CHAPTER VI

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This study has attempted to critically evaluate the role of state ideology and policy in the settlement of post-1948 immigrants in Israel and their implications on the Afro-Asian Jews in general and the Indian Jews in particular. ‘Absorption of immigrants’, conceptualised in the phrase *klitat ha aliyah* was perceived as a policy as well as process by which the immigrants would be settled in Israel. It was conceived not merely in specific technical terms, but in broader ideological terms as a complete re-education and resocialisation of immigrants. Thus, it forms the crux of the very nation-building in Israel.

To take the ideological dimension first: two central tenets of the Zionist undertaking were *kibbutz hagaluyot* and *mizug hagaluyot*, respectively the ‘ingathering’ and fusion of diaspora Jewry into a single nation. These were idealistic and revolutionary notions. They called for the fulfillment of the age-old ideal of return to Zion and for the radical change of the Jewish fate of exilic existence into collective national deliverance. Accordingly, the newly formed Israeli State took on an unprecedented effort to maintain large-scale, well financed machinery for the immigration and absorption of Jews. However, these goals were thwarted, bringing out the strains between original Zionist visions and the
realities of statehood and nation-building. A full ingathering, entailing the complete dissolution of the diaspora, did not occur because the vast majority of Jews living in the west have chosen to remain there, not to immigrate to Israel. But precisely that segment of diaspora Jewry that did immigrate in large numbers after 1948—Jews of Africa and Asia—posed problems for the goal of fusion.

Afro-Asian Jewry had a relatively peaceful existence in the diaspora. In the case of Indian Jews, they did not experience any persecution or anti-semitism throughout their long history in India. However, they preserved the religious-ethnic symbols across generations of existential continuity and expressed a primeval yearning for Zion. Their Jewish identity was largely without any defensive parameters which expected religious fulfillment through immigration and settlement in the land of Israel. But their experiences contradicted the hope of an egalitarian society. The Indian Jewish immigration was even blocked at one stage doubting their ‘Jewishness’ and later in Israel also they had little space in Zionist master narratives. Thus, the encounter of the Indian Jewish ethnicity with Zionist nationalism illustrates many tensions and contradictions between these categories.

The political setting into which the new immigrants arrived in Israel was on the one hand being shaped by Ben Gurion’s mamlakhtiyut which became a mobilising ideology and a concrete policy premised on the
assertion of the state primacy over all sectors and institutions in Israeli life and on the other was dominated by the Labor movement that increasingly took on the form of a paternalistic elite. Labor not only formed Israel’s governments in the first 3 decades, but was regarded as ‘the establishment’ by virtue of its political, economic and social power. It dominated the government, the army, labor unions and the Jewish Agency and set the tone of Israel’s value system and elite structure. This multiple domination was for all practical purposes in the hands of the country’s Ashkenazim—the Jews of European-American origin.

Although accepted unequivocally as Jews and thus on principle welcomed to the Zionist enterprise, it soon became problematic that the Afro-Asian immigrants were worlds removed from the Zionist pioneers of European background. The nation-building perspective viewed aliyyah from the Afro-Asian countries in terms of absorption and modernisation. The policy-makers in the new state emphasised the distinction between the Ashkenazi population which was portrayed as the embodiment of Jewish traditions, culture and values of modernity and the Orientals who lacked all these characteristics. Hence, the latter’s entrance into the Israeli society has been described as the beginning of a process of modernisation which will end in their dispersal throughout the social structure. The idea was to create one people, one heritage but, behind the ideals of ‘one people’ were the glaring realities of superiority, paternalism and ethnocentrism.
Although the settlement of the new immigrants was perceived as the immediate and urgent task and responsibility of the new state, it was not performed outside the general paradigm of political and economic development. There were well-framed policies and programs as well as centralised mechanisms of absorption. An understanding of qualitative difference among the immigrants actually paved the way for a differential treatment in the settlement policy.

In the immediate post-1948 period, the policy of absorption advocated the population dispersal, economic absorption and cultural fusion as its basic concerns. The task of population dispersal was considered as a primary concern. However, it was applied only to the new immigrants. Therefore, the predominant Ashkenazi population retained their original settlements in the developed urban centres into which the new European immigrants were directly absorbed whereas the Oriental immigrants were pushed to the peripheral areas.

In the rapid process of economic development, the Orientals constituted a relatively cheap labor force. While majority of them were becoming agricultural, construction and industrial workers, large numbers of Ashkenazim were entering the public services which underwent great expansion concomitant with the rapid economic development. In the case of Indian Jews, the Bene Israel were channeled into settling down in the development towns and the Cochin Jews were taken to agricultural
settlements called *moshavim*. Most of these towns and *moshavim* were built in outlying areas. A generalised view about the low socio-economic background of the Indian immigrants irrespective of their many varied occupations in India, resulted into an ethnic concentration of the Indian Jews into the lower echelons of the socio-economic structure in Israel. There has been sharp boundary maintenance between communities based on cultural characteristics, which restricted their socio-economic mobility.

The most crucial onslaught of the absorption policy took place in the cultural sphere. The ‘fusion of exiles’ as an ideological tenet was inimical to the recognition of cultural or ethnic differences among the Jews. Whether it is the perceived “Arabness” of the Middle Eastern immigrants or the ‘backwardness’ of the Afro-Asian Jews in general, it so troubled the veteran Zionist leaders who where anxious to build a ‘modern’ Jewish nation beyond any doubt. The absorption-modernisation model advocated by the pioneering policy-makers, in practice, led to the ethnicisation and marginalisation of the Afro-Asian Jews in Israel contradicting the goals of fusion. Articulated in the folk concepts ‘primitive’ and ‘lacking culture’, the ethnic category of oriental Jews was created and filled with negative cultural connotations. Since the Oriental culture was perceived as incongruent with Ashkenazi culture, there has been boundary maintenance between these communities which perpetuated the divide between the two.
A significant development which exposed the internal tensions within the Israeli society was the emergence of Oriental protest movements and ethnic organisations. The frustration and discontent of the Afro-Asian Jews took visible forms in movements such as the Black Panther Movement of the North African Jews in the early 1970s. They demanded a fairer distribution of the economic resources of the country and a share in the definition of its cultural identity. In particular, such movements articulated their disillusionment with the repressive Israeli establishment represented by the Labor Party. By 1980s there was a clear ethnic polarisation in the electoral politics. During the 10th Knesset elections in 1981, the Labor Party received the bulk of its support from Ashkenazi voters, while the reigning Likud drew heavy support from the Oriental Jews.

The setting into which the Indian Jews arrived in Israel, as we have already seen, was normatively defined as egalitarian but factually was based on an inegalitarian structure since the Ashkenazim formed the core and determined the basis of absorption. The findings of this study reveal that though they immigrated to Israel on the basis of their Jewish identity, they are ethnicised and marginalised in terms of their 'Indianness.' The Cochin Jews as well as the Bene Israel live in more or less homogenous ethnic neighbourhoods and are concentrated in certain clearly defined occupational strata and represent an ethnic class clustering. Indian culture was looked down upon and these immigrants were required to cast away
their popular legends and their folk narratives in order to become members of this new society. They had to hide their culture, their language and their origin. The policy was one of 'absorption through rejection.'

Indian Jews, like other Afro-Asian communities, have acquired some economic gains in Israel over the past fifty years but their marginalisation within the Israeli society is quite evident. It is reflected in the pattern of their settlements, the low status of their occupations and the prejudicial social boundaries between communities. Although there was a shift in the ideological pronouncements of political leadership towards 'cultural pluralism' especially with the rise of Likud to power, it could not yet reverse the fundamentals of absorption. On the contrary, the absorption of Ethiopian aliyah in the 1980s and 1990s suggest that the same mistakes have been repeated. Complaints have come out that the absorption of the Ethiopians has not been carried out on equal terms compared with the absorption of the Russian immigrants. Also, there is an on-going debate regarding their Jewishness similar to that of the controversy regarding the religious status of the Bene Israel Indian Jews in the 1950s and 1960s.