

*ISRAEL IN THE PERCEPTION  
OF INDIAN JEWS  
A CASE STUDY OF BENE ISRAEL*

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**CERTIFICATE**

Certified that this dissertation entitled "*ISRAEL IN THE PERCEPTION OF INDIAN JEWS : A CASE STUDY OF BENE ISRAEL*" submitted by *SREEKALA.S* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY has not been previously submitted for any degree of this university or any other university and is her own work.

*We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.*

  
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***SREEKALA. S***

## *INTRODUCTION*

## INTRODUCTION

The State of Israel was created in 1948 by the European Jews and since then, it has been largely sustained by the Jewry in America and Europe. For Zionism, the creation of the Israeli State was the culmination of its political aspirations. However, most of the Jews in the diaspora viewed it as the fulfillment of their long cherished hopes centering towards the land of Israel.

Hence, there occurred a mass influx of immigrant Jews not only from Europe but from different parts of the world including Afro-Asian countries. All throughout the history of their existence in the diaspora, they remained preserving the religion of their ancestors and maintaining cultural features linked to the religion. Unlike their European counterparts, Jews from the oriental countries hardly faced any persecution or anti-semitism.

The Jewish history in India is marked by the real freedom and equality they enjoyed here. They have been living in three main settlements in Bombay, Calcutta and Cochin. The Jewish population in India, even at the peak of its growth in 1940s, did not exceed 30,000<sup>1</sup>. Their number have been reduced considerably after the creation of the State of Israel. The Cochin Jewry has almost

1. Isenburg, Shirley Berry, India's Bene Israel, (Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1988), p. vii.

disappeared leaving behind some 92 persons. According to a fact finding mission at the end of 1991, there were about 6,000 Jews in various parts of India, viz., Bombay, Pune, Ahmedabad, New Delhi, Calcutta and Cochin.<sup>2</sup> Though very few in number the Jews attract very much attention in terms of their historical background, religious and cultural peculiarities, the implications of their Indian experience etc. And it is important to analyse why after so many centuries of peaceful existence in India, the Indian Jews left en masse at a time of almost simultaneous emergence of an independent India and an independent Israel.

The Jewish community in India comprises mainly of the Bene Israel of Maharashtra, the Cochin Jews of Kerala and the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay and Calcutta. The Bene Israeli community was, and remains, the largest of the three groups. According to 1991 estimates given by the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee (AJDC, Bombay), there are about 4,600 Bene Israel, 92 Cochin and 200 Baghdadi Jews in India.

Each of these three groups has its own respective history and life contexts providing each group with its own characteristic form of Indian experience and sense of belonging. The Baghdadi community is relatively of very

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2. Cited in Laskier, Michale M., "A Note on the Presentday Shephardi And Oriental Jewry," Jewish Journal of Sociology, Vol. 35, no. 2, 1993, p.

recent origin unlike the Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel who have many many centuries of history in India.

The present study is focused on the Bene Israel the history of whom has not yet been adequately researched. Some appreciable attempts have been made by a few foreign authors, namely, Shirley Isenburg, Schifra Strizower, Joan G. Roland, Walter J. Fishel and Shalva Weil. The prominent Bene Israel authors who had written about their own community include H.S. Kehimkar, B.J. Israel, Shellim Samuel etc. "The history of the Bene Israel of India" written by Kehimkar remains the classic book on the subject.

So far the researches on the community have been concentrated mainly on the origins of the Bene Israel, communal organization, religion, anthropological descriptions of the community etc. It was a noisy controversy in Israel in the late 1950s and early 1960s about the "purity" of the Bene Israel in religious terms which attracted the interest of many to this relatively unfamiliar community. Until then, the Bene Israel were little known to the world outside and perhaps even within India unlike the Cochin Jews and the Baghdadis who were better known to the outside world through wider contacts. It is to be noted that among the Indian Jews in Israel, it was only the Bene Israel who were reported to have faced problems regarding their religious status. Again, it was



they who consistently complained about problems of adoption including housing, jobs etc., and many of them even demanded to be repatriated to India in the 1950s and 1960s. These incidents demand attention into the uniqueness of Bene Israel as well as the complex realities they face in Israel.

Quite unlike Jews elsewhere the Bene Israel have a curious deficiency in their background as Jews. Their ancestors, so far as they can discover lacked knowledge of the Pentateuch, the Talmud, traditional synagogue rituals familiar to their co-religionists and even Hebrew. Their observance of religious rituals were not in full agreement with rabbinical Judaism. There were no hereditary priests in the community. Although the religious revivals and many other circumstances contributed to the religious development of the community, there still remained an ambiguity regarding their ancestry; that is, whether they are really the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel.

Hence, since the creation of Israel, the Bene Israel who migrated to Israel had to face problems regarding their religious status and there was prohibition upon their marriage to other Jews until 1964.<sup>3</sup> They were reported to have faced a major crisis during the early 1950s, when

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3. Weil, Shalwa, "The State of Research Into Bene Israel Indian Jews", The Indian Economic and Social History Review, vol.27, no.4, p. 403.

some of them appealed to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion in Israel and Prime Minister Nehru in India to return to India on the grounds that they suffered ethnic/racial discrimination in Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Generally speaking, the development of zionism over the last hundred years and the emergence of the State of Israel have given the question "Who are Jews"? a significance that goes far beyond the limits of Jewish history proper. The modern concept of the Jewish people as a nation is essentially a European one, with its roots deeply embedded in the 19th century nationalist ideology. For non-European Jews, however, the constructs of community, ethnicity and religious sect were more relevant in their efforts to maintain their identity. Hence, the in-gathering of Jews in Israel from different parts of the world has contributed to an unprecedented necessity in Jewish history to achieve a kind of synthesis between two different types of Jew, the European and the Oriental Jew. The Oriental Jews, who had long existed for countless generations in a State of isolation from the mainstream of Western Jewish life and cultural developments, had then to confront their western counterparts who were having the characteristic features of the Western world and having international connections and mutual influences.

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4. Ibid.

Apart from the Zionist State's inherent antagonism towards Arabs, stories of Ashkenazic-Shephardim conflicts, pathetic conditions of the Falashas (Black Jews from Ethiopia) and discriminations against the oriental jews in general started coming out. Hence, it is not surprising if one comes across in Israel, members of the Bene Israel who persisted in defining themselves and being defined in particular situations as Indians. A number of Bene Israel have come back to India after having migrated to Israel. At the same time in India, there is at least a few among the Bene Israel who wish to remain in India forever. It is against this background the present study is initiated. Accordingly a field trip was conducted in Bombay for two months and about 50 Bene Israel families, scattered in different parts of Bombay, Thane and Kurla were interviewed through questionnaires about their socio-economic positions, religious activities and community life, their impressions about India as well as Israel etc.

During the two month stay in Bombay, effort has been made to interact with the community as much as possible by visiting several houses, attending some synagogue ceremonies (wedding, circumcision and Purim festival) and contacting important Jewish institutions. Discussions with people like Prof. Nissim Ezekiel, Dr. E.M. Abraham, Mrs. Shuba Nagavonkar, Mr. Elijah Jacob and Mr. Ralphy Jhirad had been particularly helpful. Institutions like AJDC and

ORT India and Secretaries of certain synagogues extended great help and cooperation. Above all, the hospitality and willingness to share the experiences showed by the Bene Israel families were of immense encouragement without which the field survey would not have been possible. To name in particular is the family of Mr. Ezekiel Eliezer Solomon Dighorkar to whom the author owes a lot.

Although the present study of the perception of the Bene Israel about Israel depend to a great extent on the information collected through questionnaires and interactions with several community members, it is rather insufficient since this perception is also largely part of a historically constituted orientation. Hence an attempt has been made to integrate the historical facts with the contemporary to make the analysis more meaningful.

The Scheme of Chapters is as follows:

Chapter I is devoted to the Historical Background of the three Jewish settlements in India. Chapter II deals with the Socio-economic background of the Bene Israel. The Orientation of the Bene Israel Towards Israel is analysed in the Chapter III. Chapter IV deals with the future prospects of the Bene Israel and finally, there is Conclusion for summing up the study in Chapter V.

*CHAPTER I*

*THE EVOLUTION OF JEWISH SETTLEMENTS  
IN INDIA - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND*

## CHAPTER 1

### THE EVOLUTION OF JEWISH SETTLEMENTS IN INDIA : HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The beginning of the three main Jewish settlements in India differed from each other as far as the period of their origin is concerned. Also, the evolution and later development of each of them took place within specific context of Kerala, Maharashtra and Calcutta without much connection with each other. This specific nature of the origin and development of each of these will be discussed in this chapter.

#### **The Jewish Settlement in Kerala:**

Cranganore which is 20 miles north of Cochin in Kerala is considered as the oldest Jewish settlement in India. Cranganore, known as Muzhiris to the Greeks and Shingly to the Jews, was an important seaport to which the early Jewish settlers turned as a haven of trading center and refuge. The first Jewish visitors to Kerala were traders who came from Palestine and other regions of Western Asia and the Mediterranean, attracted by its beauty, lush vegetation and the richness of its spices and other natural resources.<sup>1</sup> They received the active encouragement of

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1. Segal, J.B., A History of the Jews of Cochin (London; Vellentine Mitchel & Co. Ltd., 1993), p.12.

local princes.

Many scholars believe that the first Jewish merchants came in King Solomon's fleet in the 10th century B.C. Certain philological evidences and some references in the Bible are usually used to support this argument. The Book of Kings says that "the Navy of Hiram....brought in from Ophir great plenty of Almug trees....And King (Solomon) made of the almug trees pillars for the house of the Lord, and for the kings house, harps also and psalteries for the singers: there came no such almug trees, nor were seen unto this day."<sup>2</sup> Almug is usually interpreted as sandalwood which is likely to have been transported from South India and Valgu, the Sanskrit and Tamil word for Sandalwood, resembles closely the Hebrew name.<sup>3</sup> Again it is said in the Bible that "the king had at sea a navy of Tarshish with the Navy of Hiram: once every three years came the Navy of Tarshish, bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks."<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word for apes, gophim resemble Sanskrit Kapi and the Hebrew word for Peacock tukiyyim resemble Tamil tokei.<sup>5</sup>

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2. 1Kings 10: 11

3. Menon, Padmanabha, History of Kerala I, (Ernakulam, 1924), p.298.

4. 1Kings 10:22

5. Rawilson, H.G., Intercourse Between Indian and The Western World (Cambridge, 1916), p.11.

The Hindu rulers in Kerala welcomed these merchants. However, the early traders were no more than temporary settlers.<sup>6</sup> There is no definite proof of the exact date of the beginning of a permanent settlement in Cranganore. Local legend has it that early Jewish immigrants came in the wake of the Exiles of Shalmanassar or Nebuchadnasser<sup>7</sup> or they came from Persia, after being freed from captivity by Cyrus in 540 B.C.<sup>8</sup> Another tradition of the Cochin Jews maintains that soon after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D., 10,000 Jews were graciously received by the then Hindu ruler and were allowed to settle in different parts of which the majority made their home in Cranganore.<sup>9</sup>

The first definite proof of the Cranganore Settlement is the Charter of Bhaskara Ravivarman (999 A.D) granting lands and priveleges of nobility to the Jews.<sup>10</sup> The Charter in the form of copper plates conferred in perpetuity upon

6. Segal, op.cit., n.1, p.6.

7. Ibid.

8. Wink, Andre, "The Jewish Diaspora in India: 8th to 13th centuries", The Indian Economic & Social History Review, Vol.24, no.4, 1987, p.362.

9. Musleanh, Ezekiel N., On the Banks of the Ganga : A Sojourn of Jews in Calcutta (Massachusetts; Christopher Publishing House, 1975), p.359.

10. Elamkulam, Kunjanpillai P., Studies in Kerala History (Trivandrum, 1970), p.379.



Joseph Rabban, the leader of the Jews, and his heirs the freehold of a parcel of land called Anjuvannam.<sup>11</sup> In addition, certain priveleges of nobility were granted to Rabban including the "right to ride an elephant, to be carried in a litter, to have a state umbrella, to be preceded by drums and trumpets, to call out so that the lower Hindu castes might withdraw from the streets at his approach."<sup>12</sup> It is also specified that the recipient shall not have to pay taxes and shall enjoy all the benefits of the Rajah's administration.<sup>13</sup> The Jews gradually became well established and very influential. A popular Jewish tradition even maintains, that a Jewish king rulled Cranganore. A poem written by Rabbi Nissim, a 14th century Hebrew poet and traveller and is usually recited at Cochin Jewish weddings says; "I travelled from Spain, I heard a city, Shingly; I longed for an Israelite King, Him I saw with my own eyes."<sup>14</sup>

While Cranganore remained the Main Jewish settlement, there were Jews in Kollam in the South and Flandrina in the north. Synagogues were founded at Parur in the year 1164 and Chennamangalam in possibly the 13th century. The

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11. Musleah, op.cit., n.9, p.359.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Segal, op.cit., n.1, p.15.

Kadavumbhagam Synagogue was built at Ernakulam on the mainland around 1200 which indicates the presence of Jews near Cochin at that time. In 1341, a violent underwater upheaval reduced the harbour of Cranganore and created the port of Cochin. Four years later, Cochangadi, the first Synagogue in the town of Cochin was founded.

The arrival of Portuguese at the close of the 15th century was an event of far reaching importance. They viewed the vitality of the Jewish community, the social and religious freedom they enjoyed here and their involvement in the trading activities of the region etc., as a threat to their vested interests and also to the Christian faith. Hence, the Jews were attacked and were forced to flee out of Cranganore. By this time the importance of Cochin rose undermining Cranganore. The Jews took refuge in Cochin and the King of Cochin treated them liberally and granted them a large portion of land adjoining the palace.

At this time the Jewish community in Cochin expanded greatly in number through the arrival of refugees fleeing the persecution in Spain and Portugal and also from Turkey and Persia. The Pardesi Synagogue was built in 1568.

The Rajah of Cochin appointed a Mudaliar, a Chief, from among the Jews as their recognised spokesman and invested him with special priveleges and prerogatives and with jurisdiction in all internal matters. The first

Jewish Mudaliyar is said to have been Barukh Joseph Levi, who came from Cranganore and he was succeeded by his son Joseph Levi.<sup>15</sup> After that this title and position went over to the castiel family.<sup>16</sup>

This institution of Mudaliyar which remained hereditary in some of the leading families of Cochin, became the backbone of the communal organisation of the Cochin Jews and continued in force in the Dutch period.<sup>17</sup>

The Dutch Period (1663-1795) was a golden age for the Cochin Jews. They experienced not only complete cultural autonomy and religious freedom but also an economic prosperity unparalleled in their long history. Among the prominent figures of the Jewish community in Cochin, the name of Ezekiel Rahabi should be mentioned in particular who enjoyed great confidence of the Dutch and was appointed by the Dutch East India Company as the Joodsche Koopman (Principal merchant).<sup>18</sup> The prosperity and the loyalty of the Cochin Jews became so well known that Jews from Amsterdam and Talmudic scholars from the Holy Land visited

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15. Fischel, Walter J. "The Contribution of the Cochin Jews to South Indian and Jewish Civilization", Commemoration Volume, Cochin Synagogue Quarter Centenary Celebrations (Cochin, 1971), p.20.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid, p.21.

18. Ibid, p.21.

Cochin during this period.

By this time, a sort of caste stratification had developed among the Cochin Jews. Three groups are discernible - the White, Brown and Black Jews called as Meyuchasim, M'shuhararim and Malabar Jews respectively.<sup>19</sup> Although both the Malabar Jews and the White Jews claim to the lineage of the Cranganore settlement, the antiquity of the Malabar Jews can be traced much anterior to the white jews.<sup>20</sup> The so-called Brown Jews are recognised as having a dual status; some subordinate to the White Jews and some to the Black Jews, being descendants of converts of slaves and servants of each group. Intermarriage was strictly forbidden between the white Jews and Black Jews and they had separate settlements and synagogues in Cochin. Although it is not clear when this rigid stratification got institutionalised in the Jewery of Kerala, some references about the dispsutes between the Blacks and the Whites are available from certain documents like "Letters from Malabar (1717-1723)." <sup>21</sup>

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19. Schermerhon R.A., Ethnic Plurality in India (Tucson; University of Arizona Press, 1978), p.242.

20. Gurukkal, Rajan, "The Ethnic Dichromentism of the Jewery in Kerala - A New Interpretation", Journal of kerala Studies, vol.3, June 1976, p.198.

21. Ibid, p.200

Socio-economic reasons have been attributed to these divisions. While some scholars find it as an impact of Indian caste system, some others consider it more as a result of the economic disparity between the two. The White Jews were rich merchants and the leading group whereas the majority of the Black Jews remained poor.<sup>22</sup> The rigidity of this stratification increased corresponding to the economic degradation of the Blacks. During the Dutch period when the whites successfully traded with the Dutch East India Company in valuable commodities, the Black Jews remained as labourers and local retailers and also in agriculture and cattle rearing.<sup>23</sup>

With the coming of the British in 1795, the Jewish prosperity dependant much on the monopolies granted by the native rulers declined in general and the later years witnessed further economic degradation. While some of the White Jews migrated to the thriving centres of Bombay and Calcuta, the condition of the Black Jews deteriorated to the extent that an official delegate Rabbi Ascher Levi was sent by the Jewish ecclesiastical authorities of Israel, to investigate the depressed conditions of the Black Jews in

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22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

Cochin.<sup>24</sup> Asher Levi's letter dated 24th April 1882 to the British Resident of Cochin refers to the wealthy dominant white minority and the non-privileged Black majority.<sup>25</sup> However, the British period also witnessed complete social and religious freedom of the Jews.

All throughout their existence in Cochin, the social conditions of the Jews have been, to a great extent, governed by their own religion, rituals, dietary and marriage laws. They were so keen in preserving these traits and cherished in their minds the zion-centered myths and hopes as told by their religious texts.

Zionism had influenced them greatly and the first Zionist Organisation was set up in Cochin in 1923. They worked in cooperation to raise funds for Palestine. Emigration on a large scale started in the 1950s. Now, in the Mattancheri Jew Town, there are only 6 or 7 families remaining. Some more are scattered in different parts of Ernakulam.

### **The Baghdadi Settlements in Bombay and Calcutta**

Unlike the Cochin Jews, there is no ambiguity regarding the origin of the Baghdadi Jewish settlements in

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24. Ibid., p.201.

25. Ibid.

India. The port of Basra on the Persian gulf had been a trading center of the British East India Company from 1760 on and many Jews of that port and of Baghdad who had already played an important role in the English commerce in that part of the world, gradually moved on to India.<sup>26</sup> Arabic speaking Jews from Aleppo, Baghdad and Basra made their way to Surat in the second half of the 18th Century on trade purposes. They formed the Arabian Jewish Merchant colony under the leadership of Shalome Obadaiah ha-Cohen who came from Aleppo in 1790.<sup>27</sup> Referring originally to Jews who came from the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, for centuries a center for Jewish learning and culture, the term Baghdadi or Iraqi soon came to include as well Jews from Syria and other parts of the Ottoman empire, Aden and Yemen all of whom were Arabic speaking and even Jews from Persia and Afghanistan who were not.<sup>28</sup>

As the British presidencies of Bombay and Calcuta developed, Surat lost its importance as a port and Jewish merchants began to look for new commercial opportunities. The first family to settle down in Calcutta was that of

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26. Roland, Joan G., Jews in British India, (Hanover & London; Uty Press of New England, p.1989), p.15.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

Shalome Cohen in 1798 who soon made a considerable fortune in Calcutta. He conducted trade in diamonds, silk, indigo and the famous Dacca Muslin.<sup>29</sup> In 1816, Shalome Cohen was appointed as Court Jeweller to the Nawab of Lucknow. The Nawab gave him a high monthly salary and presented him with the "Robe of Honour".<sup>30</sup> Hearing about the wealth and fame of Shalome Cohen, more and more Baghdadi Jews migrated to Calcutta most of whom rapidly rose to prominence in business and trading activities in Calcutta.

In 1825, the Neveh Shalome Synagogue was formed. With the gradual growth of the Community, Jewish cemeteries, prayer halls and synagogues were built up. While in the first two decades of the 19th century, the Jews in Calcutta were mostly syrian Jews who came in search of better trading opportunities, the second quarter witnessed a sizeable immigration from Iraq, primarily as a result of the persecution by Daud Pasha of Baghdad. By the end of the 19th century the Jewish community in Calcutta numbered over 1800.<sup>31</sup> Most of them had now moved into the stock exchange and became large urban landowners. The Ezras became one of the most important Jewish family in Calcutta.

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29. Parasuram T.V., India's Jewish Heritage (New Delhi; Sagar Publications, 1982), p.95.

30. Ibid.

31. Roland, op.cit., n.26, p.19.



Like the Europeans in that city, large Jewish firms such as those of B.N. Elias, S. Manasseh, E. Meyer, A.M. Shellim and M.A. Sassoon developed international networks.<sup>32</sup>

The origin of the Baghdadi community in Bombay dates back to about 1730, when Joseph Semah from Surat came to Bombay. Towards the end of the century, Solomon Jacob, a successful merchant played a leading role in the economic and commercial affairs in Bombay. In 1839, more Jews came fleeing persecutions of Daud Pasha. Solomon Jacob died in 1834, but the year before, there arrived in Bombay a figure who was to establish a great dynasty and a merchant house known throughout the world - David Sassoon of Baghdad. Personally an Orthodox Jew, David Sassoon was a great philanthropist too. The economic empire that the Sassoons eventually established, with centres in Bombay and Calcutta, Rangoon, Hongkong, Shanghai, Singapaore and elsewhere and their great charitable enterprises earned for them the title of "Rothschilds of the East".<sup>33</sup>

However, the Bene Israel-Baghdadi relations in Bombay have not been satisfactory. The Baghdadis, being extremely orthodox and enjoyed immense economic wealth, claimed religious aristocracy and tended to view the poor Bene

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32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., p.16.

Israel with contempt whereas the latter's reactions were that of suspicion.

In the British period the Baghdadis remained loyal to the imperial government and they imitated European ways of appearances and behaviour. The removal of the British Raj and the simultaneous emergence of the State of Israel left them with a choice to leave India. However, the Baghdadi emigration was mainly not to Israel, but to other industrial cities of the West.

### **The Bene Israel Settlement in Maharashtra**

The period of origin and early settlement of the Bene Israel is obscure. When compared to the Cochin Jews, the obscurity is more in the case of Bene Israel regarding their origin. While the Cochinis came to India from different places at various times in more than one migration, there is no evidence to show whether the Bene Israel settlement in India also followed similar pattern or not. Many Jewish and non-Jewish scholars from abroad, as well as members of the community themselves had given different opinions about the origin of the Bene Israel.

Dr. John Wilson in his book "Lands of Bible" opined that the original Bene Israel had come from Yemen in the

first millenium A.D.<sup>34</sup> H.G. Reissner had argued that there was a possible connection between the expulsion of the Banu Israel from Hejaz (under Prophet Mohammed's successor Omar) and the arrival of the Bene Israel in India.<sup>35</sup> Reissner equates the Hebrew term am ha-aretz with the Arabic word umma, meaning the large mass of a people.<sup>36</sup> The Koran speaks of the "ummiyyun' who know not the Book", i.e., the Banu Israil.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, a Yuhud (Jew) in the Koran was the educated, urban, mercantile Jew, accursed by Allah.<sup>38</sup> The Banu Israil were the illiterate, non-urbanized, non-mercantile Jews - those who were Jews by birth only.<sup>39</sup> The Banu Israil were ignorant of "the Mosaic Law" in accordance with principles laid down in the (Babylonian) Talmud.<sup>40</sup> But they too refused to accept Islam and in 640 A.D. were sent north to Syria i.e., North of the Hejaz.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps a portion of these Banu Israil eventually

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34. Wilson, John, Lands of the Bible (Edinborough; 1847), pp.667-79.
35. Cited in Isenburg, Shirley, India's Bene Israel (Bombay; Popular Prakashan, 1988), p.7.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.



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fled by sea and finally reached and settled in Konkan.<sup>42</sup>

The Bene Israel traditions maintain that they are descendants of one of the Ten Tribes of Israel. According to their legends, the ancestors of the Bene Israel left northern Palestine, possibly fleeing the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes around 175 B.C. and were shipwrecked near the village of Navgaon on the Konkan coast of Western India, 20 miles south of Bombay.<sup>43</sup> Only seven men and women survived; they buried the bodies of the others in large graves still to be found at the site.<sup>44</sup> The Bene Israel author H.S. Kehimkar supports this belief.<sup>45</sup>

One legend, still told among the Bene Israel connects the Bene Israel and Chitpavan origins by relating that from the same shipwreck which brought the few surviving Bene Israel ancestors to Navgaon there were also several others washed ashore, drowned; the latter were piled in a heap on the shore by a local Brahmin who then set fire to the pyre.<sup>46</sup> The heat from this fire revived nine persons on the

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42. Ibid.

43. Roland, op.cit., n.26, p.11

44. Ibid.

45. Kehimkar, H.S., The History of the Bene Israel of India, (Jerusalem, Olsvanger, 1937) p.

46. Isenburg, op.cit., n.35, p.13.

pyre who had not been really dead to begin with.<sup>47</sup> The Brahmin subsequently converted the senine persons to Hinduism and called them Chitpavan Brahmins.<sup>48</sup>

Although there is no hard evidence for the shipwreck story, the Bene Israel authors had pointed out several reasons to identify the Bene Israel with the lost ten tribes of Israel. Kehimkar points out that the malida i.e., ritual offerings in the observances of the Bene Israel are remarkably similar to the particular form of observances maintained in the Kingdom of Israel after its separation from the Kingdom of Judah and from the Temple in Jerusalem, uninfluenced by the later adaptations which evolved in the mainstream of Judaism as a result, first of the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.) and thereafter, of the destruction of the second temple (70 A.D).<sup>49</sup>

B.J. Israel points out that the Bene Israel never called themselves Jews as they would have, following the Bible, if they had been descendants of citizens of the Kingdom of Judah.<sup>50</sup> Because it is the descendants of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin who came to be known as Jews.

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47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Kehimkar, op.cit., n.45, pp.111-115

50. Israel, B.J., The Jews of India (New Delhi; Jewish Welfare Association, 1982), p.19.

On the other hand, he argues, that they were descendants of those who were deported and lost to history when the Kingdom of Israel was conquered.<sup>51</sup> The word Bene Israel literally means "children of Israel". It was only in the 19th century that the Bene Israel began to be referred to as "Jews".<sup>52</sup> Again, according to B.J. Israel, the Bene Israel had no knowledge of the fasts which were prescribed after the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians or of the Hanukkah, instituted even later, until they were introduced among them by the legendary David Rahabi.<sup>53</sup>

In Konkan villages, they were called "Shanwar Telis" (Saturday oilmen) since oil pressing was the most common occupation among them. Cut off for centuries from contact with the mainstream Jewish life, the Bene Israel forgot all but a few essential elements of Judaism namely, Sabbath, circumcision and a few dietary laws. They celebrated Festivals of New Year, Day of Atonement, Passover, Purim and Feast of Ingathering. They used to recite Shema, an important prayer of the Jews.

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51. Ibid., p.9.

52. Isenburg, op.cit., n.35, p.7.

53. Israel, op.cit., n.50, p.19.

However, with the coming of one David Rahabi around the 17th century who reorganised the Jewish traits of Bene Israel and taught them Hebrew, the Bene Israel were brought into the mainstream of Judaism.

The first documentary proof of the Bene Israel settlement in the Konkan is a Sanad (a Government document or Warrant containing a title to land or to an office, or a privilege or authorisation for something specific to be done) of 17th century.<sup>54</sup> It concerns a dispute won by one Ashtamkar family because the Sanad and some hereditary rights derived therefrom do belong to this family.<sup>55</sup> However, the Sanad could prove the fact that the Bene Israel were established as oilmen in the Konkan by 16th century.<sup>56</sup>

By the middle of the 18th century, the Bene Israel started moving from the Konkan villages to the towns of Pen, Panvel and Thana and then to Bombay. In Bombay they took up jobs in the Army, clerical posts in government service and also became skilled artisans and carpenters.

A second religious renaissance began in the first decades of the 19th century. The frequent visits of

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54. Isenburg, op.cit., n.35, p.33.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

learned religious scholars from Cochin and also the arrival of Christian missionaries marked a new phase in the history of Bene Israel. Synagogues, cemeteries and prayer halls were built and their religious life was consolidated and given roots.

By the dawn of the 20th century, the world Zionist Movement had extended their movement to India, and in 1919 the Bombay Zionist Association was formed. The Zionist propaganda could influence the Bene Israel to a considerable extent. Emigration started in the post 1948 period which acquired great momentum by 1960s and then onwards resulting into a rapid reduction in the number of the Bene Israel in Maharashtra.

To sum up, we can say that the evolution of Bene Israel settlement in Konkan is characterised by an element of ambiguity which is comparatively less in the case of Cochin Jews and totally absent in the case of Baghdadi Jews. This obscurity regarding the origin and early development of the Bene Israel was later to become part of a controversy concerning their religious status, that is, whether they are really the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel or they are converts of local population. This controversy owes much to the absence of authoritative historical evidences as well as to the unique nature of their early religious and socio-economic life. In religious



matters they clung to a few important remnants of Judaic practices which were handed down from generation to generation and socially they led a typical Maharashtrian life. However, the religious revivals and the later socio-political developments helped them to come closer to the mainstream of Judaism.

*CHAPTER II*

*SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE  
BENE ISRAEL*

## CHAPTER II

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE BENE ISRAEL

The present chapter will discuss the social and economic conditions of the Bene Isreal in both historical and contemporary contexts. The main focus will be on the questions such as how far they have been socially integrated into the Indian situation and hoe far they have been economically secure here and to what extent these factors have influenced the Bene Israel emigration to Israel.

The history of the Bene Israel in India is marked by three distinct phases: (i) the period of their early settlements in the Konkan villages, (ii) the period of migrations to the urban centres .of Bombay which were developing under the British and (iii) the post-independence period which is also a period of aliyah<sup>1</sup> for the Jews. In Konkan, the first Bene Israel settlers may have been traders. There is no authoritative data to prove or disprove this point but historical documents say that a great many Bene Israel were engaged in one of the lowliest occupations recognised by the Hindus, namely that of

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1. Aliyah is a Hebrew word literally meaning 'ascending' or 'going up' which the Jews use to denote emigration to Israel.

oil-pressing, while the rest were in agricultural pursuits with a sprinkling of carpenters. It was only with the advent of the British to Bombay that the Jews established themselves as entrepreneurs. Again it was not the Bene Israel who entered this category in the real sense of the term but rather the newly arriving Baghdadis who soon outstripped the Bene Israel in a number of ways. The majority of the Bene Israel, on the other hand, found chances in military and other public services. In 1872, there were among the Bene Israel, military accounts' clerks and draftsmen, sub-engineers, overseas and mistries of public works Department, commissariat and medical services employees and skilled artisans such as masons and carpenters.<sup>2</sup> However, the new bureaucratic positions that opened up in the railways customs, postal and telegraph services etc all gave the Bene Israel a sense of security and a certain status. The Bene Israel social life, in Bombay under the British was enhanced by the new opportunities for education and employment and for religions and cultural developments.

Even after the independence, the Bene Israel remained mainly in clerical jobs. By this time Baghdadis had made great fortunes in business activities while most of the

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2. Samuel, Shellim, A Treatise on the Origin and Early History of the Bene Israel of Maharashtra State, (Bombay, Iyer and Iyer, Ltd. 1963), p. 60

Bene Israel men were only employees in factories and workshops as mechanics.

In this context, it is very important to examine whether the term 'trading community', as many scholars would like to call the Jews in the Diaspora, will fit also for the oriental Jews. The late Howard Becker formulated a "constructed type"<sup>3</sup> defining a category of ethnic groups similar to that of Max Weber's ideal type"<sup>4</sup> in which he categorizes the Diaspora Jews as marginal trading communities. Authors like Andre Wink discusses the growth and development of a "trade Diaspora" of Jews in India from the 8th century A.D.<sup>5</sup> . But, in the history of Jews in India, only a few white Jews of Cochin and a fairly large number of Baghdadis of Bombay and Calcutta with a negligibly small number of Cochin Black Jews and Bene Israel could acquire prominence in trade and business activities. The great majority of the indigenous Jewish community have not been commersiats or traders, owing to

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3. Becker, Howard, "Constructive Typology in the Social Sciences," in Contemporary Social Theory by Harry Barnes, Howard Becker and Frances Bedeer (eds.), (New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1940), p. 31.
4. Weber, Marx, The Theory of Social and Economics Organisation, translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Free Press and Falcons' Wing Press, 1947), pp. 109-110.
5. Wink, Andre, "The Jewish Diaspora in India: 8th - 11th centuries", The Indian Economic and Social History Review, vol.24, no.4, 1987, p.349.

historical circumstances. The stereotype so often held of the typical Jew as a petty trader, trafficking with Gentiles in the continuous give and take of bargaining, is therefore, irrelevant for Indian Jews as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

### **Socio-Economic Conditions of the Bene-Israel In Konkan**

The early life of the Bene Israel like their origin, is obscure. The existence of a Jewish community in Konkan, at that time was unknown even within India. Bene Israel tradition speaks of a David Rahabi who around A.D.1000 came to the Konkan and 'discovered' the Bene Israel, recognising them as Jewish from some of their practices like the observance of Sabbath and circumcision and their refusal to eat fish without fins and scales. However, they were called not as Jews but as "Shanwar Telis" which means Saturday oilmen because they were engaged mainly in the occupation of extracting oil from sesame seed and coconut. Many people in the region had practised this occupation which was relatively a low-caste designation and the Jews used to abstain from work on Sabbath, i.e., on Saturdays and hence the name Shanwar Telis.

The oil pressing was done right within the premises of one's own compound. After the oil had been extracted, the

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6. Schermerhom, R.A., Ethnic Plurality in India, (Tuscon, Uty of Arizona Press, 1978), p.249.

oil presser was entitled to keep a certain portion of oil and of the oil cake, as fee for pressing oil from seeds supplied by clients. He was free to use it for himself or to sell or to barter in exchange for other necessities such as rice, salt, pulses etc.

As oil-pressers the Bene Israel were definitely on the lower rungs of the ladder in the social structure of the village. But, their social status was not as bad as Hindu oil-pressers since they did not in any way form part of the Hindu caste hierarchy per se. They were, however, interdependent in a caste-like manner with all other groups in the village and they lived a thoroughly Indian way of life except for their strict observance of the Jewish religious as they knew it".<sup>7</sup> The Bene Israel in this period often refrained from widow remarriage and beef eating. Perhaps they were attempting to raise their position socially or to rise in public esteem by imitating the behaviour of the higher castes (a form of Sanskritization) or perhaps they simply wished to show respect for their neighbours by not engaging in practices that the latter would find offensive.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, like the Hindu ideas of untouchability, the Jewish dietary rules

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7. Kehimkar, H.S., the History of the Bene Israel of India, (Jerusalem; Dayag Press, 1937), p.46.

8. Roland, Joan, G., Jews of British India, (London: Uty Press of New England, 1989), p.4.

also had the concept of pollution and the Bene Israel writer, H.S. Kehimkar states that "the Bene Israel never employ as servants the Mahar and Mang castes who use dead beasts and fowls as articles of food, a touch of whom alone defiles a Bene Israel."<sup>9</sup>

The Bene Israel adopted the regional language, local dresses and even names. They had local vernacular names which in the absence of a non-Biblical first name made it difficult to distinguish between other Hindu names. Again, like the traditional Marathi surnames, they, also used to have surnames with 'kar' added to the names of their ancestral villages. Thus a person, from 'Nagaon' village will have 'Nagaonkar' as surname and those from 'Div' will have 'Divekar' as surnames and so on. However, later since the Bene Israel religions revival and because of contacts with Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel started adopting Biblical names which were used together with the surnames ending in 'kar'.

The Bene Israel also adopted certain social customs from their Hindu and Muslim neighbours such as the laws of inheritance, ceremonial food offerings and observance of certain marriage and funeral customs. However, the prayers and blessings which they attached to all such ceremonies

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9. Kehimkar, op,cit, n.7, p.93.



were wholly Jewish in their referents, content and religious core.<sup>10</sup> In later years, towards the end of nineteenth century many of the non-Jewish influences of Bene Israel customs and rituals became less and less popular.

The Bene Israel forbade marriages outside religion. They excommunicated the Bene Israel women who had married to non-Jews. In the case of men it was different due to practices like concubinage. Hence most unions with non-Jews until the 20th century were more likely due to Bene Israel male associations with non-Jewish women."<sup>11</sup> The Kala-Gora dichotomy which existed within the community owes much to the Bene Israel way of accepting responsibility for the progeny of their irregular unions dating back to the time when there was among them no practice of conversion to Judaism.<sup>12</sup> The offsprings of such unions and their descendants were forever kept apart as Kala Bene Israel who could not intermarry with the Gora Bene Israel.

The Kala-Gora distinction within the community has been according to many authors, an impact of Indian caste system. The so-called white Jews, 'the Gora', claim to be

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10. Isenburg, Shirley, India's Bene Israel, (Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1988), p.143.

11. Ibid, p.105.

12. Ibid.

the pure descendants of the traditional seven couples shipwrecked on the Konkan coast centuries ago who were the original Bene Israel of India and their attitude towards the 'Kala' had been dominated by caste like prejudices. For a long time the 'Kala' were assigned a lowly status and there were prohibitions upon intermarriage and interdining with them. Although they were permitted entry to the synagogue, Kala could not wear the ritual garment, tallith and they received the sanctified wine of the ceremony only after the Gora had been served. However by the late 19th century such inequalities in the synagogue were abolished.

According to Kehimkar, the Bene Israel women never used to mix socially in the company of men and even with the male portion of the community itself.<sup>13</sup> In his opinion they have been truly loyal and their moral conduct has been of higher standard.<sup>14</sup> In those early days, the Bene Israel women, like women in other neighbouring communities generally preferred to confine themselves in the household duties. They were not, however, "Purda-women" because they did go out of their houses to fetch things from the bazar.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Kehimkar, op,cit, n.7, p.57.

14. Ibid, p.58.

15. Ibid, p.57.

The religious observance of Konkani Jews centered around and confined to home rituals. The arrival of David Rahabi caused a sort of religious revivalism among Konkani Jews. He tried to teach them Hebrew as well as liturgy, scriptures, rituals and ceremonies of Judaism that they had forgotten. He selected young men from three prominent families -the Jhiradkars, Shapurkars, Rajpurkars for special teaching. These families had already been providing the community with leaders or teachers called kajis, who travelled throughout Konkani to officiate ceremonies and to settle disputes.<sup>16</sup>

By the middle of the 18th century the Bene Israel population of Konkani probably did not exceed 5,000.<sup>17</sup> At this time they began moving from the villages to the towns of Pen, Panvel and Thana, and then to Bombay which was developing under the British and needed carpenters, Mechanics and artisans of all kinds.

### **The Bene Israel in Bombay**

Throughout the second half of the 18th century, hundreds of Bene Israel left their villages seeking attractive opportunities in employment and education which

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16. Strizower, Schifra, The Children of Israel: the Bene Israel of Bombay, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971), pp.37-38.

17. Roland, op,cit, n.8, p.13.

the fast developing city of Bombay had to offer. Many of them became skilled labourers, especially in the fields of carpentry and mechanical works. For the Bene Israel, the several new occupations and city life represented quite a change from their previous status as oil pressers. And in Bombay, for the first time, they developed into a substantial, vigorous community. Simultaneously their religious institutions developed. The first synagogue was built in 1796.

At the beginning of the 19th century the total number of Bene Israel appears to have been between 5,255 and 8,000 souls.<sup>18</sup> Some of them were still living in villages in the northern half of Konkan. Gradually their number in the villages reduced considerably and Bombay became the main centre of development of Bene Israel religion, education and culture.

In Bombay, many Bene Israel made careers in the army. In 1837, 19% of the Bene Israel population in Bombay depended for their livelihood on professional military service in the territorial units of the East India Company's army.<sup>19</sup> Relatively large numbers of the Bene Israel military Officers were active in breaking up

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18. Isenburg, op.cit, n.10, p.59.

19. Ibid, p.163.

thuggery, in putting down the lawlessness and vandalism of the so-called criminal tribes and in actions on the northwest and northeast frontiers.<sup>20</sup>

Even in Konkan there were Bene Israel who had served in the army of the Marathas and possibly in other armies as mercenaries.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, when the British East India Company began to recruit for the Bombay Army in the mid 18th century, it could have been one reason for the enlistment of Bene Israel in large numbers that they traditionally served in the armies of the pre-British rulers.

However the large percentage of the Bene Israel enlistments decreased when after the 1857 mutiny against the British, in which no Bene Israel took part, a new ruling made army promotions contingent upon criteria rather than merit alone. Under the new British rules for the Native Army there could be only one officer from a given caste or community. The reorganisation of the army was accordingly completed in 1863. With their chances for rising in rank practically eliminated, the fighting ranks of the army became much less popular among educated Bene Israel and many of them turned to ancillary services

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20. Ibid.

21. Roland, op,cit, n.8, p.22.

especially in the accounts' department and medical services. Bene Israel army enlistments almost ceased by 1870, due as much to the growing attraction of civilian careers as to the restructuring of the Native army regiments according to caste. So many Bene Israel school graduates became clerks in public and private offices that the Bene Israel often refer to themselves as a "clerk caste."<sup>22</sup> At the same time a fairly good number of Bene Israel were carpenters, building contractors and artisans.

However, by the close of the 19th century the initial gains which the Bene Israel had made during the early period in Bombay petered out. Since by tradition or experience, they were not merchants or businessmen, they lacked the necessary social confidence for getting ahead. While a few Bene Israel have been rather well-to-do, there have never been any persons of great wealth among them. At the same time, the newly arrived Baghdadi Jews who had wealth and business background made outstanding and continuing successes and played a major role in the industrialisation of Bombay, like Parsis. The Sassoons, known as the "Rothschilds of the East", were the largest mill-owners by 1920 in Bombay. They built-up not only economic institutions but important cultural and civic institutions, viz., schools, hospitals, orphanages,  
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22. Isenburg, op.cit, n.10, p.163.

libraries, museums and charitable organisations.

The Bene Israel benefitted from the richness of Baghdadis in the sense that they eventually found work in the mills of Sassoons. The Manchester Mill in Bombay, E. D Sassoon and Company Mill etc. gave preference to Jews (both Baghdadis and Bene Israel) in hiring employees. While several Europeans and Parsis held managerial jobs in the larger Sassoon mills, the Bene Israel always remained in clerical and mechanical jobs.

Although the fruits of philanthropy, of wealthy Baghdadis extended to the Bene Israel in a number of ways, when it came to the question of religious aristocracy and social status, the Baghdadis, however, wanted to keep the indigenous Jews away. The Bene Israel also started viewing them with suspicion and a sense of separateness.

As a microscopic community, minding its own affairs, the Bene Israel did not have a great deal of contact with the British government except in matters of employment in both military and civilian branches. At the same time, the Baghdadis maintained close contacts with the British and they were eager to share European ways, customs and culture. The British too, for all practical purposes considered the rich mercantile community of Baghdadis as loyal and useful and a valuable link between them and the natives.

From the end of 19th century, a number of Bene Israel organisations for communal improvement were initiated such as the Bene Israel association, the Bene Israel Benevolent Society, the Association for the Right Guidance of the People and the society for the protection of the Jewish Religion. This period also witnessed the publication of several Bene Israel publications such as Satya Prakash, Friend of Israel, Lamp of Judaism, Israel Dharmadeep and the Bene Israelite. Though most of these publications were short lived, their reporting of domestic functions and communal events and their articles on religious topics and Bene Israel affairs suggest an awakening of communal consciousness.

The activities of Christian Missionaries and the visits and instructions of Cochin Jews in the late 18th and 19th centuries resulted into a second religious revival among the Bene Israel. The admission into Christian missionary schools offered chance to learn English as well as Hebrew. In 1883, under the leadership of the late H.S. Kehimkar the Bene Israel Benevolent society was founded to help needy persons of the community. Under the auspices of this society, the Hebrew-Marathi school was founded in 1875 which was developed later in 1896 into the Israelite School. In this school, girl students were exempted from paying fees. Scholarships were also provided. This



encouraged the Jewish parents to send their wards to the school, thus promoting female education in the Bene Israel community.

At the dawn of the twentieth century educated Bene Israel could be found in occupations in railways, customs, post and telegraph departments etc. It was no longer popular among the Bene Israel to enlist in the fighting forces as they had done in the 18th and first half of 19th centuries. About 10% of which mostly women, of the community are now active in the professions of medicine, nursing, midwifery, social work, law and teaching.<sup>23</sup> The Bene Israel participation in business was still significantly less, owing to lack of initiative, experience and capital combined with a fear of bankruptcy.<sup>24</sup>

Within the Bene Israel community there has been no such thing as rigid stratification based on occupation. It is common that in a family different members engage in different types of occupations. Although those with higher education could move freely in higher circles, but often were reticent to do so, through a lack of self confidence which in a way kept them aloof from other communities.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Ibid, p.199.

24. Ibid, p.205.

25. Ibid, p.206.

This characteristic was mentioned in the Presidential Address to the First Bene Israel Conference in 1917 which says: ".... it is a matter for deep regret that our community as a rule remains aloof from the other communities, who are in advance of us in education and in social life. The result is that we lose the golden opportunity of finding out what is best in them, and if so of adopting it. It is therefore necessary that if our community wants seriously to rise its educated members must not fail to join all movements that would help to uplift the community directly or indirectly."<sup>26</sup>

However, in a socio-economic point of view the Bene Israel could not go beyond a certain limit. The average Bene Israel lived like other Indian lower middle class people. The 1961 census showed that the majority of the Bene Israel in the workforce were in blue collar occupations rather than in officers.<sup>27</sup> Most men have been employed in factories and workshops (mainly as mechanics) followed by commercial employment (mainly clerical).<sup>28</sup> It was in the 1960s that emigration to Israel started in large numbers and by 1981, there were only 6,000 Jews in India of

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26. Ibid.

27. Schermershorn, op.cit, n.6, p.248.

28. Ibid.

which only about 3892 were Bene Israel.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Bene Israel in the 1990s**

In the initial years of their settlements in Bombay, the Bene Israel were mainly concentrated in a sort of communal neighbourhood in the Dongri area at a conjunction of Byculla, Nagpada, Mazgaon and Umarkhadi. Gradually they spread to other areas of Bombay but with no area being inhabited exclusively by them. The majority of Bene Israel lives in rented houses.

A major trend during the 1980s and early 1990s has been the movement of the Bene Israel from Bombay to suburbs like Thane, Dombivili etc. However, this is in no way peculiar to the Bene Israel community only but a common feature among the middle and lower middle sections of the Bombay population in general, owing to the pressure of population growth and saturation of commercial and industrial institutions in the city. According to the BCDP estimates given by AJDC, about 15% of Bene Israel population in the Bombay city (2,200-2,600) is unemployed while 20% is occupied in academic sphere, 10% in small scale business and 55% in clerical and manual jobs.<sup>30</sup> A

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29. "Buncher Community Development Programme (BCDP) Report", given by AJDC (unpublished).

30. Ibid.

survey which was conducted among 50. Bene Israel members in Bombay, Thana and Kurla, gives the following figures.<sup>31</sup>

Age	No. of Samples	Occupation	Occupation of Father
16-25	16	Students	Services- 9 Manual - 4 Business- 3
26-55	23	Services - 21 Manual - 1 Business - 1	Services - 18 Manual - 5 Business - nil
56-75	11	Retired from }-7 Services } Manual - 2 Private Firms }-2 (Clerical) }	Services - 7 Manual - 4

According to these figures, among the Bene Israel occupations, services (in both public and private firms) dominate with manual jobs (mechanics, carpenters, electricians, artisans etc.) coming to the second position.

As far as the current social life of the Bene Israel in Bombay is considered, the majority still prefers to keep themselves socially separate from other communities even though Bombay offers innumerable cultural and social opportunities for mixing. A certain percentage of educated and successful Bene Israel are active in public and non-sectarian organisations, but not as many as might be expected, given the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Bombay. Even

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31. Based on the field survey conducted by the author in Bombay.

as the community life is concerned, it has been confined mainly to the celebration of festivals and High Holidays when the community members can meet together. Synagogues and a handful of Jewish institutions serve as the locus of community activities. The Bene Israel synagogues include the "Shaar Harahamim" or Gate of mercy synagogue at Samuel Street, "The Shaare Rason" at Tantanpura street, "Tiphareth Israel Synagogue at Jacob circle, Etz Haeem Prayer Hall at Umarkhadi, the Kurla Bene Israel Prayer Hall, the Magen Hassidium synagogue at Agripada and Shaar Hasha-Maim (Gate of Heaven) synagogue at Thane. The Shaar Harahamim is the oldest synagogue which is going to celebrate its 2nd centenary in 1996. The Magen David synagogue at Byculla and the Kenneseth Eliyahoo synagogue at fort street are the two Baghdadi Synagogues in Bombay. Although initially the two communities did not attend to each others synagogues, the differences seem to have diffused nowadays. However, the size of the Baghdadi community has been dwindled considerably and according to some Bene Israel such differences are no more relevant.

In any case most of the synagogues are not working on a regular basis except for marriages and other religious customs and for the celebration of festivals.

Sabbath was one of the important Judaic customs which the Bene Israel from the earliest period of their

forefathers in Konkan used to follow regularly without any fault. But the Bombay life seems to have created a situation for many Bene Israel to find no fault in travelling or engaging in occupations that required them to work on Sabbath. As far as the dietary laws are concerned, almost no one eats pork at all and majority do not eat mutton cut and sold by non-Jews. However, no one in Bombay is too orthodox to avoid eating or drinking with gentiles.

Of the 50 persons interviewed, the majority opined that marriage outside religion was not advisable and some had even spoken in favour of marriage within the Bene Israel community only. It is not so unusual that the Bene Israel youngsters who had migrated to Israel comes back to choose spouses from their community in Bombay. There are also a few liberal attitudes towards marriages and especially the younger generations show more reformative tendencies in such things. Bene Israel youth are generally active and lively and young people from the suburbs come to the urban city to seek jobs in public or private firms or to utilise the chances offered by some Jewish institutions.

Among the Bene Israel educational institutions, Sir Elly Kadoori School's name has to be mentioned in particular. This was originally called the Israelite school which was founded in 1815 by the devoted efforts of

H.S. Kehimkar. Started in a modest way, the school was further developed into a significant institution due to the untiring efforts of its founder who was particularly interested in promoting female education in the community. In 1933, the building was renovated with the financial support given by Sir Elly Kadoori, a wealthy Baghdadi Jew who donated Rs. 2,00,000 on condition that the new building be named after him.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of strong objections, the name was changed to that of Sir Elly Kadoori School.<sup>33</sup> However, the school continued to uphold the cause and principles of education, the very reason for its birth and further developed into a junior college.

Prior to Independence, 95% of the student population of this school was Jewish.<sup>34</sup> But after independence, a rapid drop in their number occurred due to the emigration to Israel and also due to some other reasons. The medium of the school has been Marathi and with the growing popularity of English, parents preferred to send their children to English medium schools. The first choice of the urbanised

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32. Isenburg, op.cit, n.10, p. 260.

33. Ibid.

34. Jacob Eliyah, Samuel Reuben and Ezedial Leora (eds.), Jewish Landmarks in Bombay City, (Bombay, Rodefshalome, 1991), p. 11.

Bene Israel elite became to send their children to, St. Xavier's, St. Mary's or St. Josephs schools or if they could not easily afford the fee then to try to gain admission at the Jacob Sassoon School, a Baghdadi institution, which now always willingly admit Bene Israel. It teaches in English and offers classes in French, Hebrew and Jewish subjects. In Bombay today, Jacob Sassoon school is the only school where Hebrew is taught. While the Jewish representation in Sir Elly Kadoori school, today is negligibly small, Jacob Sassoon school has more strength of Jewish students. But it is not Jewish, but Muslim students which dominate in total strength here also.

### **The Jewish Institutions for Community Development**

Apart from the synagogues and a few Jewish Charity Trusts, American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee (AJDC) and Organisation for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT India) play a vital role in the present day life of the Bene Israel. The American Joint Distribution Committee is an international organisation which was established in 1914 as the overseas arm of the American Jewish community. Since then it has been helping millions of people in more than 70 countries around the world, sponsoring programmes of relief rescue, rehabilitation and Jewish education. It receives funds chiefly from American Jewry and also from World Jewish Relief (U.K.), the U.S. government and from a number



of foundations and international organisations.

AJDC began its involvement in India in 1963 when Mr. Gerhard Gabriel was named Honorary Representative. In 1986, he retired and Prof. Nissim Ezekiel took over as the Honorary Rep. AJDC gives financial and medical help to the sick, infirm or unemployed. It is running an old-age home Jewish lending library (books and cassettes), conduct classes in Jewish subjects at the Rodef Shalome Building in Bombay. It makes financial contributions to other Jewish institutions in India to promote programmes for Jewish cultural enrichment. It has helped ORT India to open a Jewish library, donated a children's library in Thane synagogue as well as a Jewish library to the Ahmedabad community. Since 1989 it has brought volunteers from abroad to work with the Indian Jews mainly in informal Jewish education. In 1991 a full time youth worker and representative arrived to enhance the programme. It has also brought the first Rabbi, in over thirty years, to help provide religious counsel and education for the community.

ORT is one of the worlds largest and oldest educational and training organisations. Ever since its inception in 1880 by the Russian Jews it has sought to strike a harmonious balance between general education and techno scientific awareness and experience. Now it is a unique international network spanning 64 countries. It aims

to build up schools, develop curricula, set up labs, evolve hitech educational systems ,produce hardware, software courseware and other teaching aids . If carries out indigenous educational research, enjoys consultative status with internatinol institutions like UNESCO and ILO. It is financially supported by its own charitable membership organisations the largest of which being American ORT.

ORT India is founded in 1960. It started off in a humble way with evening classes in maths, English and mechanical drawing in 1961. Today it trains students into skilled personnel in multiple vocations,well equipped to find footholds on their own in an ever expanding and increasingly competitive job market. In the context of the young generation of the Bene Israel who are facing hard realities of unemployment, ORT 's role is significantly high. There are separate Boys and Girls Schools of ORT. Boys School is situated in Sir Ely Kadoori School compound at Mazgaon and Girls School is at Worli. The courses offered include General mechanics, Desk Top publishing, Computer Courses, Secretarial courses, Hair-dressing, Beauty Care, Nutrition and food, travel and tourism etc. The vocational training and computer centre at Worli is aptly equipped with labs, advanced electronic and automation laboratory and a library with books of Jewish interest. Thus ORT India ultimately aims to help and train Jewish youth to find out jobs, whether it is inside India

or in Israel or in any part of the world. Lot of Bene Israel girls from different parts of Bombay and even from outside Bombay come for taking courses and utilizing the facilities offered by this institution. Of the 12 girls in the age group of (17-22) who were asked whether they wish to remain in India or to migrate, all of them expressed their wish to migrate to Israel.

### **The Needs of A Dwindling Minority**

A decline of confidence, in the ability of the Jews to compete for economic position in the urban economy without the aid of family or caste to support their causes, which was evident in the general mood of the Bene Israel at the time of Indian independence, still prevails in the community. Immediately after independence, many were apprehensive that gradually fewer government jobs would become available to them, since they have to compete in the general category opened for everyone. Besides, the new avenues of employment and advancement now offered by the private sector seem to have been offset by the beginnings of a new development, in the sense that the Bene Israel seeking employment were occasionally told by potential employers that they were reluctant to hire Bene Israel because of the likelihood that they too might eventually emigrate, following the example set by so many of their

brethren.<sup>35</sup> Can the government of India do anything in order to help revive the self-confidence of those Bene Israel who prefer to stay back in India despite the pull of emigration to Israel, and also to revive their confidence in the Indian socio-economic and political systems? Mr. Elija Jacob, the chief programme co-ordinator of AJDC Bombay, says that the inclusion of the Jews in the Minority Commission should be considered seriously by the Indian government.<sup>36</sup> In fact many of the Bene Israel share similar opinions.

In this context it is to be remembered that in the initial period of socio-political changes under the British, the Jews of India were struggling to define their identity in an increasingly competitive environment where communal identity was becoming a significant factor. As response to the proposed Montague-Chemlsford reforms, although the Bene Israel leaders in 1917, renounced any demand for separate electorates, by the end of this period many began to wonder whether their decision had been wise. Later in 1930s, such issues again came to the fore. With the growth of political consciousness among all sections of the Indian public, the Jews also had now to consider how to secure for their community a proper share in the

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35. Isenburg, op.cit., no. 10, p. 272.

36. From an Interview with Mr. Elijah Jacob.

administration of the provinces and the country as a whole. A heated debate was going on within the Bene Israel leadership over such matters, which ultimately for various reasons, decided to work in co-operation with the major communities instead of being singled out as separate. Although the next generation started thinking about it with a sense of regret, the above mentioned debate reflected the attempts of the then leadership of the community to define their identity in a complex situation of transitional Indian polity. These issues will be analysed in the next chapter.

To sum up, we have seen that in a period of early Konkan settlement, the Bene Israel had never been ranked anywhere near the top of the social hierarchy unlike the Cochin Jews who used to enjoy privileges of nobility which were often bestowed on them by the local rulers. While the majority of the Bene Israel were occupied in oil pressing, the rest were engaged in agricultural pursuits or in carpentry. Later, the spread of education, new opportunities opened up in the army and other public services during the British period etc. all gave the Bene Israel a sense of security and a certain status. However, generally speaking, they never acquired immense economic wealth unlike the majority of their Baghdadi counterparts who had also made important footmarks in the upper echelons of the society in Bombay and Calcutta. On the other hand,

from the socio-economic point of view they were confined to the middle or lower middle classes. The independence of India contributed to a general decline of confidence in their ability to compete for socio-economic positions, which served as a catalyst for emigration of the Bene Israel to Israel. This decline of confidence is still evident among the majority of Bene Israel now remaining in Bombay.

*CHAPTER III*

*ORIENTATION OF THE BENE  
ISRAEL TOWARDS ISRAEL*

## Chapter III

### ORIENTATION OF THE BENE ISRAEL TOWARDS ISRAEL

To analyse the orientation of the Bene Israel towards Israel, we have to take into account some important factors, namely the religious and historical factors, influence of the Zionist movement and also the implications of their Indian experience. This chapter is trying to analyse how far each of these factors contributed to mould their perception about Israel.

For the Jewish people the ties with Israel are both religious and historical. To be religious is to crave for Zion. Historically, the many catastrophe which befell them further strengthened this craving. However, the experiences of the Diaspora Jews varied from country to country. Indian Jews never had to face any kind of persecution in the name of anti-Semitism. Still, they preserved in their minds the Zion-centered hopes and they too, like their correligionists all over the world, used to wish ritually among themselves the formula "Next Year in Jerusalem".

We have already seen that in the initial period of their earliest settlement in Konkan, the Bene Israel led a Jewish life in a pristine way, though at a minimal level. Although they did not possess any book or scroll of the Torah and did not know any of the Hebrew liturgy, they did



pronounce in Hebrew the opening sentence of the Shema, the fundamental tenet of Jewish faith: "Here, O Israel, The Lord Our God, The Lord is One". (Deuteronomy 6:4). They recited it at every rite of passage and on every occasion for prayer. The Isralite Sabbath was scrupulously observed, but not with all its rabbinic nuances. They circumcised all their male infants on the eighth day after birth. (Genesis 17:7-14). The dietary laws mainly included the avoidance of eating fish with fins and scales (Leviticus 11:9&10). They observed religiously certain Jewish holidays prescribed in the Bible, like Rosh Hashana (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Hay-He-asif (Feast of Ingathering), Purim (Feast of Esther) and Pessah (Passover). However, they called these fasts and feasts with Marathi names.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, they retained these traits and clung zealously to the faith of their fathers handed down from generation to generation.

The contacts with Cochin Jews, Bagdadhis, Palestinians and European Jews at different periods of time, the growth of education, religious institutions, new opportunities for learning and later, Zionist activities etc all helped the Bene Israel to channelise their Judaic traits and also to enhance their orientations towards Israel.

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1. Kehimkar, H.S., The History of the Bene-Israel of India (Tel Aviv; Dayag Press Ltd, 1937), p.22.

## Early Religious Development

It is not clear that how and when the pristine tradition of Bene Israel ended to begin a renewed Judaic life. According to the Bene Israel tradition, it was the arrival of a Jew called David Rahabi around 1000 A.D. which marked the first religious revival. He might have come from Cochin where such a name was traced out from history. He taught them Hebrew and tried to bring them in line with mainstream Judaism.

Further religious revival occurred during the 18th Century because of fruitful interactions with the Cochin Jews. In 1796, the first Bene Israel synagogue was built. By this time the Baghdadi Jews also started arriving giving the Bene Israel opportunities of learning more and more about their religion. In 1826, a small group of Cochin Jews came to Bombay, among whom the names of Michael and Abraham Sargon, David Baruch Rahabi, Hacham Samel and Judah David Ashkenazi may be prominently mentioned.<sup>2</sup>

Another group of Cochin Jewish teachers arrived in 1833. They were able to effect a thorough-going religious revival not only in Bombay, but also in Revdanda, Alibag, Ashtami and Palli where they served among the Bene Israel

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2. Ibid, p.66.

as teachers, preachers and interpreters of Bible and of Jewish law.<sup>3</sup>

The religious revival was aided by education. The British lifted ban on Christian Missionary activities in 1813. In 1827, the American Mission established a Hebrew school at Alibag in Konkan. The missionaries' Marathi translation of Bible, though originally intended to propagate Christianity, proved of great help to the Bene Israel in understanding their own religion. For the first time they could study their heritage in their mother tongue.

Dr. John Wilson of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission aided Hebrew education by publishing the Hebrew-Marathi Grammar. He introduced Hebrew into the syllabus of the matriculation and higher examinations of Bombay University. How the Christian missionaries helped to foster Judaism among the Bene Israel is an interesting chapter of the history of the Bene Israel. All these things brought the Bene Israel close to the mainstream of Jewish life. At this time they confidently began to identify with their correligionists elsewhere.

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3. Isenburg, Shirley, India's Bene Israel (Bombay, Popular Prakasan, 1988), p.60.

The orientation of the Bene Israel towards Israel is clearly reflected in the words of the Bene Israel author, late H.S. Kehimkar, who, at the close of the 19th century, wrote: "The Bene Israel and the Jews in general have no ambition to gain an inch of ground anywhere except in Palestine, the possession of which they expect to acquire by some miraculous agency. Their predilection, therefore, lies in the direction of that country, and the dream of their life is the reconstruction of Jerusalem and country of which it forms the natural capital. It is ever before the eye of every individual of that race by day and night and ever does he remember, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning; Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I remember thee not, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy (Psalm CXXXVII: 5-6).<sup>4</sup> "Happy therefore, shall be the day for the Jews and the Bene Israel when the proud dream of theirs is realised, and glorious will be the condition of Palestine when Jerusalem is re-built by the chosen people of God."<sup>5</sup> He also wrote, "this sentiment however does not lessen their patriotism for the country where they live at present, for they have been distinctly commanded by God through the prophet of Jeremiah to look to the country of

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4. Kehimkar, op.cit, n.1, p.224.

5. Ibid, p.225.

their residence and naturalisation with feelings of great love and true patriotism (Jeremiah - XXIX, 4-7)."<sup>6</sup>

## **Zionism And The Bene Israel**

Modern Zionism came to the way of the Bene Israel in 1897, when Theodre Herzl invited them to attend the first World Zionist Congress. Even before that Jewish emissaries and Shlichim (messengers) from the Holy Land had visited India in search of the lost tribes of Israel and to give spiritual direction and legal advice and also to collect funds for their community. The earliest documented visit of an emissary to India occurred in 1740, when a Shaliach (messenger) arrived in Cochin.<sup>7</sup> The earliest documented proof of contact between Bene Israel and Palestinian Jews is apparently a tombstone in a Bene Israel cemetery in Navgaon inscribed with the name of a Shaliach from Saved who was buried there in 1824.<sup>8</sup> Other early visitors to the Bene Israel included Rabbi David d'Beth Hillel in 1829 and Rabbi Eben Saphir in 1859. However, the Bene Israel found themselves in an impossible position to contribute financially to these emissaries. At times the requests from charitable institutions and congregations in the Holy

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6. Ibid, p.224.

7. Roland, Joan G., Jews In British India (Hanover and London; Uty Press of New England, 1989), p.79.

8. Ibid.

City became too frequent that in 1896, the Bene Israel asked pardon of those concerned for not opening funds for them, as requested by the presidents of the institutions and the chief rabbi of Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> They explained that "the Bene Israel were so poor" that they were conducting their own charity institutions with great difficulty."<sup>10</sup>

Although the contacts with the Holy Land existed mainly through the Shlichim's visits, occasionally Indian Jews made pilgrimages to Palestine in the 19th century. The first Bene Israel pilgrims, Isaac Solomon Gossalkar and Dr. Joel Samael Shapurkar (Shirkolkar?) spent twenty-one days in Jerusalem in the spring of 1880; when they returned, Gosalkar reported on their journey in a public meeting and in 1887 published a book about it.<sup>11</sup> In 1894, Jacob Ezekiel Pingle spent a month and a half in Jerusalem with his family who later published an illustrated book entitled 'Pilgrimage', about his travel to Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Bene Israelite, 3 (7 Jan 1896), p.1 cited in Roland, n.7, p.80.

10. Ibid.

11. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.80.

12. Ibid.

In 1897, when the Zionist leaders sent their invitation to the Bene Israel community to attend the world Zionist Congress at Basel, the Bene Israel however declined sending their representatives on the grounds that they looked upon the fulfillment of the restoration of the Jewish Kingdom by the "Divine Hand".<sup>13</sup> However, after the Congress, Prof. Heinrich Loewe, one of the earliest Zionist leaders in Germany and a friend of Herzl, sent a report on the Zionist Congress to the "Bene Israelite" and in his covering letter, he stated, "it would be most desirable and important for Jewish affairs and the cause of Judaism if the Bene Israel sends delegations to the Zionist Congress next year, after having founded, before hand Zionist association in towns and villages of India."<sup>14</sup>

In 1919, when a Zionist leader, Paul Tolkovsky came to Bombay and tried to ascertain the attitude of the Bene Israel toward Zionism, members of the two Bene-Israel organisations, the Bene Israel conference and the All India Israelite League gave different opinions. Most members of the Bene Israel conference were in favor of Zionism, while strong opposition came from the All India Israelite League.

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13. Fischel, Walter J., "The contribution of Cochin Jews to South Indian and Jewish Civilisation", commemoration volume, Cochin Synagogue Quater Centenary Celebrations(Cochin, 1971), p.62.

14. Ibid.

The then editor of "The Isralite", David Erulkar and his brother Dr. A.S.Erulkar held a critical opinion of Zionism. Dr. A.S.Erulkar saw that Zionism had two aspects, intellectual and political. He supported intellectual Zionism which aimed at the preservation and development of Jewish learning and culture, but he disagreed with national and political aspirations.<sup>15</sup> In his view, Zionism was not the solution to Jewish oppression because there were more persecuted Jews in Poland alone than Palestine could ever possibly absorb, even if Arabs and other non-Jews were made to leave.<sup>16</sup> He argued that the Zionist state would provide an excellent breeding place for racial hatred based on color prejudices and the bond of religion would be a mockery. David Erulkar also cautioned prophetically that the Western Jews as a rule were not free from colour prejudice, even toward their correligionists.<sup>17</sup> In his view, the Bene Israel were flatly denied their rights as Jews even in the Baghdadi Synagogues because of their colour. Recalling instances where Western Jews had without any grounds condemned the Bene Israel as converts to Judaism, even as descendants of slaves, David Erulkar concluded: "If we have to contend against such calumnies

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15. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.147.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.



in the Diaspora, what chance would there be for a handful of people to stand against overwhelming majorities of men with whom, the past has shown, color can entirely eclipse the obligations which religion entailed."<sup>18</sup>

The Board of Shaar Ha-Rachanin Synagogue, after much debate and insistence upon no discrimination in the Holy Land based on color or on place of origin, however, voted to express its sympathy toward the Zionist movement. On the other hand the jamat (assembly) of the Tifereth Israel Prayer Hall in Jacob circle supported only the Zionist aims for development of Jewish learning and culture, deferring consideration of Zionist political or national aims.<sup>19</sup>

It was in 1919, long after the establishment of the first Zionist Association in Cochin in 1903, the Bombay Zionist Association (BZA) was founded on the initiative of a few Baghdadi Jews like Judah. J.Gubbay, E.S. Somekh and J.S.Ezra. It is to be noted that it was the Baghdadi group, rather than the Bene Israel which initiated to carry the flag of Zionism in Bombay.

However, the Bene-Israel looked forward for more information regarding the aims and activities of Zionism and they continued to watch the Zionist movement,

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18. Ibid.

19. Isenburg, op.cit, n.3, p.209.

carefully. News of the League of Nations' award of the consequent prospects for the development of the Jewish national home pleased the Zionist supporters of Bombay. In August 1920, David. I. Rogov of New York gave a lecture on Zionism to about one hundred Bene Israel in Bombay, exhorting his audience to form themselves into a Zionist organisation as a practical way to help the movement, which American Jews, he stated, were supporting.<sup>20</sup>

This call seemed to be a push and less than a month later, Zionist sympathisers held another meeting, resolved unanimously to form a Bene Israel Zionist Association and appointed a committee to draft a constitution, with Dr. E.Moses as President and Jacob Aptekar as treasurer. D.M. Samuel, the Secretary, immediately wrote to the Zionist Organisation in London requesting a copy of its constitution, a statement of its aims and objectives and advice on how the Bene Israel branch could affiliate to it. Pleased that "the present moment in Jewish history was appreciated in Bombay", the head office expressed the hope that the Indian Jews would "do their utmost in collecting a large fund towards the rebuilding of Palestine and thus assist in the redemption of our people."<sup>21</sup>

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20. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.150.

21. Ibid, p.151.

The World Zionist Organisation was eager to encourage the fledgling movement in all countries and, of course, to raise funds for colonisation and development. In what might be considered a twentieth century Shlichim movement, the organisation set out emissaries to Jewish communities all over the world.

The visit of Israel Cohen, General Secretary of the World Zionist organisation, on behalf of the Palestine Restoration Fund in 1921, gave an impetus to the Jewish community in Bombay and thereafter many Zionist leaders began visiting Bombay, among whom Dr. Immanuel Olsvanger was the most successful and distinguished one. It was he, who, learned of H.S.Kehimkar's still unpublished manuscript on "The History of the Bene Israel of India", arranged to have it published appreciating its importance, almost forty years after it was written.

After Olsvanger, teachers, most of them from Palestine came to Bombay where they taught Hebrew as a modern language, giving extra-curricular lessons to the various Jewish Youth Clubs as well as to adult groups. Classes in Jewish history and for teaching Hebrew songs and folk-dances were also organised.

In the early 1920s, the Bombay Zionist Association was active and under took many important tasks. In 1921, BZA launched " Zion's Messenger", a newspaper devoted to

"Judaism, Zionism, literature and science in general and to the mental culture and progress of the Jews in the Orient."<sup>22</sup> It was again a Baghdadi enterprise. During this period, the BZA had devoted much of its time to ameliorating the conditions of wartime refugees pouring into Bombay from Bukhara and Anatolia until they could be sent to Palestine. By the end of 1922, the BZA was trying to solve the problem of the lack of trained religious leadership and sent a few members of the community to London to study for the rabbinate. At this time the Bene-Israel Zionist Society was keeping a low profile, and the opinion among the few active members of the community continued to differ on the question of Zionism. While the All India Israelite League was still reluctant to participate actively for Zionist cause, the Bene Israel conference responded by passing a resolution to help funding it.

In 1924, 'Zion's Messenger' reported that the Jewish Community of Poona, including the Bene Israel, showed considerable sympathy to Zionism and that several of them became members of BZA.<sup>23</sup> When Dr. Alexander Goldstein, a Zionist representative came to India in 1927, he reminded a meeting of the Bene Israel community of the threefold

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22. Ibid, p.154.

23. Cited in Roland, Ibid, p.156.

increase in the Jewish population of Palestine, of improvements in the country and of the Hebrew University. When he appealed for financial contributions many members of the Bene-Israel community called this sum exorbitant and said no one would contribute as the immediate needs of the community were more urgent. However, Goldsteins' powerful appeals led more than fifty Bene Israel to pledge 3,000 rupees payable within three years.<sup>24</sup>

If the Zionist ideology received a mixed response from the Bombay Jews in the 1920s, the question of Jewish identity, complicated within the context of growing Indian Nationalist and Zionist Movements, really came to a fore in the 1930s, fostered by the events in Hitler's Germany and increasing anti-Semitism and the consequent arrival of Central European refugees in India. Although a sprinkling of Independent European Jews had come to Bombay in the late 1920s, it was not until after 1933, when the refugees began to arrive, that the reasons for their arrival and the problems regarding their absorption caught the attention of the Bombay Jews.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, about 2,000 European Jews found refuge in India, mainly in Bombay and

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24. Ibid.

Calcutta.<sup>25</sup> The European Jews organised a Jewish Relief Association which represented and worked for the common interests of the refugees. Many of the refugees took up the occupations which they had practiced in their native countries, earning a living as physicians, architects, fruit-farming specialists, businessmen etc. They considered themselves to be transients in India during the war years and were concerned more about Zionist objectives, having the first hand experience of the need for a Jewish homeland. The European Jews' very presence as well as the tragic reasons for it heightened the social Jewish communities' sense of Jewish consciousness.

### **Indian Nationalism And the Jewish Concerns**

Having emerged by the late 19th century with a heightened consciousness of themselves as Jews, the Bene Israel at the same time had to deal with the question of their "Indianness" or their position in a changing India. Similar to the two types of attitude towards political Zionism, there was not a united opinion about Indian politics also. For the Bene Israel the two issues were, in a way inter-related. Should they link up with and identify with Indian nationalists or should they continue to support the British under which they had benefited a lot? If India

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25. Isenburg, op.cit, n.3, p.209.

were to become independent, who would safeguard Jewish rights? Such questions dominated their thinking. Ultimately almost on all political issues, the Bene Israel position turned out to be neutral or ambivalent. Some politically articulate Bene Israel, however, were convinced that the Jews would not get lost in the shuffle and that the Indian nationalists would protect them. Also, there was some noteworthy participation by Bene Israel in their individual capacities actively supporting the independence movement. At the same time, the Baghdadi Jews never tried to identify with Indians and on the other hand, they wanted to be reconsidered along with the Europeans. Even their sense of identification with Jews beyond India was perhaps much greater than with the Bene Israel.

The advocates of Indian nationalism among the Bene Israel include the names of Dr. Joseph Benjamin who had an early role in the Indian National Congress, Dr. Jacob. E. Solomon who served as Secretary of the Ahmadabad Branch of the India Home Rule League and Mr. Aaron Daniel Talkar who was a supporter of Lokamanya Tilak. I.A. Ezekiel a Bene Israel journalist was a some-time nationalist whose political views seem to have run the gamut from communism to anti-Gandhian Nationalism (he wrote an anti-Gandhi book entitled 'Swaraj and Surrender') to mysticism.<sup>26</sup>

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26. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.102.

By the year 1930, Gandhi realised that many members of the smaller communities were a little hesitant about joining Congress. They were not prepared to accept the call for civil disobedience or non-cooperation and also, Congress was gradually looked upon as a Hindu organisation. Gandhi advised these groups who were dependent on the British govt. for jobs, not to endanger their position by taking part in such political activities as breaking the law and going to jail. In 1921, during Gandhi's fast at the time of riots in Bombay (with nationalists attacking in spite of Gandhi's call for non-violence, those Indians who had welcomed the visit of the Prince of Wales), Dr. A.S. Erulkar asked Gandhi what the role of Indian Jews should be in the struggle for freedom.<sup>27</sup> Gandhi's answer was that "If you could influence the Jews, or put me on to some, I would like it. They must feel also absolutely secure from Hindus and Mussalmans. If the Bene Israel have not been injured or affected, one need not worry. The English Jews I class among Englishmen, who don't need any special assurance."<sup>28</sup>

However, in 1930, certain Bene Israel made an attempt to form a Jewish (Indian) Nationalist Party to

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27. Isenburg, op.cit, n.3, p.250.

28. Ibid.



contribute to the national movement. But somehow it was not materialised.

In the period between the Govt. of India Act of 1919 and the Govt. of India Act of 1935 witnessed a heated Jewish debate on their position and role in the contemporary context.

In 1917, as a response to the proposed Montague-Chelmsford Reforms, some Bene Israel members submitted an address to Montague, expressing their agreement with the aims of the Indian National Congress and All India Muslim League and their intention not to seek separate communal representation. They wrote,<sup>29</sup> "In connection with the question of communal representation though we belong to a microscopically small community, the past history of our community in India, extending over the long period of two thousand years, has convinced us of the spirit of tolerance and fairness practiced by those Indian communities who command the majority towards their numerically insignificant sister communities; and hence we are of the opinion that the interests of small communities will not suffer in any way by a general representation as distinct from communal representations.

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29. Ibid, p.249.

For a large community such as the Mohammadens, a separate representation may be necessary for a time, but we feel that smaller communities stand to lose by communal representation, in as much as they are marked out, and whatever special representation they may get, can never be very effective.

By giving a separate electorate to a community, the racial feeling is accentuated and the interest of the community is narrowed down to its own activities. Such communal elections do not foster the development of the Indian nation they rather retard it."

There was another faction in the community who disagreed with these ideas and argued that the advocates of these ideas did not really represent the community. Dr. E. Moses was the leader of this faction who instead of demanding communal representation insisted upon an apolitical stance. However when the Govt. of India Act came into force in 1919, special constituencies were created not only for Muslims, but also for Indian Christians, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, landlords, universities and chambers of commerce. Not receiving special representation, the Jews could vote in general constituencies, which had, of course, a Hindu majority. At that time, the community members in general, did not seem to regret much about it. But by the time of the

Govt. of India Act of 1935, the Bene Israel had shown a heightened concern that the Govt.'s policy of giving preference in the services to Muslims, other recognised minority communities and the intermediate and Scheduled classes would work to their disadvantage. There emerged a strong faction among the community who strongly argued for special representation. Actually, by this time the Bene Israel had come a long way in their attempts to remain culturally separate and politically conscious. But such sentiments were never translated into any kind of concerted political move. Even Dr. E.Moses, when he became the Mayer of Bombay, although perceived the grievances and confusions of this community, preferred to avoid any clash politically with the majority interests at any level. On the other hand, he hoped that the spirit of harmony and good feeling on the part of the Bene Israel will secure them a proper position in the economy and polity of the country.<sup>30</sup>

Amidst all such turbulent issues, the Jews kept a watchful eye of only on the events in Germany but on Indian and world reaction to it. The Jewish press dominated by the Baghdadis took more interests in this regard. The Jewish Advocate noted that the Indian press, including the

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30. Moses, E., "Special Message To The Jewish Tribune", Jewish Tribune, 8(Sept, 1937), p.9.

Times of India and the Evening News had strongly condemned the Nazi outrages and sympathized with the Jews. The Jewish Tribune published an editorial in June 1937 against the Nazi misrepresentations of the Jews and Jewish ethics. The prominent leaders of World Zionist Organisation (WZO) also were interested in the Indian opinion on these issues. By the end of 1938, Mahatma Gandhi had received many letters asking him to declare his views about both the persecution of Jews in Germany and the Arab Jewish question in Palestine. On 26 November 1938, Gandhi published some of his views in this regard in "the Harijan".<sup>31</sup> Gandhi expressed his sympathy toward the Jews and the German persecution of the Jews seemed to him to have no parallel in history. "If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity", he wrote, " a war against Germany to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race would be completely justified. But I don't believe in any war".<sup>32</sup> He felt that the Jews could have resisted their organised and shameless persecution, preserved their self-respect through organised non-violent action.<sup>33</sup>

On the Palestine question he re-assisted his already declared views of early 1920s which were unfavorable to

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31. Harijan, 26 Nov, 1938, pp.352-53.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

Zionism. He wrote, "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French... What is going on in Palestine today cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct. The mandates have no sanction but that of the last war. Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home."<sup>34</sup> He also wrote, "I am not defending the Arab excesses. I wish they had chosen the way of non-violence in resisting what they rightly regarded as an unwarrantable encroachment upon their country. But according to the accepted canons of right and wrong, nothing can be said against the Arab resistance in the face of overwhelming odds"<sup>35</sup>

Gandhi's views drew strong protests from the Jewish press, both in India and abroad. 'The Jewish Advocate' argued that the Mahatma was either misinformed or ignorant about the Jewish question in Germany and his remarks were naive, if not tragically inconsistent.<sup>36</sup> According to them, he was comparing the Jews in Europe with the Harijans in India in which he forgot one fundamental difference --

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34. Ibid, 352.

35. Ibid, 353.

36. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.187. |

the Jewish homelessness.<sup>37</sup>

Disappointed with Gandhi's statements two prominent Jews from Palestine, Martin Buber, a philosopher and Judah Magnes, the President of the Hebrew University, wrote to Gandhi in early 1939 saying that the concept of Satyagraha was unworkable to fight Nazism and the tradition of Jewish martyrdom provided the same inner strength and dignity as Satyagraha.<sup>38</sup> The Jewish Agency from Palestine, too much concerned about these issues sent messengers like Dr. Olsvanger to convince the Indian National Movement of the Zionist aims and achievements. Dr. Olsvanger met Nehru and a number of Muslim leaders. Nehru made it clear that Zionism was a movement of high finance and that he was against all imperialism whether German or British. To Olsvanger's remark that the Arabs were supported by Hitler, he replied: "We have sympathy for the national movement of Arabs in Palestine because it is directed against British Imperialism. Our sympathies cannot be weakened by the fact that the national movement coincides with Hitler's interests".<sup>39</sup>

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37. Ibid.

38. Ibid, 189.

39. Ibid, 193.

In July 1937, both Indian National Congress and All India Muslim League reacted strongly to the Royal Commission Report on Palestine. Congress passed a resolution condemning in no uncertain terms, Britain's decision to bring about the partition of Palestine and the measures taken to implement this decision. M.A.Jinnah, in his presidential address to the All India Muslim League meeting, also rejected the partition of Palestine: "The whole policy of the British government has been a betrayal of the Arabs, from its very inception... this question of Palestine, if not fairly and squarely met, boldly and courageously decided, is going to be the turning point in the history of the British empire. I am sure I am speaking not only for the Mussalmans of India, but of the world..."<sup>40</sup>

All these issues were discussed, debated and analysed mainly by Jewish leaders other than the indigenous Jews, who were almost reluctant to express their views on Palestine. Dr. E. Moses, the then Mayor of Bombay, strongly advised the Jewish community not to embarrass the government by importation of this extraneous bitterness nor allow the dissensions in the Holy Land to interfere, with their cordial relations with the Muslims in India. He proposed direct talks with Arabs and Jews, especially

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40. Ibid, p.198.

since the Royal Commission had recommended partition.<sup>41</sup>

### **Zionist Propaganda and the Bene Israel in the 1940s**

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, there was no ambivalence among the Indian Jews attitude toward the cause of Allied powers. Synagogues offered prayers for the speedy termination of war and the success of her allies. The Bene Israel of Tiffereth Israel Synagogue stated that, in accordance with their ancient traditions, they were prepared to support Britain in her war against Nazism and oppression. The Calcutta Hebrew Association (Baghdadi) sent a wire to the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, affirming its loyalty to the King and the British government and assuring the viceroy that "there is not a Jewish soul who will not show his gratitude by sacrificing his all for success of the British arms."<sup>42</sup> Before the outbreak of the war, Edmund de Rothschild, having visited India for three months sent a message to the Indian Jews through the Jewish Agency that, "I have seen that many of the different sections of the Jews are at variance with each other. German Jews, British Jews, Baghdadi Jews, Bene Israelites and Cochin Jews must tolerate and cooperate with each other for otherwise a divided Jewry

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41. Jewish Tribune, 8 (Sept 1937), pp.9-11.

42. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.213.



will fall."<sup>43</sup>

Once the war started, the need for Indian Jew to stand together to interpret the Jewish position for the Indian Community at large and to mobilize contribution of money and personnel to the war efforts, seems to have promoted an increased unity. The BZA arranged a meeting on 25 October 1939, at which, for the first time all sections of the Jewish community met on one platform to express loyalty and unanimity of opinion and purpose. In July 1940, Bombay Jewry met again to mobilize its force to help Britain in the war. Dr.E.Moses presided the meeting which elected a committee the meeting which elected a committee to translate the resolutions into practice and to plan social and welfare work. "The Jewish Tribune" wrote that "never in the annals of the community was a more representative gathering present. Accordingly, the Bombay Jews, including the Bene Israel contributed money and many of them also enrolled in the armed forces. In addition to mobilising money and personnel to aid the British war effort, the Jews had as well to deal with the increasing Jewish refugee problem. In the midst of all these, the relevance of Zionism was no longer in doubt.

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43. Jewish Advocate, 10(16 June 1939), p.13.

In January 1941, the familiar Zionist friend of Bombay Jews, Dr. Olsvanger came again to India as an emissary. A reception committee, which included leading Baghdadis, continental Jews and Bene Israel, was organized to invite people to Olsvanger's public lecture entitled, "The Situation in Palestine Today".<sup>44</sup> The reception and the lecture were well attended by the Bene Israel. In response to Bene Israel's questions about Jews ousting the Arabs in Palestine, Olsvanger countered that the Arabs were ousting the Jews, as could be seen from the increase of the Arab population, many of whom had been attracted to Palestine from the surrounding Arab countries by the Jewish economic enterprises and the general improvements in health and education.<sup>45</sup> Some ~~one~~ suggested that Olsvanger arrange for the publication of the facts, with figures and illustrations showing the benefits derived by the Arabs in Palestine, in some leading newspapers in India to counter anti-Zionist propaganda.

"Your ancestors came here at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple; we want you in Palestine to assist us in the building of the third temple," Olsvanger told the Bene Israel, repeating his invitation

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44. Roland, op.cit, n.7, p.231.

45. Ibid.

many times to send a few youths for settlement.<sup>46</sup> At his suggestion, a small committee was formed to consider such a scheme. But eventually the Bene Israel decided not to go ahead with the plan. However, the BZA offered to finance the journey to Palestine of a delegation of young people who were not interested in training for youth work, but who were prepared to settle on the land.

There were doubts, still prevailed among the Bene Israel about Zionism which were often debated in their meetings. By the end of Olsvanger's visit to Bombay his campaign had yielded the highest total yet collected by any Zionist delegate in that city. While the largest amount came from a non-Jewish Source, namely, Ratan Tata and his institutions, the smallest contributors consisted mainly of continental refuges and only a half-dozen Bene Israel names appeared. The children of Sir Elly Kadouri School donated Twenty-Three rupees, the cost of five trees in Palestine.<sup>47</sup>

As the end of world war II approached, and with the prospect of an independent India and possibly an independent Jewish state, the Jews became more concerned about their future. The constant efforts of Zionism, the daily headlines in the media and the presence of European

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46. Ibid, pp.23-32.

47. Ibid, p.232.

Jews etc all helped to clear up many doubts of the Bene-Israel. There was little they could do financially to promote refugee absorption or Zionism, but they now understood the relevance of Jewish homeland.

The events in Palestine in the mid and late 1940's culminating in the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948, gave a thrust to Zionism in Bombay. In November 1948, J.J.Gubbay, the President and one of the founders of BZA died and J.S. Ezra became its president.

In July 1948 F.W. Pollack, a German Jew residing in Bombay, began to edit and publish a magazine called "India and Israel". It was a highly professional magazine containing much less local news and more international coverage with reports of Israeli and Indian Jewish life, Indians (Jewish and non-Jewish) who had visited Israel, the history of Palestine, Arab life in Israel, conditions of Jews in Oriental countries, and Indian Press reviews on Israel. It gave special emphasis on Indo-Israel relations and it was published until 1953, when Pollack returned to Israel after a thirteen-year stay in Bombay.

### **Zionist Organisation in Bombay And Indo-Israel Relations**

India was one of the eleven countries represented on the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. Along with Iran and Yugoslavia, India disapproved of the majority

plan of partition, recommending instead a federal state of Palestine. Once the Jewish State came into existence, it took India more than two years to recognize Israel. A few days before Indian recognition was announced, Israel appointed F.W. Pollack as trade commissioner for Southeast Asia, with head quarters in Bombay. Despite the grant of recognition, diplomatic relations with Israel were held up.

In early 1952, conversations were held at New Delhi between an Israeli representative and Nehru and other senior Indian officials over the establishment of diplomatic relations. Despite initial optimism nothing materialised and Moshe Sharett, then foreign minister of Israel insisted on reciprocity while Nehru, although ready to have Israel establish a legation in Delhi, was not prepared to establish a mission in Israel. This hesitation was due to Nehru's pro-Arab policy fostered by several domestic and foreign policy concerns. Consequently, India refused to send any representative to Israel and Israel could establish only a consulate general in Bombay. The office of trade commissioner was now changed to consul and Pollack became Israel's first consular representative in India, to the disappointment, perhaps, of some Baghdadi's, who felt that an Indian Jew should have had the honour.<sup>48</sup>

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48. Ibid, p. 244.

At the instance of BZA, the All India Zionist Federation was formed in August 1950. Although it did not work for long, it gave a chance for all Zionists to celebrate on a massive scale with rallies, meetings and several articles in the local and national press, India's recognition of Israel. The BZA then formed the Indo-Israel cultural society to function "as an arena in which India's friendship with and goodwill for Israel would be promoted", an unofficial, non-governmental institution to foster understanding between the peoples of the two countries.<sup>49</sup> The initial meeting was attended by a large number of Jews as well as non-Jews. But the BZA received strict and insistent instructions from Israeli authorities to suspend immediately all activities connected with the society.<sup>50</sup> Many members of the BZA felt demoralised by the Israeli official attitudes to such an initial attempt to sponsor friendship society. It is probable that in working diplomatically to achieve better relations with India, the Israelis did not want to embarrass the Indian government by a visible pro-Israeli organisation that might antagonise Indian Muslims.<sup>51</sup> Only after the 1967 war could the Indo-Israel Friendship League be formed, this time at the

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49. Ibid., p. 246.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

request of more than thirty Indian members of Parliament.<sup>52</sup>

'The Jewish Advocate' ceased publication in the early 1950s but reappeared in 1958 as the Indo-Israel Review. Shellim Samuel, a Bene Israel lawyer, became the editor and the main purpose of the publication was to interpret India and Israel to each other and promote friendship and cooperation between their peoples. In 1968 three members of the BZA resigned from the association and formed the separate Indian Zionist Organisation (IZO). They felt that overemphasis on personalities and irreconcilable ideological differences within the BZA were causing too much conflict to enable it to work constructively. Perhaps they also wished to free themselves from the influence of Hersh Cynowitz, a Polish Jew who was dominating the Jewish affairs in Bombay at that time.<sup>53</sup> However, in 1972, both IZO and BZA managed to combine to elect a delegate to the twenty-eighth Zionist Congress, selecting Albert Talegaokar, a Bene Israel from the BZA. For the first time, in over half a century of the Zionist Movement in India, an Indian-born, Indian Jew left India to be a fully accredited, elected delegate.<sup>54</sup>

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52. Ibid.

53. Isenburg, op.cit., n.3, p.

54. Shalom, Feb. 1972, P.1

## **Bene Israel Emigration to Israel**

Immigration from India to the new State of Israel was initially organised by J.S. Ezra and Cynowitz, who concentrated on sending Jews in refugee camps, particularly from Afghanistan to Israel. A Jewish immigration office was set up in Bombay in September 1950. At first, Pollack, the new trade commissioner, said that only European and Arab Jews who really needed homes should go to Israel.<sup>55</sup> Then, when there was more room, American and Indian Jews, who were not suffering from anti-semitism, persecution or homelessness, could go. This attitude did not please the Indian Jews, many of whom were reported to have said to Pollack in effect, "it's our homeland too, so don't say we can't go."<sup>56</sup>

We have seen that, political Zionism had not such a great appeal to the majority of the Bene Israel, though they shared the belief of most oriental Jews that, in God's good time, the Jews would return to Jerusalem under the guidance of the messiah. A few sophisticated Bene Israel did share the aspirations of political Zionism and watched with admiration the achievements of the Zionists under the Mandate. They did not, however, seem to contemplate

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55. Roland, op.cit, n. 7, p. 247.

56. Ibid.



themselves moving to Palestine. They regarded the movement as largely dominated by Western Jewry and wondered what place would be there in Palestine for the Bene Israel. Zionist emissaries who visited the Bene Israel from time to time were constantly asked about such doubts by the Bene Israel.

After the outbreak of world war II, the attitude of the Bene Israel underwent a radical change. The stories of Jewish sufferings in Hitlerist Germany, the messianic spirit of Zionist activities to bring back the European to Palestine the dramatic circumstances in which the state of Israel was created in 1948 just a year after India got independence, all these created a wave of sympathy and solidarity which drove away the doubts that the Bene Israel had entertained.<sup>57</sup> When the opportunity came for the "ingathering of the exiles", many Bene Israel began moving to Israel with aid from the Jewish agency or at their own cost. Young people went first which was called "Youth Aliyah" with parents sending even little children. Gradually adults and older people also followed and many gave up quite good jobs to make their future in Israel resulting into a mass emigration from the 1950s.

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57. Israel, B.J., The Jews of India, (New Delhi, Jewish Welfare Association, 1982), p. 54.

## **Israel and the Bene Israel Remaining in India**

For the members of the Bene Israel community remaining in Bombay, Israel continues to be a source of identification. There is definitely a heightened awareness on the part of these Bene Israel about the atrocities committed against Jews in so many countries and the Jewish sufferings in the past. Although they themselves had not been subjected to any kind of persecution or anti-semitism, they consider Holocaust as one of the darkest phases for the Jewish people which united them as never before and reminded them of the urgent need for a Jewish homeland. Some of the educated and well-read persons of the community asserted that the creation of the state of Israel arose from a strong sense of belonging and it was also an answer for a strong state to fight anti-semitism.

However, the general sentiment or orientation toward Israel is principally guided by their own age-old hopes and myths centered around the land of Israel. Many of the Bene Israel who were interviewed, shared the hope that "the day will come when they reach their homeland" In the words of Mrs. Sheeba Nagaonkar, the author of the book "Zion se Sahyadri Tak," "India is a wonderful country, we had the most friendly relations with the neighbouring communities here. But we wish to go to Israel, because it is the promised land of the Jews. All our prayers are for

Israel."<sup>58</sup>

Mr. Samuel Divekar, the secretary of Kurla Bene Israel Prayer Hall, in a very friendly talk a few months back when he was doing his final preparations to go to Israel, said that "my sentiments toward Israel are purely religious. For a Jew, that is more important. I am not bothered about politics. I just want to reach the land of Jerusalem." He was a lively community worker with a thorough knowledge of Judaism.

Famous Jewish poet, Prof. Nissim Ezekiel who does not want to go to any other country leaving India to which his commitments are deep rooted, however, recalled an incident of one of his relatives who held a very high office post in India and later migrated to Israel.<sup>59</sup> This relative of him wanted to live in Jerusalem only, a place which was already saturated with absolute scarcity of jobs and living chances. He refused to go to any other parts of Israel other than Jerusalem and finally preferred to stay there only and took up the job of sweeping the streets of Jerusalem. However, some of his Indian friends there could later arrange a better job for him in a hotel. It is indeed surprising that, after all sorts of reports and experiences

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58. From a personal interview with Shaba Nagaonkar.

59. From an interview with Prof. Nissim Ezekiel.

of ethnic/racial discrimination against the oriental Jews in Israel, the Bene Israel had such a passionate and intense feeling towards Israel.

When asked about the reports of discriminations against the oriental Jews in Israel, many Bene Israel responded that "it is quite natural that when one migrates to new situation of life, he/she has to encounter lots of problems of adjustments and adaptation. According to Mr. Elijah Jacob, the Chief Programme Co-ordinator of AJDC Bombay in 1960s, there were instances of discriminatory tendencies against the Indian Jews but it is no longer evident.

On the Arab-Jewish relations in Israel many of the Bene Israel expressed their hope for an enduring peace between the two peoples but they think that no peace will be forthcoming unless the Arabs give up their undue claim on Jerusalem. According to many, Arabs are not discriminated against in Israel by the government. In the words of Prof. Nissim Ezekiel, neither the government nor the majority of Israelis discriminate Arabs. There may be cases of individual Arabs being discriminated against by individual Israelis and vice versa."

There may be divergent interests regarding the immediate aims of those Bene Israel who want to migrate to Israel. For example, problems of economic hardships future

uncertainties etc. must have motivated a great many to embrace such an option. But if that is the only reason, then why choose only Israel and not any other country? Because unlike the European Jews of Bombay in the 1940s and most of the Baghdadis who preferred Western countries to Israel for migration, the Bene Israel orientation is almost entirely directed to Israel. Hence, to conclude, it can be said that, the Bene Israel orientation towards Israel although involves complicated contexts of situations, there has been a vital underlying, age-old Jewish ideal of return to Zion.

*CHAPTER IV*  
*FUTURE PROSPECTS*

## CHAPTER IV

### FUTURE PROSPECTS

In the previous chapter we have discussed the different factors which determine the Bene Israel orientation towards Israel. Now, the present chapter will discuss the nature and extent of emigration and also the problems and prospects for those remaining in India.

#### Emigration To Israel

Aliyah or emigration to Israel had been an on-going feature for the Bene-Israel ever since the creation of the state of Israel, which still continues. The initial period of emigration was characterised by "youth aliyah" when it was the younger generations of the community were particularly mobilised to go. Gradually people from all age groups and all walks of life followed resulting into a "Mass aliyah" by the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1948, the Bene Israel in India numbered somewhere between 17,500 and 20,000 souls, the Baghdadi Jews about 6,500 and the Cochin Jews about 2,600.<sup>1</sup> According to the data recorded in Bombay by the Jewish agency, the

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1. Isenburg, Shioby B., India's Bene Israel, (Bombay, Popular Prakshan, 1988), P. 274.

emigration figures of Indian Jews leaving for Israel are as follows:<sup>2</sup>

Table 4.1

ANNUAL INDIAN JEWISH EMIGRATION TO ISRAEL FROM 1948 TO 1984

1948:	--	1957:	969	1966:	1239	1975:	474
1949:	1,055	1958:	512	1967:	855	1976:	345
1950:	1,088	1959:	453	1968:	2,041	1977:	260
1951:	334	1960:	249	1969:	1,933	1978:	267
1952:	--	1961:	732	1970:	1,658	1979:	213
1953:	651	1962:	993	1971:	1,211	1980:	98
1954:	1,533	1963:	761	1972:	655	1981:	85
1955:	523	1964:	537	1973:	561	1982:	97
1956:	292	1965:	824	1974:	446	1983:	113
						1984:	156

This data actually does not distinguish between the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews and Baghdadis. However, as a matter of fact, between 1948 and mid 1950s, the emigrants to Israel mainly constituted Cochinitis and Baghdadis. As far the Bene Israel is concerned, mass emigration started from late 1950s and by 1968 their total strength in India was reduced to 13,000 approximately while there were 1,500 Baghdadis and 100 Cochinitis, left in India.<sup>3</sup> Between 1951

2. Cited in Isenburg, *ibid*, P. 302.

3. *Ibid.*, P. 274.



and 1953, about 150 Bene Israel who had migrated earlier to Israel were unhappy with their jobs, housing and living conditions and they returned to India.<sup>4</sup> It is to be noted that in the year 1952, virtually no emigration is recorded. Emigration was high in the late 1960s and early 1970s and in 1978, the total number of all Jews then remaining in India was estimated at, maximally 7,000 souls.<sup>5</sup>

According to a 1991 estimate, there are about 4,600 Bene Israel, 200 Baghdadis and 92 Cochinis in India.<sup>6</sup> Aliyah is still going on, but it is more or less 'individual aliyah', rather than 'family aliyah' which occurs nowadays.

Of the 50 Bene Israel who were interviewed by this author, majority of those who readily expressed their wish to migrate to Israel were from the age group of (16-25). Fourteen of the sixteen persons interviewed in this age group wanted to make their future in Israel. Of the 23 persons interviewed in the age group of (26-55), 15 persons wanted to migrate while a couple of persons wanted to be in India only and the rest had no immediate plans

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4. Ibid., P. 303.

5. Ibid., P. 274.

6. Buncher Community Development Programme Report of AJDC Bombay (unpublished).

regarding migration. Seven out of the eleven persons in the age group of (56-75) had no plan or wish to migrate to Israel. Those who have no plans to migrate have varied reasons like strong attachment to India, old age and similar inconveniences, a well-established family in India etc. However, almost all of the Bene Israel who were interviewed have relatives or close friends in Israel with whom they maintain frequent communication. Also, those who have no emigration plans, however, wish to visit Israel occasionally or at least once in their lifetime.

### **Bene Israel in Israel: Myth And Reality**

The Bene Israel who had migrated to Israel had reportedly faced a series of problems of discriminations and adaptation in the Israeli society. As some Bene Israel leaders had prognosticated in 1930s, the myth of a common religious bond turned out to be a mockery even in the promised land, for the Bene Israel were welcomed by racial prejudices of the European Jews in Israel. The New York Times, 22 November 1951, reported the following statement of Bene Israel experience in Israel: "In Bombay we were told that there is no colour bar in Israel, but in a shop in Beer Shela we were told that we should eat only black bread as we were black and white bread was only for white

Jews".<sup>7</sup> Then Bene Israel in Beer Shela complained that the Ashkenazis—the white skinned Jews— called them by different names such as "Indian bare-footed beggars" and "hungry junglis".<sup>8</sup> Again they found much discrimination against their community particularly in jobs and housing and in any case they reiterated that they were never properly informed what life in Israel was going to be like.<sup>9</sup> About 137 Bene Israel appealed to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Prime Minister Nehru to return to India and about 150 persons were repatriated in the early 1950s itself.<sup>10</sup> Yet, fresh Bene Israel emigration continued as well as fresh complaints about discrimination.

Another issue in the 1950s was the eruption of a controversy about the religious status of the Bene Israel and their acceptability as pure Jews for purposes of marriage. It was only the Bene Israel who were singled out to be investigated by the Chief Rabbi of Israel to trace

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7. Cited in Strizower, Schifra, "The Bene Israel in Israel", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.2, no.2, Jan. 1966, p.123.
  8. Ibid, p.125.
  9. Ibid.
  10. Weil, Shalva, "The State of Research Into Bene Israel Indian Jews", Indian Economic And Social History Review, Vol.17, no.4, 1980, p.403.

their ancestry "as far back as possible".<sup>11</sup> The result was a general strike on the part of the Bene Israel with the final outcome that such directives of the rabbis were revoked in 1964.

Practical problems regarding jobs, housing etc continued through 1960s. Life in Kibbutzim proved to be difficult for many who found adjustment to agricultural labour created severe hardships, especially for those who were accustomed to office work in doors. Many seemed to argue that "why don't they give us the chance to be clerks in Israel as we were in India."<sup>12</sup> Many of them left the rural cooperatives for places like Beer Shela.

Problems of adaptation were reported in the 1980s also, which still seem to continue. The Bene Israel are consistently described as a "closed group" who have not "succeeded" in Israel society either politically, economically or socially. In the educational field, a disproportionate percentage of Indian children in towns like Dimona are found in special education streams and schools and only a few Bene Israel pupils graduate to university per year.<sup>13</sup> In comparison with children of

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11. Schermerhorn, R.A, Ethnic Plurality in India (Tucson, City of Arizona Press, 1978), p.259.

12. Strizower, op.cit, n.7, p.138.

13. Weil, Shelva, op.cit, n.10, p.403.

Moroccan Jewish origin, children of Indian extraction who are nevertheless born in Israel display greater signs of introversion and with drawal from the surrounding environment.<sup>14</sup> One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon may be the language factor with even the second-generation Bene Israel continuing to speak Marathi and displaying singular difficulties in learning and communicating fluently in Hebrew.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the Bene Israel had grasped the seriousness of such problems and Jewish institutions like AJDC Bombay and ORT India take special interest in conducting Hebrew classes and imparting religious knowledge. Similarly ORT's vocational training centre conducts specialisation in such career-oriented courses which would help the Bene Israel youth to build up their future if they migrate to Israel.

The cultural gap and alienation which the Bene Israel experience in Israel are clearly reflected in the words of a 62 years old lady who was back in Bombay from Israel for a short visit; she says, "I have been in Israel for the last fifteen years. Initially, I used to cry every night longing to come back to India. There is no trust among the people. They don't respect elders. Even wives can beat-up

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14. Ibid, p.403.

15. Ibid, p.404.

their husbands. Many Indians after coming there try to imitate their culture".<sup>16</sup> This lady who still cherishes and preserves the warmth of her early day in a typically Maharashtrian village, has no hesitation to say that "I like India more than Israel". According to her, her sons who are working in Israel have no time to think about such things as they have to work hard day and night to make their living".<sup>17</sup>

However, there is a heightened consciousness among the Bene Israel that their community is not the only group which had difficulties in adjusting to a new life in a new country and had encountered antagonism, discrimination or lack of equality with white skinned Jews. The conditions of Falashas are more pathetic. Falashas (literally meaning strangers)<sup>18</sup> are Ethiopian Jews who physically resemble other Ethiopians with black wooly hair and darker complexion. They are in the most reduced circumstances. Even the Cochin Jews who had more adjusted to the Israeli situations and in a better position than the Bene Israel had the feeling that although they had gained much in Isareal, they had lost something precious that was rooted

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16. In a personal interview. 16 March, 1995. The person pleaded anonimity.

17. Ibid.

18. samuel, Shellim, Bene Israel of Maharashtra State (Bombay; Iyer & Iyer Pbt. Ltd., 1963), p.57.

in their way of life in Cochin.<sup>19</sup>

In the opinion of a few Bene Israel in Bombay, the problems of adaptation and acculturation in Israel are necessarily a part of emigration. They think that it will take some time for the emigrants to reconcile with and get adapted to an entirely new life situation. Another issue facing those who want to migrate is the apprehension that the Israeli state is no more interested in promoting immigration from oriental countries: Recently a report came in Indian newspapers that the Israeli government had "abruptly cancelled the visas for 50 young Indians claiming to be Jews".<sup>20</sup> The reason for the withdrawal of the visas was "the foreign ministry's fear of a mass emigration of indigent Indians claiming the lost-tribe status".<sup>21</sup> What are the real facts about such incidents? Is the govt. of Israel no more bound to promote aliyah? In the words of Mr. Elijah Jacob, "as per the Law of Return, Israel should be a home for all Jews spread out in the diaspora. Today, it would depend on a variety of factors namely, sociological, economic and geographical".<sup>22</sup>

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19. Mandelbaum, David.G., "Social Stratification Among the Jews of Cochin in India And In Israel", the Jewish Journal of Sociology, vol.17, 1975, p.200.

20. The Pioneer (New Delhi), 6 Nov., 1994.

21. Ibid.

22. Interview with Mr. Elifah Jacob, 3 March, 1995.

## **The Bene Israel in India: Future Prospects**

The central issue for the Jews in India is the very survival of their community. With about 6,000 Jews remaining in India, their institutions in India are struggling to keep alive. Synagogues and prayer halls are gradually closing down or finding their membership shrinking. As far as the Bene Israel is concerned, they want a dynamic community to strive and continue to flourish in India. They hope that their community can be given a new lease on life, continuing in India as do other Jewish communities in other countries.

Some Bene Israel strongly feel that the Jews owe a great debt to India, where they have always been treated well and that they should not abandon her. Mr. Jacob Nagawkar who is running a small scale business in Bombay, pointed out his reasons to remain in India as attachment to India, affinity to Indian culture and the harmonious environment and he feels much satisfied here.<sup>23</sup> He is well settled and looks forward to the expansion of his business in India. Mr. Nissim Ezekiel, famous Indian poet and a retired professor of English literature, expressed his desire to spend the rest of his life in India, reading and

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23. Interview with Mr. Jacob Nagawkar, 16 March 1995.



writing.<sup>24</sup> He says, "I feel committed to India, as I have always been since my school days".<sup>25</sup>

According to some other members of the community, to forfeit Jewish representation in a given country is a loss to Judaism. They believe that they have an obligation to remain as an active, meaningful, united community with proper leadership. Mr. Ezrakolet, the Bene Israel leader in Delhi fears the assimilation as a potential problem.<sup>26</sup> It is the disintegration of the community through assimilation, rather than through emigration, that would disturb him.<sup>27</sup> He feels that the younger generation of Indian Jews has little Jewish identity or concern.<sup>28</sup> Several Bene Israel respondents deplore the neglect on the part of many parents in transmitting Jewish knowledge to, and providing a full Jewish life for their own children.

Hence there is definitely a need for knowledgeable, capable and dynamic leadership who can re-orient the community activities as well as who can put forward the day

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24. Interview with Prof. Nissim Ezekiel, 25 Feb, 1995.

25. Ibid.

26. Cited in Roland, Joan. G, Jews In British India (Hanover and London; University Press of New England, 1989), p.264.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

to day grievances of the community members into a socio-political platform. Shirley Isenberg writes, "at this stage in the history of Indian Jews, one need no longer differentiate between separate Jewish identities. Any sort of leadership of the community should be able to reach young and old in all clusters of Jews living in various parts of India, however little their number may be".<sup>29</sup> In Bombay the community feeling is enhanced by the activities of some dedicated members of the community, Jewish institutions like AJDC and ORT and also by the authorities of certain synagogues.

Finally, what in India will serve as a potential threat to the Jewish identity? In a thoughtful piece written in the early 1970s, the Bene Israel writer B.J. Israel articulated some of the concerns of his community members as follows:<sup>30</sup>

"The question of identity for the Indian Jew is not just an academic one. In so far as being an Indian consists exclusively in being a member of a political entity of a secular character, one can be both a complete Jew and a complete Indian\_\_\_\_ If to be an Indian requires one to renounce the ties of Jewish brotherhood with our

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29. Isenberg, op.cit, n.1, p.271.

30. Cited in Roland, op.cit, n.26, p.263.

coreligionists abroad, there is no place in India for the Jews. If as some claim, we are required as Indians to adopt the ideological basis of Hindu culture on the ground that it alone is indigenous to the Indian soil, then again there is no place for the Jews in India except as strangers enjoying India's hospitality as do so many foreigners temporarily resident here\_\_hence if there is a danger on the Jewish side in political Zionism, there is a danger on the Indian side in the shrill cry of Indianisation that has been raised recently....".

*CHAPTER V*

*CONCLUSION*

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The perception of Bene Israel about Israel has basically been guided by the religious factor. They consider Israel as their promised land as Jews all over the world would like to call it. This attitude is primarily rooted in the age-old religious myths and hopes centering towards the land of Israel. Hence, although they never faced any persecution or anti-semitism in India, the Bene Israel preserved in their minds the zion-centered aspirations and remained preserving the cultural features linked to their religion.

In the initial period of the Bene Israel settlement in Maharashtra, they followed a pristine tradition of Judaism at a minimal level and remained for centuries in a state of isolation from the mainstream of Judaism. However, the religious revivals which occurred among the Bene Israel somewhere around the 11th and later in the 18th centuries made them increasingly observant of Judaism. The activities of Christian Missionaries, The visits of Jewish scholars from Cochin and also from Palestine, the spread of English education, the learning of Hebrew etc., all helped them to forge closer links with the wider Jewish world. From that period onwards, the Bene Israel became strong adherents of religious beliefs and practices followed by Jews elsewhere.

In the context of Indian socio-cultural matrix, the Bene Israel maintained a certain degree of separateness and also enjoyed a sort of religious autonomy both of which did not encounter any serious opposition from the neighbouring communities, especially from the Hindu majority. This does not mean that the Bene Israel have been religiously two orthodox to avoid interactions with other communities. On the other hand, they cultivated most friendly relations with them and they did not find it as a hindrance to preserve the traits which were typical of Jewish life. Although they cherished the ideal of the return of Jews to the Holy Land, this feeling did not undermine the importance of India to them. They looked upon to it only with great love and patriotism.

The changing socio-political atmosphere in India under British colonialism provided with different communities an opportunity to define their identities on ethnic lines. The Bene Israel also showed an awakened political consciousness and acquired a heightened sense of Jewish identity. But again, even though they debated issues regarding their position in a changing India on several platforms, in practical terms, the majority remained neutral on almost all political issues. Some even sympathised with the Indian nationalists, rather than identifying with the British as what their Baghdadi counterparts did at that time. At the

same time, their orientation towards Israel remained uninfluenced by the politicisation of the whole question of Palestine by the early 20th century. Neither the pro-Arab tilt in the attitude of Indian nationalists could alter nor the Zionist propaganda could influence much of their orientation. They still preferred to confine their aspirations towards Israel purely within religious terms or even as part of a personal salvation.

Zionism did not have much impact on the Bene Israel at least until late 1930s and many Bene Israel leaders even criticised the political and national aspirations of the Zionist movement. They believed in the creation of the Jewish Kingdom by a divine hand rather than through political propaganda and colonisation. They even feared the racial chauvinism of the European Jews which would translate the myth of common bond of religion into a mockery.

However, the arrival of Jewish refugees to India fleeing Nazi persecution by the late 1930s and early 1940s, marked a significant change in the attitude of the Bene Israel. The very presence of these European refugees and the tragic reasons behind it convinced the Bene Israel of the urgent need to make the myth of Jewish homeland into a reality. The Zionist activities got legitimised as never before in the eyes of many as well as the Bene Israel. Although they could not provide financial support in any big

manner, they extended their support morally and financially as much as possible.

The heightened activities of Zionism which culminated into the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 opened up chances of emigration for the Bene Israel. An important thing to be noted here is that the creation of the Israeli state almost coincided with the Indian Independence which left with the Bene Israel the option of selecting between the two. Many political events in British India resulting into the final break up into two nations had given this microscopically small community the opportunity to think about their future identity in Independent India. At the same time, a rapid decline of confidence in their ability to compete for socio-economic positions occurred which served as a catalyst for emigration.

Even after the rise of a bitter controversy regarding the religious status of the Bene Israel in Israel in the 1950s, the emigration of Bene Israel continued and even acquired greater momentum by the late 1960s. Most of those who were repatriated to India following these controversies, soon found it very difficult to be economically secure here and again went back to Israel.

Among the Bene Israel now remaining in India, while the majority look forward to emigration to Israel sooner or later, there are at least a few who wish to remain in India



forever. In any case, Israel continues to be a source of identification of the Bene Israel. The need for the existence of a strong Jewish state to fight away possible future attack on the Jewish people in the name of anti-semitism or similar dangers has got a prominent place in their perception about Israel.

Among the Bene Israel who have no plans to migrate to Israel, the majority are, either economically well off and are satisfied with life here or belong to the older generation who still cherish the memory of the long peaceful years of their existence in India. However, they want a dynamic Bene Israel community to continue to flourish here not only because of their satisfaction and love for India, but also because of the feeling that to forfeit Jewish representation in India will be a loss to Judaism.

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