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# Migration, Discrimination and Assimilation in the State of Israel

*A Case Study of the Indian Jewish Diaspora from 1949 to 1973*

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## Abstract

The coalescence of Jews from across the world to form a unified Jewish nation-state has been the dream of many Jewish and Zionist leaders. With the gathering of immigrants after the State of Israel was established, the founders strived for a ‘fusion of exiles’ (*mizug hagaluyot*), where individual migrant cultural identities would assimilate to form a new Israeli identity that was predominantly European. Though the idea of a ‘New State’ appealed to Indian Jews, the promises that were made before they migrated from India did not materialise once they arrived in Israel, and they had to undergo several challenges, including discrimination based on colour and ethnicity, thus delaying their assimilation within Israeli society. This paper tries to understand the migration patterns of the Bene Israeli and Cochin Jewish communities and the prejudices enforced by the Israeli government and its agencies on them, which challenged their integration into mainstream Israeli society.

## Keywords

diaspora – Israel – Indian Jews – discrimination – assimilation

## 1 Introduction

The formation of the State of Israel in 1948 was a clarion call for Jewish communities spread across the world for centuries to return to their homeland. The appeal by the Zionist and Jewish leadership was well received by the Jewish

communities in India, who believed that emigration to Israel would provide them with a new beginning in a young country. They would be leaving a changing India, with the exit of the colonial rulers and the partition of India and Pakistan. Zionism answered their longing prayer, 'Next year in Jerusalem', at a spiritual level.

Since the new state was formed, Israeli society has been deeply divided across many aspects, including culture, ethnicity and religion. The ethno-national divide led to the formation of distinct Jewish and Arab populations and created sub-groups within these populations. Cohen points to the use by the Israeli Bureau of Statistics of the term 'continent' to denote origin, on which the division of Jew and Arab is based (Cohen, 2002). Thus, the distinction was created between those whose origin was Europe or America (as well as Oceania), and were referred to as Ashkenazim. On the other hand were those who immigrated primarily from Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa, who were called Mizrahim (Epstein and Cohen, 2018). However, this classification does not encompass all the ethnic groups in Israel. The Indian Jewish community, originating from Asia, does not share the geographical origins of the Mizrahim or the Ashkenazim, and yet is categorised as Mizrahi. Doron M. Behar argues that the Jews from India, Yemen and Ethiopia do not fit into the Ashkenazi, Mizrahi or Sephardic<sup>1</sup> divisions and questions whether these groupings were in fact based on origin, or skin colour (Behar et al, 2008). This paper argues that the latter is true in the case of the Indian Jews, who faced rampant discrimination based on skin colour, Asian lineage and financial status. These biases have delayed the assimilation of first-generation Indian migrants into mainstream Israeli society.

This research article is based on an empirical study conducted in Israel from July to August 2018. The primary method of documentation was through detailed interviews and observations at various events organised by the Indian Jewish community in Israel. Twenty Indian Jews belonging to the Cochin and Bene Israeli communities from Dimona, Herzliya, Haifa, Ashdod, Ramle and Kfar Saba in Israel were interviewed. Among them, thirteen were first-generation migrants and the others were second-generation. Primary data was collected in extensive interviews with first-generation migrants who had arrived between 1949 and 1973. Snowball sampling, also known as the chain

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1 The Sephardic Jews are long-established communities from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) who were expelled through the Alhambra Decree by Spain's Catholic monarchs in 1492 and the 1496 decree by King Manuel I. They migrated and settled in North Africa, including modern-day Morocco and Algeria, and in the southern European countries of France and Greece, as well as in the USA.

referral sampling method, was used whereby the informants provided referrals to people who shared or knew of others who possessed some characteristics of research interest (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981) from within the community. Around 50% of the first-generation Indians were interviewed in the regional Indian languages of Hindi and Malayalam, and the rest were interviewed in English.

## 2 Indian Jews in Israel—*Aliyah*

The Jewish population of India, for whom India was their home and ‘Indianness’ their cultural identity, made *Aliyah* (immigration to Israel) to the Holy Land after 1948. Today, over 85,000 Indian Jews of various ethnic groups are spread across Israel (Chawla, 2009). The Indian Jewish communities include the Malabar Jews (black) and Pardesi Jews (white) from Kerala, also known as the Cochin Jews, the oldest Jewish community in India. The Bene Israeli community, believed to be one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, arrived following a shipwreck off the western Indian coast in the first or second century CE (Datta, 2020) and first lived in Lahore and Karachi, which are now part of Pakistan. They eventually settled in Mumbai. The Baghdadi Jews, also called the Indo-Iraqi Jews, lived predominantly in Kolkata. Another important Jewish community is the Bnei Menashe community of Manipur and Mizoram, predominantly belonging to the Mizo and Kuki tribes who converted to Judaism (Weil, 1996). They came to the mainstream diaspora discourse only after the 1980s. Today these communities are spread all over Israel, from the northernmost border with Lebanon and deep into the Negev and in pockets of Haifa and Jerusalem. The Bene Ephraim, who speak Telugu and claim to be the descendants of the tribe of Ephraim, are still awaiting recognition from the Jewish authorities for migration (Egorova and Perwez, 2010).

Israel had periods of mass migration after the formation of the state in 1948. From 1948 to 1951, many European Jews, mainly from Western Europe, moved to Israel (Smoocha, 2008). The North African immigrations happened during the 1950s and 60s. Following the 1967 war in Israel, there were two primary waves of immigration—one in the 1970s, which included the Ethiopian Jews, and the other in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Indian Jews migrated to Israel during the initial phase, from 1949 to 1964 (Chawla, 2009). An estimated 5,310 Jews left India in the initial years between 1949 and 1952; among them, 2,300 were from the Bene Israeli community and the others belonged to the Cochin and Baghdadi Jewish communities (Deshmukh, 2021). Initially, the migrations were in big groups; post the 1960s, the

migrations became more individualised. For this paper, migrations between the years 1949 to 1973 are significant, as 1949 marks the first wave of Cochin Jewish immigration under the leadership of Kadavil Meyer, from the village of Chendamangalam in the state of Kerala (Varghese and Parui, 2020). The main reasons for the *Aliyah* of Indian Jews included their Orthodox Judaic faith, the appeal of Zionist ideology, better economic prospects in Israel, discrimination within the Jewish community in India, and the view that Israel was an opening to the West.

The close affinity of first-generation Indian Jews with their Judaic faith and Orthodox observation of rituals emerging from a pride of religiosity could be identified as the primary reason for making *Aliyah*. Some devout Indian Jews viewed the formation of the State of Israel as a symbol of a 'religious home' more than a 'political homeland'. This spiritual home with Jewish characteristics fulfilled their 'lamenting for the Zion'. A first-generation Cochin Jew from Ramle remembers that 'In all our prayers, it has always been "Next year in Jerusalem"'.<sup>2</sup>

Though religious, many Indian Jews were also directly influenced by the political Zionist movement and this formed another crucial choice in making *Aliyah* for the community. A first-generation Cochin Jew remembers that 'the Zionists highly influenced his parents that they even named their children after the Zionist leaders'.<sup>3</sup> An old Cochin Jewish folk song goes like this: 'The Flag is now Flying high of the golden Aliyah, let us go to Israel to pick up the gun for our motherland' (Johnson and Zacharia, 2004). These folk songs were used as a tool to spread the idea of Zionism mainly among the black Jewish community of Cochin, who faced discrimination from their white counterparts, thereby instilling the idea of a new home in a new land. The 'idea of Israel' as a homeland, therefore, was both religious and political, which was more complementary than contradictory in nature.

Though many categorised Jewish migration to Israel solely as religious or ideological and motivated by Zionism, there were many more compelling reasons for *Aliyah* for Indian Jews, which varied from individual to individual. Critiquing the ideas proposed by sociologist and Zionist Shmuel Eisenstadt, that 'Israeli immigration was motivated mainly by ideological reasons and that Jewish immigration is unique from any other migratory movements', Judith Shual rejected the idea that immigration to Israel is a 'unique phenomenon' and pointed out that 'not all immigrants to Israel were motivated by Zionist ide-

2 Interview with a first-generation Cochin Jew, 17.7.2018, Ramle, Israel.

3 Interview with a first-generation Cochin Jew, 24.7.2018, Ofer, Israel.

ology. Instead, most were motivated by pragmatic cost-benefit considerations' (Shuval and Lesham, 1998). This observation could be accurate in the case of Indian Jews as they viewed Israel as a land of better economic prospects, where they could also fulfil their religious and political aspirations.

The prospect of Israel as a Jewish homeland where people were needed to build its infrastructure, industries and communities from scratch appealed to many Indian Jews, particularly those who had meagre economic prospects in India (Fernandes, 2008). A second-generation Bene Israeli believes that the reason his parents made *Aliyah* in 1972 was partly due to religious reasons and partly economical. They had a child and they wanted to provide a better future.<sup>4</sup> Another first-generation Bene Israeli and his brother who made *Aliyah* in 1961 said that 'Many Bene Israeli families made the migration due to severe financial hardships back in India and many did not have an excellent job to support the family and depended on the synagogue and community for sustenance'.<sup>5</sup> Schifra Strizower noted that, 'The main motive of the Bene Israel was to better their material conditions, as they are neither Zionist nor religious unlike the Cochin Jews' (Strizower, 1966).

Another important reason that spearheaded migration among the communities in India was discrimination. Even though Indian Jewish communities did not experience anti-Semitism in India, there was colour discrimination prevalent among the white and black Jews of the Cochin Jewish community of Kerala. Jussay argued that, 'the Cochin Jews, mainly the white Jews, did not adopt the Hindu caste system in toto, but only the superiority based on birth' (Jussay, 1991). The discrimination was prevalent to the extent that black Jews were denied entry to the synagogues controlled by the white Jewish groups (Segal, 1993). This discrimination was also evident in aspects of marriage and economic opportunities. These repeated incidents of discrimination motivated the black Jews to make the *Aliyah* to Israel to escape the long years of discrimination and have a 'New Beginning'; they believed that Israel would be a country for all Jews, regardless of colour or ethnicity. A second-generation Bene Israeli who settled in Kibbutz Tura remembers that her parents had a good life back in India. When the British left, they felt that India was changing. On the one hand, they were rooted within the British culture because the school, teachers, everyone was British, and her father was the headmaster and mother a teacher and they wondered about their future in India.

4 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 19.07.2018, Kfar Sava, Israel.

5 Interview with a first-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 23.07.2018, Dimona, Israel.

At the same time, they heard about the state of Israel, a young state and they thought it was time to move to a young state and be part of building something. So, on one visit to Bombay Jewish agency office, they said tomorrow they could take a plane to Israel and they got the stuff organised and immigrated in June 1954.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian Jewish migrations should not be mistakenly read as an escape from difficulties in their motherland. Instead, they were rooted in an entanglement of 'Jewish homeland' nostalgia, informed by material and political aspirations (Oommen, 2008). Many members of the Baghdadi Jewish community of Kolkata viewed Israel as an opening to the West, mainly to the USA, UK and Canada. Apart from religious, ideological and economic reasons, the community members were finding it difficult to identify Jewish marriage partners in India.

Though many Indians hoped for a better life in the new country, contrary to their expectations they were confronted with many problems, starting with finding jobs that matched their qualifications. The Hebrew language was a significant impediment and the relocation of the migrants by the government to geographical locations on the periphery of the state further isolated them.

### 3 Conceptual Framework

This paper uses the concept of 'ethnocracy' as proposed by Oren Yiftachel to explain the role of political Zionism in the creation of an ethnocratic regime in Israel. The belief in European supremacy, the economic and social benefits gained by the coloniser, are the main factors that have been interwoven into the formation of this ethnocratic narrative. Oren defines ethnocracy as a regime facilitating the expansion, ethnicisation and control of contested territory and state by a dominant ethnic nation (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004). He further adds that the Israeli system is an ethnocratic regime and attempts to extend or preserve disproportional ethnic control over a contested multi-ethnic territory, thus creating a structural and ideological apparatus which safeguards the rights and privileges of the 'dominant ethnos' and excludes Indigenous people and minorities (Yiftachel, 1999). This explains the plight of the Indian Jews and other minority communities in Israel, where the Ashkenazi elite in the coun-

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6 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.07.2018, Kibbutz Tura, Israel.

try systematically operated a well-organised apparatus that dominated Jewish society before and after the establishment of Israel through a 'system of exclusion', thus determining the nature and boundaries of the collective identity and thus the nature of legitimacy for each group (Al-Haj, 2004).

This system of ethnocracy in Israel has led to the creation of a three-tier society, with Ashkenazi at the core, Mizrahim at the periphery and Palestinians at the semi-periphery (Yiftachel and Avinoam, 1998), thus dividing Israel into a minority of dominant white Ashkenazim and a majority of subordinate Mizrahi and other minorities. It could also be further noted that 'the patterns of dominance in Israel includes discrimination, economic exploitation, cultural suppression and other forms of oppressions' (Smootha and Yohannan, 1980). Additionally, ethnocratic regimes like Israel typically display a 'thin' democratic facade covering a more profound ethnic structure, in which ethnicity (or race or religion)—and not citizenship—is the key to securing power and resources (Anderson, 2016). Israel, thus, fits the model of an ethnocratic regime well.

Constructivist theory in International Relations is helpful in understanding how identity is socially constructed and is not a one-time task but is constantly reconstructed with changing social dynamics. Israel as the 'land of all Jews' did not apparently work much in creating an egalitarian society. In their own organic ways, Jews from European societies came along with their Western-Oriental outlook and thought of leading the state because they believed the people of Asia and Africa to be less intelligent, irrational or not educated enough. Second, Zionism was their brainchild and one can grudge the fact but not deny that they played the pioneering role in building Jewish nationalism and establishing the State of Israel. Indian Jews, or for that matter other Asian-African Jews, were second-rank people in the larger story of state-building and hence their history, cultural-linguistic heritage and identity could work only in the shadows of white, male, European Jews. Therefore, identity construction is an essential element of inquiry into the functioning of the State of Israel and one has to look at the social history of Israel as much as its diplomatic and political past.

#### 4 Aspects of Discrimination in Israel

The official Israeli policy on immigration in the 1950s was to assimilate the masses of new immigrants coming from different environments within a definable culture and to create a unified and homogenous nation. From the Israeli nation-building perspective, only the Mizrahi and other African and Asian

immigrants had to cast off their folk narratives, mythologies and cultural convictions, including dress style. The cultural diversity of immigrant communities was cordoned off and dismissed as less-Zionist. In 1951, Golda Meir, the former Prime Minister of Israel, said, 'we do not want Yemenite way of life; we shall bring the immigrants to Israel and make them human beings' (Swirski, 1981). This policy of the Israeli government to 'civilise' and 'homogenise' was reflective of their treatment of new immigrants, including the Indian Jews.

An article published in the *New Statesman* noted that 'The Israelis generally do not know the history and culture of Indian Jews and their life in India. The Indian Jews were the victims of general Israeli ignorance and stereotypes about their country of origin' (Mandalia, 2004). Most Israelis did not know the primary difference between a Bene Israeli and a Cochin Jew. All Indian Jewish groups were addressed as *Hodim* (meaning India, in Hebrew), thus ignoring the differences between them.

Discrimination and biases perpetrated by the Israeli government significantly affected the lives of Indian Jews, mainly Bene Israelis and Cochin Jews. These biases were evident from the start, when officials from the Jewish Agency visited the Cochin Jewish settlements in India in 1948 to begin the process of *Aliyah*. Edna Fernandes (2008), commenting on the *Report on the Jews of Malabar*, wrote that 'the authorities of the Jewish agency described Cochin Jews as small, weak and thin with many suffering from a disease transmitted via mosquito larvae deposited on the skin at night' (Fernandes, 2008). The report stated that 'more than fifty percent of all Jewish families subsist under acute want and the majority live on rice and fish and malnutrition is widespread' (Jewish Agency, 1948). Thus, the report raised concerns regarding the suitability of settling Cochin Jews in Israel in the first place and even cast doubt on allowing them to make *Aliyah*. A first-generation Cochin Jew remembered that she and her family came to the Sha'ar Aliyah Ma'abarot (immigration camp) located in Haifa in 1955 and had to undergo a tough life. There was often a shortage of food and clothes, and diseases were rampant, until they were relocated to a *moshav* in Mount Carmel after a year. The spread of leprosy was a major concern of the authorities.<sup>7</sup>

The discrimination continued once the Indian Jews arrived in the camps. Unlike their Ashkenazi counterparts, they stayed much longer in these camps, even for years (Kushner, 1973). To explain this discrimination, four parameters are studied in depth. These include Indian Jews being categorised as Mizrahi; segregation based on their darker skin colour; spatial and socio-economic

7 Interview with a first-generation Cochin Jew, 24.7.2018, Ofer, Israel.

restrictions; and the government's bias against their cultural practices and beliefs. An analysis of each parameter is explained in detail in the following text.

#### 4.1 *Mizrahi—A 'Constructed' Identity for Indian Jewish Immigrants*

The Israeli Ashkenazi leadership was, typically, paternalistic towards the immigrant populations and hoped to mould them into their image (Epstein and Cohen, 2018)—that is, in the image of the white Ashkenazim. As an initial step, this small ethnic group of Indian Jews was addressed as Mizrahi and treated similarly to communities from Yemen and Iraq, despite their various differences. This was the primary act of discrimination—to subsume the unique Indian Jewish cultures into the greater Mizrahi identity.

Apart from being ethnic communities from the same continent, and certain similarities regarding the recital of prayers, Indian Jews—mainly the Cochin and Bene Israeli—did not have much in common with other Mizrahi communities. The Cochin Jewry had a unique liturgical book, named *Kolas*, which was supposedly compiled by Yemenite Rabbi Nehemia Motta<sup>8</sup> in the sixteenth century (Goldstein, 1998). The style of the hymns and liturgy had similarities with Yemenite prayers, where the prayers were sung in quarter tones, unlike the Sephardic or Ashkenazi prayers, which had a southern European sound accompanied by a Western-style choir (Khazzom, 2021). A second-generation Cochin Jew who had settled in Jerusalem said that: 'For Jewish prayers whenever I go to an Iraqi synagogue or Yemenite synagogue, I feel more comfortable in comparison to an Ashkenazi synagogue. Like the sound and the pronunciation of prayer, there is much similarity'.<sup>9</sup> Drawing inspiration from the work of Walter F. Weikner on Balkan Jews, Maina Singh Chawla makes a similar comparison, that the Indian Jews shared a specific 'Oriental' culture, customs, modes of prayer, language and food habits with other communities in the Mizrahi bloc, notably the Moroccans and the Iraqis. Because of this similarity, the Indian Jews—a comparatively smaller community than the Moroccans or the Iraqis—were subsumed into the Mizrahi grouping (Chawla, 2009). It should be noted

8 Nehemiah (also called Namya) Motta was a Kabbalist from a major centre of Judaism in Yemen. He was the only rabbi and spiritual leader considered to be a patron saint, a mediator between God and man in the Cochin community. He is thought to have been born roughly between 1570 and 1580 and died in 1615, as indicated on his tomb in the Cochin cemetery. His tomb is still venerated today, by members of the Jewish community but also by Christians, Muslims and even by some Hindus who attribute yogic powers and a certain number of miracles to him.

9 Interview with a second-generation Cochin Jew, 15.7.2018, Jerusalem, Israel.

that most Oriental groups in Israel spoke one of the dialects of Arabic as their mother tongue, while most European groups spoke a Germanic language. However, the Bene Israelis spoke only Marathi, one of the main languages of India (Strizower, 1966), thus giving an important reason not to categorise the Indian Jews with other Mizrahi communities.

Another reason why many Indian Jews felt that being subsumed by the government into the Mizrahi bloc was discriminatory was because the categorisation was based on skin colour (non-Western/non-white) rather than any shared civilisational heritage.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the ethnicity and identity of this small group went unnoticed within the more significant cleavages of Israeli society and they felt 'culturally different' from the Iraqi or the Algerian Jews who were also referred to as Mizrahi (Chawla, 2009). A second-generation Indian stated that 'the smaller size of the community and their low political bargaining power compelled them to be satisfied and accept the Mizrahi categorisation'.<sup>11</sup> The acceptance by the Indian and other smaller Jewish communities of their forced categorisation further led to the creation of the 'other', where Ashkenazi Jews were one group and all other ethnic communities—be it the Ethiopians or the Indians—came under the broader Mizrahi umbrella. Schifra Strizower wrote:

white-skinned Israelis were completely ignorant about the position of Indian Jews in Israel so that when they encounter Bene Israeli, they treat them as Oriental—of whom the white-skinned Israelis were accustomed to thinking only in condemnatory terms.

STRIZOWER, 1966

Though included in a group with minimal similarities, the Indian Jews felt that being part of a larger collective would fetch them more bargaining power in improving their conditions. The number of Indian Jews in Israel was small compared to other ethnic groups and they believed that associating with the larger Mizrahi communities would help them win the numbers game politically, thus bringing about changes.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the diversity practised among the Mizrahi groups gave the Indian Jews the confidence to retain their unique identity. Like the Mizrahi communities of Iran and Bukhara, the Indian Jews formed strong familial associations with members from their community and began establishing synagogues exclusively for their communities, which was less practised

10 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Kibbutz Tura, Israel.

11 Interview with a second-generation Cochin Jew, 15.7.2018, Jerusalem, Israel.

12 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Tel Aviv, Israel.

among the Ashkenazi. The first Cochini synagogue in Israel was built in 1979 in Mesilat Zion, near Beit Shemesh; today there are around ten spread across the country.

#### 4.2 *Skin Colour—A Marker of Prejudice*

The incorporation of the Indian Jewish identity, and indeed other group communities with Asian/African lineage, into the Mizrahi binary created by the Zionist authorities showcased that, rather than Oriental heritage, skin colour was used as a marker to identify, discriminate against and socially stratify these communities. Maya Maor and Henriette Dahan Kalev claim that:

skin colour stratification is prevalent in racially/ethnically stratified and immigrant societies like Israel. The Mizrahi Jews were often addressed as the 'Jews of Colour' ... it could also be argued that black skin colour is often stigmatised because it has negative associations such as slavery, disease, antagonism to Western culture, or poor hygiene.

MAOR and KALEV, 2015

It could also be said that dark skin colour was a visible sign of social stigma, whereas the Ashkenazi whiteness passed as the norm—colour-neutral and transparent (Sasson-Levy and Shoshana, 2013). Black skin colour was considered primitive and the Zionist authorities did not know how to deal with the group, who were sent to the desert on the assumption that they would get used to it. Thus, the attitude of the Israeli government reveals how the Indian Jewish community was viewed in Israeli society because of their skin tone.

Skin colour was noted by other scholars: Hagar Salamon, for example, states that some Jewish groups, such as those who came from Yemen and India, are relatively 'darker-skinned' (Salamon, 2003). A *New York Times* article from 1951 quotes a member of the Bene Israeli community: 'In Bombay we were told that there is no colour bar in Israel, but in a shop in Beer Sheba we were told that we should eat only black bread as we were black and the white bread was only for white Jew' (Schmidt, 1951). During the initial years after the formation of Israel, the Indian Jews, particularly the Cochin Jews, were viewed as the 'darkest coloured people' in Israel (Chawla, 2009). A first-generation Indian Jew remembers:

One of my cousins grew up in a kibbutz for 30 years and he had dark skin. It was a kibbutz of Argentinians; they were picking names and he had a difficult time. In the school, the children came from the *kibbutzim*, they were fair, with white Ashkenazi parents, but he was dark he did not want

his mother to come to the school. He wanted his father to come because he was Ashkenazi. He did not want them to see how dark his mother was. It was difficult for him. Eventually, he got over it.<sup>13</sup>

John Abbink noted that:

Bene Israel faced specific and, in many respects, problems not faced by other communities. They were a socially and economically disadvantaged group with an unfavourable starting position in Israel due to low levels of formal education, lack of economic and language skills. They were also rather than any community, carrier of a historical-religious stigma symbolised in the colour of their skin and, which declared them to be of dubious Jewish descent.

ABBINK 2002

The skin colour discrimination faced by the Indian Jewish communities was not homogenous. Not everyone had dark-coloured skin and the discrimination was more explicit towards the Indians who were settled in the *kibbutzim* (which were run by white Ashkenazis) than in the new developmental towns, which had new immigrants who came and left frequently. The skin-colour biases eventually changed with the integration of Indian Jews into Israeli society and with the gradual arrival of the Ethiopian Jews in the 1980s. Barbara Okun adds to this:

The differences between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim were explicitly understood through the dark skin tone associated with Mizrahi Jews. However, the broad differences between the Mizrahi Jews and the Ashkenazi were reflected in the socio-economic status, residential location, cultural and religious practices.

OKUN 2004

#### 4.3 *Spatial and Socio-economic Discrimination*

The markers of discrimination were also evident in land allocation, resettlement and the socio-economic prospects of the Indian Jews. The politics of location had a significant impact on their lives. The social marginalisation and weak economic position of the Cochin Jews was due mainly to the arbitrary geographical dispersion and discriminatory policies of the Israeli government.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a first-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 23.7.2018, Dimona, Israel.

Most of the Indian Jewish community members were settled in *moshavim*<sup>14</sup> and new developmental towns in the 'periphery areas'. Some Bene Israelis settled in *kibbutzim* initially for a short period before moving to developmental towns established by the Israeli state to disperse the population and populate these underdeveloped areas (Abraham, 1995). In contrast, the Ashkenazis were settled in Tel Aviv and Haifa, the 'core areas' of the state. The lack of financial resources limited the Indian Jews' ability to buy homes in bigger cities, thus compelling them to accept subsidised housing provided by the Israeli government, unlike their European counterparts. However, this housing came with several restrictions regarding subletting and the government housing company made it difficult to relocate to a different area.<sup>15</sup> The result was the 'spatial marginalisation' of the Indian Jews both in *moshavim* and developmental towns, where they formed communal networks and engaged in economic activities (Abraham, 1995).

Many Indian Jews believed that despite having relevant educational qualifications from India, many were forced to work as farmers in the Negev or were relocated to other dry lands located on the state's periphery. The *Report on the Jews of Malabar* stated: 'The Israeli physicians recommended that the Cochin Jews be resettled in arid regions with great variations in temperature which would minimise the risk of the conditions of spreading of disease and for this many ended up in the Negev' (Jewish Agency, 1948). This marginalisation was evidence also of economic discrimination.

The Cochins and Bene Israelis were pushed to the periphery in poor and stigmatised neighbourhoods of Israel's major cities as a result of the Israeli dispersion policy, which has seriously constrained their political, economic, social and cultural integration (Oommen, 2008). Many first-generation Cochin Jews settled in the *moshavim* of Nevatim, Ofer and Taoz. One immigrant remembers, 'I came directly to Ofer upon arrival, there was no home, it was just barren land, just tents. Then we had a tin shed and later a house that is currently ours'.<sup>16</sup> Members of the Bene Israel community were mainly sent to the new development towns of Dimona and Yeruham upon their arrival. An immigrant family who came to Dimona remembers, 'My father's family came directly in the 1960s and there was not like a city there is today, there were only temporary homes, so that is where they had camped at first'.<sup>17</sup> Schifra Strizower notes from her study

14 Smallholder cooperative farming settlements in rural areas.

15 Interview with a first-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 23.7.2018, Dimona, Israel.

16 Interview with a first-generation Cochin Jew, 24.7.2018, Ofer, Israel.

17 Interview with a first-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 23.7.2018, Dimona, Israel.

that 'Bene Israelis received less pleasant homes than members of other communities and this showed their helplessness in the State of Israel' (Strizower, 1966).

The 2004 Israeli movie, *Turn Left at The End of The World (Sof Ha'Olam Smola)*, directed by Avi Nesher, showcases the life of a new immigrant family from India, who are sent to a new development town in the Negev. Despite the immigration authorities promising him a competitive salary in the city, the head of the family was sent to work in a factory. The movie describes the inability of migrants to choose something better in their lives; instead, they are given only the option to work in a factory located in the desert. The failure by the authorities to deliver on promises was not exclusive to the Indian Jews; some Moroccan families faced a similar situation in this development town. The film conveys the politics of location through a dialogue narrated by the character: 'He dislikes people from Tel Aviv, as they think we are animals.' The film eventually shows how people lose hope. 'They came here to be part of something, but they are part of nothing.' It represents the hardships faced by Indian Jews and other Mizrahi communities settled across various developmental towns throughout the country during the 1960s. The Indian Jews, initially shocked at being sent to the deserts of Negev, eventually adapted to the conditions and channelled their efforts into agriculture, which eventually helped them assimilate within Israeli society.

#### 4.4 *Homogenising Culture*

The State of Israel urged new immigrants to discard their folk practices, narratives, association with the homeland and manner of dress, as these were viewed as an impediment to the principles of 'Jewish homogeneity' and the 'amalgamation of exiles' (Al-Haj, 2004). This idea emerged from an assumption that through these changes the new immigrants and the established settlers would become assimilated, thus forming a homogenous society. The principle was essentially *mission civilisatrice*<sup>18</sup> in nature, to civilise the Oriental population, who were perceived as less Israeli, less intelligent, as well as primitive, vocal and irrational compared with the Ashkenazi (Oommen, 2008).

The Ashkenazi establishment feared that traditional beliefs imported by the Mizrahi and Indian Jewish communities might downgrade their Western culture, disrupt the democratisation process and negate the progress that the

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18 The civilising mission was a rationale for an intervention that was purported to contribute to the spread of civilisation; it was used mostly in relation to the Westernisation of Indigenous people.

Zionist leaders had envisaged. Their ethnic, cultural heritages were denigrated as contemptible products of diaspora life or as retrograde superstition unworthy of the new, modern Israeli system (Cohen, 1980). Fear of the Oriental way of life and practices made the Zionist authorities force the Mizrahi to adopt Western European culture.

The Indian Jewish communities of Cochin and Bene Israel were devout and followed a religious way of life that had cultural influences from India. The Cochin Jews who initially settled in the *moshavim* were at first surprised and disappointed to find that 'religious observance was more difficult for them in their new homes than in Kerala because the demand of the agricultural work highly interfered with the daily synagogue prayers and strict Sabbath observance' (Oommen, 2008). Many who were sent to the *kibbutzim* left within a few months, since the non-religious, non-kosher, Western lifestyle of the Ashkenazim there was alien to them. Many were upset and even furious at the irreligious attitude of Israeli society. A second-generation Indian said:

In the beginning, in the 50s, there were many families sent to *kibbutzim* and most of them did not last because the *kibbutz* way of life did not go with their life. First, they had a communal dining room and women also should work. There was no such thing among Indians and all were equal. The kids were not with their parents. In many of the *kibbutz*, they did not sleep at home and the food was undoubtedly not Indian.<sup>19</sup>

The problems faced by the Bene Israeli community of Mumbai on their arrival in Israel are another vivid example of racial discrimination and the prerogative of the Ashkenazim in granting status to new immigrants. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel demanded that the ancestry of those Bene Israelis be checked 'as far back as is possible' (Strizower, 1971). The Rabbinate questioned their Jewish lineage and refused to marry them to other Jews without ritual immersion or proper conversion (Sommer, 1997). A second-generation Bene Israeli Jew who witnessed the 1964 protests said:

In the 60s, when they married within the community, there was no problem, but when the community boys or girls wanted to marry from other community, French or Moroccan, the Rabbinate said no and that we are not precisely Jewish and have to go through the whole procedure to become Jewish and it happened more than once. Then the people came

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19 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Kibbutz Tura, Israel.

together and understood that there was a problem here and they got organised and they formed the action committee.<sup>20</sup>

Almost two thousand Indian Jews marched in the streets of Jerusalem to end the 'religious fascist rule' in Israel. During the protest, they said that 'For two thousand years they lived as loyal Jews in India and only to come to Israel and suffer anti-Semitism at the hands of our brethren' (Kukiman, 2014).

In Israel, the Ashkenazi Orthodox rabbis controlled religious matters. They questioned many of the religious traditions and prayers of the Mizrahi and Indian Jews, which were written in their native language, and even labelled these as the influence of pagans. The Mizrahi liturgy and songs in diaspora languages was not encouraged. Ashkenazi Jews also controlled the Jewish educational system, fearing that the Mizrahi would pollute the fundamental beliefs of Judaism (Goldstein, 1998). Contrary to being pagan worshippers, these Indian communities were significantly influenced by their own culture and interactions with other religions before migration. According to B.J. Israel, 'the Bene Israelis never adopted Islam, Christianity or Hinduism for that matter, though they were influenced by all three' (Israel, 1970). The Bene Israel story opens a new narrative, which shows there can be forms of Judaism other than rabbinic or halakhic traditions, which most Jews consider normative. 'Mainstream Judaism, has assumed itself to be the centre of the religion, viewing Bene Israel as a marginal community' (Kukiman, 2014).

Indigenous traditions and customs are still prominent in the lives of Indian Jews, but they underwent great stress due to the hegemony and homogeneity of the mainstream Israeli culture. The revival in the 1970s of cultic festivals and tomb worshipping among the Mizrahi was an act of resistance against the Rabbinate, which gained wider acceptance among other communities. One such vital festival observed by the Bene Israeli community, despite opposition from the Rabbinate, is the *Eliyahoo Hanabi*, in memory of the prophet Elijah, where the *Malida* ritual is practised. This involves the invocation of the prophet Elijah and the preparation of an elaborate dish of fruits and nuts placed on top of *Malida*, a mixture of rice, flour and sugar (Katz, 2000). The Cochin Jews, too, have realised that abandoning their diasporic customs and traditions will neither help them achieve any social status nor change the prejudice and negative stereotypes of the dominant community towards them. The main customs they have adopted from Kerala are: wearing the Sacred Tali (thread) or Mangalya Sutra, by married women; entering the synagogue with bare feet; touching the

20 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Kibbutz Tura, Israel.

feet of elders during auspicious occasions and festivals; hanging colourful oil lamps in the synagogue; washing of the feet and hands especially by the men before the prayers (Oommen, 2008).

## 5 Aspects of Assimilation

From the study conducted by Noah Lewin-Epstein and Yinon Cohen, we know that first- and second-generation Ethiopian Jews tend to keep up their Ethiopian ancestry. However, second-generation Ashkenazi and Russian Jews have accepted their Jewish/secular and Israeli identity entirely. In addition, Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews are less likely than Ashkenazi Jews to select 'Israeli' as their first identity, in contrast to 'Jewish' (Epstein and Cohen, 2018). Both Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews are more religiously oriented than other Israeli Jews and thus many feel excluded from the Zionist project of modern Israel. This religiosity is reflected in their political choice: the Mizrahis generally tend to support the right and the Ashkenazi support left-inclined political parties.

Similarly, we could draw a certain parallel with Indian Jews and their political choice—of right-wing political parties Likud and Shaz. However, in the 1960s and 70s the Cochin Jews supported the Labour Party and, in return, received grants to construct Cochin synagogues in Israel (Oommen, 2008). The gradual distancing from the Labour party started when the 'Jewishness' of the Indian Jewish communities was questioned. Moreover, the attack of the Ashkenazi Rabbinate on the Jewishness of Bene Israelis, especially regarding the non-kosher lifestyle, has made Cochins more conscious of their Jewish identity and religious observances. A second-generation Bene Israeli said:

When my parents came here, they were forced to be non-religious, because of *kibbutzim* and the Zionist were anti-religious. So, it is known in history that they cut it by force and they did not respect others. The other 50 or 60 immigrants were also forced to be non-religious. The point was that, it became a reaction and many joined Shaz party<sup>21</sup> and the religious people even went to Yeshivas.<sup>22</sup>

21 The support for the Shaz party was a reaction to the lack of supportive action from successive Labour governments. The Shaz party's promise to end prejudice and discrimination against the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities and its focus on economic issues and social justice attracted Bene Israelis.

22 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Though supporting the political right gave Indian Jews collective bargaining power with the greater Mizrahi groups, the awareness and embracing of their real identity helped them develop a hyphenated identity—Indian-Israeli. Today, in Israel, there are various Indian Jewish organisations, like the Indian Jewish Association, the Indian Jewish Heritage Centre, Cochin Jewish Heritage Centre, the International Organisation of Bene Israelis and the Indo-Israeli Cultural Organisation. These cultural centres not only showcase the history, traditions and culture of Indian Jews but also enjoy significant political status within Israeli society and power structures. The author of the book *Mother India Father Israel* reiterates this Indo-Israeli identity construct of the Bene Israeli community in the statement: 'In India, I was a Jew and in Israel, I am an Indian.'<sup>23</sup> It reveals that despite the Israeli government's efforts to socialise the immigrants as Israeli, their ethnic identification remains (Oommen, 2008).

The Indian-Israeli identity construct was more evident among first-generation Indian Jews and is gradually waning with second- and third-generation Indians, while some Indian Jews, who had once rejected their Indian roots, are now trying to embrace them. A second-generation Indian said: 'It felt shameful to accept your roots as your friends would often laugh at you, but with age, you tend to understand and grow more connected, then eventually accepting it.'<sup>24</sup>

Today, the community of Indian Jews in Israel is marked by significant class variations. Even though some are successful in their respective areas, the vast majority are still confined to middle-level and modestly paid jobs. The homogeneous, closed atmosphere has hampered upward mobility, social interaction and the successful integration of the Indian Jews into Israeli society. Feelings of inferiority, shyness, fear and passiveness are outcomes of the geographical isolation of the Cochin Jews (Abraham, 1995). Many first-generation Indians are not willing to give up their homes on the 'periphery' of Israel, which were allotted to them when they first came to Israel. Particularly in the close-knit Indian communities in the neighbourhoods of Dimona (Bene Israeli) and Nevatim (Cochini Jews), these have become a comfort zone within which they can recreate their Indian community life with 'nostalgia' for when they were in Mumbai or Kerala. They even find comfort worshipping in exclusively Indian Jewish synagogues and prefer a Mizrahi synagogue over an Ashkenazi one. Their initial experiences of segregation based on colour and origin, by the Zionist state, froze their entrepreneurial mindset. They became acclimatised to roles where

23 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Tel Aviv, Israel.

24 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 19.7.2018, Kfar Saba, Israel.

they obeyed commands rather than giving any, which explains their absence from elite roles in the military, government and academia.

For Indian Jews, the aspect of their Jewish identity resonates with their high level of religiosity. Given their skin colour and the significant cultural differences between them and the rest of Jewish society in Israel, the common (Jewish) religion is paramount in helping them to gain acceptance into the host society (Chawla, 2009). In the Israeli context, the Zionists, mainly composed of white Jews, imposed their norms on the new immigrants who were ethnically different from them. Imitation of the Ashkenazim was the only viable political option they had. Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshana, reflecting on Homi Bhabha's term 'mimicry', argue that, 'The oppressed black person takes upon him or herself the (white) image dictated by the coloniser' (Sasson-Levy and Shoshana, 2013; Bhabha, 1984). A good example of this is the kippah (skull cap worn during Jewish prayers). First-generation Indian Jews would wear the kippah during prayer time only, but today many Indian Jews wear the kippah to represent their religiosity even when they are engaged in their daily activities (Interview, 16.7.2018).<sup>25</sup> The attack on the Jewishness of the Mumbai Bene Israelis by the Ashkenazi Rabbinate must be one of the reasons for their marked demonstration of religious orientation. It also reflects how, once a liberal community, the Indian Jewish community has become conservative. Partly, this is to overcome the discrimination they face because of their skin colour and ethnicity, and to display an affiliation with the power centre to earn favour.

The Zionist movement and the Israeli state emphasised that the 'ingathering of the exiles' must be based on the founding principle of the Jewish state, which envisaged the integration of diverse and culturally distinct groups of Jews that would create a new identity called 'Israeliness'. It is possible that these groups would have shed their diasporic identities and taken on a uniform Israeli, Western and modern identity (Sasson-Levy and Shoshana, 2013). However, the absorption policies dictated by the Zionist government, such as land allocation and school integration programmes, were based on an ethnic categorisation of immigrants. This led to the formation of two permanent ethnic groups with different social statuses, the Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, thus establishing a permanent, ethnic stratification in Israel. Certain studies have shown that ethnic identities erode over a period following intermixing between the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi and thus give rise to a new national identity (Epstein and Cohen, 2018). In the Israeli context, it gives rise to an Israeli identity, which is Jewish/secular.

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25 Interview with a second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 16.7.2018, Tel Aviv, Israel.

## 6 Conclusion

In his study on Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union, Majid Al Haj suggested that the 'immigrants have a strong link with their country of origin and that they are quite nostalgic about their life in the Soviet Union' (Al-Haj, 2004). This is true in the case of the Indian Jewish communities. Though many changes are happening within these communities to re-establish a connection with their roots, unlike the other Ashkanazified groups, they try to keep their Indian surname rather than changing it to a local Israeli one. For the Bene Israeli community, last names end with 'kar', representing the village from which they migrated to Israel. Nevertheless, there are some who believe that changing their name increases their symbolic capital, thereby giving them access to desired social resources (Sasson-Levy and Shoshana, 2013).

Today the Indian Jews are struggling to find a 'space' in the social constructs of Israeli society. Factors like geographical isolation, lack of access to education, the collapse of the agrarian sector, lack of patronage and racial discrimination have aggravated their social and economic problems. Thus, they are creating various initiatives politically and socially to achieve the legitimacy they seek. The Indian-Jewish/Israeli identity that was strong among the first generation is changing among new and second-generation Indian Jews as they are becoming more Israeli-Jewish/secular. It should be understood that they are not averse to Indian traditions but contend that these observations are time-consuming and costly. Many young Indian Jews try to follow these traditions by giving them a modern twist. They often value their community identity, be it Bene Israel or Cochini, as more important than being Indian.<sup>26</sup>

The question of which identity is upheld by Indian Jews is still a matter of debate. The experience of the first-generation Indians in their initial days in the State of Israel makes them connect more with the Mizrahi identity and community. Despite this affiliation, they are not imitating Mizrahis but are trying to strike a subtle balance between both Indian and Mizrahi identities. The dominant community's social prejudice and negative attitude towards the Indian Jews is still prevalent. The socio-economic mobility of the Indian Jews is undoubtedly poorer in comparison to other Indian diasporas, in North America and the Middle East. Though skin colour-based discrimination has reduced, discrimination has taken subtle new forms, such as the lack of promotions in academia and the military. A second-generation Indian Jew says that:

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with a second-generation Cochin Jew, 15.7.2018, Jerusalem, Israel.

Discrimination now—it's more subtle. The board of my university department or the board of the governors most of them are Ashkenazi men, from middle and upper class and from the centre of Israel. We can still say that today in Israel—it's a high-tech nation and still you can see in politics, in government, in courts, military is an exception, academia obviously, it is mostly governed by Ashkenazi people.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Interview with second-generation Bene Israeli Jew, 17.7.2018, Haifa, Israel.

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### Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. What is your name and where do you live in Israel?
2. What is your age?
3. Who all made *Aliyah* in your family? And when?
4. Are both of your parents Indian? And where in India did they belong to?
5. What is your marital status? If married, are you married to an Indian Jew? If single, would you be comfortable marrying a non-Indian?
6. Have you travelled to India? If yes, where and why?
7. Would you ever want to settle in India?
8. How would you define your identity in Israel? How much of 'Indian-ness' have you retained? What is the general perception of 'Indian' among second- and third-generation Indian Jews?
9. Is the Indian Jewish community subjected to discrimination? If yes, how do they respond to it? Having been subjected to discrimination themselves, does the Indian Jewish community have a history of discrimination against other Jews and do they still discriminate? Have you ever faced such discrimination?
10. How did the Indian Jews deal with the identity crisis they faced in Israel as they clearly never related to the rhetoric provided by other Jews?
11. Did your parents ever feel like they were living in 'exile' in India?
12. Food is an important part of culture. How does the food tradition of Indian Jews reflect their cultural ties to India?
13. What Indian traditions, in particular, are thriving still within the Indian Jewish community?
14. Did Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel generate any excitement? How do you perceive the growing closeness between India and Israel?
15. Would you call Israel as your fatherland and India as your motherland?