



# Lights Out in Kolkata

**At first sight, Kolkata is a throbbing cacophony of throngs of people, peddlers, grime, motorcycles carrying entire families, rumbling buses, and hand-drawn rickshaws all zooming in different directions. But tucked behind the noisy streets is the lonely remnant of another world, where prayers — not horns — would echo through the sanctuary**

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We thought we knew what Kolkata (Calcutta until 2001) would be like — we'd done a fair bit of research and spoken to a Jewish contact before our trip — but nothing can substitute for actually taking in the sights, sounds, and scents of this Indian city.

At first, it wasn't even clear how we'd get to our first contact. The city's taxi drivers were on strike when we arrived. But two old rickshaws pulled up to solve our dilemma. A rickshaw, remember, is a two-wheeled, human (not animal) powered wagon that somehow distributes the passengers' weight efficiently enough for the shleppe to race through the congested streets. We climbed on and perched high up on the old leather seats, which afforded us a wide view of our surroundings — noise, dirt, and chaos.

Everywhere we looked, there were people: sitting on the stoops of their peeling, dilapidated houses; peddlers hawking products, people in every nook and cranny. And the honking was constant — as if a necessary accompaniment to the traffic. Well, maybe it is, with traffic moving in multidirectional streams trying to avoid the pedestrians, the rickshaws, and the rumbling buses. Many of the city's residents have no running water at home, and we saw partially clothed men busy soaping up and bathing in the streets, using the free public water pumps. While it's normally very hot and humid, being there in December gave us the year's best weather, a delightful 80 degrees with little humidity. And despite the throngs of people, the dirt and

smog, we didn't see much garbage piled up or smell rotten food or sewage. The multitude of food vendors filled the streets with other smells.

Most of the people we saw were busy chewing something called betel nut. Like tobacco, it is a mild stimulant that stains teeth and gums a dark brown. It is also carcinogenic, giving India the dubious honor of having the world's highest rate of oral cancer. It seems like everywhere you turn, small vendors are busy wrapping sugar and spices into bright green betel leaves. Fresh breath must be a big deal, as everyone buys this little packet and chews the mixture. Brave souls that we were, one of us actually tried the betel leaves — a little kick, and not altogether unenjoyable.

On every street we saw little idol huts, where worshippers bring small food donations and donate the beautiful garlands of multicolored flowers sold along the streets. To round out the picture were the cows roaming around, which are considered sacred.

But it's not a typical trip back in time. The 1.2 billion people crowded into India's cities and hamlets are a big mix. These cities are financial powerhouses and high-tech centers, yet are teeming with poor peasants eking out their day's bread in a country where over half the population doesn't have modern sanitation.

And, of course, our primary question: Are there any Jews in this grand mixture? Under Britain's East India Company that ruled India in the 18th century, and later under direct rule by the British crown, Calcutta was the capital of India (the capital was transferred to Delhi in 1911). The resulting business opportunities attracted Jews, and the growing community, mostly from Iraqi descent and known collectively as Baghdadis, found themselves with a unique opportunity, being on the direct trade route between China and England. They didn't hesitate to maximize that opportunity, and some of those families became immensely wealthy. For many, their financial success came from shipping opium to millions of the addicted in China in return for massive amounts of tea for the addicted in England.





While India has a mere three-and-a-half-hour time difference from Israel (yes, that is actually a “half”), the cultural divide is huge. The flight attendants on our internal Indian flights had never heard of kosher food. Arriving in Mumbai and waiting for the connecting flight to Kolkata, the name by which Calcutta has been known for the last decade (rejecting the British pronunciation in favor of the original Bengali pronunciation), we davened Shacharis in the terminal. Nobody batted an eyelash at our talleisim, since everybody there wears wraps and wild colors, but one guard did ask about our tefillin. “Are they a camera?” he asked. Good morning, Kolkata.

**Purified** We made contact with Jo Cohen before our trip via an acquaintance of ours from India. She’s one of the elders of the Kolkata Jewish community, which consists of about 20 remaining Jews. Jo runs the Jewish school with its hundreds of non-Jewish students, looks after the three spectacular shuls in the town, and maintains the Jewish cemetery. When we complimented her on its upkeep, she said that had we come right after the monsoon season; had we come a bit earlier, it would have looked like a jungle, and we’d never have been able to locate the graves. The foliage here grows so high and thick that we would surely have gotten lost.

The Jewish community attributes the acquisition of the cemetery to its first Jewish settler, Shalom Cohen. Cohen felt responsible for the Jews who followed him, and when a Jewish visitor died, he decided to buy a plot of land to be earmarked for the cemetery. A Bengali Muslim business associate took him to an open field on the outskirts of the city and asked if it would be suitable for the purpose. Shalom was delighted and then surprised when he asked the price: the magnanimous gentleman wanted to gift it to him. Shalom insisted on paying for the land, explaining that it was going to be a Jewish religious site. (Remember Avraham Avinu purchasing the Mearas Hamachpeilah?)



1.

**We climbed on the rickshaws and perched high up on the old leather seats, which afforded us a wide view of our surroundings — noise, dirt, and chaos**

The gentleman told him to pay him what he liked. Shalom handed him his ruby ring in return and thanked him profusely.

As we walked around with Jo, we commented on the large number of children’s graves and we asked if there had been a plague. She replied that in India you don’t need a plague for children to die. “Every year during the rainy season people simply get sick and die,” she explained. At one point she stopped at a grave and said, “This is my two-year-old daughter’s grave. She would have been 42 next week.” We said *Keil maleh rachamim* for her on the spot.

Jo showed us the *taharah* room and the stretcher used to transport the body to the grave. She is the only one left in town who knows how to do a *taharah* — following the Kolkata custom of using nine pottery jugs, one

for each *kav* poured over the body, and then smashing them — and today some Muslim women help her out when a woman dies. She figures she’ll have to bring down somebody from Mumbai when the next man dies. These are not theoretical questions as the few remaining Jews are not young — on our Shabbos in the city a Jewish woman passed away.

Although Jo’s husband Mordecai is quite ill with cancer and she’s dealing with heavy personal obligations, she has taken upon herself to preserve all aspects of the community’s assets. When we asked her how she felt about being a leader of such a community, she thought for a minute and said, “It’s sad, but I’m the one left now so it’s up to me to do it.”

We noticed a white domed structure with a small window-like opening in the middle

# KOLKATA

**Location:** West Bengal State, East India  
**Population:** 14 million (greater metropolis)  
**Climate:** Tropical wet-and-dry  
**Languages:** Bengali and English



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**1. WHAT A SHLEP** The taxi strike had us worried, until two able-bodied rickshaw drivers raced us to our destination

**2. UNDERTAKEN** Jo, the last holdout of the community, showed us the stretcher used to transport the body to the grave. “Now it’s all up to me”

**3. PAPER TRAIL** After checking for bats and snakes, Ari G. takes the plunge into the *genizah* hut

**4. SALVAGED** Most of the books were decayed from the humidity, but we found a treasure of tallis and tefillin bags



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of the cemetery, and Jo explained that that’s where she and others dump all of the “old books.” We started to imagine the treasure trove of “old books” that had been deposited into the communal *genizah*, and asked her if she minded if we took a look inside. She said she didn’t mind, but warned us that the heat and damp had probably turned everything into dirt. After all, this is not Cairo, she stated, as she headed off to her job at the girl’s school and left us to explore the *genizah*.

We peered through the small opening and asked the workers to bring us a ladder to climb down into the darkness. They found some rickety bamboo thing, which we cut to size and slid down it into the pile of old books. Ari G. attached his “halachic adventurer kit” headlamp and volunteered to go in after checking the roof for bats and the floor for snakes, at least as far as he could see. Jo was right — most of the books and documents were in an advanced state of decay, emitting a strong smell of ammonia — but we did find a *sefer* printed in Baghdad 120 years ago and some beautiful hand-embroidered tallis and tefillin bags.



4.

**Distributing the Wealth** Of the various Jewish groups that have established a presence in India over the years, the most recent arrivals are the “Baghdadis” who arrived from Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. They established themselves in various Asian localities including Rangoon, Singapore, and Shanghai, but the two main Baghdadi Jewish centers were the Indian cities of Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata (Calcutta).

Despite the renown of the Baghdadis, the first recorded Jewish





**1. EMPTIED OUT** The Maghen David shul is still magnificent, although ours might have been its last Shabbos prayers

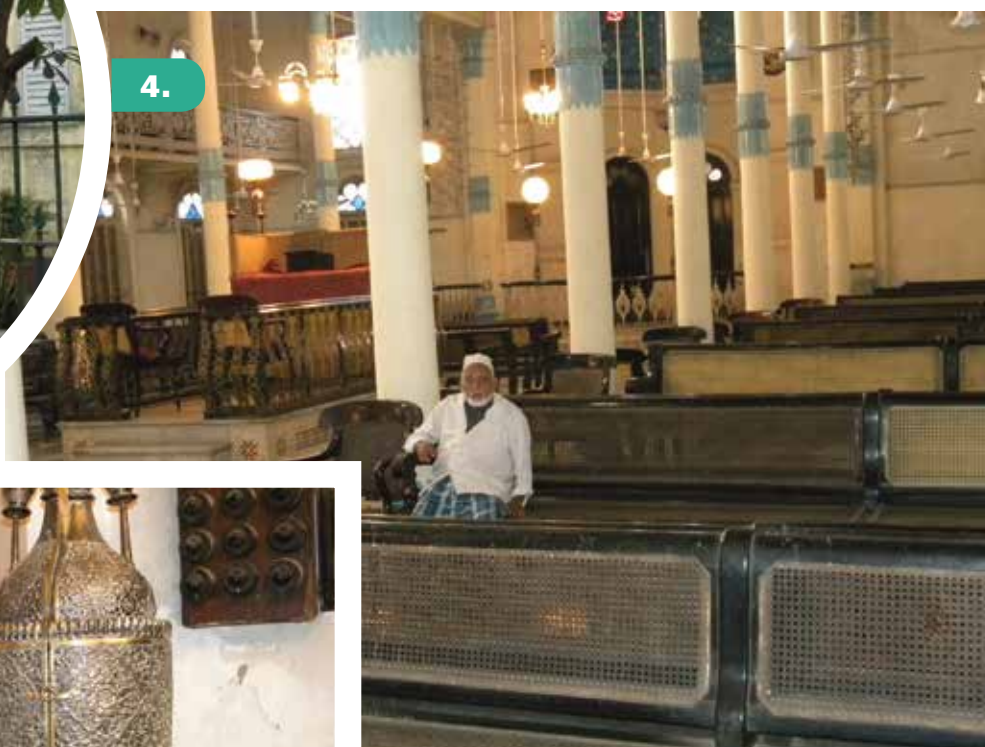
**2. ON TIME** If you crane your neck, you can still see the famous clock (which still works if you jiggle the wires)

**3. ALMOST A MUSEUM** The Beth El synagogue. Jo Cohen still lights an oil lamp in all three shuls every week

**4. ON GUARD** The Muslim caretaker of the Beth El shul has been lovingly tending the grounds for over 50 years

**5. SCROLLED DOWN** Ari Z. with one of the two ancient (*pasul*) *sifrei Torah* remaining. This *aron kodesh* room once contained a hundred

PHOTOS: SAGNIK BANERJEE, SHYAMBAZAR, CALCUTTA



immigrant to Kolkata was actually a Jew from Aleppo, Syria, named Shalom Aharon Obadiah Cohen, who arrived in Bombay in 1790 and in Kolkata in 1798, bringing a *shochet* along with him. Cohen traded in gems, rosewater, imported Arabian horses, spices, silks, and indigo, and was respected by many of the local leaders. In 1805, his nephew and future son-in-law, Moses Simon Duek Cohen, joined him in Kolkata and upon Shalom's death in 1836, Duek Cohen became the leader of the community of about 600 Arabic-speaking Jews. But eventually the Syrians were outnumbered by the influx of Iraqi Jews who faced persecution in the 18th century.

The most prominent Baghdadi exile to India was David Sassoon, who around 1830 moved his wealth to Bombay, where his factories and trading controlled much of the business in the city. Despite his immense wealth, he remained Shabbos-observant and the dynasty he founded was known for its generous charitable work.

Like the Sassoons of Bombay, the Ezra family of Kolkata used their vast wealth to benefit the public. David Joseph Ezra became the city's leading businessman and bought up huge tracts of land for pennies that eventually became prime real estate. When he died in 1882, he was the largest property owner in the city. His wife, Mozelle, was the daughter of Sir David Sassoon, and the Maghen David synagogue where we davened on Shabbos was built in his memory by his grandson Elia David Ezra.

Another leading member of the community was Benjamin Nissim Elias, who

became fabulously wealthy via cotton, jute, tobacco processing, and engineering and electricity projects. The Baghdadis made a striking and disproportionate contribution to Indian life, so much so that a highly educated and well-connected health care expert whom we met asked us if it true that the Jews control 50 percent of the US economy.

One of the few remaining Jews is Yitzchak Eliyahu (Ike) Nahoum. Entering the large metropolitan maze known as the "New Market," we assumed that finding his famous Nahoum's bakery would be a challenge, but we were wrong — everyone knows where it is. This nonkosher, Jewish-owned bakery seems to be the most popular bakery in the city. Over 100 years ago, Israel Mordecai Nahoum immigrated from Baghdad and began selling home-made pastries door-to-door. The shop has been at its present location for over 65 years. Grandsons of the founder, brothers David and Nahoum Nahoum — both bachelors — ran the shop until they died. Today it is run by their brother Ike, who has a married dentist son living in Israel. At this point Ike splits his time between his apartment in Kolkata, a five-minute walk from his shop, and his place in Beit Shemesh, a five-minute walk from Ari Z.

**Wine and Matzah** There aren't too many Jews left here, but Kolkata's three shuls are still standing. Neveh Shalom, the smallest of them, originally dates back to 1825. A few blocks away is Beth El, built in 1856, and then there is





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## QUESTIONS FROM CALCUTTA

Calcutta Jewry never produced its own *poskim* and *talmidei chachamim*, but as a community, they strictly adhered to halachah, and as Baghdadis they sent their questions to the leading authorities in Iraq. The principle authority with whom they were in touch was Hakham Abdallah (Ovadia) Somekh (1813-1889), the leading *posek* for Iraqi Jewry for much of the 19th century. A direct descendant of Rav Nissim Gaon, he was the *rebbe* of both the Ben Ish Chai and the Kaf HaChaim, the next generation's leading Iraqi *poskim*. Many of the first- and even second-generation Baghdadis in India were themselves learned and corresponded with *talmidei chachamim* in Iraq on Torah topics, not only regarding practical halachic queries.

Owing to the British presence in India, the halachic questions that Rav Somekh received from there often related to technological advances that he, as someone who never left Iraq, was not personally familiar with. In 1877 he received a question about "carriages that are powered by steam... that travel on their own on the train track called 'rail'." The questioner wanted to know if they can be used on Shabbos. Rav Somekh said he was familiar with the existence of trains because he had read about them in the works of the Chasam Sofer and he permitted their use as long as one did not travel out of the *techum*. After this response was received in India, he was informed that an Ashkenazi, Rabbi Chaim Yaakov HaKohein Feinstein, had published a book (*Imrei Shabbos*) in Calcutta in 1874 prohibiting all travel on trains on Shabbos. Rav Somekh responded by reaffirming his position.

One of the more important questions received from Calcutta resulted in an innovative response, and related to the construction of the Calcutta *mikveh*. In 1869 the government began a massive waterworks project designed to supply 6 million gallons of filtered water per day to the city of Calcutta. As a result, the Jews wrote to Rav Somekh: "There is a large building about a day's distance from Calcutta... that stands on the banks of the Ganges River..." It goes on to describe how using a machine, the water was taken from the river, sent through pipes, and then flowed to Calcutta. They wanted to know if that water could be used for a *mikveh*. Basing himself on 17th-century Turkish and Italian precedents, he said that the people of Calcutta may use water brought by those pipes for a *mikveh*.

**1. SHMURAH** The large clay matzah oven in Beth El's courtyard. The old caretaker remembers how they baked in the Iraqi tradition

**2. BOTTOMS UP** These huge, ornate Chinese porcelain containers used to store wine were left in the shul basement

**3. NO SALUTE** This looks like a Nazi swastika, but in Kolkata, it's considered a sacred symbol of India's Jain religion

the spectacular Maghen David, built in 1884 in the courtyard of Neveh Shalom. A hundred thirty years later, the building is still exquisite, with ornate Italian Renaissance-style construction and stained-glass windows that throw colorful patterns on the black-and-white marble floor. Eighteen stone pillars surround the sanctuary, topped by teal blue arches inscribed in gold with Hebrew verses.

During the late 19th century there was also a *shtiebel* called Shaare Rason, and another in the home of Chacham Shlomo Twena, the most learned individual in the Kolkata community. Born in Baghdad, he

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was dispatched by Rav Abdullah Somekh, *rebbe* of the Ben Ish Chai, to India as a religious functionary. After a year and a half in Bombay he moved to Kolkata, where, in addition to being a *shochet*, teacher, and *chazzan*, he ran a printing press to publish his own prolific writings in Arabic and Hebrew.

Maghen David's main sanctuary can hold 400 men and 300 women, and not half a century ago it was full. The population decline wasn't a sudden mass exodus but a slow, years-long process, as families left to the UK, US, Australia, and Israel. By the mid-1980s Neveh Shalom closed and all services alternated between Maghen David and Beth El. In the last 20 years there hasn't been a regular minyan, and the last Jewish wedding was in 1982 at Maghen David. Last year, probably the last minyan the city will see was held, when Israeli ambassador Alon Ushpiz brought some of his staff

from Delhi to make a minyan for Simchas Torah. The only remaining *mikveh* in the city is in the courtyard of Beth El and is no longer in use. The last *shochet* in town, Ezra Kadoorie, made aliyah in the early '80s. Until then he used to sit outside the New Market and people would bring their chickens there for him to *shecht*.

Today it's hard to notice Maghen David and Neveh Shalom — they were once on the main street, but newer buildings have been erected in front of them. Still, if you crane your neck and look up, you can see the spectacular clock tower atop Maghen David. We convinced the caretaker to let us go all the way up to the tower, even though the clock hasn't worked for years. It wasn't really broken, though, and after yanking on one of the wires going up to the belfry, we heard the magnificent sound of the bells that used to ring on the quarter hour for the entire city to hear.

A curious peek into the *aron* left us stunned. Instead of a "closet," we found an entire room with a shelf running along the back wall. Jo told us that there were once 100 *sifrei Torah* lining the shelves. Most have been taken by the descendants of the families who donated them and now are scattered around the globe, and primarily in the US. There are only two lonely, *pasul* Torah scrolls remaining.

We had Jo as our escort, but there are Muslim caretakers who live on the grounds of the shuls and open them for visitors. While in most of the Middle East Muslims and Jews currently aren't on what one would call good terms, here in Kolkata, the relationship has always been smooth. One of those caretakers has been lovingly tending to the shul for over 50 years.

What would our "halachic adventure" look like if we didn't find a wine press or matzah oven on the site? Kolkata didn't let us down, and the wine cellar in Beth El still has the winepress and the ornate huge Chinese porcelain containers in which the wine was stored. The caretaker showed us the large clay matzah oven in Beth El's

courtyard, and an old Baghdadi resident told us how they would make the matzos on Erev Pesach following the Iraqi tradition (which we've seen Iraqis doing in Israel), making one, two or three pinches on a matzah to distinguish it as Kohein, Levi, or Yisrael for the *matzos mitzvah*. There were different types of matzah made for the Seder (thicker) and the rest of the week (super thin). One of the women we met, Flower Silliman, told us that those thin matzos were delicate and were carefully carried home on trays that were then suspended by rope from the ceiling so that rodents would not get to them.

Flower has fond memories of her youth in the vibrant Jewish community. Today she lives with her daughter in a well-appointed apartment decorated with local style Jewish Indian oil lamps. She told us how the Baghdadis often sent their learned men out to be *klei kodesh*, and indeed her uncles ended up along the Asian business chain as *shochtim* and *chazzanim*. At one point Flower lived in Israel, and for about seven years she ran an authentic Indian restaurant in Jerusalem. Her daughter has written a book about the history of the Jewish community of Kolkata, as told through the stories of four generations of women in her family.

**The Lamp Lady** Wherever we travel, we try to wear our yarmulkes rather than hats if there are no security threats. It's a surefire way to find every other Jew in the region. This was certainly true in Kolkata, a city with about 20 elderly and unaffiliated Jews and not the biggest tourist destination.

Our first surprise catch was on Friday night as we walked to our hotel from shul. To appreciate it, you need to know about India's congested streets. Kolkata has about 5 million people and it seemed to us that every single one of them was always on the street. The infinite throngs of people were so thick we often had to push our way through the sea of humanity and the endless small stalls selling everything you could imagine. Add to that the cacophony of horns,



**Morning prayers at the cemetery, with a minyan of souls**

the cars, trucks, the three-wheeled tuk-tuks (little tricycle cabs), bicycles, a huge number of motorcycles that often carried whole families, and the hand-drawn rickshaws. We were amazed at the multitudes of people streaming everywhere all of the time. Nonstop noise and tumult seem to be the way things work in Indian cities. In fact, they seem to have made driving into a type of sport, where there are no rules except to beep your horn. The walk from our hotel to the shul was a good 50 minutes along treacherous and noisy roads. In fact, Ari Z. got sideswiped by a wagon axle, and still has the bruise to prove it.

Once in shul, it was just us and the hundreds of empty seats. We could only imagine what it must have been like when the city had thousands of Jews.

On the way back from shul, we decided to attempt a (hopefully) safer and quieter alternate route (it turns out there is no such

thing in central Kolkata). About 20 minutes from the shul along the nondirect path we heard a distinctive yeshivish "gut Shabbos" from behind us. We turned to meet a young man wearing a cap with *peyos* tucked behind his ears. He said he was visiting from Bnei Brak and heard we'd be in the shul, but we left before he got there. We never did get to find out more details, because although we invited him to join us for davening the next morning in shul and then meet us at the hotel for a salami lunch, he never showed.

Shortly we returned to the hotel, our yarmulkes led us to be stopped in the lobby. This time it was by a nonobservant Australian Jewish family. The parents had been to India before and decided they wanted to return with their two 20-something daughters. Why? Because they live a comfortable, upper-middle-class Sydney lifestyle, and they wanted to expose the girls to people who have real problems, so as to put their own issues into perspective. And indeed the family visited the orphanages and hospitals in the destitute areas of Kolkata, seeing how millions of others live.

Toward Seudah Shlishis time, we were in the lobby when an elderly gentleman walked in, saw our yarmulkes, and greeted us with "*Shalom aleichem.*" Small world — the man was Jo's brother-in-law! He had moved away from Kolkata to Zurich and, as a sharp, vibrant 87-year-old, he regaled us with tales of the community of his youth.

The city's three shuls no longer hold regular services, but that doesn't stop Jo from trekking through the crowds every Friday afternoon to light an oil lamp in each synagogue before Shabbos and return again Shabbos morning to say a prayer in each sanctuary. She's making sure the flame doesn't go out entirely, and in fact, the week after our visit, Israeli ambassador Danny Carmon paid his first visit to Kolkata and was taken by the magnificent Maghen David. But who will be left to lock the doors of those shuls, already designated as Indian national heritage sites? We don't know, but at least we had the honor of davening what might be the last Kabbalas Shabbos those shuls will ever hear. ●