CHAPTER III

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This chapter traces the history, social and economic background of Jews in India and the motives and pattern of their immigration to Israel. The Jews of India have unique features in their diaspora life. Their incorporation into a Hindu majority society singles them out from their counterparts in Christian and Muslim lands. The virtual absence of anti-Semitism in India is another distinguishing point. Yet, after centuries of peaceful coexistence, the Jews of India started immigrating to Israel at a time of almost simultaneous emergence of independent India and the State of Israel.

Immigration of Indian Jews into Israel began with the establishment of the State in 1948. In 1948, the Bene Israel Jews in India numbered somewhere between 17,500 and 20,000 souls, the Baghdadi Jews about 6500 and the Cochin Jews about 2,600.\(^1\) Urged by religious fervor and deteriorating economic conditions in post-independence India, the Indian Jews responded to the “Law of Return” resulting into their mass immigration in the 1950s. The initial period of immigration was characterised by youth aliyah when it was the younger generation of the community were particularly mobilised to go. Gradually, people from all age groups and all

\[\text{Shirely Berry Isenburg, } \text{India's Bene Israel (Bombay, Popular Prakasan, 1988), p.274}\]
walks of life followed, resulting into mass *aliyah*. By the early 1990s, about 60,000 Jews of Indian origin lived in Israel of which almost 55,000 were Bene Israel, about 4,500 Cochinis and the rest the Baghdadi Indians.² This chapter analysis the factors which led to the immigration of Indian Jews to Israel.

**The History and Socio-Economic Background of Jews in India**

**The Bene Israel**

The origin of Bene Israel in India is obscure. The Bene Israel traditions maintain that they are descendants of one of the Ten Tribes of Israel. According to their legends, the ancestors of the Bene Israel left northern Palestine, possibly fleeing the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes around 175 B.C and were shipwrecked near the village of Navgaon on the Konkan coast of western India, 20 miles South of Bombay.³ Only seven men and women survived; they buried the bodies of the others in large graves still to be found at the site.⁴ The first documentary proof of the Bene Israel settlement in the Konkan is a *sanad* (a Government document or warrant containing a title to land or to an office, or a privilege or authorisation for

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³ Ibid., p.11

⁴ Ibid.
something specific to be done) of 17th century. It concerns a dispute won by a Jewish family because the sanad and the hereditary rights derived therefrom belong to this family. However the sanad could prove the fact that the Bene Israel were established as oilmen in the Konkan by the sixteenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Bene Israel started moving from the Konkan villages to the towns of Pen, Panvel and Thana and then to Bombay.

The history of Bene Israel Jews in India can be roughly divided into three phases (1) the period of their early settlements in the Konkan villages of Maharashtra state (2) the period of migrations to the urban centres of Bombay which were developing under the British (3) the post-independence period which is also the period of aliyah for the Indian Jews. In Konkan, the Bene Israel were engaged in one of the lowliest occupations recognised by the Hindus, namely that of oil-pressing, while the rest were in agricultural pursuits with a sprinkling of carpenters. It was only with the advent of the British to Bombay that the Jews established themselves as entrepreneurs. Again it was not the Bene Israel who entered this category in the real sense of the term but rather the newly arriving Baghdadi Jews who soon outstripped the Bene Israel in a number of ways. The majority of Bene Israel, on the other hand, found chances in military and other public services. In 1872, there were among the Bene Israel, military accounts

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5 Shirley Berry, Isenburg, op.cit, n.1, p.33
clerks and draftsmen, sub-engineers, overseers and mistries of public works department, commissariat and medical services employees and skilled artisans such as masons and carpenters.  

However, the new bureaucratic positions that opened up in the railway customs, postal and telegraph services etc. gave the Bene Israel a sense of security and a certain status. The Bene Israel social life in Bombay under the British was enhanced by the new opportunities for education and employment and for religious and cultural developments. Even after the Independence, the Bene Israel remained mainly in clerical jobs. By this time Baghdadis had made great fortunes in business activities while most of the Bene Israel men were only employees in factories and workshops as mechanics.

Owing to their traditional occupation of oil pressing in Konkan the Bene Israel were known as Shanwar Telis, which means saturday oilmen. Many people had practiced this occupation but, the Jews used to abstain from work on Sabbath, i.e., on Saturdays and hence the name Shanwar Telis. As oil-pressers, the Bene Israel were definitely on the lower rungs of the ladder in the social structure of the village. But their social status was not as bad as Hindu oil-pressers since they did not in any way form part of the Hindu caste hierarchy per se. They were however interdependent in a caste-like

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manner with all other groups in the village and they lived a thoroughly Indian way of life except for their observance of the Jewish religion as they knew it.\(^7\)

The Bene Israel adopted the regional language, local dresses and even the names. They had the local vernacular names, which in the absence of a non-Biblical first name made it difficult to distinguish between other Hindu names. Again, like the traditional Marathi surnames, they also used to have surnames with ‘kar’ added to the names of their ancestral villages. Thus a person from ‘Nagaon’ village will have ‘Nagaonkar’ as surname and those from ‘Div’ will have ‘Divekar’ as surnames and so on. However, later since the Bene Israel religious revival and because of contacts with Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel started adopting Biblical names which were used together with the surnames ending in ‘kar’.

The Bene Israel also adopted certain social customs from their Hindu and Muslim neighbours such as the laws of inheritance, ceremonial food offerings and observance of certain marriage and funeral customs. However, the prayers and blessings which they attached to all such ceremonies were wholly Jewish in their referents, content and religious core\(^8\). In later years, towards the end of nineteenth century, many of the

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\(^7\) H.S. Kehimkar, *The History of the Bene Israel of India* (TelAviv: Dayag Press Ltd., 1937), p.46

\(^8\) Shirley Berry Isenburg, op.cit, n.1, p.143
non-Jewish influences of Bene Israel customs and rituals became less and less popular.

The religious observance of Bene Israel in Konkan centered around and confined to home rituals. Although they did not possess any book or scroll of the Torah (the Pentateuch, five books of Moses) and did not know any of the Hebrew liturgy, they did pronounce in Hebrew the opening sentence of the Shema, the fundamental tenet of Jewish faith: “Here, O Israel, The Lord Our God, The Lord is One”. (Deuteronomy 6:4). They recited it at every rite of passage and on every occasion of prayer. The Israelite Sabbath was scrupulously observed, but not with all its rabbinical nuances. They circumcised all their male infants on the eighth day after birth. The dietary laws mainly included the avoidance of eating fish with fins and scales. They observed Jewish Holidays prescribed in the Bible, like Rosh Hashana (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Hay-He-Asif (Feast of Ingathering), Purim (Feast of Esther) and Pessah (Passover). However, they called these fasts and feasts with Marathi Names. For centuries, they retained these traits and clung zealously to the faith of their fathers handed down from generation to generation. The contacts with Cochin Jews, Baghdadis, Palestinian Jews and European Jews at different periods of time, the activities of Christian missionaries, the growth of education, and

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9 H.S.Kehimkar, op. cit, n.7,p.22
later Zionist activities etc. all helped the religious development of the Bene Israel.

There have been caste-like distinctions within the Bene Israel community. The *Kala-Gora* dichotomy which existed within the community owes much to the Bene Israel way of accepting responsibility for the progeny of their irregular unions dating back to the time when there was among them no practice of conversion to Judaism.\(^\text{10}\) The offsprings of such unions and their descendants were forever kept apart as *Kala* Bene Israel who could not intermarry with the *Gora* Bene Israel. The *Kala-Gora* relationship had been dominated by caste like prejudices. The changing socio-political atmosphere in India under British colonialism provided with different communities, an opportunity to define their identities on ethnic lines. The Bene Israel also showed an awakened political consciousness and acquired a heightened sense of Jewish identity. But, again, even though they debated issues regarding their position in a changing India on several platforms, in practical terms, the majority remained neutral on almost all political issues. Some even sympathised with the Indian nationalists, rather than identifying with the British as what their Baghdadi counterparts did at that time. At the same time, their orientation towards Israel remained uninfluenced by the politicisation of the whole question of Palestine by the early 20\(^\text{th}\) century.

\(^\text{10}\) Shirley Berry Iseburg, op.cit. n.1, p. 143.
Neither the pro-Arab tilt in the attitude of Indian nationalists could alter nor the Zionist propaganda could influence much of their orientation. They still preferred to confine their aspirations towards Israel purely within religious terms or even as part of a personal salvation.

The Cochin Jews

Kodungallur is the oldest Cochin Jewish settlement in Kerala. Kodungallur, known as ‘Muzhiris’ to the Greeks and ‘Shingly’ to the Jews, was an important seaport to which the early Jewish settlers turned as a haven of trading centre and refugee. The first Jewish visitors to Kerala were traders who came from Palestine and other regions of Western Asia and the Mediterranean, attracted by its beauty, lush vegetation and the richness of its spices and other natural resources. They received the active encouragement of local princes. Many scholars believe that the first Jewish merchants came in King Solomon’s fleet in the 10th century B.C. Certain philological evidences and some references in the Bible are usually used to support this argument. The Book of Kings says that “the Navy of Hiram…. brought in from Ophir great plenty of Almug trees….And King (Solomon) made of the almug trees pillars for the house of the Lord, and for the King’s house, harps also and psalteries for the singers: there came no such almug trees, nor were seen unto this day”. Almug is usually

12 1 Kings 10: 11
interpreted as sandal wood which is likely to have transported from South India and Valgu, the Sanskrit and Tamil word for Sandalwood, resembles closely the Hebrew name.  

Again it is said in the Bible that “the King had at sea a navy of Tarshish with the Navy of Hiram: once every three years came the Navy of Tarshish, bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and pea-cocks. The Hebrew word for apes, qophim resemble Sanskrit kapi and the Hebrew word for peacock tukiyyum resemble Tamil toket.

The Hindu rulers in Kerala welcomed these merchants. However, the early traders were no more than temporary settlers. There is no definite proof of the exact date of the beginning of a permanent settlement in Kodungallur. The Local legend has it that the early Jewish immigrants came in the wake of the Exiles of Shalmanessar or Nebuchadnasser or they came from Persia, after being freed from captivity by Cyrus in 540 B.C. Another tradition of the Cochin Jews maintains that soon after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D., 10,000 Jews were

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13 Padmanabha. Menon, History of Kerala (Ernakulam, 1924), p.298
14 1 Kings 10: 22
16 J. B. Segal, op. cit, n.1, p.6
graciously received by the then Hindu ruler and they were allowed to settle in different parts of which the majority made their home in Kodungallur.\(^\text{18}\)

The first definite proof of the Kodungallur settlement is the Charter of Bhaskara Ravi Varman (999A.D) granting lands and privileges of nobility to Jews.\(^\text{19}\) The Charter in the form of copper plates conferred in perpetuity upon Joseph Rabban, the leader of the Jews, and his heirs the free hold of a parcel of land called Anjuvannam.\(^\text{20}\) In addition, certain privileges of nobility were granted to Rabban including “the right to ride an elephant, to be carried in a litter, to have a state umbrella, to be preceded by drums and trumpets, to call out so that the lower Hindu castes might withdraw from the streets at his approach.”\(^\text{21}\) It is also specified that the recipient shall not have to pay taxes and shall enjoy all the benefits of the Rajah’s administration.\(^\text{22}\) The Jews gradually became well established and very influential. A popular Jewish tradition even maintains that a Jewish King ruled Kodungallur.


\(^{20}\) Ezekiel Musleah, op.cit, n.18, p.359

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
While Kodungallur remained the main Jewish settlement, there were Jews in Kollam in the South and Flandrina in the North. Synagogues were founded at Parur in the year 1164 and Chennamangalam in, possibly, the 13th century. The Kadavummbhagam Synagogue was built at Ernakulam on the mainland around 1200 which indicates the presence of Jews near Cochin at that time. In 1341, a violent under water upheaval reduced the harbor of Kodungallur and created the port of Cochin. Four years later, Kochangadi, the first Synagogue in the town of Cochin was founded.

The arrival of Portuguese at the close of the 15th century was an event of far reaching importance. They viewed the vitality of the Jewish community, the social and religious freedom they enjoyed here and their involvement in the trading activities of the region etc., as a threat to their vested interest and also to the Christian faith. Hence the Jews were attacked and were forced to flee out of Kodungallur. By this time the importance of Cochin rose undermining Kodungallur. The Jews took refuge in Cochin and the King of Cochin treated them liberally and granted them a large portion of land adjoining the palace.

At this time the Jewish community in Cochin expanded greatly in number through the arrival of refugees fleeing the persecution in Spain and Portugal and also from Turkey and Persia. The Paradesi Synagogue was built in 1568. The Dutch period (1663-1795) was a golden age for the Cochin Jews. They experienced not only complete cultural autonomy and
religious freedom but also an economic prosperity unparalleled in their long history. The prosperity and the loyalty of the Cochin Jews were so well known that Jews from Amsterdam and Talmudic scholars from the Holy land visited Cochin during this period. By this time a sort of caste stratification had developed among the Cochin Jews. Three groups are discernible – the white, Brown, and Black Jews called as Meyuchasim, Meshuhararim and Malabar Jews respectively. Although the Malabar Jews and White Jews claim to the lineage of the Kodungallur settlement, the antiquity of the Malabar Jews can be traced much anterior to the white Jews. The brown Jews are recognised as having a dual status; some subordinate to the white Jews and some to the Malabar Jews, being descendants of converts of slaves and servants of each group. Intermarriage was strictly forbidden between the white Jews and black Jews and they had separate settlements and synagogues in Cochin. Although it is not clear when this rigid stratification got institutionalised in the Jewry of Kerala, some references about the disputes between the Blacks and the Whites are available from certain documents like “Letters from Malabar (1717-1723)”. Socio-economic reasons have been attributed to these divisions. During the Dutch period when the whites successfully traded with the Dutch East India Company in valuable commodities, the


25 Ibid., p. 200
black Jews remained laborers and local retailers and also in agriculture and cattle rearing. With the coming of the British in 1765, the Jewish prosperity, dependent much on the monopolies granted by the native rulers, declined in general and the later years witnessed further economic degradation. While some of the white Jews migrated to the thriving centres of Bombay and Calcutta, the condition of the Black Jews deteriorated to the extent that an official delegate Rabbi Ascher Levi was sent by the Jewish ecclesiastical authorities of Israel, to investigate the depressed conditions of the black Jews in Cochin. However, the British period also witnessed complete social and religious freedom of the Jews.

All throughout their existence in Cochin, the social conditions of the Jews have been, to a great extent, governed by their own religion, rituals, dietary and marriage laws. They were so keen in preserving these traits and cherished in their minds the Zion-centered hopes as told by their religious texts. The first Zionist Organisation was set up in Cochin in 1923. Immigration on a large scale started in the 1950s.

The Baghdadi Jews

Unlike the Cochin Jews, there is no ambiguity regarding the origin of the Baghdadi Jewish settlements in India. The port of Basra on the Persian Gulf had been a trading center of the British East India Company from

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 201
1760 on and many Jews of that port and of Baghdad who had already played an important role in the English commerce in that part of the world, gradually moved on to India.\textsuperscript{28} Arabic speaking Jews from Aleppo, Baghdad and Basra made their way to Surat during the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century on trade purposes. They formed the Arabian Jewish merchant colony under the leadership of Shalome Ovadaiah ha-Cohen who came from Allepo in 1790.\textsuperscript{29} Referring originality to Jews who came from the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, for centuries a center for Jewish learning and culture, the term Baghdadi or Iraqi soon came to include as well Jews from Syria and other parts of the Ottoman empire, Aden and Yemen all of whom were Arabic speaking and even Jews from Persia and Afghanistan who were not.\textsuperscript{30}

As the presidencies of Bombay and Calcutta developed, Surat lost its importance as a port and Jewish merchants began to look for new commercial opportunities. More and more Baghdadi Jews migrated to Calcutta, most of whom rapidly rose to prominence in business and trading activities in Calcutta. In 1825, the Neveh Shalome Synagogue was formed. With the gradual growth of the community, Jewish cemeteries, prayer halls and synagogues were built up. While in the first two decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Jews in British India (Hanover and London: University Press of New England. 1989, p.15.


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
century, the Jews in Calcuta were mostly Syrian Jews who came in search of better trading opportunities, the second quarter witnessed a sizeable immigration from Iraq, primarily as a result of the persecution by Daud Pasha of Baghdad. By the end of the 19th century the Jewish community in Calcuta numbered over 1800. Most of them had then moved into the stock exchange and became large urban landowners.

The origin of the Baghdadi community in Bombay dates back to about 1730. In 1839, more Jews came fleeing persecutions of Daud Pasha. However, Bene Israel-Baghdadi relation in Bombay has not been satisfactory. The Baghdadis being extremely orthodox and enjoyed immense economic wealth, claimed religious aristocracy and tended to view the poor Bene Israel with contempt, where as the latter’s reactions were that of suspicion.

In the British period, the Baghdadis remained loyal to the imperial government and they imitated European ways of appearances and behavior. The removal of the British Raj and the simultaneous emergence of the state of Israel left them with a choice to leave India. However, the Baghdadi immigration was mainly not to Israel, but to other industrial cities of the West.

**Zionism in India**

The news of the birth of modern Zionism reached India’s Jews in 1897 itself when Theoder Herzl invited the
Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel to attend the first World Zionist Congress. Even before that, Jewish emissaries and *Shlichim* (messengers) from Palestine had visited India in search of the lost tribes of Israel and to give spiritual direction and also to collect funds for their community. The earliest documented visit of an emissary to India occurred in 1740, when a messenger arrived in Cochin.\(^{31}\) The earliest documented proof of contact between Bene Israel and Palestinian Jews is apparently a tombstone in a Bene Israel cemetery in Navgaon inscribed with the name of a messenger from Safed who was buried there in 1824.\(^{32}\) Other early visitors to the Bene Israel included Rabbi David d’beth Hillel in 1829 and Rabbi Eben Saphir in 1859. However the Bene Israel found it difficult to contribute financially to these emissaries. At times requests from charitable institutions and congregations in the Holy Land became too frequent that in 1896, the Bene Israel apologised for not opening funds for them. They explained that “the Bene Israel were so poor” that they were conducting their own charity institutions with great difficulty.\(^{33}\)

In 1897, when the Zionist leaders sent their invitation to attend the Basel Congress, the Bene Israel however declined sending their representatives on the grounds that they looked upon the fulfillment of the restoration of the Jewish Kingdom by the “Divine Hand”. In 1919, when Paul

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p.79.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

Tolkovsky, a Zionist leader came to Bombay and tried to ascertain the attitude of the Bene Israel towards Zionism, members of the two Bene Israel organisations, the Bene Israel Conference and the All India Israelite League gave different opinions. While members of the Conference were in favour of Zionism, strong opposition came from the All India Israelite League. The then editor of “The Israelite”, David Erulkar and his brother Dr. A.S. Erulkar held a very critical opinion of Zionism. Dr. A.S. Erulkar saw that Zionism had two aspects, intellectual and political. He supported intellectual Zionism, which aimed at the preservation and development of Jewish learning and culture, but he disagreed with national and political aspirations. In his view, Zionism was not the solution for Jewish oppression because there were more persecuted Jews in Poland than Palestine could ever possibly absorb, even when all the Arabs and non-Jews were forced to leave. He argued that the Zionist state would provide an excellent breeding place for racial hatred based on color prejudices and that the bond of religion would be a mockery. David Erulkar cautioned prophetically that the Western Jews as a rule, were not free from color prejudices, even toward their coreligionists. In his view, the Bene Israel were flatly denied their rights as Jews even in the Baghdadi synagogues in India. Recalling

\[34\] Joan. G. Roland, op.cit, n.28, p.147

\[35\] Ibid

\[36\] Ibid
instances where Western Jews had without any grounds condemned the Bene Israel as converts to Judaism, even as descendents of slaves, David Erulkar concluded: “If we have to contend against such calumnies in the Diaspora, what chance would there be for a handful of people to stand against overwhelming majorities of people with whom, the past has shown, colour can entirely eclipse the obligations which religion entailed.”

In 1919, long after the establishment of the first Zionist Association in Cochin in 1903, the Bombay Zionist Organisation (BZA) was founded, but it was on the initiative of a few Baghdadi Jews in Bombay. The visit of Zionist emissaries like Israel Cohen and Dr. Immanuel Olsvanger didn’t help much to alter the Bene Israel position on political Zionism. Rather these contacts helped them to reorganise their community life with new learnings in Hebrew language and literature.

Thus, the Zionist ideology remained outside the Bene Israel concerns, until the question of Jewish identity got complicated within the context of growing Indian Nationalist movement and it really came to the fore in late 1930s, fostered by the events in Hitler’s Germany and the consequent arrival of Central European refugees in India.

37 Ibid.
The arrival of Jewish refugees to India fleeing Nazi persecution by the late 1930s and early 1940s marked a significant change in the attitude of the Bene Israel. The very presence of European refugees and the tragic reasons behind it convinced the Bene Israel of the urgent need to make the myth of Jewish homeland into a reality. The Zionist activities got legitimised for the first time in the eyes of many, as well as the Bene Israel. Although they could not provide financial support in any big manner, they extended their support morally and financially as much as possible.

The creation of the Israeli State almost coincided with the Indian Independence, which left with the Bene Israel the option of selecting between the two. Many political events in British India resulting into the final break up into two nations had given this microscopically small community the opportunity to think about their future identity in Independent India. At the same time, a rapid decline of confidence in their ability to compete for socio-economic positions occurred which served as a catalyst for emigration.

**Indian Nationalism and the Jewish Responses**

Having emerged by the late nineteenth century with a heightened consciousness of themselves as Jews, the Bene Israel Indian Jews at the same time had to deal with the question of their Indianness or their position in a changing India. Similar to the two types of
attitude towards political Zionism, there was not a united opinion about Indian politics also. For the Bene Israel the two issues were in a way interrelated. Should they link up or identify with Indian nationalists or should they continue to support the British under which they had benefited a lot? If India were to become independent, who would safeguard Jewish interests? Such questions dominated their thinking. Ultimately almost on all political issues, the Bene Israel position turned out to be neutral or ambivalent. Some politically articulate Bene Israel, however were convinced that the Jews would not get lost in the shuffle and that the Indian nationalists would protect them. Also, there was some noteworthy participation by Bene Israel in their individual capacities actively supporting the Independence movement. At the same time, the Baghdadi Jews never tried to identify with Indians.

The advocates of Indian nationalism among the Bene Israel include the names of Dr. Joseph Benjamin who had an early role in the Indian National Congress, Dr. Jacob. E. Solomon who served as the Secretary of the Ahamadabad Branch of the India Home Rule League and Mr. Aron Daniel Talkar who was a supporter of Lokamanya Tilak. I.A Ezekiel, a Bene Israel journalist was a sometime nationalist whose political views seem to have run the gamut from Communism to anti-Gandhian nationalism to mysticism.38

By the year 1930, Gandhi realised that many members of the smaller communities were a little hesitant about joining Congress. They were not prepared to accept the call for civil disobedience or non-cooperation and also Congress was gradually looked upon as a Hindu organisation. Gandhi advised these groups who were dependent on the British Govt. for jobs not to endanger their position by taking part in such political activities as breaking the law and going to jail. In 1921, during Gandhi’s fast at the time of riots in Bombay (with nationalists attacking, inspite of Gandhi’s call for non-violence, those Indians who welcomed the visit of the Prince of Wales), Dr. A.S Erulkar asked Gandhi what the role of Indian Jews should be in the struggle for freedom. Gandhi’s answer was that “if you could influence the Jews, or put me on to some, I would like it. They must also feel absolutely secure from Hindus and Mussalmans. If the Bene Israel have not been injured one need not worry. The English Jews, I class among Englishmen, who don’t need any special assurance”.

However in 1930, certain Bene Israel made an attempt to form a Jewish (Indian) Nationalist Party to contribute to the National movement. But somehow it was not materialised. The period between the Govt. of India Act of 1919 and Government of India Act of 1935 witnessed a heated Jewish debate on their position and role in the contemporary context. In 1917, as a response to the proposed Montague-Chelmsford Reforms,

39 Shirley Berry Isenburg, op.cit, n.1, p.250.
some Bene Israel members submitted an address to Montague, expressing their agreement with the aims of the Indian National Congress and All India Muslim League and their intention not to seek separate communal representation. They wrote;

In connection with the question of communal representation, though we belong to a microscopically small community, the past history of our community in India, extending over the long period of two thousand years, has convinced us of the spirit of tolerance and fairness practised by those Indian communities who command the majority towards their numerically insignificant sister communities; and hence we are of the opinion that the interests of those communities will not suffer in any way by a general representation as distinct from communal representations.

For a large community such as the Mohammedans, a separate representation may be necessary for a time, but we feel that smaller communities stand to loose by communal representation, in as much as they are marked out, and whatever special representation they may get, can never be effective. By giving a separate electorate to a community, the racial feeling is accentuated and giving a separate electorate to a community narrows the interests of the community narrowed down to its own activities. Such communal elections do not faster the development of the Indian nation, they rather retard it.40

There was another faction in the community who disagreed with these ideas and argued that the advocates of these ideas did not really represent the community. Dr. E.Moses was the leader of this faction who instead demanding communal representation insisted upon an apolitical stance.

40 Cited in Shirley Berry Isenburg, ibid, p. 248
However when the Govt. of India Act came into force in 1919, special constituencies were created, not only for Muslims but also for Indian Christians, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, landlords, universities and chambers of commerce. Not receiving special representation, the Jews could vote in general constituencies, which had of course, a Hindu majority. At that time, the community members in general, did not seem to regret much about it. But by the time of the Govt. of India Act of 1935, the Jews had shown a heightened concern that the Govt.'s policy of giving preference in the services to Muslims, other recognised minority communities and the intermediate and Scheduled Classes would work to their disadvantage. There emerged a strong faction among the community who strongly argued for special representation. Actually by this time the Bene Israel had come a long way in their attempts to remain culturally separate and politically conscious. But such sentiments were never translated into any kind of concerted political move. Even Dr. E. Moses, when he became the Mayor of Bombay, although perceived the grievances and concerns of his community, preferred to avoid any clash politically with the majority interests at any level. On the other hand, he hoped that the spirit of harmony and good feeling on the part of the Bene Israel will secure them a proper position in the economy and polity of the country.

Amidst all such turbulent issues, the Jews kept a watchful eye on the events in Germany and the Indian and world reaction to it. The Jewish Press dominated by the Baghdadis took more interests in this regard. The Jewish
Advocate noted that the Indian Press, including the Times of India had strongly condemned the Nazi outrages and sympathised with the Jews. The prominent leaders of World Zionist Organisation (WZO) also were interested in the Indian opinion on these issues. By the end of 1938, Mahatma Gandhi received many letters asking him to declare his views about both the persecution of Jews in Germany and the Arab-Jewish question in Palestine. In 1938, Gandhi published some of his views in this regard in the Harijan. Gandhi expressed his sympathy toward the Jews and the German persecution of Jews seemed to him to have no parallel in history. He wrote: “If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race would be completely justified. But I don’t believe in any war.” 41 He felt that the Jews could have resisted their organised and shameless persecution, preserved their self-respect through organised non-violent action.

On the Palestine question he reasserted his already declared views of early 1920s which were unfavourable to Zionism. He wrote,

“Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French...What is going on in Palestine today cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct. The mandates have no sanction but that of the last war. Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine

41 Harijan, November 26, 1938.
can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home”. 42

He also wrote, “I am not defending the Arab excesses, I wish they had chosen the way of non-violence in resisting what they rightly regarded as an unwarrantable encroachment upon their country. But according to the accepted canons of right and wrong, nothing can be said against the Arab resistance in the face of overwhelming odds.” 43 Gandhi’s views drew strong protests from the Jewish Press, both in India and abroad. The Jewish Advocate argued that Gandhi was either misinformed or ignorant about the Jewish question in Germany and his remarks were naive, if not tragically inconsistent. 44 According to them, he was comparing the Jews in Europe with the Harijans in India in which he forgot one fundamental difference—the Jewish homelessness. Disappointed with Gandhi’s statements, two prominent Jews from Palestine, philosopher Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, the President of the Hebrew University wrote to Gandhi in early 1939 saying that the concept of satyagraha was unworkable to fight against Nazism and the tradition of Jewish martyrdom provided the same inner strength and dignity as Satyagraha. The Jewish Agency from Palestine sent messengers like Dr. Olsevanger to convince the Indian National Movement of the Zionist aims and achievements. Dr. Olsevanger met Nehru and a

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
number of Muslim leaders. Nehru made it clear that Zionism was a movement of high finance and that he was against all imperialism whether German or British. To Olsevanger’s remark that Arabs were supported by Hitler, he replied: “We have sympathy for the National movement of Arabs in Palestine because it is directed against British imperialism. Our sympathies cannot be weakened by the fact that the National Movement coincides with Hitler’s interests.”

In July 1937, both Indian National Congress and All India Muslim League reacted strongly to the Royal Commission Report on Palestine. Congress passed a resolution condemning in no uncertain terms, Britain’s decision to bring about the partition of Palestine and the measures taken to implement this decision. M.A. Jinnah, in his Presidential address to the All India Muslim League meeting, also rejected the partition of Palestine: “The whole policy of the British Govt. has been a betrayal of the Arabs, from its very inception…this question of Palestine, if not fairly and squarely met, boldly and courageously decided, is going to be the turning point in the history of the British empire. I am sure I am speaking not only for the Mussalmans of India but of the world…” All these issues were discussed, debated and analysed mainly by Jewish leaders other than the indigenous Jews who were almost reluctant to express their views on Palestine. Dr. E.


46 Cited in Joan G. Roland, op.cit, n.28, p.198.
Moses, the then Mayor of Bombay, strongly advised the Jewish community not to embarrass the Govt. by importation of this extraneous bitterness nor allow the dissensions in the Holy Land to interfere, with their cordial relations with the Muslims in India. He proposed direct talks with Arabs and Jews, especially since the Royal Commission had recommended the partition.

Immigration Factors

Among the Immigration factors, religion played a primary role. Unlike majority of Jews from other parts of the world who immigrated to Israel as an alternative to anti-Semitism, the Indian Jews were motivated by an age-old ideal of return to the promised land and the desire to live in an environment where Judaism is a way of life. Cochin Jews were the only community to finance its own immigration to Israel. The money from the sale of synagogue properties covered travel expenses. Azriel Carlebach, founder of the Ma'ariv newspaper in Israel, when he visited Kerala in 1956, wrote about the Cochin Jews: "I had to come all the way here to see genuine Zionism". An old generation Cochin Jew in Israel remembers Carlebach's visit to his native place Chennamangalam. "We received him with elephants and trumpets. It was like a festival. Any visitor from Israel meant so
important to us". Their Zionism was more of religious nature and less political.

Zionist emissaries from Palestine and abroad frequently visited them. Another informant in Israel remembers Olsvanger's visit to Cochin when he motivated them to immigrate and contribute to the Zionist vision of "ingathering of exiles". Political Zionism had very little impact on the Bene Israel at least until the mid-twentieth century. They regarded the movement as largely dominated by Western Jewry and feared racial prejudices. One of the reasons that contributed to such fears was the prejudice they had to face from the Baghdadi Jews in Bombay who looked down upon the indigenous Jews. However after the outbreak of the World War II, the attitude of the Bene Israel underwent a change. The stories of Jewish sufferings in Hitlerist Germany, the messianic spirit of Zionist activities to bring the European Jews to Israel, the creation of the State of Israel, all these created a wave of sympathy and solidarity. Apart from the religious factor, economic factors played the role of a catalyst. The lack of job opportunities, low income, housing problems and the low economic status of the majority of the Indian Jews were economic push factors, while better economic opportunities, greater amenities, loans and low cost rehabilitation schemes for immigrants and a comparatively

47 Personal Interview
48 Personal Interview
higher standard of living in terms of material possessions were some of the pull factors. Moreover, the hope for a better social status and social life in Israel was a motivating factor. As R. C. Jain points out,

The existential dilemma of Bene Israel in the Indian social system lies in the fact that the Hindu majority was by and large economically backward and viewed itself as such in relation to the Jewish category. The Bene Israel, on the other hand, though internally subdivided, were viewed in a monolithic fashion by the Hindu majority and were seen to be geographically and economically mobile, although they were in their turn, exploited by another Jewish group, the Baghdadis. The fundamental opposition between Jewish and Hindu ideologies; Jewish ideology stressing equality for all irrespective of caste or colour, but in practice practising discrimination, and Hindu ideology representing hierarchy, inequality and exclusion, but in practice tolerating minorities such as the Bene Israel... The Bene Israel hoped that the resolution of their existential dilemma would take place once they emigrate to Israel. They hoped that they would return to their homeland, neither as Indians nor as members of the lost tribes, but as Jews, the same as all other Jews.\(^49\)

The changing socio-political scenario in India, the political tensions accompanied the Indian Independence, the break up of the nation into two and the growth of religious chauvinism, especially in the state of Maharashtra were among other pull factors. The ideology and the actions of political parties such as Shivasena took on a strong militant dimension. In the late 1960s, the Shiva Sena articulated their communal sentiments.

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through the slogan “Maharashtra for Maharashtrians”, where Mahrashtrians was equated with Hindu.\textsuperscript{50} Although there was no antagonism towards Jewish community, they also might have shared the fear of minorities. Writing in early 1970s, the Bene Israel writer B.J. Israel articulaed some of the concerns of his community members as follows,

“The question of identity for the Indian Jew is not just an academic one. In so far as being an Indian consists exclusively in being a member of a political entity of a secular character, one can be both a complete Jew and a complete Indian. If to be an Indian requires one to renounce the ties of Jewish brotherhood with our co-religionists abroad, there is no place in India for the Jews. If as some claim, we are required as Indians to adopt the ideological basis of Hindu culture on the ground that it alone is indigenous to the Indian soil, then again there is no place for the Jews in India except as strangers enjoying India’s hospitality as do so many foreigners temporarily resident here. Hence if there is a danger on the Jewish side in political Zionism, there is a danger on the Indian side in the shrill cry of Indianisation that has been raised recently.”\textsuperscript{51}

In the case of Cochin Jews, political independence meant the termination of their favoured position. They could not expect any more the kind of prospects and rewards they had received under the British or the local


\textsuperscript{51} Cited in Joan G. Roland, op. cit, n. 28, p. 263.
Maharajahs. The introduction of an electoral system based on adult suffrage meant that numerically insignificant minorities would be rendered ineffective as political entities. The Indian Jewish immigration started in 1949, immediately after the creation of the State of Israel.

Initially it was the younger generations that were particularly mobilised to go. Gradually people from all age groups started moving. The need to maintain the Unity of family, where the emigration of one member of the family results in other members emigrating, and for reasons of getting marriage partners among the unmarried had all resulted into the dwindling of this community in India. Between 1948 and 1987, 25,214 Indian Jews emigrated which means the majority were already in Israel by this period\textsuperscript{52}. Immigration still continues and it is on individual basis. Today, about 5000 Bene Israel live in the state of Maharashtra and only about 72 Cochin Jews remain in Kerala\textsuperscript{53}. The future of the Cochin community in India is quite ambivalent. Their synagogues have shut down. There is not enough people to form a \textit{minyan} (religious quorum of 10 males to conduct prayers). The remaining youngsters are preparing for immigration in search of marriage partners.

\textsuperscript{52} Margarat Abraham, op. cit, n. 50, p. 110

\textsuperscript{53} Field Survey conducted in Bombay (1995) and in Cochin (1999) by the author.
Table 3.1 Immigrants and Potential Immigrants\(^{(1)}\) in Israel from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka by Period of Immigration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919-1948</td>
<td>....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948-1951</td>
<td>2,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-1960</td>
<td>5,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-1964</td>
<td>2,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965-1971</td>
<td>10,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1979</td>
<td>3,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1989</td>
<td>1,539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1997</td>
<td>1,441</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Since the establishment of the State (15.5.1948), incl. tourists who changed their status to immigrants; as from June 1969, incl. tourists who changed their status to immigrants or potential immigrants.

Source: Adapted from *Statistical Abstracts of Israel*, (Jerusalem: Central Bureau of Statistics, 1999), pp. 5-6.

Frustration and Crisis during Immigration

Immigration from India to the new State of Israel was initially organised by J.S. Ezra and Cynowitz, who concentrated on sending Jews in refugee camps, particularly from
Afghanistan to Israel. A Jewish immigration office was set up in Bombay in September 1950. At first, Pollack, the new trade commissioner, said that only European and Arab Jews who really needed homes should go to Israel. Then, when there was more room, American and Indian Jews, who were not suffering from anti-semitism, persecution or homelessness, could go. This attitude did not please the Indian Jews, many of whom were reported to have said to Pollack in effect, “it’s our homeland too, so don’t say we can’t go.”

When the opportunity came for the “ingathering of exiles”, with the enactment of the Law of Return, many Bene Israel began moving to Israel with aid from the Jewish agency or at their own cost. Young people went first which was called youth aliyyah with parents sending even little children. Gradually adults and older people also followed and many gave up even quite good jobs to make their future in Israel resulting into amass immigration.

But, as soon as they arrived in Israel, they faced a series of problems of discriminations and adaptation in the Israeli society. As some Bene Israel leaders had prognosticated in 1930s, the myth of a common religious bond turned out to be a mockery even in the promised land, for the Bene

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54 Cited in Joan G. Roland, op. cit, n.28 , p. 247.

55 Ibid.
Israel were welcomed by racial prejudices from the European Jews in Israel.

Reacting disappointedly to the question of color bar, some Bene Israel appealed to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Prime Minister Nehru to return to India and some 337 Jews had actually come back during May 1948-December 1952.56 This issue was debated in the upper house of the Council of States of India on May 11, 1953 and the Indian Government sought explanation from the Israeli government. Though Israel has informed that there is no color bar in the Jewish nation, many more had been granted travel documents for their return.

Another issue in the 1950s was the eruption of a controversy about the religious status of the Bene Israel and their acceptability as 'pure' Jews for purposes of marriage. It was only the Bene Israel who were singled out to be investigated by the Chief Rabbi of Israel to trace their ancestry "as far back as possible". The result was a sit-in strike in Jerusalem by the Bene Israel with the outcome that such directives of the rabbis were revoked in 1964. It is be noted that in the year 1952, virtually no immigration of the Indian Jews is recorded.57 Yet, immigration was high in the late 1960s, and early 1970s, and fresh complaints about discrimination started coming out.


57 See Appendix 2 for Annual Indian Jewish Immigration to Israel
The Cochin Jewish immigration was also no less difficult. With the creation of the State of Israel 1948, the Cochin Jews started moving to Bombay to meet with Jewish Agency officials. They opened a special Cochin Aliyah Fund and began selling their houses and communal property to finance their travel. Rabinowitz describes thus,

They proceeded to negotiate with Jewish Agency for the charter of ship which would bring them, in three successive batches of 650 each, to the Land of Promise... a boat was available... but they had to relinquish the option because of the 650,000 rupees which they had to pay, there was only 32,000 in the bank!... Already elements of tragedy loom ahead, and there is ample room for serious misgiving. Some of the Jews who live in houses which have already been sold have... to pay rent to their new landlords. There is a feeling of uncertainty in the air, and their buoyant enthusiasm is not shared by outsiders. There is no news of the next ship but with a quite conviction that they will return to the home of their fathers they carry on.58

As it soon became clear, making the decision to go and actually implementing that decision were two very different stories. While a few families left as early as 1948 and 1949, most Cochin Jews had to wait four to seven years until they made it to Israel. Between 1952 and 1954, a few hundred youngsters, aged twelve to sixteen, were brought to Israel by the agency Youth Aliyah and were placed in transitional housing.

Yet another obstacle for the Cochin Jews during the early years of *aliyah* was the prevalence of filariasis, commonly known as elephantiasis, a debilitating mosquito-borne disease that causes extreme swelling of the limbs. Fearful of bringing in potential carriers of the illness, Israeli officials barred any further immigration of Jews from Cochin in the early 1950s. The decision was a blow to many Cochin Jews who, having already disposed of their material possessions found it a struggle to survive while awaiting Israeli government’s clearance to immigrate. Growing desperate, community leaders approached A.B. Salem, a community leader in Cochin, to go to Israel and intervene on their behalf. On February 23, 1953, he went to Israel as a financed “emissary.”

However, his mission was delayed, as the then–representative of the Jewish agency, Shlomo Smith did not approve of granting him visa. Later, he obtained the necessary paperwork to leave India. In Israel, he met with President Itzhak Ben-Zvi and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to plead the case of Cochin Jews. A lawyer with considerable oratorical talents, Salem interwove his arguments with appropriate passages from

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Scripture, such as II Samuel 22:28: “And the afflicted people-thou wilt save.”

Evidently, Salem worked out some kind of agreement with Israeli government officials. He returned to Cochin in early 1954 with German-born Israeli physician Dr. Rudolph Reitler. Reitler, in addition to other doctors dispatched to survey the Indian Jewish population afflicted with filariasis. At the time, he recommended that these prospective *olim* “be settled in cool and/or dry regions with great daily variations in temperature so that the possibilities of perpetuating the disease would be remote.”

Old generations Cochin Jews still recall with intense pain the humiliations they faced from the doctor who came to examine them in Cochin. An informant said, “They behave like Nazis. Of course, the main doctor was a German Jew. He asked us to remove our clothes for examinations irrespective of man or woman. For our women, it was a question of honour. But we had to go through all that.”

Cochin Jews were among those immigrants when arrived in Israel were sprayed with DDT immediately after disembarking from the plane; who waited many hours on line for food, only to discover that it wasn’t fit to eat, who were referred to by the staff as *Kushim* (Blacks) and who were

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60 Ibid.
dumped in outlying areas. Another case of an old Cochin Jew in Israel reveals the intensity of agony which awaited the Indian Jews in Israel.

A few months after immigrating to Israel from Cochin, this man was sent to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem for medical examinations. The authorities were afraid that malaria, which was then widespread in Southern India, was also present among the Jews of Cochin. Without offering any explanation, the doctor guided his hand into a cage full of mosquitoes. It was only withdrawn after that insects had exhausted themselves stinging it. At this stage, his role ended, since the rest of the tests were conducted on the mosquitoes. This incident has left its mark deep in his heart. When I interviewed him, he explained that “every thing was for Medinat Israel (State of Israel).”

To sum up, the Jews in India had expressed a primeval, yearning for Zion and preserved the religious – ethnic symbols across generations of existential continuity. The changing socio-political atmosphere in India under British colonialism provided different communities with an opportunity to define their identities on ethnic lines. This was a period of heightened sense of Jewish identity among this microscopic community. Many political events in British India culminating into the final break up into two nations had given the Jews an opportunity to think about their

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62 Cited in Shimon Lev, ibid.
future identity in independent India. At the same time, a rapid decline of confidence in their ability to compete for socio-economic positions occurred. The creation of the Israeli State provided an enormous lure. The Jews of India opted to immigrate to that country of their prayers where Judaism is a way of life. Though immigration process was full of hurdles, the Indian Jews continued to immigrate to Israel over the years leaving behind only a miniscule population in India.