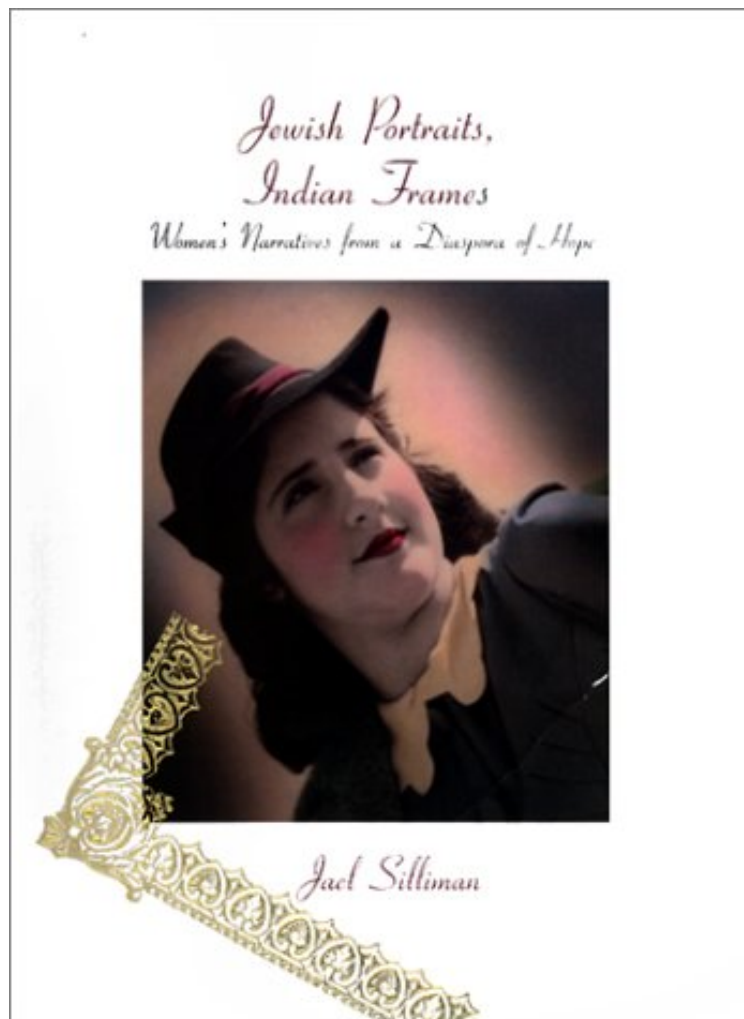


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## Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Womens Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope (HBI Series on Jewish Women)

Jael Silliman

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**Jael Silliman : Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Womens Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope (HBI Series on Jewish Women)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Womens Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope (HBI Series on Jewish Women):

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Jewish Women's Portraits in Indian FramesBy Dr. C. J. SinghJewish Portraits, Indian Frames:Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hopeby Jael Silliman(Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England 2001)198 pages \$ 24.95Not many know that the Jewish diaspora reached India as early as the first century. Although all three Indian Jewish diasporas were small, they merit study because their history of sustained

harmony contrasts sharply with their history of periodic horrors inflicted upon them in Europe and elsewhere. Each of the three Indian Jewish diasporas has a distinct history: the Cochin Jews arrived in A.D. 72 after the Roman destruction of the second temple; the Bene Israel Jews of greater Bombay arrived 1600 years ago, to escape persecution; and the Baghdadi Jews of the port cities of Bombay and Calcutta fled the Ottoman Empire and Iran in the late eighteenth century to escape forced conversion to Islam. The Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta is the subject of Jael Silliman's "Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope." Published by the University Press of New England in arrangement with Brandeis University Press and Seagull Books, Calcutta, the book is part of the Brandeis Series on Jewish Women. Silliman, an associate professor in the Women's Studies department at the University of Iowa, discusses the social history of the Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta by presenting biographical sketches of her foremothers: her great grandmother, grandmother, and mother. Her autobiographical sketch extends the study to include four generations of women. These engaging narratives are skillfully interspersed with references to some of the theoretical issues raised by leading scholars in women's studies and postcolonial literary theory. For example, the term in the subtitle "diaspora of hope" is borrowed from *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* by Arjun Appadurai, who also refers to "diasporas of despair" and "diasporas of terror." Other scholarly references, sure to interest academic readers, include the works of Inderpal Grewal, Gauri Viswanathan, Tanya Luhrmann, and Vijay Mishra. The earliest of the Baghdadi Jewish settlers was Shalome Cohen, the author's ancestor on her father's side. He and other Jewish merchants saw great economic opportunities in India under British colonial rule and started a trade of exporting silks, muslins, and cash crops like sesame oil, jute, sugar, spices, and indigo. Building on this successful trade, the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta turned, early in the nineteenth century, to a far more profitable commodity: opium. Silliman candidly observes: "They played a pivotal role in this infamous and unfair triangular trade that impoverished China and India . . . and directly supported British economic hegemony and imperial rule. . . . They clamored unsuccessfully for European status, which the British never granted them. Most Baghdadi Jews had British colonial ideas of race and placed themselves in the upper echelons of the racial pyramid that structured social life in the colonies. Neither British nor Indian, the Baghdadi Jews clung tenaciously to their Jewish identity." In passages such as this, and throughout her book, Silliman's voice rings honest; she is not afraid to criticize the Jewish communities when such criticism seems warranted. The first portrait is that of Farha, the author's great-grandmother, who was sent to Calcutta from Baghdad in 1900 to marry Saleh Abraham, a small-scale trader. The marriage had been arranged by her father: "it was not unusual for a family to send a daughter off to be married in another part of the trading community." Farha married a man 35 years older than her. They had seven children. We are shown many details of where they lived (rented apartments among other Jews), what the family ate (always kosher), what Farha wore (never an Indian dress). Saleh Abraham was the first to import rickshaws from China and for many years ran this innovative business in Calcutta. Farha never learned English or Hindi and remained ensconced in her Baghdadi Jewish home her whole life. All of their children married within the Jewish community. The author's grandmother, Miriam, born and raised in Calcutta, consciously distanced herself from Indians and Indianness. She "never saw an Indian film in her life and never listened to Indian film songs." Among her rising affectations of English culture, she preferred to be called Mary, but nonetheless maintained a strong Jewish identity. Late in life, she moved to London and still later to Jerusalem. "Mary spent her life building family and community in a diasporic context even as the continuation of the community as she knew it was seriously threatened. She was at once rooted and rootless in a deterritorialized community: 'home' was not a consistent geographic space; rather, it was a shifting site." This Baghdadi Jewish family's relationship to India began a transformation with the author's mother. Flower, born in 1925, went to the Jewish Girls' School in Calcutta, but during the threat of Japanese invasion of Calcutta in 1943 was sent to study in a Delhi college. There she interacted with Indian girls for the first time, was often invited to their homes in the Punjab, and formed close friendships. Elected president of the student union, Flower often wore Indian dresses and learned to cook Indian dishes, a skill that years later was to prove very useful when, after her divorce from her Baghdadi Jewish husband, she opened the first kosher non-vegetarian restaurant in Jerusalem, the Maharaja. The transforming relationship with India is shown fully completed in the author's autobiographical sketch: "I was born in 1955, the third of Flower and David Silliman's five children, and I grew up as part of the Calcutta elite. Ever since I can remember, I considered myself Indian, as did my parents. Although they were proud of being Jewish, our home was not very Jewish." Jael went on to study in the U.S. and married a Hindu student. Their two daughters are pictured in the book wearing bindi. She identifies herself now primarily as part of the large South Asian intellectual and professional diaspora in North America. As noted by Nathan Katz in his recent book, *Who Are the Jews of India?*: "Indian Jews lived as all Jews should have been allowed to live: free, proud, observant, creative and prosperous, self-realized, full contributors to the host community. Then, when twentieth century conditions permitted they returned en masse to Israel, which they had always proclaimed to be their true home despite India's hospitality. The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora." For spiritual reasons and for better economic opportunities, the emigration of Jews from India to Israel has indeed been en masse. The Jewish Girls' School in Calcutta no longer has a single Jewish student or teacher. The synagogues in India have stopped holding regular services because they often fail to gather a quorum of ten male Jews. Although Indian Jews are a

vanishing community, this book's importance lies in the unique four-generation women's narratives that, the author rightly claims, "challenge and extend some of the contemporary discourses about diasporas and travel. These stories flesh out the conditions and mechanisms that enable a 'diaspora of hope' to emerge. This Jewish diaspora experience demonstrates that the European Jewish experience cannot be generalized to other Jewish communities."-- C J Singh  
7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. One Of The Best Books written on the Jews In India. By Samuel M. Daniel  
Jael Silliman has written an excellent, scholarly book on the Jewish community in India. Her descriptions of her family elders show her love and respect for them and yet she is sensitive and kind and most of all truthful and honest. As a member of the Baghdadi Jewish community she does not put down the other Jewish Communities in India to prove her community's superiority, as several Baghdadi writers have done. Instead, her excellent book builds bridges among these Indian Communities. Ms. Silliman has done her research and her writing style is a pleasure to read. I recommend this book wholeheartedly. Samuel Daniel  
Senior member of Bene Israel Community living in the USA.  
5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Women's stories from Calcutta to Iowa  
By A Customer  
Excellent reading. Dr. Silliman brilliantly brings to light the world of four generations of women in her family. Not only has she presented excellent, affectionate, and enlightening portraits of these unique individuals, she gently teaches us about history, culture, and anthropology. The tales of these women reach from Calcutta through trade routes in Asia, Israel, London, and Jerusalem--ending up in Iowa. Best of all, these stories present the times and places through WOMEN's lives--these are stories that we do not hear in mainstream texts.

Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames offers a personal and social history of the author's foremothers -- Baghdadi Jews who lived most of their lives in the Jewish community in Calcutta. Jael Silliman begins with a portrait of Farha, her maternal great-grandmother, who dwelled almost entirely within the Baghdadi Jewish community no matter where she and her husband traveled on business (Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore). Next is her maternal grandmother, Miriam (Mary), who was much more Anglicized than Farha and deeply influenced by British colonial practices. The third portrait, of Silliman's mother, Flower, reveals a woman in a double transition: her own and India's. Flower grew up in colonial India, witnessed India's struggle for independence, and lived her middle years in an independent India. The final sketch is of Silliman herself. Born in Calcutta in 1955 in the waning Jewish community, Silliman grew up in a cosmopolitan and Indian world, rather than a Baghdadi Jewish one. Silliman's own travels have taken her to the US, where, as a teacher and scholar, her primary identification is with the "South Asian intellectual and professional diaspora." These rich family portraits convey a sense of the singular roles women played in building and sustaining a complex diaspora in what Silliman calls "Jewish Asia" over the past 150 years. Her sketches of the everyday lives of her foremothers -- from the food they ate and the clothes they wore to the social and political relationships they forged -- bring to life a community and a culture, even as they disclose the unexpected and subtle complexities of the colonial encounter as experienced by Jewish women.

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About the Author  
Born into the Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta, Jael SILLIMAN was educated at a Catholic school there, and later at a boarding school in Coleraine, Northern Ireland. A scholarship took her to Wellesley College, and she continued her studies at Harvard University, University of Texas, and Columbia University. She is Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Iowa