

The Pontic Greeks of India: From Exile to the Birth of a Unique Cultural Legacy

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Soumela Monastery. Credit: Wikimedia commons / Valen1988 CC BY SA 4.0

The Pontic Greeks of India represent a fascinating chapter in the broader story of migration, adaptation, and identity. Their history is a blend of Hellenistic heritage, survival, and integration into the rich and diverse culture of India. This group, primarily known as the descendants of Greeks from the Pontus region (modern-day northeastern Turkey), holds a unique place in the historical narrative of the Indian subcontinent.

Origins: From Pontus to India

The story of the Pontic Greeks begins in the ancient world, in the region of Pontus, located along the southern coast of the Black Sea. The Greeks of Pontus were known for their distinct culture, language and history, dating back to the time of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and continuing into the Hellenistic period following the conquests of Alexander the Great.

In the early 20th century, a significant wave of Pontic Greeks found themselves displaced due to the atrocities of the [Greco-Turkish War](#) (1919-1922). However, their migration began years earlier. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and during World War I, the Pontic Greeks were subjected to systemic violence. Under the Turkish government, they faced forced deportations. The [genocide](#) that took place from 1914 to 1923 saw the mass killing and cultural erasure of the Pontic Greeks.



Pontic Greeks forcibly displaced from their ancestral homeland. Credit: Public Domain

Some Pontic Greeks fled between 1915 and 1918, escaping this persecution and settling in different parts of the world. Many initially sought refuges in Iran and other regions under British colonial influence. On encountering even further hardships in Iran, some sought refuge in places such as India.

The journey to India

The migration of the Pontic Greeks to India was not solely in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War. A few families had already fled around 1915-1918, during and after the genocide. These families, often displaced and seeking safety, arrived in Iran and then

made their way to India. During the interwar years, some Pontic Greeks found work with Western companies, like the famous Greek business Rally's Company, which provided them with opportunities.

Father [Konstantinos Chalbatzakis](#), a priest and a notable figure in the history of Greek migration, met some of these Pontic Greek refugees in India who had fled from the Parsians (modern-day Iran), and established small communities.

The Parsians, better known today as Parsis, are descendants of Persian Zoroastrians who fled to India around the 8th–10th centuries to escape Islamic conquest in Persia (modern-day Iran). They preserved their ancient religion, Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest monotheistic faiths, founded by the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) around the 6th century BCE. Zoroastrianism centers on the cosmic struggle between truth and falsehood, and emphasizes values such as honesty, purity, and communal duty. In India, the Parsis became a prosperous and respected minority, while maintaining many of their traditions. In the early 20th century, when Pontic Greek refugees passed through or settled temporarily in Persian lands, they encountered Zoroastrian-influenced customs and environments, adapting as needed to survive periods of religious tension and political upheaval. Rally's Company provided



opportunities for Pontic Greek families in India. Credit: Sir Francis Grant, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Settlement in India: Challenges and integration

The Pontic Greeks, like other migrant groups, faced numerous challenges upon their arrival in [India](#). They were starting a new life in a foreign land with a different culture, language and social systems. Despite these obstacles, the Greeks in India were resilient. Many Pontic Greeks settled in areas with established Greek communities, including parts of West Bengal, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Over time, they integrated into Indian society, while also maintaining a strong connection to their Greek heritage.

The Economides family, one of the most prominent families among the Pontic Greeks, exemplified this resilience.

They were well-known for their work in the retail and hospitality industries in India, particularly in the city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). This family, like others, found a way to contribute to the local economy while preserving their cultural identity, becoming an integral part of the [Greek diaspora](#) in India.

In India, the Pontic Greeks were recognized for their work ethic, entrepreneurial spirit and craftsmanship. Many of them became successful in various trades, including construction, tailoring and retail. Their contributions to the Indian economy were notable. They were also known for their work in developing infrastructure in the colonial era. However, much of their cultural identity was slowly absorbed into the broader Indian context. This led to the blending of Greek traditions with local Indian customs.



Portrait of Greek Pontian Kakoulidis Family. Credit: Επιτροπή Ποντιακών Μελετών, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Cultural legacy: Preserving Greek traditions in India

Despite their integration into Indian society, the Pontic Greeks of India have managed to preserve aspects of their cultural heritage. The Pontic Greeks continue to maintain their unique traditions, including music, dance and cuisine. All of these reflect the distinct Hellenistic influence on their identity.

One of the most significant aspects of Pontic Greek culture that remains alive in India is their language. Although many Pontic Greeks in India now speak Hindi or Bengali, some older generations still use Pontic Greek, a dialect that is distinct from the standard Modern Greek spoken in [Greece](#). This language serves as a vital link to their ancestral roots and remains a symbol of the resilience of their identity.

The Greek Orthodox Church also plays an important role in maintaining cultural cohesion. Churches and community centers founded by the Pontic Greeks serve not only as places of worship but also as hubs for socializing and cultural exchange. The Pontic Greeks continue to celebrate key religious holidays such as Easter with traditional Greek customs. These sometimes blend with local Indian practices.

Another area where the Pontic Greeks have contributed to Indian culture is in cuisine. Traditional Greek dishes, such as moussaka, souvlaki and baklava, appear in Greek restaurants and family kitchens in areas with significant Greek populations. While these dishes retain their Greek roots, locals often adapt them with indigenous ingredients and spices. They create a unique fusion of Greek and Indian culinary traditions.



Baklava, Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Benreis

A unique blend of religiosity and cultural adaptation

In addition to their rich cultural heritage, the Pontic Greeks of India also represent a unique religious adaptation. Many Pontic Greeks who resettled in Parthia (modern-day Iran) and later in India adopted certain local practices to protect their Christian faith from persecution. In Iran, they often wore white as a sign of neutrality to avoid drawing attention to their Christian identity. These Pontic Greeks actively practiced what is known as crypto-Christianity. They maintained their religious beliefs in secret to avoid potential reprisals from the Muslims in the region.

In India, the Pontic Greeks continued to face challenges in openly practicing their Christian faith, particularly in the early years of their settlement. They adhered to Christian rituals, but often in a manner that did not provoke the local population. Some Pontic Greeks chose to keep their religious practices more subdued, adapting to the socio-political dynamics of their new environment. Despite this, they remained devout, and many of the community's spiritual and cultural traditions survived across generations. This however would often happen in a more discreet manner.



Emperor Menander I Soter. Greeks had presence in India since the Hellenistic period. Credits: CNG Coins / Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0

The decline of the Pontic Greek community

In recent decades, the Pontic Greek community in India has declined due to a combination of factors. These including intermarriage with local populations, migration to other countries, and the natural decline in population over time. The younger generation, often seeking better opportunities abroad, has contributed to the dispersion of the community. Additionally, the loss of language and some cultural practices has made it more challenging to preserve the distinct identity of the Pontic Greeks.

However, despite these challenges, there are still remnants of the Pontic Greek community in India. Some families continue to live in the same areas where their ancestors settled. The younger generation have taken steps to reconnect with their heritage through cultural preservation efforts. These include language revival programs and cultural festivals.

The Pontic Greeks of India represent a unique blend of Hellenistic and Indian cultures, forged through migration, adaptation and resilience. Their story is a testament to the enduring strength of cultural identity, even in the face of adversity and change. While their numbers may be dwindling, their cultural impact remains, and their legacy continues to contribute to the rich tapestry of India's multicultural heritage. The Pontic Greeks are a reminder of the diverse histories that have shaped the Indian subcontinent. They illustrate how migration and cultural exchange have always played a pivotal role in shaping societies and identities across the world.

