indian friends at a Native American Women's meeting in Montana, USA.

The four women negotiated various identities (Judaeo-Arabic, Judaeo-British, Judaeo-Indian, and Indian) in a fluid manner, and shaped their Jewishness in response to the changing socio-cultural, and political contexts. 'Jewishness' remained central to the identity of Baghdadis irrespective of time or space. While for Silliman's foremothers' Judaism was a religion and a 'way of life,' it became more of a 'cultural identity' for her mother and herself. This may be due to the fact that while her foremothers restricted their interactions to Baghdadis wherever they went, her mother and Silliman freely mix with people from different cultures, and religions. Silliman laments that her foremothers would not recognise her lifestyle as Jewish, and would be horrified as her grandmother Mary was on seeing her daughter Flower (Silliman's mother) dressed in an Indian *salwar-kameez* after returning from Delhi.

The 'Conclusion' highlights the contribution of middle-class Baghdadi women in building and sustaining the diaspora across different centres through marriage, and other socio-cultural interactions. The presence of a Baghdadi community provided them with a sense of 'belonging,' a home away from home. It was the middle-class men who interacted with both natives and Europeans in the contact zones for their business purposes, while the women remained confined to the domestic sphere. Women actively ventured out only in the 1920s. For them, 'identity' was more a matter of 'self-representation' rather than a rigid function of their place of birth or domicile.

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As opposed to the religious and cultural transnational identity of her predecessors, Silliman's one is political - third world feminist. Silliman recalled an interesting instance of a colonial hangover (which still persists to some extent) whereby her father was denied entry into a posh restaurant (which still maintained European customs) in 1960s Calcutta for wearing Indian dress.

The book discloses the unexpected and subtle complexities of the colonial encounter as experienced by Jewish women. Despite its focus on women, the book provides a holistic understanding of a Jewish diaspora community in one of the most hospitable countries in the world – India, where Jews have been able to reside peacefully for at least one thousand years (according to documentary evidence), and two millennia (according to legends of Cochini, and Bene Israel Jewish communities). A vibrant community and culture are brought to life, through Silliman's portraits of her foremothers' daily lifestyle – their joys, sorrow, food and clothing habits.

The book doesn't have any major flaws as such. The fluid and multiple identities of the Baghdadi Jews allowed them to exploit their position as 'middlemen-minorities' to negotiate with both colonialism and nationalism to enhance their prospects. This might be seen as a critique of simple unilinear narratives. A few shortcomings of the book have been recognised by the author herself in the 'Preface.' As the first two chapters ('Farha,' and 'Mary') are based entirely on the memory of her foremothers as narrated by her Aunts, and her mother, it is quite different from the story her foremothers would have told if they were alive. Due to it being both 'a scholarly and family endeavour,' it becomes difficult to separate the voices of the author from that of her mother in the first three chapters – 'Farha,' 'Mary,' and 'Flower.'

The work's narrative challenges two dominant paradigms. Firstly, by presenting a nuanced understanding of colonial experience on a micro-minority community in one of the largest cosmopolitan colonial metropoles in Asia, it counters the simplified notion of colonialism. Secondly, it paints an alternative picture by highlighting the experience of Baghdadi Jews from Calcutta (and Indian Jewry in a larger context) who thrived in colonial India, as opposed to the experience of discrimination faced by European Jews which dominate the narratives of Jewish diaspora. Overall, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* is an interesting read for students and scholars across various disciplines – History, Jewish Studies, Women's Studies, and South Asian Studies.

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Even for non-academic minded people, it will be an informative read due to its lucid language and free-flowing style.

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