INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of the State of Israel are so recent that in order to understand its institutional framework it is necessary to recount some trends of the pre-state history. Israel is a country of immigrants composed of diverse groups, based on ethnic and religious differences.

The State of Israel is the actualisation of the program of the Jewish National Renaissance movement, known as the Zionist Movement, which emerged in Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century. The Zionist movement was thus one of the rather late branches of the European National Revolution and strove to shape the Jewish people into a modern nation defined by attributes that the European nations acquired only recently, a national language and culture, a politically autonomous nation-state and a historical-secular identity. Some of these elements, the language, the national culture and identity, and the territorial commitment had their symbolic representation in the Bible, which became the central national symbol, thus losing some of its exclusively religious meaning.

The creation of the State by European Jews was predicated upon reconfiguring Jewish identities. European Zionist leaders believed that the creation of a Jewish state would normalise the abnormal situation of European Jewry insofar as it would give them a state of their own. In addition defending European Jews against anti-Semitic attacks, Zionism was also going to make possible activity denied to them in Europe, especially in agriculture and soldiery. Hence, the objective of the Zionist movement was not simply to
transplant European Jews in a new area, but to transform the very nature of their society as it had existed in the Diaspora until then.

The type of Jewish culture that Zionism wanted to create had nothing to do with Diaspora culture, seen as manifestation of oppressed Jewishness. Yiddish, stigmatised as a product of that culture, was and is actively discouraged in favour of Hebrew, while the Arabic of Arab Jews became the contemptible language of the enemy. In sum, Israel created a new Israeli identity and culture alien to Diaspora Jews. Thus the creation of Israel was to have far-reaching effects not only for Palestinian Arabs but also on the identity both of European Jews and of Asian and African Jews.

Non-European Jews are loosely termed as Sephardim (although originally the term applied to only Spanish and Portuguese Jews) and later Mizrahim (Easterners) and were juxtaposed to the Yiddish speaking Jews whose Ashkenazi identity preceded Zionism. Today the term "Oriental" refers to Jews who immigrated from North Africa and Asian countries whereas Jews from European and American origin are termed as "Ashkenazim." For our purpose, we would refer to Jews of Asian and African origin as "Orientals" or "Sephardim" and the Jews of European and American as "Ashkenazim."

At independence the majority of Israel's population was of Ashkenazi origin. The massive migration to Israel of Jews from Oriental countries and their high birth rate have changed the demographic nature of society. Today the population of both the origin groups is almost equal, with Orientals marginally more in numbers.

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Geographically and demographically, Israel is an Oriental country; culturally, socially and politically, it is western in nature and orientation. The western immigrants created and developed a western-oriented Jewish state -- land settlements, institutions, trade unions, political parties, educational institutions and whole intellectual infrastructure of society.

The members of the Yishuv (Jewish settlement and communal organisations in the pre-state period) created many of the institutions for the functioning of a modern society which were structured in accordance with socialist Zionist ideology, and inadvertently created a situation which was inherently discriminatory against of the Oriental Jews who were to arrive in large numbers in the immediate post-independence period.

Society and institutions in Israel, as they existed in 1948, were better suited to absorb European immigrants than Oriental ones as the former were better equipped to enter a state apparatus they were not alien to. Since European immigrants were first to arrive in post-independence period and the settlement in better areas was basically on a first come, first served basis, Ashkenazim were prime beneficiaries. Sephardim were later to be resettled in the areas on the fringes, mostly desert areas on the periphery of the cities or away from them. Also, as most of the Ashkenazim had required skills for jobs in a modern state, they had to spend less time in transit camps that helped them settle fast whereas Sephardim had to linger in these camps for quite long periods.

Oriental Jews by and large were not the committed Zionists and their migration to Israel was a logical fallout of their traditional religious values. They were also politically
were not very active and they had greater opportunity costs in migrating. Ashkenazim shared more values and attitudes with existing Israeli society than did the Sephardim who had traditional way of life that made them less adaptable.

Since these two origin groups of immigrants came from diverse cultural background, the behaviour patterns, values and attitudes of the two towards society differ -- at time to the extent of polarisation. This is contrary to the general notion that Jewishness in itself automatically creates a homogeneity, and draws our attention to the need to analyse Israeli society in the context of diversity.

After independence, through all these decades, the Orientals have come to occupy mainly lower and disadvantaged socio-economic and political position. Ashkenazin Jews have been accused of seeking to preserve their dominant position by stressing the superiority of their western cultural norms and values over "backward". Oriental communities and their traditions. The socio-economic gap between the two is seen as a central social issue in Israel which has give rise to various forms of conflicts.

The Oriental Jews have been described as factory workers and building contractors, neighbourgoods and development town dwellers, synagogue goers and crack addicts, taxi drivers and Arabic-speaking interrogators, petty bureaucrats and social activists. Urban slums and low prestige development towns populated overwhelmingly by Oriental Jews have been an embarrassment in a society dedicated to the proposition

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that a Jewish state must offer each Jew an opportunity to prosper, both materially and morally.

The non-material problems which are essentially those of cultural and social integration are more complex. Although the religious tradition of the Jewish population is an asset as it provides a common core of values and ideals, there are major differences in outlook, frames of reference, levels of aspiration, and various other social and cultural components.

With respect to Oriental Jews often there is residential separation into distinct neighbourhoods, a predominance of endogamous marriages, separate and unequal schools, and a perspective that portrays the Orientals as culturally deprived or backward. These elements have further helped foster the cleavages at various levels between the two groups. Despite some improvement in the status of Oriental communities, they still constitute the bulk of blue-collar workers, lower income bracket, lower educational attainment and lower political participation. Ashkenazim still predominate in the government, bureaucracy, managerial, entrepreneurial, educational and professional occupations.

The nation-building perspective, which is dominant in the social scientific literature in Israel, views the country as a successful nation-state. It is viewed as a society which has already overcome its major difficulties of institution-building, consensus-formation, collective identity and social solidarity. Pluralism and conflict are not cardinal, the basic needs of the constituent groups are satisfied, and there is nor real menace to
national integration. The future has in store consolidation of the current processes and amelioration of certain structures. This perspective viewed aliyah (wave of immigration) from the Oriental countries in terms of absorption and modernisation, which in effect pushed them to the periphery.

The rival colonial perspective, conceives the country as a vicious, artificial entity, a white settler society, created by the displacement of the indigenous Palestinian people, and maintained by the support of the Western superpowers. According to this perspective the inherently racist Zionist state is ruled by a minority of Ashkenazim who mystify their exploitative control over the Oriental Jews and Arabs through exclusionary Jewish nationalism.

The alternative pluralist perspective rejects both these points of view and regards Israel as a pluralistic state, neither a nation-state nor a neocolonial state. It recognises the centrality of genuine pluralism and pluralism-based conflict, which both perspectives deny. The pluralist perspective agrees with the nation-building perspective that nation-building, modernisation and democracy are far advanced in Israeli society, but they have so far failed to reduce the pluralistic-inequality structure significantly.

This study has drawn a more balanced, realistic and convincing picture of Israeli society and its Oriental communities, drawing from various government figures and other studies and analysed these. While partially agreeing with and drawing from these perspectives, the study has attempted to draw an overall picture of Oriental Jews as the reality exists today.
Descriptive and historical-analytical in nature, the study attempts first to sociologically analyse the lower socio-economic status of Oriental Jews, as to what are the factors that have led to persistence of such an unequal status. Government figures on immigration, and economic and educational status of Oriental communities would be analysed in detail.

Broadly, it would analyse the role of state in the settlement of post 1948 immigrants and political economy of absorption of these immigrants. The study will also examine the nature and dynamics of absorption in the social and cultural spheres of Oriental communities in Israel and the nature and level of their integration into "mainstream" Israeli society. Finally it would attempt to establish a relationship between these processes and the socio-economic status of Oriental Jews i.e. their marginalisation and ethnicisation, an overlap between ethnicity and class.

The first chapter will examine the nature and origin of immigration and initial settlement, inherently discriminatory nature of political response in the initial post-independence period and pre-existing institutions, their subsequent impact on Oriental Jewish population of the country and the responses to these problems. The changing demographic character of the two main ethnic categories -- Afro-Asian and European-American -- would also be examined over a period of time and upto the recent past.

The second chapter attempts to demonstrate the economic divide between the two origin groups which has not shown any signs of diminishing over the decades and in the present. Government figures on prime indicators of this gap -- income, employment, the
nature of it and unemployment, the nature of households and localities, education and the
field of study etc. -- will be analysed over the years and up to the present as to establish
continuing lower status of Oriental Jews in the country. Government's response to this
challenge of growing inequalities and consequent results would also be examined briefly.

Social scientists have argued that in Israel, still marked by ethnic boundaries,
there has been a definite co-relation between ethnicity, class and political affiliations. In
this backdrop, the third chapter attempts to analyse Israeli political structure, parties and
institutions, political alienation of Oriental communities and their representation in
political system since statehood. Consequent or otherwise voting behaviour of Oriental
Jews over the years and attributed Oriental tilt towards the right-wing Likud Party for its
hard-line foreign policy with respect to Israel's Arab neighbours and ultra-orthodox Shas
party for its politics of religion would also be analysed in this chapter.

Israel's socialist/Zionist ideology preached an active, vigorous governmental
policy to achieve the true integration of the Jewish communities in Israel. Such
integration was desirable and seen as national necessity of high priority. However, the
Oriental-Ashkenazi dichotomy still persists in various spheres of life. The fourth chapter
attempts to examine, in the light of the previous chapters, the socio-cultural, economic,
educational and political integration, or the lack of it, of Oriental communities, into
"mainstream" Israeli society. The chapter will by and large draw on the facts from the
previous chapters.