CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Amalgamation of Jews into a single nation has been a national aim, which has influenced attitude and policy towards immigrants in Israel. As a State which has drawn immigrants to it in a limited space of time from vastly different countries in the world, Israel soon became a mixture of diverse cultural entities despite having common religion. The pioneering policy makers in Israel envisaged the principle of “fusion of exiles” (mizug hagaluyot) to mould a unified nation out of these cultural, diversities. However, in practice, it caused several severe damages in the Israeli society. The histories of Jews from Afro-Asian countries were sociologised into such linear categories as ‘traditional’ and ‘transitional’ while their cultures were denigrated. Even though in later years a controlled measure of cultural difference has been acknowledged the ideology of ‘absorption of immigrants’ and ‘fusion of exiles’ has pervaded public thinking unto the present. A government ministry entitled the ministry of absorption is committed to something more inclusive than immigration.

Although the literature on absorption of immigrants in Israel is abundant, the specific case of Indian Jews in this regard is rare. Most of the studies on the Indian Jews in Israel are restricted to anthropological descriptions
of the community. This thesis tries to locate the Indian Jews in the absorption dynamics in Israel. It hopes to contribute to the literature on absorption of immigrant groups in Israel on the one hand and to the growing body of knowledge on Indian diasporic communities, on the other. The study is unusual in that it deals with an Indian diasporic community, which is distinctive primarily because of its religion. Also, as a study of a Jewish immigrant group in Israel, it is unusual in that it deals with a group whose members did not originate in a Christian or Muslim country, but whose identity was often questioned as a result of their past incorporation into a Hindu majority society.

The History of Jews in India is marked by the real freedom they enjoyed in this country. They are among the few Jewish communities in the world who had not experienced any persecution or anti-Semitism. By choosing to immigrate to Israel, the Indian Jews expressed their Jewish solidarity and expected a shift from their minority status in India to equal status in Israel. Upon immigration, however, their experience contradicted the principle of an egalitarian society. They were systematically distanced from the mainstream on the basis of their cultural specificities.

There have been mainly four streams of Jewry in India of which the Bene Israel are numerically the largest. Prior to the eighteenth century, they lived in the villages on the Konkan coast, just south of Bombay, but, by the twentieth century, most of the community was urbanized. The
majority lived in the city of Bombay, but there were also smaller communities in Karachi (now Pakistan), Poona, Ahmedabad, and places as far afield as Aden in the West and Rangoon, Burma in the East. Emigration to Israel did not take place en masse as it did among some other Oriental Jewish communities, but in the twenty six years between 1948, when the State of Israel was declared, and 1974, 25,000 Indian Jews had emigrated, of whom over 20,000 were Been Israel. (Weil, 1981). Due to natural increase, the Bene Israel community in Israel numbers over 50,000 today. Nearly 2,000 emigrated from India to England and other English-speaking countries, while 5,000 Bene Israel remain in Bombay and in the surrounding Konkan villages.

The Cochin Jews, who lived on the Malabar Coast in South India, constituted 2,500 souls in 1948. Like the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews claim descent from the ‘lost Tribes’, but, unlike their Indian co-religionists, there is clear evidence of the existence of the Cochin community from at least the eleventh century AD. Religiously inclined, when the State of Israel was declared in 1948. Jews from Cochin responded to the call for immigration. Today, less than a hundred Cochinis, as they are known, remain on the Malabar Coast.

The Baghdadi Jews were comparatively newcomers to India who had moved from Iraq to Bombay, Calcutta and one or two smaller centers in the nineteenth century. In 1947 the community numbered 3,000 but after
Indian Independence the majority emigrated to English-speaking countries or to Israel. Today, fewer than 200 Baghdadi Jews remain in Calcutta, and an even smaller number remain in Bombay.

The European Jews who had fled from Germany, Austria and Poland during the Second World War, lived in Delhi, Madras, Calcutta and Bombay where they joined the Baghdadi Jews in social and religious activities. Most of these Jews regarded India as a temporary stepping-stone before they could emigrate to the United States and other countries.

In addition to these four strands, there exist a community claiming 'lost tribe status in the North Eastern India which have been the object of some recent academic attention. Some 5,000 tribals in the North Eastern Indian states of Manipur, Mizorum and Nagaland had discarded their traditional tribal customs to rebuild their lives along mosaic and Halachic (of Jewish Law) percepts, waiting for the day they finally return to the Holyland. This was done at no small sacrifice. Conversion entails giving up the eating of pork (the traditional tribal delicacy in the North-East) and the eating of any flesh without ritual purification for men, undergoing the painful process of circumcision and abandoning their old ways to practice the teachings of Torah. Fuelling the Jewish upsurge in these areas is the conviction that all the two million odd Chin-Kuki tribals living in Burma, Mizorum, Manipur, Nagaland and parts of the Chittagong hill tracts are descendants of one of the ten lost tribes of
Israel. The basis of this ‘rediscovery’ lies in the fact that their ancestral deity was called *Manashi* which sounds close to the name of the lost tribe of Menashe, the son of Joseph. Another connection is that their tradition speaks about a ‘sacred parchment’ containing God’s revelation—presumably the Torah, or Jewish religious scroll. Unfortunately, the legend adds, the parchment had been eaten by a dog.

Having discovered their Jewish roots, they have set their eyes at the final goal - migrating to Israel. In 1983, the NorthEastern Jews requested to then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin for recognition and assistance in returning ‘home’ evoked little response. Four Kukis were allowed into Israel to authenticate their claims and received formal instructions in the Torah. Since then, the Jewish Agency refused to issue visas, because of serious doubts regarding their claims. In 1990, a few Mizos were brought to Israel by *Amishav*, a messianic religious group in Israel and were settled in the occupied territories. They have become radical right wing activists. Worried that Amishav’s efforts would spur a massive influx of indigenous Indians claiming to be Jews, the Israeli government decided to stop the flow from the North Eastern India.

The present thesis focuses on the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews, the two ancient Jewish communities of India. The few Baghdadi Jews from India who immigrated to Israel got scattered in different parts and they rarely identify themselves or being identified by others as Indians. Even
in India they kept a distance from other Jews and they identified with the British. In Israel, they merged with the much larger Jewish community that had come directly from Iraq. They settled in major cities and in a few cases in kibbutzim (collective agricultural settlements). As Joan G. Roland has commented, because their numbers in Israel are relatively small, Beghdadi Indian culture is more likely to be preserved in Golders Green in London, or in parts of Canada, Australia, and the United States, than in Israel (Roland, 1995).

The general study of immigrants in Israel began in the early 1950s when most work was influenced by the theoretical framework propounded by Eisenstadt in the *Absorption of Immigrants* (1954). Thus, for example, the following hypothesis formed a basis for later studies of immigrants in different localities:

Our basic premise is that the process of absorbing immigrants and integrating them into the absorbing society is the outcome of the interplay between the immigrant's own desires and expectations with regard to the new country, and the extent to which these can be realized in terms of the various demands made on the immigrants by the institutional structure of the absorbing society.

The finding of such studies insisted that immigrants forget their origins and adopt the social conventions and norms of the country of immigration. On the basis of their analyses of veteran Jewish settlements in Palestine, sociologists claimed that immigrants with an enhanced Jewish
consciousness before their migration would achieve a high level of self-acceptance in their national identity. This outcome was deemed desirable. But when the new immigrants expressed a desire to preserve their shared traditions, they were well considered to be in danger of 'failing to adapt' (Eisenstadt, 1954).

Also, in 1953, Ben-David published an influential article under the title "Ethnic Differences or Social Change?" (reprinted in Eisenstadt et al 1970). He argued that immigrants in Israel do not see any important or vital social value in their common origin or cultural tradition and that their main orientation is toward the values of the European based culture of the Yishuv (Jewish community in pre-state Israel). Culture is only a second factor operating on the basis of the more general phenomenon of social change.

According to Ben-David,

There are no ethnic groups possessing definite cultures, but only one society characterised by a rather uniform cultural orientation... and on the margins an ever-increasing number of individuals and groups which have not yet become absorbed in it.... The frame of reference (for analysis) we suggest instead is that of social change (emphasis added)

By 'social change' he meant the modernisation of Oriental immigrants. By 'uniform cultural orientation' he meant European culture. Ben-David rejects the term 'ethnic group' in the Israeli situation in favour of the
term 'ethnic extractions' which, together with other factors, affect the processes of social change resulting from the 'crises of immigration'. Unfortunately, according to him, it is only those with 'normal psychic maturity' who will be absorbed into the dominant culture. When viewed from the point of the absorbing society all the Indian Jews must, by this theory, display great 'psychic immaturity'.

Many sociological and anthropological studies on new immigrants especially in the farming settlements followed. At this stage anthropologists performed not only as ethnographers of immigrant communities but of Government ideology and policy and were sometimes actually employed, at the same time in its management (Robert Paine, 1980:128).

Weintraub and Lissak (1964) tried to discover some general trends, and the factors producing them, in the process of adjustment to the new economic and environment. They provided some of the first categories by which the social and cultural differentiation of various groups of immigrants from different countries and regions could be comprehended, in order to advance the understanding of the elements involved in the adjustment of the different groups. Weintraub's analysis thus focused on correlating the capacity of immigrants to change with the predispositions brought to the situation by the various groups of settlers.
Weingrod (1966) and Willner (1970) described the gap, contradictions and discrepancies between the cultural and general social characteristics of the immigrants and the demands of the organization (the pattern of the settlements) to which they had to adapt in the co-operative villages. Weingrod identified a process which he called 'reciprocal change', according to this, not only did the immigrants have to adapt themselves to a new system, but the model of settlement also had to be adjusted by the absorbing administration, in order to accommodate the newcomers. In a study of a village populated by immigrants from Morocco, Weingrod analysed the social changes which had occurred in recent times among Moroccan Jewry, following the general economic and social developments which had been brought about by the French occupation of Morocco. These changes, which had preceded the coming of Moroccan Jews to Israel, Weingrod tried to relate to the manner in which various immigrants coped with the additional process of change that awaited them in their new homeland.

Beginning with Eisenstadt's leading theoretical framework, most of the sociologists and anthropologists who followed him attempted to bring into perspective the past social background of the immigrants as one of the main factors in the process of adjustment. This reasoning illuminates one aspect but ignores the structural inequalities in the absorption process. This viewpoint argued that the difference between the so-called Oriental and Ashkenazi (European and American) Jews were primarily
sociological. These Orientals came from 'traditional' societies to 'modern' Israel. Their integration into Israeli society therefore entailed their resocialisation: learning new roles, acquiring new skills appropriate to a modern society.

The errors of bureaucrats are interpreted as a technicality that can be solved with good will. When immigrants do not fill proffered roles, they are held to be suffering from lack of motivation, signaling emotional failure. Truly mature immigrants, it is claimed, will be ready to lower their levels of aspiration in order to fill available niches. Yet, immigrants who are asked to take on low-grade work and do so, are judged to lack social competence. The 'ascent' into a 'modern' society from a 'traditional' social context, is apparently only the first step in the long climb to becoming just like those who are established residents. The social context is functional, and therefore good; so the burden of proof is on the immigrant. Here, as Kevin Avruch (1987) has rightly commented, the sociologist's model of immigrant absorption is linked up with the Zionist vision of 'fusion of exiles'. Such studies, hence tended to ignore the imposed inequalities and discriminatory tendencies of the absorption policy.

However, towards 1980s and in early 90s, considerable amount of attention has been given by many authors to the absorption pangs and to the plight of Oriental immigrants in Israel. By this time the question of
Oriental Jews were addressed in public platforms and in political forums. Movements and organisations of Jews of Afro-Asian origin have come to the forefront articulating their grievances and demanding equal opportunity and status in the Israeli society. The Black Panther Movement was one of this type.

Sammy Smooha’s *Pluralism and Conflict* (1978) is a critical interpretation of the Oriental question in Israel. He ascribes the socio-economic gap between the Orientals and Ashkenazim to the structural factors inherent in a situation in which a powerful Ashkenazi elite ‘absorbs’ a mass of powerless Oriental immigrants. The principles of absorption and fusion are interpreted as an ideology which has permitted the exploitation of the immigrants and helped to perpetuate it. A more radical version can be found in the socio-economic analysis by Bernstein and Swirsky in their essay entitled “Rapid Economic Development and the Emergence of Ethnic Division of Labor.” Swirsky (1981) applying a world systems perspective and dependency theory lumps Oriental Jews and Arabs together - on the periphery and exploited by the core. However, there exists great differences between these groups in both socio-psychological (Oriental Jews reject qualities that would identify them with Arabs) and structural terms (Oriental Jews have experienced a certain amount of upward mobility because of the large-scale integration of Arab labor into the lowest echelons of Israel’s economy). The ideological orientation of the core towards its peripheries and vice versa
is profoundly different. “Fusion” and integration, even if utopian, characterise the Oriental case while a variety of orientations, some of them dystopian, hold for the Arabs.

The role of the State and the nation-building ideology in perpetrating the ethnic divide has been analysed by Cohen Almagor in his highly critical article on “Cultural Pluralism and The Israeli Nation-building Ideology”. Erik Cohen discusses the cultural and political dimensions of Oriental ethnicity and the changing patterns of ideological legitimation in Israel in his articles on “Ethnicity and Legitimation in Contemporary Israel” (1983). Articles like “Voting Pattern of Oriental Jews in Development Towns” by Ben-Zadok and Glodberg (1983) and “Ethnic Upsurgence and Decline of Ideology” by Don Peretz and Sammy Smooha throw some light on the implications of Oriental ethnicity in Israeli politics.

Problems and prospects for the integration of the Oriental Jews has been analysed by a number of authors taking the case of a particular group or comparing different groups. “Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel” (1993) by Steven Kaplan and Chaim Rosen, “The Rise of Iranian Ethnicity in Israel” (1983) by Judith. L. Goldstein deal with the respective groups. Mordechai Roshwald in “Marginal Jewish Sects in Israel”, compares the religious marginalisation of the Falashas, Karaites and Samaritans from the mainstream Judaism in Israel.
In the specific case of Indian Jewry, Gilbert Kushner (1971) was the first who dealt in detail with the absorption dynamics. In his study on the Cochini Indian immigrants, he traces in detail the problems of one particular *moshav* (co-operative agricultural settlement). Kushner calls it an ‘administered community’ which has undergone ‘directed change’, directed by outside bureaucratic agencies. Kushner has provided valuable data on the process of ‘Israelisation’ aimed at by the planners, the various techniques employed and the institutional mechanisms involved in the immigrant absorption program.

“*The Bene Israel in Israel*” by Schifra Strizower (1961) had first brought out the Bene Israel Indian Jews’ experiences in Israel. A recent study by Margaret Abraham (1995) had highlighted the marginality of the Indian community in Israel in terms of their geographical distribution, occupational status and socio-cultural aspects. She argues that ethnicity and marginality are related issues in the analysis of the Indian Jewish integration in Israel. This is a striking observation since the Indian Jews in Israel are concentrated in certain clearly defined geographical and occupational strata forming “ethnic clusterings”. The case of the Bene Israel was a further complicated one because their religious identity was stigmatised.

The present thesis continues this trend, but also attempts to go into the ideological premises which gave rise to the immigrant absorption
policies. The thesis opens by discussing the ideological premises and policy formulation in chapter 2. This chapter analyses how the concept of *mizug ha galuyot* (fusion of exiles) viewed Israeli society monolithically and worked against the ethnic diversity of the new immigrants resulting in the marginalisation of Oriental Jews. The State policies, various institutions, and the general pattern of absorption are discussed here. Chapter 3 provides the historical background of the Indian Jews, motivations and pattern of their emigration. Chapter 4 provides a critical examination of their settlement pattern and socio-economic status in Israel. It gives the picture of the nature and level of integration of Indian Jews in Israel. Though, interviews were conducted among members of the community belonging to different settlements, emphasis is given to one particular settlement in terms of socio-economic structure and community organisation, to make the analysis deeper.

Chapter 5 analyses the factors which define the identity of Indian Jews in Israel. The basic identity of these groups in the past was that of Jew. But the situation of immigration and absorption in Israel has created their new paradoxical identity as *Hodim* (Indians) or as *mizrachim* (Orientals), which distinguishes them from others. How the Indian Jewish identity gets redefined? what are the self-perceptions of the community?; these questions are addressed in this chapter. Chapter 6 is devoted to summary and conclusions. Finally, a note on the appendix: Although Hebrew, Marathi and Malayalam terms are translated and defined when and where
This study is based on an intensive sociological field-work conducted in Israel. It has also incorporated history, not just as a curtain-raiser, but one which runs through the subsequent analysis. The field-work was made possible during my stay in Israel between October 1996 and June 1997 as Israel Government Scholar. During this period I lived in different Indian Jewish settlements, interviewed members of the community, participated in the community activities and public functions. Life histories and personal memories were thus collected from these consistent interactions with the community. Since there is not much written documents regarding their situation in the initial years of absorption in Israel, these oral narratives of the informants have formed the principal date of my work. Historical reconstruction based on oral reports is methodologically debatable among both historians and anthropologists. Some have argued that such reports express mainly the current attitudes of the informants and contemporary conditions and that they do not reliably reflect past situations as they refer to them. However, I consider oral reports as valuable sources of information when controlled land used critically through parallel data of other types, primarily written sources and participant observation.

As a student of Ulpan (intensive Hebrew language course) in the Hebrew University I managed to acquire some conversational Hebrew which made my interaction with young generation Indian Jews easier. Old
members of the community speak their respective mother tongues; the Cochinis speak fluent Malayalam (which is my mother tongue too) and the Bene Israel speak Marathi. Immigrant generation Bene Israel could also converse in Hindi.

*Moshav* councils, Indian Jewish Synagogues and Heritage Centre of Cochin Jewry in *moshav* Nevatim in the Negev had provided many facts and figures regarding the community. Association of Indian Jews in Netanya and the Central Organisation of the Indian Jews in Jerusalem extended their co-operation. The Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem has preserved an incredible source of information in the form of books, theses and microfilms on various Oriental immigrants in Israel.