

The Jews of India
Studies in History, Culture and Identity

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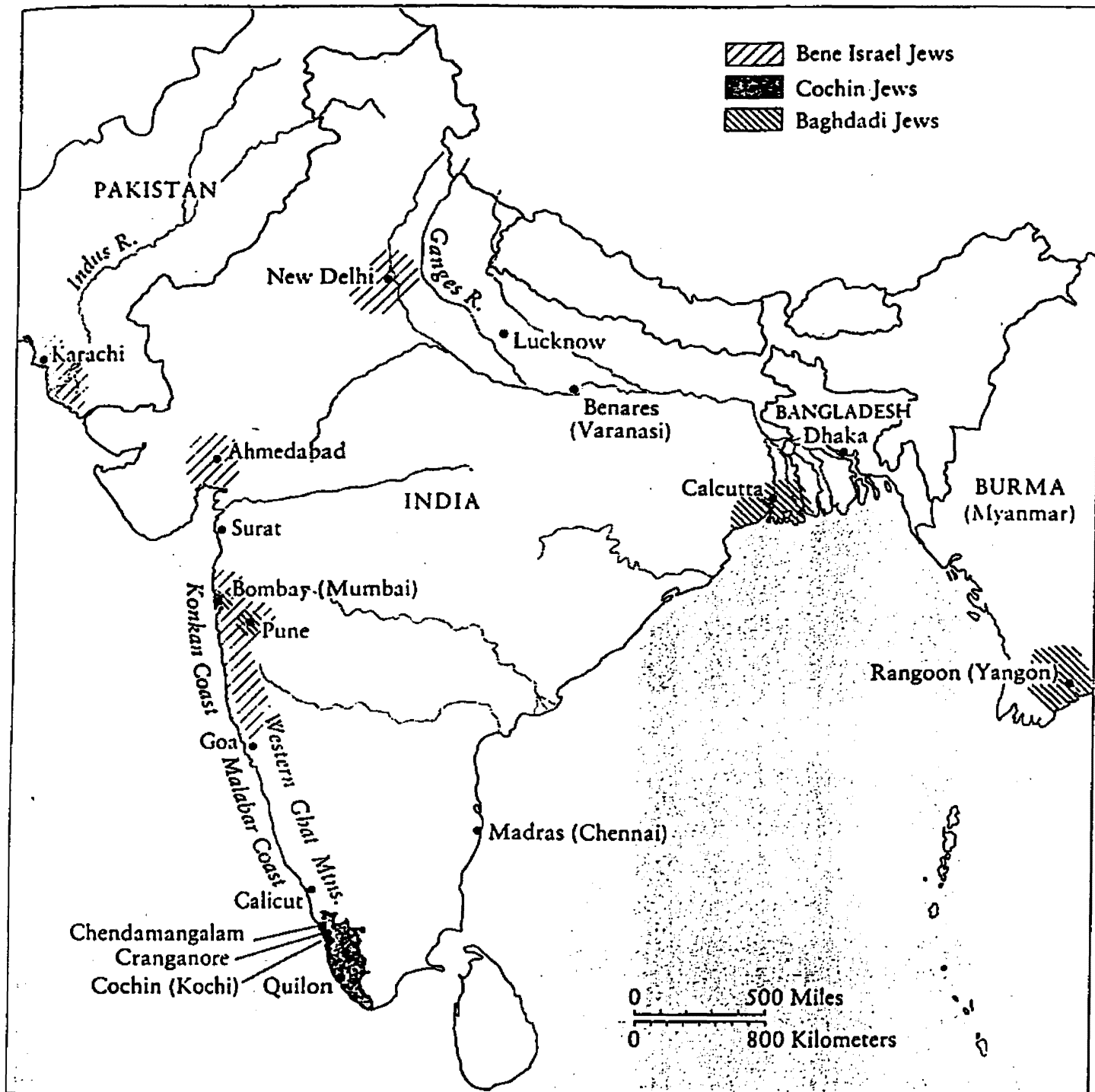


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General Introduction

What has kept Judaism and Jews alive? Over the centuries, the miracle of Jewish survival has been intriguing. The subject has aroused great interest in our day, when the most insidious threat to Jews and Judaism does not emerge from traditional anti-Semitism in its many varieties, but rather is posed by Jews who opt out of Judaism. In the age of modernity American Jews face the monumental confrontation of Judaism with the modern world. The atmosphere of the melting pot meant that the United States was for the most part, free of anti-Semitic prejudices that existed in Europe. Anti-Semitism was never, at least ostensibly, official U.S. policy. What was the result of the life in the *goldene medina* were Jews have received equal rights as an integral part of American society? Today, we live in an American Jewish world characterized by rich Jewish life, along with a frightening rate of mixed marriage, alienation and assimilation. In American society, where political equality of all citizens, regardless of religious, cultural or other differences is a norm, many Jews responded to modernity by minimizing or totally discarding their Jewishness.

In Indian Jewry, we have a Jewry in a very similar context. India has always been a remarkable civilization where a number of people from all the monotheistic traditions lived in peace and tolerance for centuries. However, unlike most American Jews, the equality with their neighbors and life in the society where all belief systems have had equal weight, did not withhold Indian Jews from perpetuation of Jewish notions of sacredness and holy peoplehood.

The Indian Jewish population, which at its height in 1947 was approximately 26,000, has been divided among three distinct subcultures, the Jewish community in Cochin, the Bene Israel Jewish community from the Konkan Coast near Bombay, and the Bagdadi Jews, who migrated to India from Arab lands, mostly from Baghdad. The first and the largest consisted of the Bene Israel - Children of Israel - a Marathi speaking group. At their maximum strength in 1951 they numbered about 20,000, but by 1961 their number had fallen to about 16,000 and by 1971 to about 5,500. Settling on the Konkan coast of western India and residing mainly in towns and villages, the Bene Israel were, for many centuries, known among their Indian neighbors as the Shanwar Tellis-Saturday Oilmen - referring to their

traditional vocation until the eighteenth century as seed-oil pressers, and to their abstention from work on Saturdays. In time, Bene Israel adapted to India's caste system and observed some Hindu practices along with observing basic Jewish holidays, recited one of the central prayers -Sh'ma, and observed few rules of kashrut. Over the centuries of living in the isolation from the rest of the Jewish communities their Judaism has become watered-down. It was only in the early nineteenth century that visiting Western missionaries revived their knowledge of Hebrew and the Bible.

During the nineteenth century under British rule the Bene Israel became more educated and prosperous, and became aware of Jewish communities worldwide. With the creation of the Israeli State, most of Bene Israel Jews decided to immigrate. However, their first years in the Holy Land were full of struggles and difficulties because the Israeli rabbinate hesitated to accept Bene Israel as genuine Jews. After years of collective protests, demonstrations, public appeals, and sit-in strikes, they were legitimized as "authentic" Jews. In Israel it is estimated that there were about 25,000 Bene Israel in the beginning of 1980.

The second group, a smaller group than Bene Israel, is commonly known as the Cochin Jews or Cochinis, who settled in the state of Kerala on the western Malabar coast about 650 miles south of Bombay. They trace their ancestry back at least 1,500 years. In the late Middle Ages they were granted autonomy by the local raja, but this favored status was interrupted by the Portuguese invaders, which was followed by a period of Catholic persecution. In the eighteenth century, tolerant Dutch conquered the Malabar territories. Under their rule and the rule of the British successors, Cochin Jews have lived in an environment where they have freely practiced Judaism. These Jews never numbered more than 2,500, spoke the native Malayalam as their daily vernacular and used English as the language of education and communication. After the emergence of the State of Israel most of the Jews from Cochin made an aliya and very few, mostly elderly members of the once flourishing Jewish community, still remain in Cochin.

The third group consists of Jews from Arab lands, mainly from Baghdad, who came from time to time in the nineteenth century as traders, and later established large business houses or industrial establishments in the port cities on the West coast of India. Baghdadis were well

educated in Jewish lore, comparatively wealthy, and spoke Arabic, or in a few cases, Persian. None of them ever adapted an Indian language as their mother tongue as the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews did. The Baghdadi Jewish community was relatively new, comparing to the two others, Cochin and Bene Israel. They Baghdadis numbered about 5,000 in 1951. Unlike the Bene Israel and the Cochinis, comparatively few Baghdadis went to Israel; most of them immigrated later to the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States of America and Canada.

Each of three groups maintained their separate identity, with little mixture. By living in the welcoming Indian society, the Indian Jews were not immune from the adoption of some customs and some Hindu influences that still remain evident in their daily practices. The groups were influenced by Indian culture in varying degrees. The Bene Israel were the most Indian in dress, language, and mode of life, the Cochinis less so, and the Baghdadis least of all. Though living in a welcoming environment and in peaceful relationships with their Hindu, Muslim, and Christian neighbors, and in case of Bene Israel in total isolation from the rest of the Jewish world, did not lead

them to the dispossession of their Judaism and they never adopted any customs that transgressed Jewish ritual.

Therefore, I find it very interesting to explore how Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, who have for centuries lived in India under circumstances that are very unlike those which have had to be endured by Jews in many other lands, succeeded in maintaining their Jewish identity. What were the factors that made their Judaism survive in an extraordinary vital form? What can we, American Jews, learn from the whole happy story of Bene Israel and Cochin Jewish communities? What are the factors that helped them to overcome the challenge of assimilation?

To answer these questions, we will proceed in the study and explore first the social and cultural history of Bene Israel and Cochin Jews. At the same time, we will attempt to answer the question "Who are the Jews of India?" by exploring the conditions in which their identity was established and maintained. Second, we will explore the historical factors of Indian nationalism, Zionism and later immigration of Indian Jews to Israel, which have affected the demographic situation and, as a result, later changed communal and religious life in Indian Jewish communities in

India and Israel. Third, we will examine how their Indian-Jewish identity was expressed in observance of religious rituals.

Unfortunately, for the last millennia history has not been kind to Jews. Most of the world's Jewry has been living as a minority in a Christian or Islamic society and being influenced by that society. At one time or another suffering was the common ordeal in almost all lands of Jewish dispersion often taking similar shape and form: expulsion, blood accusations, religious discrimination, and outright murders. This suffering is clearly evident in most preserved historical writings of almost every Jewish community in the world. And, in most of the historical courses that are taught to American students today, it is the most stressed aspect. On the basis of such calculation, we come dangerously close to presuming that for the Jew, fame comes in proportion to his struggle for survival. The Jews of India have been an obscure factor in the context of world Jewry because of the very significant fact that India is one of the very few countries in the entire world where anti-Semitism, in any shape or form, has been unknown. Indian Jewish identity emerged in an environment, which for the most part was hospitable, affectionate and nurturing.

The study of Indian Jews, therefore, compels us to modify our understanding of what it means to be Jewish and to change our understanding of Jewish identity worldwide. Our assumptions about Jewish identity as defensive in character, being based on European and Middle Eastern experience, will be challenged by learning about the Indian Jewish experience. It is, therefore, important to learn about life in Indian Jewish communities - far and isolated from other Jews, which have developed in a similar way as in America, with a palpable absence of anti-Semitism.

Furthermore, learning about the life experiences of Indian Jews will help us determine whether there are discernible parallels between Indian Jewry and American Jewish society; specifically, whether based on the common as well as unique identity experiences of the other community, it is possible to formulate an agenda for American Jews that will strengthen their Jewish identity.

The Jews of Cochin

Beginnings. Theories of origins.

The origins of the Jewish settlement in the state of Cochin, the part of Kerala on the western, Malabar coast, about 650 miles south of Bombay ruled by the Cochin maharaja, are unclear. As early as the middle of the first century B.C.E., Greek, Roman, and Arab travelers learned to sail from southern Arabia to the Indian coast. They could make the trip in about 40 days by crossing the Arabian Sea. They traded pepper, spices, ivory, teak, peacock feathers, and other valuables. It is very possible that Jewish traders also traveled this route. A legend told by the oldest Christian community in Kerala recounts that in 52 C.E., St. Thomas arrived at Cranganore, then a principal port, about 20 miles north of the present harbor of Cochin. St. Thomas stayed in the Jewish quarter of the town and made hundreds of converts, 40 of them Jews. There is no firm basis for this legend, but there is some circumstantial evidence that St. Thomas may have come to India at about that time - supporting the theory that a Jewish settlement then existed in Cochin.

A number of scholars suggest that Jews reached India as early as Talmudic times. The Talmud describes Firuz, who

ruled Babylon between 459 and 483, as "Rasshiya" (the wicked). "Rasshiya" is also a word used by the Jews of Cochin.¹ Other scholars suggest that Jews who took part in the revolt during the reign of Babylonian King Kavadh (486) immigrated to India. And still others propose that Jews had already reached India after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the King of Assyria, Shalmanezzer. However, no documents or archaeological evidence has been found to prove these claims.

The first evidence that proves a Jewish presence in India was found in the Syrian Christian Seminary at Kottayam. A series of inscribed copper plaques dating from the middle of the ninth century tells of grants bestowed by some Rajas on Christians. One set of plaques records a gift to a Christian churchman, bestowing land and a series of rights to this church and congregation at Kollam, possibly the modern town of Quilon. The inscription stipulates that the "Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam shall protect the church and its land." According to Professor N.G.S. Narayanan, the first refers to the guild of Jews and the second refers to

¹ David. G. Mandelbaum, "Social Stratification Among the Jews of Cochin" in *Jews in India*, Thomas A. Timberg, ed., Advent Books Inc., New York, 1986, pp. 60-71

the guild of Christians. It also records signatures of witnesses written in three different scripts; 18 lines in Pahlevi (Old Persian), 10 in Kufic (old Arabic), and three in Hebrew. "That is an early indication of amicable relations between Christians and Jews in Kerala, and between each community and the local Hindu Raja."²

The inscription of greatest importance to the Cochin Jews is on a pair of copper plates, which are still held by Jews of Cochin. The plates were presented to Joseph Rabban, the Leader-Prince of the community. Rabban was from a distinguished Jewish family and came to Cranganore from Yemen. The inscription on the plates records a grant of rights and privileges, made by Raja Bhaskara Ravi Varma to the Jews at "Muyiricode" (later called Cranganore). These privileges are the same as those granted to the Hindu ruling class in Malabar. Jews were given the rights "...to enjoy day lamp, decorative cloth, palanquin, umbrella, kettledrum, trumpet, gateway, arch, arched roof, weapons, and the rest of the seventy-two privileges." They were exempt from the:

² G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1972, pp. 377-78

"... Dues which the inhabitants of the other cities pay to the Royal Palace, and may enjoy the benefits which they enjoy."³ This charter was presented to Joseph Rabban in the year 1000 and included financial advantages as well as symbolic prerogatives of high status. Cranganore and the Jews of the area played an essential role in economic life and commerce. Cranganore was an important port for the spice trade. The Jews assisted the government and contributed to the welfare of all the local people. By the end of the first millennium, the Jews were so well established in Cochin that the ruler thought it wise to mark them for special material benefits, to encourage them in their services and contributions to the state, and to honor them with symbols of high status, comparable to those enjoyed by feudal lords of the martial castes.

In 1341 a great flood of the Periyar River changed the outline of the coast and closed the outlet of the flourishing port of Cranganore. Cochin became the main commercial port and many Jews soon moved there. The authorities gave them land for building homes and exempted

³ S.S. Koder, "Saga of the Jews of Cochin" in *Jews in India*, Thomas A. Timber, ed., Advent Books Inc., New York, pp.121-134

them from taxes and city dues. In 1344, Joseph Azar, the 72nd in line of succession to Joseph Rabban, built the first synagogue outside of Cranganore. In 1498, Vasco da Gama discovered the coast of Malabar and soon the Portuguese came to dominate most parts of Kerala. They imported missionaries and the Inquisition, so that Jews from outlying sections clustered into the Raja of Cochin's realm. However, the coming of the Portuguese brought some benefits to the Jews of Cochin. In 1505 a Portuguese Marrano sold Hebrew books and scrolls of Torah to the Jews of Cochin. Thus, he brought them in closer touch with European Judaic learning and rites.⁴

***Malabar Coast under the rule of Portuguese
and Dutch conquerors. (15th - 18th centuries)***

The Portuguese came to India with a sword in one hand and a cross in the other. The hundred and fifty years (1489-1663) of Portuguese occupancy in Cochin was the darkest period in the history of the Jews of Cochin. The Portuguese hated and persecuted Jews. They brought about the destruction of the community through forced conversions and completed the demolition of the already shattered

⁴ Ibid, p.67

settlement in Cranganore and its cemetery with all the gravestones partially destroyed the Jew Town and the famous Paradesi Synagogue in 1661. The Portuguese also burned the valuable historical book - Sefer Hyashar - a record of the history of the Jews of Cochin from their first arrival in Cranganore to the building of the Jew town. The Jews fled to other parts of the region not under Portuguese rule, and settled Chennamangalam and Parur, where later local government gave them more estates as a sign of appreciation for their loyalty in the war with the Portuguese. Whether from Cranganore or other places, the Jewish refugees did not arrive as paupers. From generation to generation Cochin Jews preserved their tradition and passed stories about their past. In her memoirs, Rubi Daniel tells a historical legend about Jewish refugees from Cranganore, who tried to escape from the Portuguese conquerors:

"They brought with them fabulous amounts of gold coins, diamonds, rubies, gold dust, and other such things. When they went to see the rulers they presented them with small packets of diamonds, which were placed before the ruler and cut open with a golden knife. At once the ruler wrote out the ownership of an island, or hill to the newcomer, who had to pay only a nominal tax to the government. Thus many islands and hills came into the

possession of the Jews, and like other landowners they had to spend money and develop the land and cultivate it."⁵

The persecution of the Jews continued throughout the Portuguese period up until the Dutch conquest. The Dutch attacked Cochin in 1662. They were forced by the Portuguese to withdraw to Ceylon, but did not lose a single life in this battle as a result of the help of Jews. However, Jews paid a heavy penalty for their actions. The Portuguese soldiers looted and burned the Jewish quarter. With the reappearance of the Dutch in 1663, the scattered residents returned to their settlements. Following that changeover came a rise in the fortunes of the Cochin Jews. They regained their past prosperity under the grateful and tolerant Protestant Dutch. Soon there were eight active synagogues, three in the city of Cochin, Mattanchery, two in the suburb of Ernakulam and one in each of the villages of Mallah, Parur, and Chennamangalam. The Dutch needed the Jews' services as the Raja had. The Dutch rule also ended the religious and cultural isolation of the Jews of Cochin from their brethren in European countries. Communication between the Jews of Cochin and of the Netherlands increased

⁵ Rubi Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson. *Ruby of Cochin, an Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*. JPS, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1995, p. 9

and in 1686 a delegation of four men of the Sephardi congregation of Amsterdam, headed by Moses Pereyra De Paiva, arrived in Cochin. The results of their research were compiled in Portuguese and published as a 15-page pamphlet in Amsterdam in 1687. The Jews of Holland gave the Jews of Cochin a great deal of help. In 1690, on the 15th of Av 5450 a consignment of Torah scrolls from Holland arrived in Cochin, and the occasion was celebrated with great festivities by the Cochin Jews, since their scrolls had been burned by the Portuguese.⁶ During the Dutch period, Jews played an important role in the economic development of the country. All trade was in the hands of Jewish merchants.

⁶ David G. Mandelbaum, "Social Stratification among the Jews of Cochin in India and in Israel" in *Jews in India*, Thomas A. Timber ed., Advent Books Inc., New York, 1986, p. 75

Castelike relationships among the Jews of Cochin.

Ezekiel Rahabi (1694-1771) was one of the most prominent and influential men among the Jews of Cochin during much of the eighteen century. From about 1723 to the end of his life, a period of some 49 years, he was the chief merchant for the Dutch in Cochin. He was entrusted by the Raja and the Dutch with many diplomatic missions; he substantially aided families and congregations of Jews and of some Christians as well; he was a man of learning, both religious and secular; and he carried on a voluminous correspondence on commercial, administrative, diplomatic, and religious matters. In one of Rahabi's letters written to a journalist from Amsterdam, he gave an account of the Jews in Cochin at that time. He reported the social separation, which was maintained by a rigid caste system, between Paradesi or "White Jews" and "Black Jews." There was firm evidence that the Paradesi, descended from a mixture of Jewish exiles from Cranganore, were present in India as early as 1000 C.E. - the copper tablets that were granted by Raja to Joseph Rabban. The Paradesi were mostly European in their appearance. The black Jews, whose origins are less clear but are believed to precede the Paradesi,

closely resemble their Indian neighbors. There was no intermarriage between these groups, they did not participate in each other's ceremonies and, in fact, boycotted each other. According to Rahabi, there were some differences in the way they dressed as well as in ritual matters. The majority of Malabar (black) Jews, Rahabi continues, did "not pay heed to the laws of Phylacteries, the Mezuza and the redemption of the first born." The Paradesi were an extremely wealthy community and had extensive ties with the Jews of the Diaspora. The Malabar Jews were poorer than the Paradesi. The Malabar Jews worked primarily in agriculture and cattle rearing, as well as selling and buying poultry and dairy products.⁷ According to the Governor of Cochin Moens (1771-1781), Malabar Jews "are treated by the White Jews with coldness and contempt..." He continues, "The Black Jews are constantly pressing for equality with the White Jews. The latter would not allow this, because they did not look upon Black Jews as original Jews, but considered the majority of them to be the issue

⁷ David G. Mandelbaum, "Social Stratification Among the Jews of Cochin in India and in Israel" in *Jews of India*, Advent Books Inc., New York, pp.80-81

of released slaves, or of the natives of Malabar, who had been proselytes."⁸

In 1792 Cochin passed into the hands of the British under whom the Jews continued their peaceful existence. However, due to the shift in trade from Cochin and the internal debilitation in the community, the position of the White Jews of Cochin came to decline. Probably, another reason for the decline of the Paradesi community was that British officials found no reason at all to favor the Cochin Jews because their linguistic competence at that time did not include a fluent command of English.

Rabbi David D'Beth Hillel was the first European Jew to visit Cochin under British rule. He spent four months with them in 1828-1829 and published his account about them in the Madras in 1832. He reported that during Dutch rule Jews were powerful, wealthy merchants, but "they have sunk weak and are even in the miserable state, living chiefly by the sale of trinkets and furniture purchased in more fortunate days."⁹ The Malabar Jews, on the other hand, were

⁸ Ibid, p. 82

⁹ Ibid, p.84. Fishel, Unknown Jews in Unknown Lands, op. cit., pp. 12-16

portrayed in more favorable terms. Their number was estimated at 1500 families, they had six synagogues, and most of them were artisans. They also were well learned in Hebrew and Scripture, which they translated into the Malayalam language. As Rabbi David D'Beth Hillel stated, they were "much more respectable for moral character and conduct than the White Jews."

In his book "Travels of Rabbi D'Beth Hillel", which was published in Madras in 1832, Rabbi Hillel writes about another group of Cochin Jews. The meshuhrarim, the emancipated ones, who were manumitted slaves of the White Jews and their descendants, as well as former servants and employees who voluntarily became converts but did not join the Malabar Jews.¹⁰ In the 1904 edition of the Jewish Encyclopedia in the article "Cochin Jews", Joseph Ezekiel and Joseph Jacobs depict the situation with meshuhrarim. The former slaves were allowed to undergo rites of conversion. In order to be treated fully as Jews they had to obtain a certificate of emancipation from their masters, which was given only to those who went around and kissed the hands of all White Jews in the city after the

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 89

conversion ceremony and then again at the end of the Yom Kippur service. However, even after the conversion the Brown Jews, as they were known in English, did not have equal rites with their former masters and weren't treated as free men and women. During the services they had to sit on the ground in the synagogue terrace. Meshuhrarim were not called up to read the weekly portion, except on the celebration of Simchat Torah and could not sit at the table with their former masters, except at the Passover Seder. In 1848 the manumitted slaves demanded symbols of higher status and asked for permission to pray inside the synagogue as well as to become equal members of the Paradesi community. They were rejected and only fifty years later, in the beginning of the 20th century, the Meshuhrarim were accepted by White Jews as Jews. However, even then they weren't accepted as social or ritual equals. White Jews were acting in consonance with explicit Kerala precepts of caste ranking, who have secured a high place or themselves in the caste hierarchy by adopting aspects of the life-style of the two highest castes in India.¹¹

¹¹ Nathan Katz, *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1999, p.54

Cochin Jews tried to lead a God-centered life and were preoccupied with ritual purity and pollution. A pure diet was one of the most important features of their ritual observance. They, like the highest, purest groups among Hindus, were absorbed in ritual acts of the day, the year, and the life cycle. The minhagim of the Cochin Jews represent a creative synthesis that accentuate Jewish traditions, while at the same time incorporating comparable elements from Hindu culture.

The ritual observances of the Cochin Jews served as a means of periodically reaffirming their status in the Indian caste hierarchy. They secured a high status in the caste hierarchy by adopting aspects of the life-style and the practices of the two highest castes in Kerala, Nambudiri Brahmans and Nayars. However, Cochin Jews had not scrupulously ensured that their religious patterns did not violate Jewish ethical and legal principals.

Observance of kashruth is a fascinating example of the interweaving between Jewish and Indian observances. Observance of a very strict and complex dietary code bestows a high status. But the presence of meat in the Jewish diet resembles low-caste behavior. There are more

examples of convergence in Jewish and Hindu practices: Cochin Jews use ritual Hebrew paralleling Hindu use of Sanskrit. They remove their footwear in the synagogue. They are highly concerned about family purity and avoid women in niddah. At the same time, a number of Cochin Jews practices have been borrowed from the highest Kerala Brahman caste, the Nambudiris. For example, the various Jew towns in Kerala were designed in a similar manner to the Brahman towns. Individuals were dependent on the synagogue or temple, which possessed vast estates.¹²

According to David Mandelbaum, who spent a few weeks among the Cochin Jews in 1937, all three groups, Malabar, Paradesis, and Meshuhrarim, were still kept separate in important ways. Malabar and Meshuhrarim Jews were not counted as part of a minyan in the Paradesi synagogues and no intermarriage had yet taken place. Despite the inclination in the financial status among the Cochin Jews, there was a sense of security, self-confidence, and in

¹² N. Katz and E.S. Goldberg "The Ritual Enactments of Indian-Jewish Identity of the Cochin Jews" in *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 20-39

synagogue celebrations - a gaiety that lifted their spirits and made a visitor get a lift in being with them.¹³ In the major aspects of Judaic ritual and belief, all three groups were equally observant. As followers of Judaism they are among the most devout people in the world, and adhere strictly to the tenets of their religion. The center and symbol of their religious life is their synagogue. They all honored Shabbat and holy days, prized Judaic learning, and were active in the movement to return Jews to Zion.

Jewish Identity of the Cochin Jews.

Observance of Passover in the Cochin Community.

In every country where Jews lived throughout the centuries they adapted some local customs and observances. Cochin Jews, who found in India a truly comfortable home and lived there happily and securely for centuries, were not an exception. However, the uniqueness of the Cochin Jewish community, as well as the other Indian Jewish communities, was in their successful perseverance of the Jewish faith and cultural traditions in hospitable Indian society. How did Indian conditions differ from those in other places of the Diaspora that contributed to the

¹³ Lois Rabinovitz, *Far East Mission*, Johannesburg, 1952, pp.113-20

perseverance of the Jewish tradition and prevented Cochin Jews from the loss of their Jewish identity? What were the factors that stopped Cochin Jews from total assimilation into Indian society?

A crucial distinction between India and the rest of the Diaspora is that in India Jews, whose acculturation process resembled general patterns everywhere in the world, did not end in assimilation.¹⁴ Indian culture fundamentally differed from the rest of the cultures where Jews lived in Diaspora. In India an immigrant group gained status precisely by maintaining its own identity and observing its own customs and traditions. This factor greatly contributed to the perseverance of the Cochin Jewish community. In order to feel equal in their surroundings and adapt to life in Indian society, Cochin Jews did not have to change their life style and loose their Jewish individuality. In India, social identity involves social position, power, and place. Such social position is never simply a given, it must be established ritually. Cochin Jews used their ritual observances to position themselves within Kerala complex

¹⁴ Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2000, pp. 1-7

caste system by ritually appropriating and enacting Indian symbols of power.¹⁵

By adopting some customs and traditions from the practices of the two highest castes in Kerala, Cochin Jews have secured for themselves a high status in Hindu society. Their piety and strict religious observances contributed to the elevation of their status among their Hindu, Muslim, and Christian neighbors. They adapted some aspects of the life-style and practices of the two highest castes in Kerala, the Nambudiri Brahmans and the Nayars. Those two castes represented different features of the power in Indian civilization: Nambudiri Brahmin priests the asceticism and piousness; the Nayars the nobility and political power. Cochin Jews succeeded in balancing between the prescribed halachah Jewish ritual observances and have adapted from the two highest castes symbols of piety and nobility thus establishing a distinguished system of Jewish minhagim and observances.

The fine balance that the Cochin Jews maintained between the worlds of Judaism and Hinduism is evident in

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 69

their Passover observances. Asceticism and additions to the normative Jewish practices required by halachah that they have showed in those observances, has served to their full integration into Kerala's social system. In this chapter we will look at some of the customs and observances related to the preparation and celebration of Passover in the Cochin Jewish community, which clearly encompasses Jewish traditions and customs along with Hindu values of purity and asceticism. Judaism has ample indigenous resources that could easily be assimilated to reflect two of the four priestly-ascetic brahmanical symbols:

- A hereditary priesthood of kohanim, paralleling the brahmins;
- A fastidious system of laws of kashruth, or dietary regulations;
- Complex laws governing family purity;
- Ascetic tendencies in certain holidays, Yom Kippur, and especially Passover.¹⁶

Passover in Cochin - in addition to its familiar meanings i.e., a celebration of the Exodus story and a spring-time agricultural festival - obtained another,

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 70

additional meaning of "the reassertion of the group's high-caste status, actualized through exemplary group asceticism and a period of liminal separation from the non-Jewish world" and assisted the process of reassertion of the group's high-caste status in the Kerala society.¹⁷

When compared to the rest of the Jewish world, Cochin Jews went far beyond in their observances than prescribed by the Halachah. In Jewish homes worldwide the actual cleaning of the chametz (leavening) and preparation for the celebration of Passover begins thirty days before the festival. Cochin Jews, unlike the rest of the Jews, went far beyond in their observances and exhibited strikingly ascetic behavior.

The preparation for Passover in Cochin had begun right after Chanukah. Pesach work increasingly dominated life in the Cochin Jew Town from the beginning of the month of Tevet until the middle of Nisan - about one hundred days. First, women began to clean the rice, spices for cooking, coconut, and coffee. Rice that they used for Passover had husk on it and it needed to be cleaned. Here is what Rubi

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 73

Daniel writes in her memoirs about preparation and cleaning of rice for Passover, "Then came the process of cleaning of the rice. All this was done with the help of a mortar and pestle, kept separate for Passover. We had a big stone, thick and high, with a cavity in the middle. The pestle was made of a thick and long piece of wood. One end had an iron cap and on the other an iron ring. The former one was used for grinding and the latter for separating the rice from the husk and polishing."¹⁸

During the last thirty days of preparation, and the actual time of the Passover observance, Cochanim lived in isolation from their neighbors. Many families even had a smaller house; separate from the one we usually stayed and after Purim some members of the community moved to their Pesach houses, to make sure that women had "a free hand" to do what they needed.¹⁹ The rooms were scrubbed for storing a separate set of utensils, pots, plates, and crockery for Passover. After Purim, houses were painted afresh and wooden furniture was stripped and repolished. They drained the wells and scrubbed them to make sure that wells were

¹⁸ Ruby Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson, *Ruby of Cochim*, JPS, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1995, p.154

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 155

not unclean and had no hametz. Here is how Rubi Daniel described this time consuming and even dangerous procedure, "Each family had to clean their well for Pesach. Two people would go down into the well to draw the water out; then they would cover it with a bamboo mat so no hametz would fall in. My Dolly Aunty was one to get down in the well, while others would stand on the side, and she would pass the bucket up. Our well was a little bit small and very deep. I would be the last person to go down that well!"²⁰

Special preparations were made to make the matzah unleavened bread) ready for the eight days of Passover. Each grain of wheat was inspected three times, to make sure that water did not get inside the grain. First it was inspected by non-Jewish servants and than twice by Jewish women. After the third inspection non-Jews could not touch even the shelf on which the container with the wheat rested. In this restriction, as well as in the restriction of wine preparation (the shelf or the table on which the Kosher for Passover wine sits could not be touched by a Gentile, otherwise the wine becomes non-kosher) we can see that in their observances, Cochin Jews exceeded halachic

²⁰ Ibid, p.155

norms for the preparation of matzah and reflected Hindu practices of food purity.²¹

Regular matzah, the one that was used during all eight days of the festival was prepared a week in advance, but matzah shemura, six cakes that were used for the two nights of Passover seders were made only in the morning, on the day of Passover after the ritual of the burning of the last hamets was performed. It was called massa day. This ritual of preparation and baking of matzah shemura cakes was the climax of the Pesah work. In order to keep this flour pure those cakes were baked very close in time to the actual seders. The process of the baking shemura matzah was performed by six women, each took responsibility for the preparation and baking of one cake. First women washed themselves and put on clean clothes. One of the men prepared the dough and before it was divided into six portions one of the women said a blessing and put small portions of the dough, called (hallah - the portion of the dough that during Temple days was set aside for the

²¹ Nathan Katz, *Who are the Jews of India?*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, pp.73-89

kohanim)²² into the oven to burn in fire. Then the women started to roll the matzah shemura with the rolling pins, which had brass bells inside and made a beautiful sound. This ceremony was also accompanied by the blowing of the shofar, singing of Passover songs, and the chanting of the Haggadah.

Withdrawal and separation are common practices in some Jewish communities, but Cochin Jews went much further in their separation from the world of their neighbors that the halacha prescribes. Usually very sociable, the month or two prior to Passover, culminating in almost total isolation during the eight days of the festival itself, Cochin Jews became increasingly isolated from their non-Jewish friends. But the separation was temporary and right after the festival came to a close, the regular, friendly interactions were renewed as usual. The Jews' high status was re-established and they returned to and reaffirmed the society in which they had lived.²³

Being dispersed throughout the world have always made the Jewish people adaptable to the new conditions of life

²² N. Katz "The Ritual Enactments of the Cochin Jews", Nathan Katz, ed., Studies of Indian Jewish Identity, Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, p.33

in different cultures and social systems. The Cochin Jewish community is not an exception from this general pattern. However, unlike other Jewish communities, which in their seeking a comfortable home in exile and in their desire to fit into the general structure of the society in which they have lived, lost their Jewish identity and assimilated, the Cochin Jews showed an exceptionally accomplished example of how a small religio-ethnic community can adapt into the larger society.²⁴ By adapting some of the rituals and customs of the highest caste in Kerala that did not contradict Jewish law, they not only preserved their Judaism and retained a unique Jewish identity, but also secured for themselves a high status in Hindu society.

Zionism. Immigration to Israel.

The news about the formation of the Zionist movement reached Cochin Jews at the end of the 19th century. Cochin Jews always dreamed of Zion. Even before the founding of the State of Israel, they sang about Zion in their songs.

²³ Ibid, p. 39

One of the Malayalam songs, Lokam Irubhagangalil,
which was written by Isaac Moseh Roby, (nicknamed
"Kakicha",) is very popular even today.

When the nation spirit of the Jews
Living in both hemispheres of the earth
Revives toward God,
Zion will be protected.

The hope we have had since ancient times
To return to the land
Given us by the One God
Has not faded.

Brethren of the Diaspora,
Listen to the song of our future.
As long as Jews are alive
Our hope will endure.

²⁴ Nathan Katz, Who are the Jews of India?, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p.88

The House of Jacob will again reside there,
 Through the sacred love of God.
 By the grace of the Almighty God
 The Raja Mashiah will rule over her.

The city of Jerusalem
 Will be rejuvenated like the nesher
 And remain in splendor and renown.

The hope you have given us
 May you be pleased to fulfill,
 And may you protect those who sing
 In praise of your worship.

Our ancient hope,
 The hope of returning to our ancient abode
 Where David resided,
 Has not faded away.²⁵

Here is what Rubi Daniel writes about the Zionist
 movement in Cochin, "In Cochin we had been following all
 the news about Israel, in the newspapers and from visitors

²⁵ Rubi Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson, Ruby of Cochin, JPS, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1955, p. 92

who came into town. Satto Koder had started the Habonim, a Zionist youth group, in Cochin, and we called it Gedud Shingly (Shingly Batallion), after the original Jews of Cranganore or Shingly."²⁶

When in 1948 Cochin Jews learned that the new State of Israel had been established, was welcoming immigrants from all corners of the Diaspora, and would help them move and get settled in the Holy Land, most of Malabar decided to make an aliya.

The emigration began in 1948; in 1952-54 a few hundred children age 12-16 were taken to Israel by shelihim (emissaries), representatives of the Jewish Agency; and in 1953-55 most of the Malabar Jews emigrated. They were very strongly influenced by Religious as well as by Political Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel impelled them to move to Israel.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 91-102

Some of the White Jews also went but, since the wealthier families had some properties in India, they were less quick to leave the country. Most of the Paradesis did not decide to leave Cochin until much later, in the 1970s.²⁷

Here is what Ruby Daniels writes in her memoirs about immigration to Israel:

"Why were the Cochin Jews eager to go to Israel? It was certainly not because they were persecuted in India, as the Jews were in so many other places in the world. But, for them, Israel was kadosh (holy); that was the first reason. Then for some, there was the chance to improve their situation. Some were living in poverty without work. Some wouldn't work for non-Jews, because they didn't want to work on Shabbat and Festivals, but they didn't earn much working on their own. Many were afraid to send their children outside for education, especially girls, for fear they might go away from the caste and get converted. There were others who had good positions - not rich, but they had work and were eating three times a day... The White Jews thought in Israel there was nothing then, nothing but a lot

²⁷ Ibid, p. 95

of hard work. Why should they leave their comfortable life and come to Israel?"

In Israel, the Malabar Jews were placed in several moshavim or kibbutzim. For a variety of reasons life was extremely difficult for a very long period. In Israel most of the Jews had to earn their living as farmers. Very few of them had done so in Cochin, most having been small shopkeepers, government employees, and teachers, while a few had been well-established merchants. The land assigned to them was not very good. Instead of having the synagogue's endowment and the Maharaja's protection to rely on, they now were dependent upon the instructions assigned to them by the resettlement agency, which in turn, had to depend on a complex body of remote governmental agencies. These resettlement agencies had none too bright a view of their charges; some thought the Cochin Jews were too slight in physique for heavy farm work; others believed that they were too irresponsible about the time schedule necessary

for successful farming; most thought that they were much too inclined to engage in trading in Jerusalem and that far too much of their time, resources, and energies went into religious and domestic celebrations.²⁸

Since emigrating to Israel, the most significant change for the Malabar Jews was the change in the pace and the focus of their lives. The routine of farm work, the time and energy they spent on the farm, prevented them from being as punctilious in their religious observances as they had been in Cochin. Most of the Malabar Jews were not happy with this facet of their new life in Israel. Their life and rhythms were no longer very different from those of their neighbors, and the measure of the religious rhythm had to be in tune with the pulse of the work rhythm. Those newcomers from Cochin who lived in kibbutzim amongst emigrants from Europe and America had to face another challenge - discrimination. Here is what Rubi Daniels writes about her life in kibbutz Neot Mordechai, "Before coming here I knew all about the conditions of Israel. I did not expect anything much different, but what I did not expect was the behavior of the people. Most of the members

²⁸ Gilbert Kushner, *Immigrants from India in Israel, Planned Change in an Administered Community*, Tucson Aritz., 1973

were from Europe. There were a few boys and girls from Cochin here, so I thought we could get on. But we did not get a good treatment. They thought we have come from some jungle. Everywhere we felt discrimination, and I still do. No one came forward to help and talk to me. There was an American who was looking after the interests of the Cochins, many of whom did not know English. But he did not talk to me or ask what I am doing here..... The Cochin people would talk among themselves, saying, "This is not a place for us. We can't mix with others, because others don't want to mix with us. The culture is completely different. Why stay and work and slog for them? For what?"²⁹

Today, most of the Cochin Jews live in moshavim, such as Mesillat Zion and Maoz near Jerusalem, Nevatim in the south, and Kefar Yuval in the north, as well as in some urban neighborhoods. Now called "Cochinim" in Hebrew, they are set off today as an Israeli edah or ethnic group of more than 4,000 people.

²⁹ David G. Mandelbaum, "Social Stratification among the Jews of Cochin in India and in Israel *Jews in India*, T. A. Timberg, ed., Advent Books Inc., New York, 1986, pp. 98-111

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, very few Jews remain in Cochin. Back in Jew Town, visitors to the exquisite Paradesi synagogue join the remaining handful of fewer than 30 Jews. Since there are so few Jews left in Cochin, all of them without exception meet every Sabbath in the Paradesi synagogue and pray together. The community is united and all ethnic barriers, which existed in the past, have fallen. The members take part in one another's ceremonies and try to preserve what is left of the once glorious community.³⁰

³⁰ Eliyahu Barmouth, The Jews of Cochin, In Search of Roots, Jerusalem 2001, p.20

The Bene Israel Jews.

Origins and early history of the Bene Israel.

The heartland of the Bene Israel settlement was, and still is, the Konkan coast of western India, stretching from Bombay up to Goa. A lack of reliable evidence prevents us from determining the actual origin or direct lineage of the Bene Israel and the exact time that the group appeared in western India. Bene Israel traditions maintain that they are descendants of one of Ten Tribes of Israel, but from that part of the population, which was not deported after the Assyrians defeated the Kingdom of Israel in the eighth-century B.C.E. Some scholars proposed different theories of origin of the Bene Israel community: that they arrived in the reign of King Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E.; that they came from Yemen in the middle of the first millennium C.E.; that they were part of the dispersal that took place after the destruction of the Second Temple in C.E. 70; or that the Bene Israel came to India in the fifth or sixth century C.E. from southern Arabia or Persia.³¹

³¹ Joan G. Roland, *Jews In British India, Identity in Colonial Era*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover and London, p.11

1000 C.E. to about 1600 C.E.) the Bene Israel were "discovered" by a foreign Jew called David Rahabi, who recognized them as Jews because of their observances. Cut off for centuries from contact with the mainstream of Jewish life, the Bene Israel gradually forgot all but a few essential elements of the Jewish religion. They continued to observe dietary laws and circumcision and abstained from work on the Sabbath. To this day the rural Bene Israel are known as "Shanwar Telis" (Saturday Oilmen). They live in the same area as "Shukrewar Telis" (Friday Oilman) who are Muslim, and "Somwar Telis" (Monday Oilman) who are Hindus of the sudra caste. However, only Saturday Oilmen are known not to do any work on Saturdays, nor cook food and kindle fire. There were other facts that suggested that Bene Israel were really Jews.

They celebrated the festivals of the New Year, Day of Atonement, Passover, Purim, and Feast of Ingathering, reciting the Shema on these and other important occasions. An important feature of Bene Israel tradition was, and continues to be, the practice of making special offerings. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, no other Jewish community has so consistently continued to observe this kind of ritual observance. Although the Bene Israel

observed by no means all the rituals in details prescribed in the Book of Leviticus, it still remains a remarkable coincidence that most of the offerings customary to Bene Israel are analogous in purpose and have a definite resemblance to Biblical prescriptions.³³

In spite of the lack of evidence of Bene Israel's connection to Yemenite Jewry, some scholars believed that the original Bene Israel came from Yemen in the 6th century C.E. Others contemplated that Bene Israel ancestors were Yemenite Jewish merchants who came to the western shores of India later in the Middle ages. But the Bene Israel remembrance of precepts from the Torah and incompetence in Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, which were compiled between the 3rd and 5th century, as well as traditions from the post-Biblical refute this theory. Some theories about Bene Israel origins assume that their ancestors were of the tribe of Reuben (Reuben is a very common name among Bene Israel) who came to India from Persia by sea in order to escape Assyrian captivity. According to the historical account "Masa'ot Shelomo" (Travels of Solomon) written by Solomon Reineman and published in Vienna in 1884,

³³ Ibid, pp. 3-32

"The group called the Bene Israel were of those exiled by Shalmanezzar, King of Assyria, before the destruction of the First Temple. They had settled in Persia and did not return at the time of the building of the Second Temple..... In the year 612 when Ali Ibn Aby Talib fought with Yuzgadar, King of Persia, and took his land from him, there was a time of trouble such as no other, which befell all the inhabitants of the land, even the Bene Israel, for this man Ali persecuted all the lands which he conquered, forced them to change their religion to Islam, and ruled over them by the sword; all those who could escape did so, both Jews and Persians. They came to the city of abu-Shahar and dwelt there about twenty years. They built small boats and ferries in order to cross over in them to east India, because they had heard that the Indians were pagans and would not only refrain from persecuting them but would refuse to convert others to their religion even if the latter wished to do so. After the Jews and the Parsis finished their work on the boats, they sailed away in them and headed for Bombay."³⁴

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 339-349

Some scholars claim that the ancestors of Bene Israel were Asher and Zebulun, who lived in the Upper Galilee, an area famous for its oil-pressing industry. However, despite the fact that any of the theories could be the actual story of the Bene Israel's first settlement in India, no documents regarding their origins have yet been discovered.

From the perspective of comparative Jewish history, given their long isolation, the maintenance of some Jewish traditions by Bene Israel seems remarkable. For the rest, they slowly assimilated into their surroundings. Having no Hebrew prayer books, Bible, or Talmud, they forgot most of their Hebrew language and prayers.³⁵

Jewish Revival in the Bene Israel Jewish Community.

Influences of the Christian Missionaries and Cochin Jews.

We cannot be sure where the tradition ends and theorizing begins. However, most scholars agree that David Rahabi helped Bene Israel to rediscover their Judaism. He chose three men from the most prominent Bene Israel families - the Jhiradkars, Shapurkars, and Rajpurkars- and taught them the basic elements of Judaism and the Hebrew

³⁵ Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India, Identity in Colonial Era*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover and London, p. 13

language, along with prayers and blessings. He trained them to officiate at all rites of passage according to accepted Jewish ritual, and to serve as judges in religious matters. These leaders were called Kajis. They traveled throughout the Konkan to officiate at ceremonies and to settle disputes.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Bene Israel started to move from the villages to the towns of Pen, Panvel, and Thana, and then to Bombay, which was developing under British rule. There were no Bene Israel synagogues or prayer halls until the establishment in Bombay of the first Bene Israel synagogue in 1876. The synagogue was known as Sha'ar ha-Rachmim and the first hazzanim were Cochin Jews. Until the establishment of this synagogue, Bene Israel had prayed in the homes of the prominent families.³⁶

Regular contacts between the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews did not begin until 1826, when idealistic and knowledgeable Cochin Jews arrived in Bombay. One of the most effective and beloved teachers was Shelomo Shurrabi, who lived among the Bene Israel from 1838 until his death

³⁶ Ibid, p. 14

in 1856. Along with the teachers of Judaism from Cochin, the Christian missionaries who, after the ban on missionaries was lifted in 1813, exerted a vital influence upon Bene Israel Jewish education. The missionaries became very active in Bombay and also in some parts of Konkan, especially where there was the largest concentration of Bene Israel Jews. Protestant missionaries established many primary schools, not only for boys, but for girls as well, making available to Indian children (Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Jewish alike) knowledge of the English language, Christian doctrine and the Gospel. All students were required to memorize the Ten Commandments, as well as some Christian catechism. Translation into Marathi, printing and circulation of the Scriptures - both the Old and the New Testament - all constituted very vital features of missionary work.³⁷ The missionaries had hoped that Jews, already monotheists, would convert to Christianity and accept Christ as the Messiah. From the missionaries' point of view, they saw in the Bene Israel's willingness to listen to their preaching and to attend all their classes,

³⁷ Shirley B. Isenberg, "Paradoxical Outcome of Meeting of Bene Israel and Christian Missionaries in 19th Century India" in *Jews in India*, Thomas A. Timberg, ed., Advent Books Inc., New York, 1986, p. 350

on secular as well as on Christian religious subjects, a phenomenon unthinkable among Jewish communities outside India, which encouraged them to expect that the Bene Israel could easily be won over to Christianity in large numbers.³⁸

However, the Bene Israel rarely took the final step of conversion. They would reply to missionaries arguments, "We do not know the replies to your questions; our learned men elsewhere do; ask them."³⁹

The Bene Israel were of a special interest to the Reverend John Wilson of the Free Church of Scotland, who arrived in Bombay in 1829 and continued to be the most important missionary in the Konkan until his death in 1875. He was a remarkable man, a scholar and an erudite writer on theology, philosophy, various religions, linguistics, and Indian archeology. He served as President of the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society for seven years and was one of the founders of Bombay University in 1875.⁴⁰ In 1831

³⁸ Ibid, p. 351

³⁹ Ibid, p.351-352

⁴⁰ Berry Isenberg, "The Bene Israel Villagers of Kolaba District: Generations, Culture Change, Changing Identities" in *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, Nathan Katz, ed., Manohar, New Delhi, 1995, p.94

Wilson had published his Rudiments of Hebrew Grammar in Marathi. In a pre-publication announcement he explained:

"This Grammar is intended for the benefit of the native Israelites in the Bombay Presidency, whose number is estimated at 8,000. In addition to an explanation, and an exemplification of the different parts of speech, it will contain an account of the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood, the Ten Commandments, Selected Moral Sentences, and passages relating to the messiah contained in the Old Testament, and contrasted with the corresponding ones in the New, both in Hebrew and Murathee languages, so as to form a set of useful and constructive exercises."⁴¹

By 1836, 250 Bene Israel children, one-third of whom were girls, were attending the Reverend Dr. Wilson schools. Learning the English language and secular subjects opened up for Bene Israel the world of science and literature. However, not only did some of the graduates from the schools become doctors, lawyers, engineers, nurses, and teachers, many of them also became proficient in the Hebrew

⁴¹ Quoted from a pre-publication announcement of the book. The Oriental Christian Spectator 2/7, July 1831, p.9

language. The schools taught them Hebrew so well that it gave Bene Israel students access to all Jewish writings. Some of the Wilson's students became so proficient in the Hebrew language they later translated from Hebrew to Marathi many Hebrew classical writings. One of highest priorities of the Christian missionaries was that Bene Israel, already monotheists, eventually would convert to Christianity. In Christian missionary schools, Bene Israel absorbed the Protestant emphasis on the importance of the Bible and became less concerned about rabbinical teachings and halaha. However, the mission schools did not make many converts among the Bene Israel. As regards the Scottish mission schools, as late as 1854 after Reverend John Wilson had tried for twenty-five years, he admitted that he had not converted a single Bene Israel. Shirley B. Isenberg who has done research into this phenomena in some depth found the following facts, "For the entire nineteenth century I have found references to not more than three Bene Israel individuals who converted to Christianity, What is more, for two of those three converted Bene Israel I have found

contemporary accounts of the circumstances under which they retracted and were later re-admitted to Judaism."⁴²

At the same time, when the Christian missionaries were very active in Konkan, Jewish teachers, hazanim, introduced Bene Israel to the synagogue liturgy. Learning by rote, many Bene Israel were able to repeat long passages in Hebrew by heart. The Jewish teachers were called Cochin Jews, with whom Bene Israel had had infrequent contacts and occasionally sought guidance on Jewish religious matters in previous years. The Cochin Jews concentrated on explaining and inculcating the ways of halaha. They opened a whole new world, a Jewish world, to the Bene Israel Jewish community.

The Bene Israel community benefited from both the intense instruction of Christian missionaries and the new inspiring experience of learning from devoted Jewish teachers from Cochin. However, as if by some collective instinct, the Bene Israel almost unanimously rejected Christianity as a religion even while absorbing from the missionary teaching a maximum of secular enlightenment,

⁴² Shirley B. Isenberg, "Paradoxical Outcome of Meeting of Bene Israel and Christian Missionaries in 19th Century India" in *Jews in India*, Thomas A. Timberg, ed., Advent Books Inc., 1986, p. 354

knowledge of Hebrew and of English, and through these languages, the world of Judaism.⁴³

In 1875, in Bombay, Bene Israel established an important school of their own, called The Israelite School. This school was administrated and staffed by the Bene Israel community. In spite of many obstacles, the school managed to secure sufficient funds and also a government grant, which enabled poor Bene Israel children to continue their education beyond primary school, when they otherwise would have become dropouts, doomed to child labor. The school set high standards. The curriculum included instruction in Hebrew and Jewish studies and it was closed on Saturdays and Jewish holidays.

Acquaintance with the ceremonials and their heritage through the teachings of the Cochin Jews, numerous translations from Hebrew into the Marathi language undertaken by the Bene Israel themselves in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the spread of English, which

⁴³ Ibid, p.355

enabled them to read Jewish books published in England and the United States increased the Bene Israel's sense of belonging to a larger Jewish community, gradually reducing their isolation and their dependence on other Jewish communities.

**Synagogue-Centered Organization
of the Bene Israel community**

The teachers from Cochin introduced Bene Israel to the structure of the synagogue-centered communal organization. Synagogues were built in Bombay as well as in the villages where relatively large numbers of Bene Israel families were living. Here is what Shirley Berry Isenberg writes about a typical Bene Israel congregation:

"The leader of the congregation, mukkadam, was often the same person who was already headman of the Bene Israel families in a given village. He was assisted by four or five local Bene Israel elderly councilors, Choglas. And there was a local Bene Israel treasurer, Gabbai, and a local Bene Israel Shamash, sexton and herald for the congregation. The Hazan, was until the twentieth century either a Cochini, a Bagdadi, or Yemenite Jew "imported" from Bombay. The Hazan usually also performed the duties of Shochet (ritual slaughterer of fowl or goats), Mohel (ritual circumciser), and Sofer (Hebrew scribe and teacher). The Jamat (general assembly) consisted of all the adult males of the congregation. Next to each synagogue was a small building housing a regulation-size mikvah, a pool for ritual immersion and bath. The more affluent Bene Israel made donations in cash or in kind. Synagogue income

also accrued from the custom of bidding for the privilege of reading from the Torah and of reciting blessings accompanying each reading."⁴⁴

Whether in urban or in rural areas, for Bene Israel the synagogue become the focal point of their social and communal life. Between 1840 and the close of the nineteenth century Bene Israel had founded no fewer than seventeen synagogues scattered all over the Konkan and Bombay, as well as outside of the Konkan area - in Ahmedabad, Karachi and Poona.

India under the British Rule.

Social Changes in the Bene Israel Community.

The British presence affected the way in which the Jewish communities developed, related to each other and to other Indian groups, the extent to which they identified with other Indians or with the colonial rulers, their attitudes toward Indian political aspirations, and their eventual relationship with Zionism. The position of the

⁴⁴ Shirley Berry Isenberg, "The Bene Israel Villagers of Kolaba District: Generations, Culture Change, Changing Identities" in *Studies of Jewish Indian Identity*, N. Katz, ed., Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, p. 101

Jewish communities changed under the British so much that the eventual departure of the British greatly influenced the decision of Jews to remain in India or to leave.⁴⁵

Indian resentment at the discrimination in the higher ranks of the administration and the army was further fueled by growing racial discrimination by the British. India was regarded as a conquered country and its people as a subject of race: official opinion believed that no one but an Englishman could do anything. The British were religiously and intellectually arrogant towards Indians, and exclusive. As British attitudes of racial superiority became more pronounced and policies discriminated increasingly against the westernized elite, the English educated Indians, who had initially supported and collaborated with the British, now viewed their rules more and more as colonial exploiters and finally took a more positive view of themselves.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Joan G. Roland, "Indian-Jewish Identity of the Bene Israel during the British Raj" in *Studies in Indian Jewish Identity*, N. Katz, ed., Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, p.125

⁴⁶ Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India, Identity in Colonial Era*, University Press of England, Hanover and London, 1989, p.35

By the middle of the nineteenth century, western religious ideas and modes of thought had started to affect certain Indian leaders. Under the influence of such leaders as Ram Mohan Roy and Dedendranath Tagore, Indian society was overshadowed by the interest of nationalism. The urge toward Indian independence was expressed in opposition of the landlords, orthodox religious groups, and the old ruling elite to the government. The development of the vitality in regional languages that expressed itself in literature and newspapers, as well as the frustration of increasing numbers of graduates from Indian university, who could not serve in the governmental offices, contributed to a heightened sense of Indian identity.

The British subdivision of Indian society is worthy of special attention. The British not only profoundly changed Bene Israel identity but the very nature of group identity. In order to analyze the changes that took place in the caste system in the 19th-20th centuries we have to learn about the basis of Indian society - the structure of caste. The concept of caste can serve as a focus for exploring identity and social change in the Bene Israel community.

Although caste was not necessarily the most significant aspect of the Indian Jewish environment, it was certainly a unique feature - as distinct from the experience of other Jewish communities in the world. Caste cannot be overlooked in any study of groups in India. Hinduism is prepared to affirm, in a culturally pluralistic way, the truth of all religions. Indian civilization is marked by a form of absorption, of tolerance, of acceptance of "unity in diversity".⁴⁷

The term Jati, is derived from the root jan or ja, "to be born". It conveys the sense of nature, character, or class in the biological sense. According to scholarly analysis, castes can be distinguished by three characteristics: separation in matters of marriage and contact (direct or indirect; food); division of labor (each group has in theory or by tradition, a profession from which its members can depart only within certain limits); hierarchy that ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another. However, the ritual superiority did not imply secular or economic dominance. The castes

⁴⁷ Louis Dumont. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980

were ranked but not counted; they were fluid but not competing.⁴⁸

British rulers through a different analysis of Indian society transformed the caste-ranked society into competitive parties and, as result, castes were competing for educational resources, government employment, and political power. British authorities made a clear distinction in regards to employment. Distinctions were made between Indians and Europeans, and among Indian, and non-Hindu minorities as well. In the ranks of certain public services, such as posts and telegraphs, police, customs, and railways, preferences were given to Anglo-Indians, Christians, Parsis and Jews, who were thought to be more reliable than Hindus and Muslims.⁴⁹

In 1884 the first Bene Israel students graduated from Bombay University. As Bene Israel graduates began to emerge from the university, they entered such fields as architecture, engineering, medicine and law. Many graduates

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Joan G. Roland, *Indian-Jewish Identity of the Bene Israel during the British Raj in Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, N. Katz, Ed., Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, p. 127

took jobs with the British civil services, such as posts and telegraphs, police, customs, and railways. Bene Israel, along with Anglo-Indians, received European rates of pay, which was very important to them, as it added to their status. Many Bene Israel found economic security within the British civil service and as Indian nationalism developed in the first half of the twentieth century, they were ambivalent. On the whole Bene Israel were pleased with the effects of British Rule in India and were grateful for the advantages and opportunities it had provided them. They were dependent on the British for employment and were reluctant to support Indian nationalism too strongly. Nonetheless, Bene Israel were aware of the fact that throughout history, India was the one country where Jews found security and peace.

Most Bene Israel saw themselves as Indians and identified with other Indians. Some of the leading members of the community, highly placed professionals, were proud to be Indian and sympathized with the aspirations of Indian nationalists. They felt it would be unwise to tie themselves too closely to England, as the split would eventually come. By 1947, most of the Bene Israel in India

had become staunchly pro-Gandhi, but the development had been a slow and natural process.⁵⁰

There were distinct indications of a communal revival in the late nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century. Hindu castes and ethnic groups throughout India began to form voluntary communal organizations, which promoted caste or group consciousness and tried to serve the general needs of the group. As a result of that rekindling of Indian nationalism, a number of organizations emerged dedicated to communal improvement, such as the Bene Israel Association, the Bene Israel Benevolent Society, the Association for the Guidance of the People, and the Society for the Protection of the Jewish Religion. Some indications of that were recorded in the Bene Israel communal journals.

The beginning of the 20th century was marked by a mass immigration of the Bene Israel to Bombay from the villages. By mid-century only 20 percent of the community remained as agriculturists. Most of the Bene Israel sold their houses

⁵⁰ Joan G. Roland, "Indian Jewish Identity of the Bene Israel During the British Raj" in *Studies in Indian Jewish Identity*, N. Katz, ed., Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, p. 127

and property and moved to the city to begin to work there. Often, a typical former villager worked in carpentry, earning no more than a rupee a day, paying more than he could afford in rent for one undesirable room for himself and his family, and getting deeply into debt whenever births, marriages or deaths occurred in the family. Even eventual pay raises of up to two rupees per day did not really improve matters and, more often than not, he took to drinking to forget his troubles. He would withdraw his son from school at the age of twelve; the boy would begin working for nothing at first, as an apprentice under his father, before he, too, would begin earning a pittance. Ten percent of the Bene Israel community were carpenters, but only in the rarest instances did they establish themselves as owners of their own carpentry shops.⁵¹ Educated Bene Israel entered new occupations or continued to work, as in the late 19th century, as clerks and administrators for the government railway, customs, or post and telegraph offices. It is very interesting to note that about ten percent of the community - among them many women - was active in the fields of medicine and education. Bene Israel women teachers especially were highly qualified, competent and

⁵¹ Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*. Bercley, CA: Judah Magnes Press, 1998, p. 200-201

much in demand, not only teaching regular subjects, but also gym, music, and handicrafts. They were not timid and even accepted positions in out-of-the-way schools. Many Bene Israel women were professionally highly qualified, competent and more successful than most Bene Israel men.⁵²

The Impact of Zionism and Indian Nationalism.

Immigration to Israel.

In 1897, the Bene Israel received an invitation to the First Zionist Congress in Basel. The Bene Israel community held a meeting where leaders of the community discussed whether or not to send a representative to Basel. The decision not to send anyone to represent the Bene Israel community emerged as a result of this meeting. The Bene Israel were orthodox Jews. They had very little interest in Political Zionism and "looked upon fulfillment of the restoration of the Jewish Kingdom by the Divine Hand and would undertake nothing that would drive even the smallest chance or opportunity to anti-Semites to rise against the Jews."⁵³ Here is what Kemikar wrote at the close of the 19th century in his History of the Bene-Israel of India,

⁵² Ibid, p. 199

⁵³ Bene Israelite 4, see Walter Laqueur, A History of Zionism, New York, 1972

regarding Bene Israel's attitudes towards the Land of Israel:

"The Bene Israel, and the Jews in general have no ambition to gain even an inch of ground anywhere except 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 the country of which it forms the natural Capital...Happy, therefore, shall be the day for the Jews and the Bene-Israel when the proud dream of theirs is realized, and glorious will be the conditions of Palestine when Jerusalem is rebuilt by the chosen people of God. But until that desired event is brought to pass, the Bene Israel, as well as all Jews on the face of the Earth, loyally regard the country in which they are living as their fatherland, and consequently they are entitled to have every disability under which they labor entirely removed..

... It is on this very account that on the night of the Day of Atonement, the Bene Israel add the following words to their prayers for the Empress of India, the Prince of Wales, the Royal Family, the Governor General of India and the Governor of the Presidency the: "In their days and in ours, may Judah be saved, Israel dwell in safety and the

redeemer come to Zion. May such be the Divine and let us say Amen."

It is only in 1917, almost twenty years later, that the Bene Israel showed some interest in Political Zionism. Friend of Israel, one of the most popular Bene Israel magazines, published for the first time an article that talked in favor of immigration to Israel. It was only in 1919-1920 that a Zionist group of Bombay emerged on the initiative of three committed young men of the Baghdadi community and only later in 1940 that members of Bene Israel started to join this organization. Perhaps it was the mounting rejection by the Baghdadis, who were active pro-Zionists, in the first two decades of the twentieth century that eventually prompted some Bene Israel to seek to straighten their ties to the Jewish world beyond India by becoming involved in the growing Zionist movement.⁵⁴

Another reason that was behind the rise of the Bene Israel's identification with the Jews worldwide and support of the Bombay Zionist Association (B.Z.A.) was the rise of

⁵⁴ Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India, Identity in a Colonial Era*, University of New England, Hanover and London, 1989, p. 84-85

Hitler and anti-Semitic moods during the 1930s in Europe. As a result of the challenges that confronted European Jewry, the idea of the need for a Jewish homeland appeared to the Bene Israel community as a more relevant one. Their sense of an ethnic identity within India had now developed into a worldwide religious ethnic-minority consciousness.

First, Jewish refugees from Europe arrived in India in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Most of those who came to India during this period were temporary wartime residents, settling in Bombay and in Calcutta. The Jewish Relief Association, which represented and worked for the common interests of the refugees, mobilized money and personal aid for 1,520 German subjects, including women, who were registered in British India, not counting those in the Indian states. At the outbreak of war, 850 of these were interned, including all male Jewish refugees, who were technically described as "enemy aliens." As a response to the request from the Jewish Relief Association, the government soon instituted a committee to look into cases of "friendly enemy aliens" and, as a result, most of the Jewish refugees were released. The Jewish Relief Association continued to persuade the government to modify its rules regulating the admission of refugees. They

succeeded in getting permission for about one hundred fifty persons to enter the country, mostly aged parents and dependents of those refugees who had already found jobs in India.⁵⁵

With the spread of the war, new problems were added to the responsibilities of the Jewish Relief Association. Refugees from Allied countries and Poland found their way through Russia and Japan to India, where they had to be fed, clothed, and looked after before they could continue to Palestine or North or South America. They often even had to be given fares to their ultimate destination. Later, with the fall of Singapore, Malay, and Burma to Japan, Jewish evacuees to India created yet another challenge. Government-financed hostels were set up, and the Jewish Relief Association was entrusted with running them and coping with the needs of the evacuees.⁵⁶

It was the first time the Bene Israel Jews had an opportunity to mingle with large numbers of Western Jews. This encounter profoundly affected the Bene Israel's view

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 221

⁵⁶ Jewish Advocate 9 (24 Feb. 1939) in Jews in British India, Identity in Colonial Era by Joan G. Roland. Hanover and London, 1989, p. 221

of Zionism and although the Bene Israel seemed to have no direct contact at this point with the head offices of the Zionist organizations (The Jewish Agency, Jewish National Fund, Keren Hayesod), the Bene Israel conference, meeting in Bombay in March of 1940, passed a resolution that "expressed its full sympathy with Zionism and conveys to their brethren in Erez Israel its great admiration for their achievements."⁵⁷

Dr. Immanuel Olsvanger came to India as an emissary of Keren Hayesod in January 1941. As one of the journalists commented, Olsvangers' goal was, "to assist us to make our due contribution, as a Jewish community which is still free, to consolidate what already exists in Palestine, in order to enable it to be the most compelling factor at the Peace Conference which will follow the war."⁵⁸ Dr. Olsvanger presented a public lecture, entitled "The Situation in Palestine Today", which was very well attended by members of the Bene Israel community. Listeners asked many questions about the situation in Palestine, Arab-Jewish relations and general improvement of the health and

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 230

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.230-235

educational systems. During this meeting the lecturer repeated his invitation to "send a few youth for settlement...." to "assist us in the building of the third temple." By the end of Olsvangers' 1941 visit to Bombay, his campaign had yielded the highest total yet collected by any Zionist delegate in that city. Having come at a critical period for the world in general, and for Palestine in particular, he had easily convinced people of the importance of his cause, and individual contributions were larger than ever.⁵⁹ The emissaries from various Zionist organizations continued to visit India during the war and post-war years. They collected money, lectured about Palestine and later when the State of Israel was founded, talked about the situation in the young Jewish State.

Thus, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Bene Israel Jews were dealing with the enormous challenge of balancing the opportunities available with the coming of the British, ideas of Indian nationalism and Zionism. All three were closely connected and seemed to point to several options for the Bene Israel Jews in the postwar period; a communal cultural autonomy within a pluralistic,

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 232

egalitarian, independent India; greater affirmation of their ethnicity through the espousal of Zionism and emigration to Israel.

As World War II was coming to an end and the possibility of an independent India, as well as an independent Jewish state, was foreseen in the near future, Indian Jews found themselves in an ambivalent frame of mind regarding their future. For almost 2,000 years, Jews prayed and hoped to return to their homeland. However, when with the founding of the Jewish State on May 14, 1948 it became a reality and Indian Jews finally had the opportunity to make an Aliya, most of them could not decide whether they should move to Israel or stay in independent India, which adverted on August 15, 1947.

In his article entitled "The Future of the Jews in India", which was published in the Jewish Advocate in 1944, Maurice Rassaby reflected the mood of most Indian Jews:

"For us to become full-fledged Indian citizens will mean first and foremost complete allegiance to India as our mother country. We shall have to realize we are Indians as much as we are Jews. Palestine will have to be our spiritual home just as Mecca is for the Muslims. We must

realize once and for all that we will no more be "protégés" of Great Britain or any other country, but free and equal citizens in our own right, responsible to one power alone - the Government of India."⁶⁰

The emergence of independent India caused waves of concern among all the minority groups, including the Bene Israel. After the British moved out and new positions were opened up to competent Indians of all classes, the Bene Israel Jews encountered some difficulties finding jobs due to a several different reasons. The Bene Israel seemed to think that without the British, they had lost their protectors, and they would be discriminated against, even though nepotism and the idea of protecting one's own community had yet to set in strongly. Some employers were reluctant to hire Bene Israel Jews because many members of their community made an Aliya to Israel. Employers did not want to hire and invest in training workers who, in the near future, might decide to leave the country. There is no doubt that economic factors contributed to the emigration of the Bene Israel after India received her independence.

⁶⁰ Rasaby, Maurice. "The Future of the Jews in India" in Jewish Advocate 3 (April, 1944) in Jews in British India, Identity in a Colonial Era by Joan G. Roland, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1989, p. 235-236

One might postulate, however, that had Israel not emerged as an independent state at around the same time, the vast exodus of the Bene Israel might not have occurred. Feeling more confident in themselves as Indians, and having fewer connections to the west, the Bene Israel might well have adjusted to the new political situation in India.⁶¹

India was one of the eleven countries represented on the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine and, along with Iran and Yugoslavia, disapproved of the majority plan of partition. They recommended, instead, a federal state of Palestine.⁶² Once the Jewish State came into existence, the Indian government not only refused to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, but also refused even to recognize Israel as a State. Even after the Indian government officially recognized the State of Israel in 1950, diplomatic relations were held up because the Indian government was concerned about its minority of forty million Muslims, although they had not seemed particularly shocked at the recognition.⁶³ Beginning in 1952

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 243

⁶² Ibid, p. 244

⁶³ Ibid, p.244

representatives of both countries held conversations regarding diplomatic relations, which resulted in the establishment of an Israeli consulate in Bombay. It is only since 1992 that Israel and India have enjoyed full diplomatic relations.

In July 1948, the first issue of the new magazine called "India and Israel" was published in Bombay. It featured reports and articles about life in Israel, the history of Palestine, Indian-Israeli relations, and more. But there is no doubt that it is mostly the efforts of Jewish Agency representatives among Indian Jews, their information about Israel, their Hebrew classes and work with youth groups, teaching the ideals, and song and dances of modern Israel, and explaining her needs for pioneers - that all these activities aroused among Indian Jews great enthusiasm to emigrate to the new country, reinforcing their already deeply ingrained religious ideal to return to the Jewish homeland.

Large-scale immigration from India to Israel began in 1949. Israel was not an affluent country, but it surely welcomed new Jewish immigrants. Jewish historians and scholars hold different views regarding what truly

motivated the Bene Israel's immigration. Some claim that it was the attachment to Judaism and the attraction of Israel, and that they left largely for idealistic reasons. Others believe that economic factors motivated the Bene Israel to leave India. After Indian independence, fewer government jobs were available to them because competitive examinations for such jobs were opened to everyone. It has also been suggested by some that many Bene Israel decided to leave later because so many had already left and those who remained in India began to think that they should leave too. However, the reasons for the mass exodus of the Bene Israel from India to Israel are complex and underlying all of them was the age-old Jewish ideal of a return to Zion.⁶⁴

By the end of 1952, there were approximately three thousand Indian Jews in Israel. Conditions in Israel turned out to be very different that they anticipated. Many new immigrants had difficulty adjusting to life in Israel for a number of reasons. Those Bene Israel Jews who had degrees and were high professionals in India could not find good jobs in Israel. They came to feel that Israel was really

⁶⁴ Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*. Berkeley, CA: Judah Magnes Press, 1998, p. 272

looking for more laborers than teachers, physicians, and engineers.⁶⁵ Indeed, some of the Bene Israel manual workers, such as craftsmen and carpenters who could barely make ends meet in India and who emigrated with the aid of the Jewish agency, could earn a good living in the new country and soon have luxuries they did not enjoy in India. It is interesting to note that in contrast to Cochin Jews, who mostly settled in kibbutzim and moshavim, Bene Israel Jews settled in Israeli towns or in cities in preference to life in an agricultural community. In addition to the many difficulties of finding jobs and housing, for Bene Israel Jews the issue of marriage created the most difficulties. Some Orthodox Jews questioned the Bene Israel's status as full Jews due to their past ignorance of Jewish law regarding marriage and divorce. As a result, most of the Rabbis refused to perform marriages between Bene Israel Jews and members of other communities unless the Bene Israel first underwent ritual conversion.⁶⁶ For many years' representatives of the Bene Israel community lobbied the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and Israeli government to issue a

⁶⁵ Benjamin J. Israel, *The Bene Israel of India, Some Studies*, Apt Books, Inc., New York, 1984, pp.88-90

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp.88-90

document, which guaranteed Bene Israel Jews an equal status in Israeli society. It was only later, after years of talks, negotiations, even sit-in strikes and demonstrations, that in 1964 Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and the Knesset passed a resolution in which they affirmed that Bene Israel Jews are equal in all respects and have the same rights as other Jews.

According to Israeli statistics, at the end of 1980, approximately 12,400 Bene Israel Jews lived in Israel.⁶⁷ It was mentioned earlier, most of them settled in urban areas and even those Bene Israel Jews who lived in villages in India preferred to live in towns and cities in Israel. It is very unfortunate that for Bene Israel Jews absorption into life in Israeli society was full of challenges and difficulties. Whether predicated on ethnic, religious, economic, or color discrimination, the tendency to set them apart has been a disappointment to many of the Bene Israel.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.95

⁶⁸ Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India, Identity in a Colonial Era*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1989

Although the years that followed their immigration were difficult, the community's situation has greatly improved. Today, in Israel and elsewhere, marriage of Bene Israel with other ethnic groups of Jews is becoming increasingly common. Growing numbers of Bene Israel are completely integrated into Israeli society.

The Power of the Ritual. Shabbat, Shema, and Kashruth.

The Bene Israel have been always been the largest of the three Jewish communities in India. In 1838, for example, the total Bene Israel population of India was estimated at 8,000, far more than combined numbers of Baghdadi and Cochin Jews. For generations they lived as a distinct endogamous group in rural villages, some of them in remote areas of Kolaba District, renamed later to Raigad District, south of Greater Bombay and Thane District, stretching some 250 km southward along the Arabian Sea and 60-90 km eastward to Pune District.⁶⁹ They were a purely agricultural community. The world outside of India first heard of the Bene Israel in 1768 from David Y. Rahabi's letter in which he wrote about Jews known as Bene Israel. The newly found community's religious observance was based on biblical Judaism: they celebrated Jewish holidays related to the Bible; the Shabbat was strictly observed; all male children were circumcised eight days after birth; and the first Hebrew verse of Sh'ma was recited on all occasions for prayer. They had no Torah scrolls, prayer books, or synagogues, nor were they familiar with rabbinical Judaism or the details of halakhah.

⁶⁹ Shirley B. Isenberg , "The Bene Israel" in *The Jews of India*, the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, pp. 17-23

In my research I have showed that through a series of encounters with Cochin Jews, Christian Missionaries, and British colonists, and Indian nationalists Bene Israel transformed from a rural, oil-pressing people into modern Jews.

Uniqueness of the Bene Israel community among Diaspora communities in its commitment to Judaism.

Admittedly, living in total isolation from the rest of the Jewish world there was much in Jewish ritual that the Bene Israel did not observe for long centuries. And, in many aspects of their observances they adapted the customs of their Hindu or frequently, Muslim neighbors. But it is significant that even when their observance of Jewish law was minimal, it included the essentials (observance of Shabbat, avoidance of forbidden foods, circumcision on the eighth day, observance of the major Biblical festivals). It is very important to note that Bene Israel have never adapted any practices from either Hindu or Muslim, that transgressed Jewish ritual. Though, they integrated into the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian surroundings, so that their homes and way of life resembled those of their neighbors, Bene Israel maintained their Jewish identity and have never totally assimilated.

An often quoted phrase of Ahad Ha'am is about the centrality of Shabbat to Judaism: "It is not so much that the Jews kept Shabbat, but Shabbat preserved the Jews'," truly apply to the unique story of Bene Israel.⁷⁰ The Bene Israel observed the Shabbat strictly, even before their religious observance became institutionalized. R. Jacob Sapir, an emissary from Eretz Israel who visited India in 1858, wrote in his memoirs: "These are the precepts and customs that they kept with utmost diligence, holding them sacred: they observed the Sabbath, refraining from kindling the fire on it, and also rested from their occupations."⁷¹ Their observance of Shabbat distinguished Bene Israel from their Muslim and Hindu neighbors. To this day the rural Bene Israel are known as "Shanwar Telis" (Saturday Oilmen) because they abstain from work on Saturdays. There are in the same area "Shukrewar Telis" (Friday Oilmen) who are Muslim, and "Somwar Telis" (Monday Oilmen) who are Hindus. But only the Saturday Oilmen did no manner of work on their day of rest; neither did they kindle any fire, nor cook any

⁷⁰ Ahad Ha'am, "Shabbat and Zionism," op. cit., N. Katz, Who are the Jews of India?, University of California Press, 2000, p. 96

⁷¹ Sapir, Even Sapir, pp.42-48, op.cit. in The Jews of India, O.Slapak, ed., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1995

food on that day.⁷² They have observed Shabbat as a complete day of rest.

Nothing speaks more vividly of the importance of the observance of Shabbat to the Bene Israel Jews than the following folk story:

There was a family of Talker residing in Sarsuli, a village near Tale Khar where also there was a Bene-Israel congregation. His name was Abraham alias Bandu Shet Talker. He had a big family consisting of sons and daughters. One Saturday afternoon, two Hindu neighbors came to Bandu Shet and asked for a loan of his cart. Bandu Shet replied that it was his Sabbath and as such everyone, even his cattle, was resting and nobody was supposed to work. The Hindu neighbor again said he was asking for the cart and not for his bullocks. To which Bandu Shet replied that he did not understand the position, but such a thing had never occurred in the past, even putting his cart on its wheels, he could not take the risk of doing it and thus contravene the old-age customs of his forefathers. No one in the family knew Hebrew or had any Hebrew education. What was

⁷² Shirley B. Isenberg, India's Bene Israel, Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley, p.3

significantly noticed was the unshakable belief in the traditional practices of our forefathers.⁷³

It was the observance of Shabbat, as well as the observance of the major Jewish holidays, that set them apart and distinguished them from the other groups in premodern Konkan society. But later, when they were discovered by Cochin Jews, those practices linked Bene Israel with the rest of the Jewish world. In his very informative book *The History of the Bene-Israel of India* Haeem Samuel Kehimkar (1830-1909) analyzed and described Bene Israel's observances of the major holidays, which were prescribed in the Bible.

Even though all the fasts and feasts which the original ancestors of the Bene Israel observed have purely Marathi names, Kehimkar suggests that those were the Biblically-prescribed annual holidays, which Bene Israel observed long before the religious revival of their community. Holiday in Marathi language means San. According

⁷³ Gadkar, ed., "Shabbath Observance" in *Religious and Cultural Heritage*, op. cit. N. Katz, *Who are the Jews of India?*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 96

to Kemikar's the Bene Israel traditional modes of observance for these holidays were as follows:

- Navicha Sun - Rosh Hashana (New Year; Numbers 29:1; Leviticus 23:24).
- Darfalnicha San - Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement; Numbers 29:7)
- Shila Sun - Simhat Kohen (Merry-making day of the priest; holiday unique to the Bene Israel)
- Khiriacha San - Hag He-Asif (Feast of Ingathering)
- Holicha San - Purim (Feast of Esther)
- Anashi Dhakacha San - Pessach (Passover)⁷⁴

It is significant that though the Bene Israel observances of the Jewish holidays were limited only to the observance of Biblically prescribed celebrations, Bene Israel celebrated them at approximately the right times and have never incorporated into their celebrations any practices which transgressed Jewish ritual.

⁷⁴ Haeem S. Kehimkar, The History of the Bene-Israel of India

Another important factor that helped the preservation of the Bene Israel way of life was the observance of kashruth, which enforced social distance from the gentile world. According to Bene Israel tradition, kashruth was another vestigial Judaic observance by which the Saturday Oil-pressers were recognized as "lost" Jews. In his book, Kehimkar writes about the incident, which happened in one of the rural Kolaba villages:

"Although David Yechzekel Rahabi was convinced that the Bene-Israel were the real descendants of the Hebrews, he still wanted to test them further. He therefore, it is said, gave their women clean and unclean fish to be cooked together; but they promptly singled out the clean fish from the unclean ones, saying that they never used fish that had neither fins nor scales. Being thus satisfied, he began to teach them systematically the tenets of the Hebrew religion."⁷⁵

This folk story supports a firmly entrenched Bene Israel tradition that the Bene Israel's biblical practices

⁷⁵ Haeem S. Kehimkar, History of India's Bene-Israel, p.41, op.cit., N. Katz, Who are the Jews of India? University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 98

were recognized by a Jewish stranger, named David Y. Rahabi, who sometime in the distant past, was the first to recognize them as Jews and revive their Judaism.

As a result of their tutelage under Cochin Jews during eighteenth century, the Bene Israel become more cognizant of normative (which is to say, halachic-rabbinic) Judaism's rules for Sabbath observances.⁷⁶ A group of dedicated Cochin Jews arrived in the Konkan in the year 1826, followed by another group in 1833. They served among the Bene Israel as teachers, preachers, and interpreters of the Bible and of Jewish Law. On weekdays they taught the Bene Israel children religion and how to read and write Hebrew. On Saturdays, in addition to the regular prayer service, many hours were devoted to the education of the adults.⁷⁷

With the impact of the teachers of Cochin, Bene Israel Jewish observances and organizations began more closely to resemble those of Jews elsewhere.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.96

⁷⁷ Shirley B. Isenberg, India's Bene Israel, Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley, 1988, p.59-63

Almost since the beginning of Jewish tradition, the Shema has been considered the most important statement of a Jew's belief in God, the primary creed and affirmation of faith. Although Bene Israel had forgotten the Hebrew language and prayers, did not possess any book or scroll of Torah, they did pronounce in Hebrew the opening sentence of the Shema. Since they did not know any other prayers, the Shema became their all occasion expression of religious sentiment and affirmation of identity. They repeated the Shema at every rite of passage and on every occasion for prayer.⁷⁸

The centrality of the Shema is often illustrated in Bene Israel tradition with stories of its guarding powers:

During the days when Siddi Nawab of Janeiro was ruling over Tala and Peshwa, the Viceroy of the Maratha King, over the neighboring parts, there lived on Shelomo Abraham Talker who a rich oil-presser and who owned many agricultural lands and cattle in Tala Village. Being a man of importance and of God-featured nature, he was respected not only by his community and villagers, but also even by

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.3

the Muslim and Hindu rulers. The courtiers of both the rulers used to come to his residence and enjoy his hospitality. But as the relations between the two rulers become strained, it was reported to the Court of the Peshwa that Shelomo was conspiring with the help of the Siddi ruler to overthrow the Hindu rule. Accordingly, Shelomo was called to the Court of the Peshwa, and when he reached there with four of his associates of whom Shimon was one, Shelomo noticed that he was not given his usual place of honor. Shimon suspected foul play and warned Shelomo to be on his guard. When the charge against Shelomo was read out, he flatly denied it and declared openly that the God of Israel would protect him. According to the custom of those days Shelomo was ordered to be thrown at the feet of a mad elephant, but Shelomo was not afraid. He kept on repeating the Shema Israel, the only refuge, solace, prayer and weapon of the Bene Israel of the ancient days. When he was thrown before the elephant, there happened a miracle and the God of Bene-Israel rushed Shelomo's rescue. It is said the mad elephant no sooner saw Shelomo, at once became quiet and picked him up by its trunk and instead of dashing

him to the ground placed him on the back royally and majestically.⁷⁹

In my research I have showed that through a series of encounters with Cochin Jews, Christian Missionaries, and British colonists, and Indian nationalists the Bene Israel were transformed from a rural, oil-pressing people into modern Jews. We have seen that the circumstances in which the Bene Israel have lived in India for centuries were unlike those which have had to be endured by Jews in many other lands. The story of the Bene Israel Jewish community is a unique chapter in the book of Jewish history. What is important to note is that through long centuries of isolation, the Bene Israel kept faith with what they remembered of Judaism, and as soon as the opportunity came with their "discovery" by the Cochin Jews, they eagerly absorbed within a few decades all the Cochinitim had to teach, including the liturgy and order of services. For the centuries during which the Bene Israel were living a vestigial life they had always not only persisted in maintaining their strong group identity, but also in

⁷⁹ "Miracle", in Gadkar, ed., Religious and Cultural Heritage, p.81 op. cit., N. Katz, Who are the Jews of India?, University of California Press, Berkley, 2000, p. 96-101

observing the few Jewish customs which they knew, even though they were scattered throughout Konkan and had no prayer-halls or synagogues. Thus, we can confidently say that observance of Sabbath, Kashruth, major Jewish holidays preserved Bene Israel from total assimilation and helped to maintain the special character and heritage of their community.

Conclusion

This research paper, which discusses the Cochin and Bene Israel Jewish communities and their unique socio-history, cultural traditions, and identity since its earliest, often obscure beginnings, is only a start. Indian Jewish communities in both Israel and India deserve the attention of historians and Jewish scholars who can plumb their depth for greater detail. The areas of potential research include the compilation of a detailed bibliography of all written materials that have been published in any language on the subject of the Jews of India, the recording of songs, liturgical music, and folk tales, and the study of records and documents of synagogues and Jewish schools in the areas of the Cochin and Bene Israel settlements. The analysis of the relationship between the Cochin, Bene Israel and Bagdadhi Jewish communities in India and the

studies in the Israeli-Indian Jewish identity in the 21st century are other suggested topics for future research.

Yet research is only one goal for those who will explore Indian Jewish communities. The major goal is to use the material and facts discovered as educational tools. There is a lot we can learn from our Indian fellow Jews, whose history is striking by its uniqueness.

The Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, who lived as distinct endogamous groups in rural areas of India and had very little contact with the Jewish world beyond India and never experienced anti-Semitism, succeeded in preserving their Jewishness and identified themselves with Jewish ethnicity. Today's Jewish educators should revive the traditions, melodies, folk tales and texts preserved through the centuries. This old tradition of the Indian Jews will never be out of date.

The Jews of India
Curriculum for 5-8th grades

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materials

General Instructional Guidelines

This curriculum is geared for use in grades 5-8 in both a day and supplementary school setting. The curriculum is divided into 3 units. I recommend concluding the study of the "Jews of India" with a festival as a summarizing activity.

While each educator will bring his/her experience and knowledge to the presentation of this curriculum, I have tried to plan lessons that are easy to prepare and ready for immediate use. Times given for each procedure of the lesson are approximate.

Each unit will take approximately 3-4 hours of class time and can be used individually and inserted into existing curriculum or combined and presented as a series on world Jewry.

Each unit includes historical background materials, oral and written assignments, games, research activities, skit and drama writing and performing, individual and small group efforts, etc. Stories, historical documents, memoirs, and tales are an important vehicle for helping students understand how Jewish people lived in different

cultures and different times. It is, therefore, recommended that the class read at least one story about each Indian Jewish community. To help the students learn about holiday celebrations, ritual observances, and life cycle events many experimental activities, such as cooking, crafts, and singing songs are included in the curriculum. These activities will enrich the factual learning, increase interest and generate motivation among the students. The learning about the customs and ritual religious observances of Indian Jews will help the students to understand that the observance of Mitzvot helped Indian Jews to preserve their Judaism and to overcome the challenge of assimilation. The map activities are designed to help the students locate each Indian Jewish community geographically and learn about the implications of the location on the development of each of them.

The study of "Jews of India" will conclude with a festival where children, together with their parents, learn more about colorful customs, culinary treats, ritual observances, history, and the music of the Jews of India.

At the beginning of the fair, children will perform short plays about the Passover celebration in Indian Jewish

and American Jewish families. Afterward, the large group will be divided into five small groups. Each group will be sent to a different station. At each station, parents will participate in different activities.

Description of each station:

Meeting with a Guest Station

- Parents and children will meet with a member of the Indian Jewish community, who will tell about his/her experiences in the country of origin and share how he/she lives today.

Indian Jewish Food Station

- All guests will have an opportunity to taste different Indian treats.

Story Station

- Parents and children will hear a story or memoirs about life in an Indian Jewish community.

Music Station

- Parents and children will listen to examples of Indian Jewish music and, with the help of the facilitator, write a song

Arts and Crafts Station

- The facilitator will show pictures of the Jewish ritual object from India. Under the supervision of the facilitator, parents and children will create various ritual objects using similar designs.

At the conclusion of the festival, the group will get together to learn new Indian Jewish songs.

Overall Curriculum Goals and Objectives

1. To familiarize students with the Indian Jewish community.
2. To acquaint American Jewish students with Jewish lifestyle and culture in the Indian Jewish community. To explore traditions, rituals, historical legends, personal narratives, autobiographies, and songs of Indian Jewish communities.
3. To point out the commonalties of values and experiences among various Jewish communities which have been separated in time and place. To compel students to modify their understanding of Jewish identity worldwide.
4. To help the students identify and examine major factors that enabled Indian Jewry to maintain their

identity, preserve and retain their collective Jewish tradition through the centuries.

5. To help students understand that although for long centuries Jews lived dispersed in the four corners of the earth and were frequently isolated from other Jews, in every country they preserved their faith.
6. To point out that Indian Jews were influenced by the societies in which they lived and adapted some life customs, attitudes, rituals and traditions from their neighbors.
7. To help student learn important historical facts, location, and relationship to geography and culture in different Indian Jewish communities: Cochin's and Bene Israel's.

Lessons 1-3

Outline

Goals and Objectives:

1. To explain that today's Jewish demographic map is kaleidoscopic and constantly changing due to aliya to Israel and rapid assimilation.
2. To explain the students that Jews have lived in many places and developed many customs throughout the

history, but at the same time they have always shared certain basic beliefs, values and behaviors.

2. To familiarize students with the history of the Indian Jewish community.

3. To familiarize students with Passover ritual observances of Cochin Jews. To help them to understand that observance of the holidays helped Indian Jews to preserve their Judaism and overcome the challenge of assimilation.

4. To familiarize students with important historical documents related to the Cochin Jewish community.

Procedures:

Display pictures of Jews from different Jewish communities from around the world. Ask students to share their impressions and thoughts about each picture. (5 min.)

Where do you think these people live? What continent or country? How long ago were those pictures taken? How can you tell the difference? (5 min.)

Ask students to look at the world map and put pins in each location where they think these Jews live. Refer to the World Jewry table (#1). Explain that Jewish people live in many different places in the world. Tell the students that after creation of the Jewish State in 1948 almost all members of some Jewish communities migrated to Israel. For

example Jews of Yemen, Morocco, Syria, Ethiopia, etc. Ask students to come up with five things, which, in their opinion, are common to all Jewish people around the world.

Ask the students what in their opinion is very different among them.

(5-7 min.)

As Jews, have we always been able to become part of the people in whose midst we have lived? Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews have lived all over the world. Those who settled in central, eastern and northern Europe became known as Ashkenazi. They shared the identical folk language Yiddish, folkfoods, and folkways. The majority of the class probably identify themselves as Ashkenazi Jews. Families' countries of origin may have been Russia, Poland and Germany. Others settled in Spain and Portugal. These Jews are known as Sephardim, from "Sepharad," the Hebrew word for Spain. Beginning in 1492, Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. They transported their culture to the new places where they settled -Holland, North Africa, the Middle East, and even Asia. (5 min.)

Where is India? Study the map. (5-7 min.)

How and when did Jewish people arrive in India?

Explain that Bene Israel, and Cochin Jews are members of

different Jewish communities. (Refer to the background material) (10 min.)

Tell the students that first you will explore the Cochin Jewish community.

Explain that it is still unknown to historians how and when Jews arrived on the Southwest coast of India. However, it is an undisputed fact that from the 5th to the 15th centuries the Jews in Cranganore had virtually an independent principality. Most scholars agree that the first communities consisted of merchants. The evidence is provided by two copper tablets, which are still held by the Jews of Cochin. The tablets were presented by Sharman Piromil, the governor of the state of Malabar, to the head of the Jewish community, Joseph Rabban.

Ask students to read the text of the grant. Ask the following questions:

Some of the symbolic privileges given to the Jews of Cochin have no significant meaning in our understanding. However, those rights were enjoyed only by the aristocracy of Kerala. At the same time, the grant includes financial advantages and tax privileges. What relationship do you think Cochin Jews maintained with the local authorities? What are the privileges given to the Jews that indicate their high financial status? What else can you tell about

life in the Jewish community of Cochin? What are the aspects of their life you find exotic and unusual?

(10 Min.)

Historical Background. Research Activity.

Ask students to briefly summarize the history of the Jews of Cochin.

Divide the class into different research teams and assign each team a different historical period to focus on. The periods to be studied are the following:

Period of Independence. Copper plates given to Joseph Rabban, leader of the Jewish community in Cranganore (1000-1498)

Portuguese period (1498-1663)

Dutch Period (1663- end of the 18th century)

Cochin Jews under British rule; emergence of Zionism (18th -19th centuries)

Emigration to Israel, life in Israel (20th century)

Each team should be given appropriate research information. (Text for the Research Activity can be found in the Student's Study Booklet) Upon the completion of the research, each team should be responsible for presenting a short oral report. (30-40 min.)

Holiday Celebrations in Cochin Jewish Community

Passover

The Student's Study Booklet includes the memoirs of Ruby Daniel, in which she writes about the celebration of Passover in the Cochin Jewish community, as well as some excerpts about Passover preparation and celebration in Cochin that were found in different sources. Divide the students into two groups. Assign each group to read one of the sections. Ask each group to prepare an oral report about Passover preparations and celebrations in the town of Cochin. (20-30 min.)

There are many differences between students' lives and the lives of the Jews of Cochin. However, some Jewish customs are common to both American and Indian Jews. Divide the students into two groups. Ask each group to write a script about Passover preparation and celebration in an American Jewish family and a Cochin Jewish Family. An alternative to working in groups might be to have the students working in pairs. They can write a role-play dialog within a family as to how the family should prepare to the celebration of Passover. Ask the students to be creative. Motivate them to depict events, characters,

include some details about customs, dress, feelings, funny situations, etc.

Once the writing is completed the teacher will help to evaluate the script and to conduct rehearsals. The students present each skit during "Jews Around the World" festival.

(1,5 hours)

Cooking Project (1 hour)

Neyyappam

Fried Sweet Cakes

The sweet cakes are usually eaten on Hanukah or on the day before Yom Kippur. Of course, they can be prepared any time during the year and served with tea and coffee.

Ingredients:

2 cups water

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt

1 cup white wheat flour

1 cup semolina

1 tablespoon sesame seeds

1 tablespoon chopped almonds

1 tablespoon chopped cashew nuts

1 tablespoon chopped raisins

2 dates, chopped

2 apricots, chopped
½ teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon ground cardamom
oil for deep-frying

Mix the water, sugar and salt together in a pan and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and cool until just warm.

Add all ingredients except the baking powder, cardamom and oil. Mix well and let stand at room temperature, covered. Next stir in the baking powder and cardamom.

Heat the oil in a skillet or wok over moderate heat. Take one heaping tablespoon of the dough and drop it into the oil. Fry it on all sides for about four minutes or until well browned. Remove and drain on the paper towels. Continue with the batter until all are fried.

Serve warm. Makes 20 cakes.

The Text of the Tablets Presented by Sharman Piromil,
the Governor of the State of Malabar to the Head of the
Jewish Community Yoseph Rabban.⁸⁰

"We grant from our government palace in Muyirikkodu in
the thirty sixth year of our life and in the second year of
our rule and for hundreds of years after us.

We grant from this day forward to the respected Yoseph
Rabban and give him as a gift land of Anjuvannam
(Cranganore) and also the right to shoot from the great
cannon and to use music and cymbals, trumpets and shofars
and the right to walk on spread out white clothes and to
carry before him torches in daylight, and to use the round
parasol, and to beat the elephant drum, and to use garlands
of flowers before the bride and groom and to carry branches
and march through the streets.

We also grant him the right of exemption from taxes
and city dues, and land to build seventy two houses and a
large site for commerce, free of all taxes and dues and to
head all of the Jewish community and the synagogues in the

⁸⁰ There is no agreement between scholars regarding the correct date.
Cochin Jews traditional date is 1000 C.E.

land of our government. All these rights are given to Yoseph Rabban owner of Cranganore, to his sons and his sons' sons, to his sons-in-law and daughters-in-law and to all members of his family forever, while the moon shines in the sky.

These things are recorded on a copper tablet.

Written and signed in front of witnesses.

Passover in Cochin

From the memoirs of Ruby Daniel⁸¹

When I was a child, the Feast of Pesah, or Passover, was an elaborate affair, starting with the cleaning up right after Purim. During Pesah the Jews could not eat any food which was hametz (leavened). This meant that we had to clean the entire house and any utensils, which were to be used for Pesah. Any hametz remaining in the house had to be removed. Many families have a separate set of utensils, from plates to pots, for Passover. We had a smaller house, separate from one where we usually stayed. After Purim we lived in that house, so grandmother had a free hand to do what she wanted, with the help of servants and the older girls of the family. We children had the annual examination

⁸¹ Ruby Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson Ruby of Cochin, *An Indian Jewish Women Remembers*, JPS, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1995, pp.154-159

in the schools about that time, so when I was in school I was safe from this manual labor.

Grandmother would buy whole coffee, spices for cooking, coconut, and of course rice paddy with the skin on. All of this had to be cleaned so there was no hametz in it. The coffee was washed, dried, then baked and powdered. Spices like coriander, chillies, and turmeric had to be washed, dried, broiled, and ground. To prepare salt, we had to wash pieces of salt and keep it for one or two days, till all the mud sinks to the bottom, and then we filter the salt off the top and cook it into granules. One Pesah my aunt did all this and put the salt on the roof to dry in a bamboo sieve. In the evening she forgot to take it, and the whole night it was raining! The next morning, when she looked, there was no salt at all, so she had to do all the work again. Then when she went up to take the salt, there was wheat on top of it, maybe brought by the wind or by a crow, so she had to throw it out again. The third time she did it, it was all right.

Then came the process of cleaning the rice. All this was done with the help of a mortar and pestle, kept separate for Passover. We had a big stone, thick and high,

with a cavity in the middle. The pestle was made of a thick and long piece of wood. One end had an iron cap and on the other an iron ring. The former one was used for grinding and the later for separating the rice from the husk and polishing. Fortunately, the Cochin Jews eat rice during Passover, so we would keep all this rice flour ready for making cakes and all kinds of pastries during Pesah.

Each family had to clean their well for Pesah. Two people go down into the well to draw the water out; then they cover it with a bamboo mat so no hametz will fall in. My Dolly Aunty was the one to get down in the well, while others would stand on the side, and she would pass the bucket up. Our well was a little bit small and very deep. I would be the last person to go down into that well!

Special preparation had to be made for the unleavened bread (matzot)... Some Jews went to the fields and reaped the wheat harvest themselves and preserved it till the next Pesah.

Then they sold it for making the unleavened bread. For the seder plate we made special cakes from this shemura (guarded) wheat. These matzot, called sedarim because they were used for the seder meal on the first two nights, were

made separately from the regular matzot, and every cake was made from a quarter kilogram of flour.....

Regular matzot were made the week before Pesah, but the six cakes for two nights of the seder were made only on the day before Passover after the burning of whatever hametz was found at the end of the cleaning. While making the sedarim, some people blew the shofar and sang parts of the Haggadah, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt...

Six women would make the shemurah matzot. First these ladies washed themselves and put on clean clothes. As far back as I can remember, Grandfather made the dough with just enough water. He divided it into six portions or seven. Before it was divided, a lady said a blessing, removed a handful the size of an egg from it (called hallah) and burned it in the fire. The six women stood near a board made of copper plated with zinc, each with a rolling pin made of brass with a tinkling brass bell inside. When they rolled the matzot, the bells made a beautiful sound like music.

Each portion was given to one of the women, and together they finished the six. Then because these shemurah

matzot should not be burnt or broken, as a precaution they made an extra one.

Grandmother did the finishing touches. First of all, she made sure that all cakes were of the same size; then she pierced them with a fork but not making holes. Then she made lines on each one like a diamond shape. On the first she put two small lines on the side, on the next three lines, and then on the next four lines, standing for Cohen, Levi , and Israel. These three cakes were to be put on the seder plate in that order. Before the service starts, the middle one- Levi- is broken into two pieces, and one piece is kept away for the afikoman....

How they did all this work! After making the shemurah matzot on the eve of Passover, then they had to clean everything and dry it and put away. The utensils are all hametz afterwards. Only then would Grandmother start cooking for the evening, for the seder meal.

From the time I can remember, our house is full for Pesah. Our relatives would come, along with in-laws and neighbors who had no men in the house to conduct the seder. The table was very long, to accommodate all of them.

Grandfather sat at one end, my father at the other end, both dressed nicely in white shirts. And my grandmother dressed as she would for the synagogue, with a white blouse with tinsel on the sides and neck, and a scarf on her head. Until she comes to stand by him, Grandfather will not start the seder. That is what I remember.

Passover in Cochin.⁸²

According to halacha (Jewish Law), preparations for Pesach should begin thirty days before the festival, which is to say that they should begin just after Purim. In Cochin, however, the Chanukah candles had barely cooled before "Pesah work", as it is called, to warm up. First came the cleaning of the tea, chillies, tamarind, and spices to be set aside for Passover use. "Now the work for Pesah begins," Sarah Cohen said on January 15th, when she bought a basket of tamarind for Passover cleaning...

"Pesah work" increasingly dominated life in Jew Town for about one hundred days. So important was "Pesah work" to the Cochin community that they believed that if women made even the slightest mistake in Passover preparations,

⁸² N.Katz, *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1999, pp.20-39

the lives of their husbands and children would be endangered...

Special rooms for storing Passover items were scrubbed, followed by all utensils, pots, and crockery. Houses were painted or whitewashed soon after Purim.. Wells were drained and scrubbed, lest they be polluted by a crumb of bread. Each grain of rice to be used during the festival had to be examined to ensure that it was free from defects, or cracks into which polluting chametz might have found its way, after which it was known as "Pesah Rice." Cushion covers and curtains were replaced with special ones for the holiday. Wooden furniture was stripped and re-polished.

The Cochin Jews believed that the only way to avoid chamets completely was to avoid their non-Jewish friends. "For eight days I cut off everything. If I see my friends," Isaac said, "they may offer me a cup of tea or some food. Actually, Pesach is a very hard time for us." Sarah warned, "Don't go outside (of Jews Town). You might make a mistake and eat or drink something you can't have." During the Passover festival, the Cochin Jews' universe did not extend beyond Synagogue lane.

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ברין כח הנקראים בני ישראל שבהודו כ"ד כסלו תשי"ד לכבוד הר"ח הנכבד כמוה"ר רבי רפאל ענתבי יצ"ו בעיר בומבאי שבמדינת הודו.

רמיני הומצא לידי עיי חברי הרב הראשי הנ"ל הרצוג שליט"א שאלתו ע"י חכת הנקראים בשם בני ישראל שנמצאים במדינותם שמחננהם כדת משה וישראל, אך גט, מקוה, חליצה ויבום אין להם, ואין בהם לא כהן ולא לוי, ונפשו בשאלחו, אם מותר להתחתן אדם, ואם מותר לצרפם למנין ולקרוהם להורה.

ואשיבנה: בנידון זה כבר נשאלתי בשנת תרצ"ח ע"י האי יוסף סיגון, עורך הירחון הבימה היהודית בזמבארי. והשבתתי אז בארוכה. הוכן השותבתי היתה שהיהודים ששם בני ישראל נקרא עליהם, דם מגזע קורש של דידית, ותמכתי יסודותי על השובת רה"ג בשערי תשובה (סי' מ"ו ה') ובמקומות אחרים, ואגרת הרמב"ם לחכמי לונלי, שמדובר שם על היהודים שבהודו שאינם יודעים התורה שבכתב ואין להם מן הדו אלא שרם נימליש ושוכחים כיום השבת. והמדובר הוא בודאי על אבות אבותיהם של אלה הנמצאים אצלכם ונקראים בשם יהודים.

ולענין להזהרם לבוא בקהל. אחר סיביריה בתשובתי שם את שיטות הקדמונים בדבר היתר הקראים משום כפם מזירות שמקדשים ואינם שומרים הלכות ניטין דשמה הם עצמם כשרים לעדות או שקדשו בפני עדי ישראל שהארכתי בזה גם כפרי נשפטי עוזיאל ה' אה"ע וחבאתי דברי שו"ת הרשב"י סי' י"ו וסי' שמ, והתשובה ה"ג כי מ"ז והד"ם אה"ע סי' ד' בדבר האנוסים, העליתי במסקנא, שכח זו בני ישראל הם חוטר מגזע עם ישראל ואין לזנום כקראים ש"קו מעליהם עול תורה ומצות כמו שמקובל ממש מסיני בתורה שבעל פה, אבל אלה לא מרצונם פרקו מעליהם תורה ומצות אלא שנשחכחה מהם תורה מסיבת גלותם בארצות רחוקות מנהקים ומבדידים מכל עזרי האומה ונהגים החת גלות קשה ומרה, אלא שהואיל שכל אחרי שבאו אל פניהם קהלות ישראל וראו מעשיהם הטובים והישרים שדבקו בהם בחורה ומצות, היתה עליהם להחזיר למטב ולהשיב ללב ולבניהם את התורה שנשחכחה מהם. וכיון שעמדו בפניהם נקראים פושעים, כמו שכתב הרשב"י לגבי האנוסים. והואיל ועד השנים האחרונות עמדו כמרוחקים מקהלות ישראל ולא קדשו בפני עדים כשרים מישראל, חרי נשואיהם בטלן וממילא אין בניהם ממזרים.

יבסוף דברי תשובתי הבאתי ב"דרי רב נבדוגאי נאין בתשובה שהשיב על מאיינין שפרשו מדרבי ישראל והם פרוצים בעריות ואין כוהבין כתובות ולא גיטין ולא חליצין ולא מיבמין: אי אפשר לקבלם ולחכנים בקהל ישראל שמא יחערבו בישראל וישאו נשים וישיאו בניהם לבנות ישראל ומרכים ממזרים בישראל. ואם באים אבות וחזירים בהם ומקבלים עליהם עול מצוה כשאר ישראל, קבלו אותם שגולדו מטיפה קדושה ונולדו בכשרות וברקו בולדותיהם ודקדקו בהם. וכל מי שיש לו שמץ פסול הכריזו עליו והפרישוהו ויהיה מובדל מישראל (כ"י אה"ע סוף סי' ד') ודברי תשובות המבי"ט ח"א סי' י"ט שדביא השובה זו ביתר אריכות.

ומהוך כך העליתי בנידון דידן בהכתב בני ישראל שאותן המשפחות ששמרו ענין המקוה ולא היה ביניהם עניני גט או חליצה באופן שלא נודע שנמצא בהם פסול ממזרות, מצוה לקבלם בקהל ישראל ולקרבם עכ"י וכך לחורת ישראל וצריכים להתנות עליהם שיקבלו באופו פומבי והניני לשמור ולעשות כל מצוה התורה חכמות והמסורות וביחוד מצות הנדה שהיא יסוד טהרת המשפחה.

ומינה גם לשאלתו השניה של כת"ר: שבתנאים אלה כשיחקרבו לתורה ישראל, יחזקו גם לכהן אחר שיקח בן מכת זו ויהיה להם לעתיד כהנים ולויים.

ובדבר לצרפם למנין ולקרוחם לתורה. - דעתי היא גם כן שאוחם שאינם מבקשים קרבת שלומי אמוני
ישראל לקבל עליהם עול הורה ומצות, אין לצרפם למנין ולא לקרוחם לתורה מחשבת רב עמרם גאון
הנייר שמא יבואו על ידי כך להתערב בישראל וישאו נשים וישאו בניהם לבנות ישראל ומרבים ממזרים
בישראל. אבל אלו שרוצים קרבחנו ומקבלים עליהם בפומבי עול מצות כשאר ישראל הכשרים, מצוה גם
לבקש קרבתם, לצרפם לכל דבר שבקדושה ולקרוחם לתורה.

וה' אלקי ישראל מהרה יקבץ נדחני מארבע כנפות הארץ ויאמן לעינינו יעודו מפי נביא קדשו לאמר:
ונשא נס לנויים ואסך נדחי ישראל ונפוצותיו יקבץ מארבע כנפות הארץ

20th Century Responsa

In reference to the sect that is called Bene Israel in India, Kislev 5704/1943 in honor of the great Rabbi, may he be in good health and peace, Rabbi Rafael Antabi. In the city of Bombay, in the State of India:

A question was brought to my attention by my friend Rabbi Herzog, the Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Israel*, (*may he be in good health*), about the sect called Bene Israel that reside in your state and behave according to the religion of Moses and Israel, but do not have *get* (divorce agreement), *halitzah* (levirate marriage), *mikvah* (ritual bath), and *ibum* (widowed sister in-law). And there is amongst them neither Cohen, nor Levi. His main question is if one is allowed to add them to the minyan, and give them the honor of coming up to the Torah?

I (Rabbi Usiel) shall answer regarding this question, I was asked (the same question) in the year 5698/1937 by Yosef Sigon, the editor of the Jewish central monthly magazine in Bombay. I thought about it at length. The content of my answer was as follows: they emerged from the holy race, and from the very beginning this was supported in the writings of Rambam to the sages of *Lonil*, where he talked about Jews that lived in India, Jews who do not know the written Torah and have no knowledge of the Oral tradition, but are circumcised and rest on the Sabbath. In his writings Rambam surely talks about the fathers of the fathers of the Jews that currently live in India and are called Bene Israel.

In the matter of allowing them to become part of the community I based my answer on the *responsa* of our elders about permitting Karaites to join the community. The elders doubted whether Karaites were legitimate, because they marry according to the Jewish law, but aren't strict with the laws of divorce...

I came to the conclusion that this sect, Bene Israel, is a branch of the race of the people of Israel. However, one cannot judge them as Karaites that took off from themselves the yoke of Torah and Mitzvot willingly. Bene Israel simply forgot Torah because of their living in foreign and far lands, cut off from all the Jewish dispersed communities, and lived a bitter and difficult life in the Diaspora. However, even after other Jews came to their vicinity and saw their good and decent deeds; that the Bene Israel were observing some Mitzvot, they (in this case the Cochin Jews, who were learned in Torah) were kind to the Bene Israel and reminded them and their children of the Torah that was forgotten by them. They still remained ignorant and we could call them sinful. And since until lately they stood afar from the Jewish communities and did not perform marriages in front of lawful witnesses, their marriages were invalid and therefore their children were not legal (*mamzerim*).

At the end of my answer I quoted the words of Rabbi Natronai Gaon regarding corrupted Jews, who separated themselves from Jewish ways and did not write *ktubot*, *gittin*, *halitzah*, and *ibum*. We cannot accept those Jews in the Jewish community, lest

they will mix with Jews, take wives and marry their sons to Jewish women, and bring *mamzerim* into Israel.

However, if men come and become Jews (through conversion) and accept the yoke of Mitzvot like the rest of Israel, accept them as a holy seed. But if any one of them has a serious flaw, declare it and set him aside, and separate him from the rest of the Jews.

And from this I brought out the connection to the sect Bene Israel. Those Bene Israel who were strict regarding *mikvah* (ritual bath), did not have problems with the *get*, *halitzah*, and did not have a problem of *mamzerut*. It is a Mitzvah to except them in the Jewish community and to bring them closer to the Torah. We have to help them recognize and accept Jewish law, both the written and oral tradition, and especially the Mitzvah of the cleanliness of women that is a foundation of the Jewish family.

And regarding allowing them in the *minyan* and giving them the honor of coming up to the Torah my opinion is that those Bene Israel who do not want closeness to Judaism or do not accept the yoke of Torah and Mitzvot, one should not add them to the *minyan* and not give them the honor of coming up to the Torah. Because as Amram Gaon, whom I mentioned before, said, they will mix with Jews and take Jewish wives, and marry their sons to Jewish daughters and bring forth many *mamzerim*. But those who want to get closer to us and accept publicly the yoke of Mitzvot, like the rest of the lawful Jews it is a mitzvah to add them to any holy thing and to call them up to the Torah.

And the Lord, God of Israel will quickly gather our dispersed from the Four Corners of the earth...