CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION
The Indian Jewry is one of the few communities to have faced no persecution or anti-Semitism during the diasporic times unlike other Jewish groups in Europe. Important factors like economic backwardness and religious sentiments prompted them to immigrate to Israel in spite of their peaceful life in India. The Jews of Cochin along with other Jewish communities of India immigrated to the so-called promised land of “milk and honey” with great hopes and dreams. The harsh realities they had to face in Israel, however, were beyond their comprehension. The problems of immigration and integration of Cochin Jews cannot be understood in isolation but only within the wider context of the dynamics of a neo-colonial state. The Mizrachim groups received lackadaisical, if not humiliating, reception in all spheres and in due course of time became Jewish proletariat along with underprivileged Palestinians in their “home land”. Initially, the Cochin Jews were sent to Mabarat or immigration camp and they stayed there for a longer period unlike other Ashkenazi groups. Later some Cochinis were sent to kibbutzim but the non-kosher, non-religious and essentially westernized way of life in these centers was alien to the Cochinis and they left the kibbutz within a few months. The highly observant Cochini community was shocked to see extremely secular and attitude of racial superiority of their Ashkenazi counterparts in Israel.

The settlement authorities had unilaterally allotted to Cochinis various isolated Moshavs in Negev desert and border areas like Nevatim, Kefar Yuval, Mesillat Zion, Tao’z, Aviezer, Givat hayim, Moschav Ofer, Rekhatzim and Moschav Shaher. Most of these Moshavs allotted to Cochinis were abandoned by earlier settlers due to the shortage of water and extremely low fertility of these lands. In Israel, the Mizrachi groups like Cochinis were pushed to the periphery not only in poor and stigmatized neighborhoods of Israel’s major cities but also of Israeli mainstream political discourse due to the Israeli dispersion policy. This has seriously constrained Cochin Jewry’s political, economic,
social and cultural integration. Another main reason for sending the Cochini community in these isolated areas was the fear that the Cochinis carry contagious tropical diseases like elephantiasis. The extreme cold climate of the deserts, however, was completely unfamiliar to the Cochinis and they had no other options but to endure it. The houses or tents provided by the government never had more than two rooms and most of the houses were not electrified. The size of the houses was disproportionate to the size of families and the Cochinis with relatively large families had to adjust in one to two rooms. In addition, three to four families were given one to two toilets or bathrooms and mostly in very unhygienic conditions. Moreover the land was mostly fallow, filled with rocks, infertile and unfit for agriculture. The Cochinis, highly dependent on the Ashkenazi establishment for all aspects of livelihood, never had the courage to resist the authority of the settlement department. Lack of knowledge of Hebrew or inability to converse in Hebrew was one of the main factors that forced them to comply with the directions of the settlement department.

Compared to other immigrants, the integration of the Cochin Jews was relatively very slow. The less educated and unskilled Cochinis had to work as daily wage labourers in the agricultural farms or construction sites for many years. The Cochinis were highly dependent on the Ashkenazi dominated economic institutions for their survival and were completely isolated from the mainstream community. The Cochin Jews, contrary to their expectations, had to endure a lot in Israel. The lack of education, proficiency in Hebrew and the patronage had hampered the economic prospects of Cochin Jews to a great extent. The geographical dispersion policy of the Israeli Government has further isolated the miniscule community of Cochinis. The Mizraim immigrants like Cochinis had absolutely no say with regard to choice of residence and other socio-economic decisions. The Cochin Jews were the direct victims of the prejudice and discriminatory policies of the Ashkenazim community especially with regard to the settlement pattern. Ironically the community who left India to the land of “milk and honey” was wage labourers for more than a decade in the new land. That the community with no agrarian experience had to settle in agricultural settlements shows the arbitrariness of the absorption policy of the
Israeli Government. The Cochin Jews, who were relatively weak, suffered too much in the new environment as they expected quite a different atmosphere in the “land of Canaan”. The wages in the construction and the industrial sectors were the lowest. That compelled many women to work outside the Moshav as the income of one person was not sufficient for large Cochini families. Unsurprisingly, then, the Cochinis who lacked technical skills and generally less educated had no other option but to do menial jobs.

The lack of proficiency in Hebrew and technical skills are some of the major obstacles which prevented Cochin Jews from integrating completely into the Israeli mainstream. Moreover, the reason why the Cochini immigrants had little chances to learn or converse in Hebrew was the geographically segregated environment and the homogeneous atmosphere of the agricultural settlements. The incapability to converse in Hebrew language literally had cut off the Cochini from the rest of the mainstream Israeli population to a great extent. Till date most of the Cochini elders are not very fluent in Hebrew and they are highly dependent on their children for the official correspondence.

The Cochinis like other Mizrachi were sidelined and discriminated by the ruling Ashkenazi community at all levels. It is important to note that in terms of educational and economic achievements the Cochinis are way behind other Ashkenazi Jewish groups. The Ashkenazi establishment did not make any substantial effort to uplift the community from their backwardness in the initial phase. In the beginning the Cochinis were sent to agricultural schools and most of the members were given training in farming rather than in any other skills. Consequently there are very few postgraduates, professionals, high technocrats in the Cochini community. The average education of the Cochinis is high school or technical training and the Cochini women have mostly gone for teachers training or paramedical courses after the completion of schooling. Factors that hampered the educational success of the Cochin Jews are geographical isolation, stronger inclination towards religious education, economic constraints, lack of motivation towards high education, lack of quality education in the Moshav and so on. The academic standards of the schools in the rural areas were dismal compared to those schools in the
cities. There was a general apathy on the part of the Israeli establishment towards the rural schools as majority of the students were Mizrahim. The rural schools were practically segregated from the mainstream community, as they lacked quality educational services as well as adequate facilities.

In India the Cochin Jews were mostly vendors, peddlers, book binders, petty shopkeepers and very few of them were engaged in farming. On the contrary, in Israel they were made to settle in agricultural centers or Moshavs and they were trained in farming by the settlement authorities. The Cochinis had to struggle very hard as the land allotted to them was barren, rocky and unfit to cultivate. The Cochinis had to work as wage labourers on the farms for years since they lacked agrarian skills. Later in 1970s, the Cochinis were allowed to cultivate themselves the lands assigned to them under the supervision of the instructors and some Cochini youngsters who were trained in agricultural schools. The Cochinis were mainly engaged in horticulture, vegetable cultivation, and poultry for nearly three decades. The agrarian crisis and economic recession of the late 1980s in Israel had affected the Cochin Jews both socially and economically. By 1990s, as a result of the economic recession, most of the Cochini Moshavs had debts of million of dollars and the Moshav authorities transferred the credit to individual families ignoring their ability to repay loans on the terms received.

The deep recession made the government to withdraw all subsidies and majority of the Cochinis were thrown into huge debts. Most of the Cochinis had to stop farming as the prices crashed and income from agriculture became very low. The hike in water and electricity tariffs was a major jolt to the Cochinis as green houses were highly dependent on both water and electricity. It was very difficult financially for small farmers like Cochinis who lacked managerial experience to manage both farming and exporting since the cooperative system was completely shattered under the spell of liberalization-privatization policies of the Israeli government. Moreover, the fluctuation of the poultry prices, and the seasonal diseases of chickens also led the poultry business into a crisis. Gradually, the Cochinis have stopped poultry and agriculture and most of them are now
depended on "outside employment." Subsequently, they faced great difficulty in securing new jobs since they were neither well educated nor skilled labourers. This forced the Cochinis to enter into low status and low paid jobs. The agrarian crisis had created occupational shift within the Cochinis and most of the Cochinis today are engaged in low paid jobs like drivers, securities, factory workers, nurses, kindergarten teachers, police, mechanics, etc. Almost half of the Cochin income goes to repay loans.

Currently, the Cochin community has developed a negative attitude towards agriculture and almost all of them have moved out of Moshavs for jobs. There are very few professionals and managers among the Cochin community and the Cochin Jewry’s representation in the high ranking services like academics, scientists, high level bureaucracy, journalism, etc. is almost negligible. Besides two or three small level businessmen, none of the Cochinis are big entrepreneurs. In addition, the data with regard to the female spouses also shows that majority of the women are engaged in low income or blue collar jobs like factory workers, saleswomen, kindergarten teachers, nurses, clerks, secretaries and so on. Earlier, most of the Cochin women used to work inside the Moshavs mostly in the family farming or in the poultry but the agrarian crisis and the huge debts incurred by the families forced the womenfolk to work outside the Moshavs. However, the women respondents underlined the fact that it was more difficult for them to find jobs since they were relatively less educated than men.

The Jews of Cochin are a socially marginalized community in Israel despite their stay in the country for more than five decades. The geographical isolation has exacerbated their social marginality and isolation. Although they have unrestricted mobility, now the Cochinis were literally confined within the four walls of the Moshavs until 1980s. The unscientific geographical dispersion policy, aimed at excessive homogenization and vehement denial of ethnic plurality, has further kept the Cochinis marginalized and isolated. As mentioned earlier, the busy work schedule of the agricultural life has virtually restricted them from interacting with the outside world. The geographical isolation has hampered their social mobility and acceptance within the Israeli society and
also inculcated a sense of fear, insecurity, and ghettoization within the Cochini community. Even the young generation prefers to live in the Moshavs near their parents rather than in a heterogeneous atmosphere of the cities. The collapse of the agricultural sector has forced Cochinis to leave Moshavs and work outside which has increased the social interaction of the Cochin Jews with other ethnic communities but they have still a long way to go. Ironically, to this day the Cochinis have minimum interaction with outside world; their relations being mostly confined to the colleagues in the work place. At the same time most of the Cochinis have developed close ties among themselves within the Moshavs.

The Social marginalization of the Cochinis is also partly due to the prejudice and stereotypes held closely by the dominant Ashkenazi majority. The Mizrachim as a whole were perceived as primitive, backward, underdeveloped and less intelligent by the mainstream Ashkenazim ever since the formation of Israel. In the inception the Indian Jews were subjected to racial discrimination and the negative image of Indian Jews which was developed since immigration more or less persists till now. The Cochin Jews have more social contacts with the Mizrachim groups than with the Ashkenazim because of their similar conditions in Israel. The blue collar jobs are predominantly dominated by the Mizrachim groups and since the mid 1980s majority of the Cochin Jews have also entered the same job market. Earlier the intra-ethnic marriages were very common within the Cochini community and now there is a significant improvement in their marital preferences. The Cochini youngsters now prefer to marry outside the community and importantly most of the inter-ethnic marriages that take place within the community are with the various other Mizrachi groups. The Cochins’ interaction and relations with the Ashkenazim is very minimal in all spheres. Interestingly, very few Cochinis have married Ashkenazis and those who married were educated members of the community.

The prejudice based on colour has restricted the upward mobility of the Cochini Jews especially in the social sphere of the society. The Cochin Jews had been stigmatized by the Ashkenazim on the basis of colour during the initial years itself. Ironical as it may
sound, even other Mizrahi communities have ridiculed and socially ostracized the Cochinis since they were the darkest skinned community of Israel until the arrival of the Ethiopian Jews. The racial suppression of the Cochin Jews has adversely affected their level of confidence and social interaction for the Cochins were known in the beginning as “kushis” or blacks. The Cochin Jews, already victims of the racial prejudice of their fellow Paradesi community, were further shocked with the kind of racial discrimination they encountered in the so-called “Promised land”, and it took them years to regain the confidence and to come out of the cultural suppression. In what came as the cruel twist of fate, the Cochinis were Jews in India and only became “Hodim” or “Cochinis” in Israel. The superior attitude of the Ashkenazi community towards the other Mizrahi groups has widened the social gaps between Cochins and other ethnic groups.

The life style together with the social hierarchy of the Cochin community has changed significantly after immigrating to Israel. The Cochin Jews were a highly religious and observant community and their lives revolved around synagogues. One of the main reasons for their immigration was their deep commitment to the religion but the hard life of Israel has reshaped their religious activity to a great extent. It is significant to note that the Cochin Jews are still a highly religious community, although their religious activities have been reduced in Israel. Interestingly this numerically insignificant community has more than nine synagogues in Israel. The Cochin Jews are one of the few Mizrahi groups who transferred the mortal remains of their ancestors to Israel and this indicates the deep religious commitment of the Cochin community. Majority of the members of the community are Kosher or observe strict dietary laws but the life in Israel has changed this significantly. The Synagogue council or Yogam does not play a major role in this community as it used to in the past. The Yogam, or the religious guild of the Cochinis, had a tremendous control over the lives of Cochins before immigrating to Israel. The Yogam members were the main decision makers especially with regard to religious matters but as of now the Yogam has lost its prominence and it has been replaced by the local rabbis. However, the ethnically homogenous synagogue plays a major major in consolidating the ethnic identity of the community in a multi-ethnic society like Israel.
The western and non-observant approach of the Israeli society has some influence on the lives of the younger generation. The participation of the youngsters in the religious activities is relatively low compared to the older generation.

The indigenous traditions and customs still hold a prominent place in the lives of the Cochinis but are under great stress due to the hegemony of mainstream Israeli culture. The community is still proud of its traditions and customs and is very keen to retain them in spite of various obstacles. Yet many of the traditions and relics of their Indian past have completely vanished after immigration. In the beginning the Cochinis were not very vocal about their traditions due to the fear of social isolation but currently the Cochin community is in the midst of ethnic revivalism. The Cochins have now realized that abandoning of Diasporic traditions and customs will neither help them to achieve any social status nor alter the prejudice and negative stereotypes of the dominant community towards them. The younger generation is not very much interested in retaining the Cochin culture due to the influence of the mainstream westernized culture of Israel, yet it is also very proud of their traditions and their diasporic heritage. The religious oriented life and the social isolation of the Cochinis are the main reasons for the continuation of the diasporic traditions in Israel. Interestingly, the duration or usually the time spent to complete many of the Cochin traditions and rituals have been reduced in Israel due to lack of time and money or both. Currently many of the Cochin ceremonies are a mixture of both Ashkenazi and Indian traditions. The inter-ethnic marriages within the community have also been attributed to the dilution of the Cochin traditions as the non-Cochini spouses are not very enthusiastic about observing or preserving the culture which is alien to them. The Cochin food continues to be a visible expression of their ethnic identity and the community still prepares Kerala food on all festivals and Sabbath.

Surprisingly, the divisions between the Cochins and the Paradesi Jews continue in Israel although not explicitly. The Paradesi Jews who immigrated to Israel in the later period stay separately and there are no marital relations between both the communities. The prejudice and animosity still prevail in the minds of the old generation and the interaction
between these two Jewish groups from Kerala is very minimal. In addition, the Cochinis do not enjoy close interaction with the Bene Israelis of Bombay though they stay closely in places like Beersheba. The attacks pertaining to the question of Jewishness of Bene Israelis have further exacerbated the distance between both the communities, yet there are marital relations between both these groups unlike Paradesis.

The Cochinis are very nostalgic and excited about their place of origin, Kerala. The frequency of the Cochin Jew’s visit to Kerala is steadily increasing these days. The Cochin Jewry, after their immigration to Israel, did not visit Kerala for years due to lack of money and fear of social isolation. The Indian decision to grant dual citizenship to Indian Jewish Diaspora has been received by the Cochinis with great joy and pride. Some Cochins are planning to buy houses in Cochin to live during the peak winter in Israel. Since late 1980s various Indian ethnic organizations have been actively working in Israel. The ethnic organizations and associations are clear signs of the growing ethnic identity of Cochin Jews and their intention to continue as a distinct ethnic group in Israel. The Indian ethnic organizations are playing a major role in maintaining the Diasporic culture among the immigrants in Israel and strengthening the cultural continuity with the home. The establishment of these ethnic organizations appears to be the affirmation of the Cochini identity in the Israeli society.

The Cochin Jews was politically less involved in India before immigration unlike other minority groups in India. The life of the members of Cochin community was mainly confined to the religious activities around synagogue before immigrating to Israel. Only a few individuals were active in the local politics of Cochin, mostly from the Paradesi Jewish community. The political inactiveness and marginalization of the community still continues in Israel without any significant change and the Cochini community is totally underrepresented in the political hierarchy of Israel. None of the Cochinis who are involved in politics in Israel have arisen beyond the local level. Most of the Cochinis in the central committees of various political parties are either co-opted or nominated to pacify the sentiments of the community. The Cochini representation even in the
nominated positions in the various government bodies is virtually negligible. The economic constraints, lack of education, lack of patronage, numerical insignificance could be the reasons for the political marginalization of Cochin Jews. The major political parties or even the system did not make any substantial efforts either to politicize or to bring the community in the mainstream politics. The Cochin Jews were kept reserved as a political vote bank like other Mizrahi groups for decades. The geographical isolation is one of the main factors that have hampered the political involvement of the Cochin Jews in Israel. The homogenous nature of the Moshavs has constrained the interaction of the community with the outside world. The social isolation has worsened the political apathy and inactiveness in the Cochin to a great extent. The lack of knowledge of Hebrew language has further increased the gravity of their political isolation. In Israel the proficiency in Hebrew is a perquisite for one's involvement in politics.

The Cochinis were socially and economically dependent on the Labor party and the Labor Party never tried to politicize the Cochini, even if ideologically majority of them supported the Mapai (Labor) Party. The sense of political estrangement and isolation is very much visible in the community despite its long stay in Israel. The numerical insignificance is another main factor that has deeply affected the political integration of the Cochini community. This has not only attributed to the geographical isolation of the Cochini community but also the political alienation of the Indian Jews in general. The Cochin Jews are yet to integrate completely into the Israeli political system. In general the Cochins have shown a marginal sense of political involvement. Moreover, political apathy and fear are the other aspects that prevented Cochinis from integrating into the political process. The authoritarian political climate represented by the Ashkenazim could be another reason for their political alienation. Paradoxical as it may sound but the second and third generation of Cochinis have also not been completely integrated into the Israeli political process. The level of political isolation is very high among the Cochin Jews in spite of their long association with the Labor party.
In brief, the Cochin Jews are a socially marginalized community in Israel with less interaction with the outside world. Factors like geographical isolation, lack of proper education, collapse of the agrarian sector, lack of patronage and racial discrimination have aggravated both the social and economic problems of the Cochin Jews. There is hardly any change in the economic prospects of the Cochini community as majority of the Cochini members are engaged in blue collar or menial jobs. The institutional negligence and discrimination had led to the educational backwardness of the community despite their stay in Israel for more than five decades. The Cochinis are totally underrepresented in all aspects of the society like beauracracy, business, politics, education, intelligentsia, media and arts, and so on. The social prejudice and negative attitudes of the dominant community towards the Indian Jews are still prevalent in the so-called “Jewish Home Land”. The socio-economic mobility of the Cochin Jews is certainly very low when compared to other Keralite diasporas in Persian Gulf and western countries. The case of Cochin Jewry is a visible expression of the oppressive policies of the “ethnocratic state”. As indicated before, an important feature of Israeli state is the internal subjugation of both Mizrachim and the Palestinians by the Ashkenazi establishment. The Cochin Jews will have to wage a long struggle to reach the levels of integration attained by the Ashkenazim in Israeli mainstream.