CHAPTER IV

ABSORPTION OF INDIAN JEWS
SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS
Chapter IV

ABSORPTION OF INDIAN JEWS
SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

This chapter analyses the structural organisation of absorption and the social and economic implications for the Indian Jews in Israel. Upon their arrival in Israel, the Bene Israel Indian Jews 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. Certain *moshavim* of the Cochin Jews are located in conflict ridden areas such as in the northern border with Lebanon and in politically disputed Golan heights. The Cochin Jewish settlements in the Judean hills seemed to have been established in close proximity to the Jordanian border, primarily for security reasons. Dimona, a major Bene Israel settlement with the largest concentration of the community is perhaps the most isolated and underdeveloped settlement in all over Israel. This was in sharp contrast to the *Ashkenazi* communities who formed the vast majority of settlers in big cities such as in Tel Aviv and Haifa. This was the beginning of the social and economic marginalisation of the Indian Jews who are located in the 'periphery' as compared to the dominant *Ashkenazi* population who live in what can be defined as 'core' areas. This chapter examines the social structure, maintenance of social boundaries and the economic conditions
of the Indian Jews in these settlements. As a methodological note to this chapter, I would like to remind the reader that although the data had been gathered from various locations of Indian Jews in Israel, one particular settlement has been studied in detail for the sake of convenience as well as depth. Also, names of persons have been obscured according to sociological convention, though the name of the settlements have been used as they are.

**Geographical Distribution**

**A Determinant of Socio-Economic Status**

The very physical location of Indian Jewish settlements reveals the marginal position of this community in Israel. Bene Israel, the numerically largest section of the Indian Jewry are largely concentrated in development towns like Yeruham, Lod, Ramle, Dimona, Ashdod, Bersheva and Kiriat ata. Dimona has the highest concentration of the Bene Israel. Apart from these development towns, there are very few Bene Israel who settled in agricultural settlements. Unlike the Cochin Jews there is no *moshav* which is entirely populated by the Bene Israel. The Cochin Jews on the other hand live mainly in *moshavim* with the exception of a very few families living in cities like Jerusalem. Five *moshavim* are predominantly Cochini in population - Mescilat Zion, Taoz and Avieser in the Jerusalem Corridor and Kefar Yuval on the northern border with Lebanon and moshav Nevatim in the Negev. Until 1982 about 75% of the 2300 Cochini *moshav* members
lived in these five places and remainder were located in ten other moshavim.¹ Today, Cochin neighbourhoods are found in Rishon Le Zion, Ashdod, Beersheba, Padia and Patahia near Ramallah, Yesud ha Malah and Ofer in the north.

Until 1968, the Jewish Agency was not only responsible for assisting in Jewish immigration to Israel but also for the resettlement of these immigrants in Israel. The Jewish Agency provided housing, other amenities and social services. From 1969 the responsibility for resettlement was taken over by the Ministry of Absorption. Contrary to the approach adopted towards Asian and African immigrants, the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Absorption provided western immigrants, especially professionals with the opportunity of temporary accommodation in what were known as "absorption centers" in the cities. This acted as a springboard for them for later obtaining appropriate accommodation in the cities. In the 1960s and the 1970s when a large percentage of Bene Israel immigrated, they had no other option but to engage in construction works in development towns despite the fact that many of them were clerks and professionals. Darin-Drabkin argues that "the new moshavim are...mainly located in Negev, Galilee and the Jerusalem corridor. It is understandable that this policy does not always

please the individual settler...but it is the Supreme interest of the state that counts in these and not the convenience of the individual".2

Though theoretically the Indian Jewish immigrants had unrestricted geographic mobility, in practice it was extremely difficult to move. They had little option to leave their original locations since they lacked the financial resources to afford independent housing in the cities. In the moshavim, stipulations attached to the subsidised governmental housing schemes acted as further deterrents to geographic mobility. Subletting of these houses were legally prohibited. As Margarat Abraham has rightly observed, from the very beginning a spatial structure was established and separated the dominant communities from the "others", the latter being the category in which the Indian Jewish immigrants were included.3

A Moshav in the Desert: Case of Nevatim

Any visitor to moshav Nevatim would be struck by its isolated location in the desert. It is situated on a plain, 330 meters above sea level, 8 kms from Bersheba. Outlying the moshav is a Bedouin settlement. Nevatim, meaning "buds" is settled by Jewish immigrants arriving in Israel since early 1950s from the state of Kerala in India. The first group of

2 H. Darin-Drabkin, Patterns of Cooperative Agriculture in Israel (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1962), p. 112

Cochinim - as they are commonly known - of about 80 families came to this moshav in 1954. Today about 120 families of Cochinis live in this moshav.

Until their arrival, this site had been considered as one of the worst failures of the settlement effort in the Negev. This part of the Negev region was first occupied in 1946. Since then various groups of immigrants have tried to settle there, but by mid 1950s all of them left the place in search of better places. The land and climate were found unsuitable for agriculture. In 1952, the regional instructor wrote to the settlement authorities, "the position in this moshav is catastrophic. The settlers no longer believe in us. We are faced by tragedy. Please come to the rescue." 4

The inferior roads, lack of water and the poor quality of life, broke these early settlers' spirit and they subsequently abandoned the site. This was the period when most of the Cochini Indian Jews immigrated to Israel. It was decided to settle some of them in Nevatim, since its climate was considered suitable. 5 Anthropologist, Shalva Weil writes, "the first group of Cochin Jews who arrived in Israel were herded from place to place,

---


5 Ibid. p. 107. (emphasis added)
and in an early attempt to isolate them (for fear of contagious diseases), they were taken to outlying moshavim like Nevatim in the South.  

A moshavnik (member of moshav) remembers that the first impression about the land was one of great disappointment. It was all mere desert. The flat terrain reminded him of Cochin but without Cochin's greenery and water resources. They lived in small hut-like houses and sometimes in tents. According to Him, there was one consolation - that the nearest city was Bersheba - the city of Abraham.

He and his wife were in a kibbutz before they came to Nevatim in 1954. They could not adapt to the kibbutz ways, not just because of the predominance of Ashkenazi culture but also because of the lack of religiosity in the kibbutz. He remembers, Kibbutz didn't have Synagogues and it was very hard even to get kosher food. They left the kibbutz after one year of life there and joined the Cochinis who were already settled in Nevatim.

**Experiments in the Soil:** The soil in Nevatim had high salt content. It was washed several times and thus not only its salinity reduced, but the general level of other minerals. It was decided that the soil had to be upgraded by planting special crops and using fertilisers which would enrich the soil. All this was done at different stages with the help and

---

guidance from agricultural instructors appointed by the Settlement Authority. In the course of this upgrading, the growth period of crops was necessarily longer than in many other places.

The slow rate of growth, the relatively hotter climate and the low rainfall all demanded a correspondingly higher level of irrigation. In the initial period, the cultivations included olive, pomegranate, subsequently apricots and citrus fruits were also tried. However, cultivation of edible crops never reached economic viability in this moshav. A moshavnik, says, "we tried all sorts of plantations in this soil. We tried even to grow coconuts, bananas etc. brought from Cochin. All this was futile, for the agricultural products tasted salty or they were tasteless. Men and women worked together in the soil. This was never the case in Cochin. Women worked only indoors. But all such attempts did not succeed".

In 1962, when Moshe Shokeid conducted a survey of this moshav on behalf of the settlement studies centre, he described the situation as one of "failure" and "economic and social crisis" which expressed itself in output decline and emigration of members from this moshav to other places. At that time, of 74 families in the moshav, only 5 were able to support their families from their own farms and all the rest have had to fall back on outside employment.

---

7 Moshe Shokeid, op.cit., n. 3, p.11
8 Ibid.
However, the moshavniks didn't give up farming altogether. The patience and perseverance of the people of Nevatim turned it into a thriving moshav and in the 1970s it was already the standard bearer of agriculture. In a daring act, considering the geographical conditions, the moshavniks began growing flowers for export. Today out of 120 families of this moshav, 30 families are engaged in flower cultivation. They export flowers to places like Holland. Besides flower farms, 4 or 5 families have chicken farms.

The experience of Living in the Border: The Case of 'S' and 'R': 'S' and 'R' is a middle aged couple immigrated in 1957 from Ernakulam district in Kerala, a state of India. They are residents of moshav K', in the north of Israel on border with Lebanon. The moshav has about 90 families of which 70 are Cochin Jews. S is 66 year old R is 58 year old. They came to Israel after their marriage. They have no children. Upon arrival they lived in the shar aliya. From there 'S' went for a teacher's training. Both of them were later sent to this moshav. 'S' became a teacher in the moshav's school. He was the headmaster of this only school which was closed down in 1969 because of the lack of enough students. He later worked as an accountant in the Education department in the nearby town, Kritiyat Shemona from where he retired in 1996. 'R' is librarian in the moshav's library. They own 30 dunam land

---

surrounding their house in which they have a few grapefruit trees and pomegranates. Chicken farming, apple and avocado cultivation are the main occupations of the moshav people. The major problem of this moshav is its dangerous location in the always trouble ridden border with Lebanon. Every house has an underground shelter. War memories still shudder them. This couple remembers horrifying period during the Yom Kippur War - In the late 70s and 80s, there were consistent attacks by terrorists from across the border. In 1975 all members of a whole family were shot dead by the terrorists' bullets. How could they stand all these? A community which has only peaceful memories of diaspora in India.

Ruby Daniel, an 85 year old Cochin Jewish author and a kibbutznik of Neot Mordechai in the North, remembers how some of these Jews ran away from Cochin during II World War because bombs fell on Chittagong.10

'S' says that the Cochinis had difficulty in adjusting to the moshav life. Unlike common belief, the Cochinis were not peasants but petty merchants and it was difficult to adjust to the new agricultural life in Israel. 'S's own father was a merchant who traded in bananas. He used to buy bananas from cultivators and would sell them in the market.

10 Ruby Daniel, and Barbara Johnson., Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society), p.113
'R' says, "the younger generation Cochinis don't speak Malayalam. When we came here we didn't speak Hebrew. Other Jews teased Cochinis because of their Malayalam. So the children didn't like to learn it." The same was the case with the sari. Cochini women gave up saris in favor of skirts.

**Social Boundaries**

The social life of Indian Jews in Israel is distinctive due to many factors such as language, physical features, dress, food habits, marriage and religious practices. Because of these factors the Indian Jews had very little interaction with other communities. They had been endowed with negative attributes by the dominant communities from the very beginning itself. Primarily prejudiced towards dark skin, the white Europeans considered them as unclean, primitive and people without any culture. Ruby Daniel, the Cochin Jewish author writes,

> We are altogether different in color and culture from the Europeans who think they are superior to the Orientals and look down upon others. They did not know anything about our background and did not try to understand us. The Indians were not demanding and shouting. It is a disgrace for us to do so. We kept our self respect. Once I heard a lady boasting: 'we have the Central European Culture! I said in my mind, if that is culture, God save me from that culture."

---

11 Ibid. p.106.
Color difference became a visible marker of boundary formation and boundary maintenance. In mid-1960s, The New York Times quoted the complaints of the Bene Israel as follows, "In Bombay we were told that there is no color bar in Israel, but in a shop in Bersheba we were told that we should eat only black bread as we were black and the white bread was only for the white Jews".\textsuperscript{12} Stigmatisation based on color shifts from visible discrimination to invisible discrimination. For example, today people don't make such comments in public. It is more of an invisible discrimination, like how people treat them at work and who they keep as friends.

A Cochini immigrant of moshav Nevatim in Negev, remembers that they were not told about what would be the kind of life in Israel before they emigrated. They had hopes regarding betterment of their religious as well as socio-economic status. The words of an aged Cochini woman of the immigrant generation have symbolic meaning. "Olive was a heavenly fruit in our imaginations while we were in India. But in Israel it turned out to be the biggest disappointment. I hated its taste when we were eating only olives and dry bread in the transit camps"\textsuperscript{13}. Another Cochini informant said, "initially we didn't speak Hebrew. We couldn't follow what the instructors were saying. There were some people who called as kushim (Blacks) and primitivim (sl.primitives). We are dark-skinned. Jews from different places look different. What can we do about?"

\textsuperscript{12} The New York Times, 22 November 1951

\textsuperscript{13} Personal Interview.
Apart from racial prejudices, a serious issue which the Bene Israel Indian Jews faced in the 1950s was the eruption of a controversy about their religious status and their acceptability as 'pure Jews' for purposes of marriage. Bene Israel were singled out to be investigated by the Chief Rabbi of Israel to trace their ancestry "as far as possible". The result was a general strike in the part of the Bene Israel with the final outcome that such directives of the rabbis were revoked in 1964.

In the 1950s, the Bene Israel who were living in Maabara (transit camps) formed "let us Return to India" movement. About 137 Bene Israel appealed to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Prime Minister Nehru to return to India and about 150 persons were repatriated in the early 1950s itself. Yet, fresh Bene Israel immigration continued as well as fresh complaints about discrimination.

Though the directive against the Bene Israel were revoked, this incident left its mark on them and the members of the community continued to perceive themselves as socially stigmatised. Even among the Cochin


15 Ibid.

16 Details of the Involvement of Indian Govt. on the question of Bene Israel repatriation to India in India, Press information Bureau Release May, 11, 1953.

17 Shalva Weil, op.cit., n. 13, p.403.
Jews, this notion about the Bene Israel prevails and hence they refrain from marriages with them. In general, among these communities marriage occurs between members of one's own community. Among a sample of 30 Bene Israel, none had married Jews of European origin and only 8 Cochin Jews had married Jews of European origin.\textsuperscript{18} Very recently among the Indian Jews there are more inter-marriages with other oriental communities, such as Yemenites, Moroccans, etc.

A few Indian Jews who went to \textit{kibbutzim} found it difficult to adjust to the commune ideology and ways of the \textit{kibbutz}. Again, in the words of Ruby Daniel, “the worst thing for the Cochini girls was the public bathroom, where all the women bathed naked. Our own mothers have not seen our body after we came of age!”\textsuperscript{19} Even little kids would be taken from their parents and would be looked after by a nurse, who would also be a \textit{kibbutz} member. All the adults will have one or another work inside the \textit{kibbutz}. Writes Ruby Daniel, “The Cochini people would talk among themselves, saying, “This is not a place for us. We can’t mix with others, because others don’t want to mix with us. The culture is completely different. Why stay and work and slog for them? For what?”\textsuperscript{20} Those few

\textsuperscript{18} Field survey conducted by the author in Israel, 1996-97.

\textsuperscript{19} Ruby Daniel and Barbara Johnson, op.cit.,n. 9, p.106

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid
Indian Jews who went to kibbutz in the beginning soon left the place for moshavim or development towns.

In the educational field, a disproportionate percentage of Indian children in towns like Dimona are found in special education streams and schools and only a few Bene Israel pupils graduate to University per year.\textsuperscript{21} In comparison with children of Moroccan Jewish origin, children of Indian extraction who are nevertheless born in Israel display greater signs of introversion and withdrawal from the surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{22} One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon may be the language factor, with even the second generation Bene Israel continuing to speak Marathi displaying singular difficulties in learning and communicating fluently in Hebrew.\textsuperscript{23} Problems of adaptation are reported in the 1980s also, which still seem to continue. Shalva Weil wrote in 1980, "the Bene Israel are consistently described as a "closed group" who have not succeeded in Israeli society either politically, economically or socially."\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Shalva, Weil, op.cit, n. 12, p.
Hebrew Education and Socialisation in Israel

The Indian immigrants in Israel didn't speak any other language except their mother tongues in India. This has created problems of communication between Hebrew speaking instructors and the immigrants, and has further intensified the community's isolation from others. Gradually the Cochinis picked up this language through the Ulpan (intensive Hebrew courses for new immigrants). Also teachers used to come to the moshav to conduct classes in Hebrew. While it was younger men and women who learnt it faster, the older people of the immigrant generation preferred to speak in Malayalam among themselves.

In a Cochini moshav in the Judean Hills, Kushner Gilbert observed that “the village kindergarten teacher, a graduate of the Hebrew university, commuted daily from her home in Jerusalem. ....The curriculum and daily schedule were fixed by the Department of Religious Education, a subdivision of the education ministry and differed from a secular kindergarten in its emphasis on ritual education and daily prayers. The teacher aimed not only at teaching the children Hebrew, but also personal hygiene and general facts about Israeli life. The songs they sang and the stories told to the children usually emphasised not only approved values, but also daily behaviour. One song about ducks, for example, pointed out that they get dirty every day, “even on the Sabbath”. Like other Israelis involved in the education of immigrants, the teacher was concerned about
“fusing the exiles,” and especially, about the young people. The older immigrants, she said, “have to spend their forty years in the wilderness” like the generation of Moses. The youth, she was convinced, must become “Israelis”, not Cochinis.”

The moshav Nevatim has only a kindergarten supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Social Welfare. Children attended an elementary school in the nearby village called Omar. For higher schooling and university education they have to go to Beorsheba. More and more young generation Cochinis go to University year by year. Apart from schools and Universities, army serves as a major agency for socialisation. This is an occasion when young men and women mix freely with each other and many of them find their life partners here. In the initial years of immigration and settlement, the Cochin Jews had hesitations for doing the compulsory army service. Many had taken reservations to be exempted from the army, mostly the Cochin women, under the reasons of being religious. (Orthodox Jews in Israel are exempted from army service).

The Role of Army in Absorption.

Apart from the obvious role of national defense and security, the Israeli Army was assigned another major role of socialisation and integration of immigrants in Israel. Army service being compulsory, it takes over

---

Kushner Gilbert, op.cit., n. 17, p.71.
youths at the age of 17-18 and acts as an extension of educational system. It provides its soldiers with a Hebrew education in the language, literature, geography etc and with some vocational training. Its role as a socialising and integrating agency is supposedly more profound than that of schools, since it does not function with the ecological framework of immigrant settlements but takes them out of these settings and brings them in to a new social organisation. This is an occasion also for young men and women to mix freely with each other and many of them find their life partners here. Soldiers are required to spend part of their service in agricultural settlements in order to help and guide the new immigrants. Thus, the army is organised to be playing a vital role in the implementation of the official ideology of absorption.

However, the army service was a problematic experience for the Indian Jews in the initial period of their immigration and settlement in Israel. Many Cochin Jews, mostly women at hesitations for doing the compulsory army service. Many had taken reservations to be exempted from the army, under the reasons of being religious. (Orthodox Jews in Israel are exempted from army service). Five Cochinis from moshav Nevatim had died during the army service or during war. Every year, the day before the Independence Day is celebrated as Memorial Day to pay tributes to the departed soldiers. A middle aged Cochini told me that his army training was tedious. He refused to talk more about those initial years which he described as 'extremely painful'. Also, another informant
in Cochin who came back with his family to India after 1967, pointed out his compulsory army service as one of the reasons for return.

The Bene Israel informants also spoke about horrifying memories of wars and conflicts. A young Bene Israel revealed that he once witnessed the most shocking incident in the army when the blood donations of Ethiopians Jewish soldiers were discarded immediately after collecting it. Many have also articulated the prejudices and the most severe training they experienced since their Indian background did not coincide with the definition of ‘Israeli Soldier’ in the Sabra image.

Troubles in The Army: The Case of 'A': 'A' is a 26 year-old Bene Israel born in Bombay. He immigrated to Israel in 1990 after completing University degree course in Bombay. His family - mother, sister, grandparents - had immigrated long before him. His father died in Bombay when he was very young. He works now as a part time employee in the a University Library in Israel. At the same time he is doing post-graduate course in the same University. A dynamic, 

26 Sabra is the metaphor for a young Israeli born in Israel. Sabra is actually a cactus plant which grows abundantly in Israel, the fruit of which has a thorny covering with sweet edible part inside. The use of this metaphor is, the Israelis would explain, to convey the idea that the Israel-born youth who look rough, aggressive and unfriendly at the outset are but in reality quite friendly and likeable. However, it has a meaning intended to project the superiority of the Israel-born Jews over the Jews of the diaspora whether it is the stooping, victimized, intellectual Jew of Europe or it is the passive, lazy, ‘backward’ Jew of the Orient. The Sabra in contrast to these two categories is an assertive, bronzed, muscular, patriotic fighter for Israel.
vivacious, intelligent, young man with easily identifiable Indian looks, he speaks fluent Hebrew, Marathi, English and Hindi.

A product of Bombay metropolis, 'A' had to immigrate since his whole family had already chosen to immigrate. Also, as a Jew, he is ambivalent about the future of Jews in India since it is a fastly dwindling minority here. He believes that eventually all of them will have to immigrate.

Immigration and settlement had not been an easy process for him also. He had undergone vocational training and a Hebrew Language Course in the Organisation for Rehabilitation Training (ORT) in Bombay, before emigration. However, immediately after his arrival in Israel, he worked as a laborer in the citrus groves in Northern Israel with African Jewish workers. Later he was enrolled for the compulsory army service that was his bitter most experience in life. 'A' says, "everything went wrong for me in the army. I am an introvert. My calm and quiet nature was viewed as a negative quality by the authority. I have never seen a gun before in my real life. The army disciplining and training were a mental torture. I found that the prisoners-mostly Palestinians - were treated in inhuman manner. Once, I tried to commit suicide. Thanks to a few friends, I was saved. I was given psychological counseling and was later put into the job of gardening during the army tenure. Instead of using guns I ended up tending flowers and wrote
poems there. My superior like my poems and gave me a good conduct certificate". However, his army record is not a successful one because his behaviour pattern was analysed for correction as it had "the impact of Indian culture'.

After the army service he managed to get into University studies. He has to work hard as well to raise money for his own education. He had worked in restaurants, bookstalls etc. to make his living. He prefers to eat Indian food and has learned Yoga. He defines himself as an elite Bene Israel. His family sold their property in Bombay and bought their own house in Israel.

'A's problems in Israel include the initial hardships, the break up of his family, the need to work hard day and night to make his own independent living as well as to meet the expenses for higher learning, the hardships in the army and in general, the way in which the public looked down upon his Indian heritage. Experiences in the army have left deep imprints in his mind. Even now when his regular annual reserve duty comes, he becomes uneasy.

Religion

In India, these Jews had articulated their identity through the observance and practice of Judaic law. Synagogues were the centres of community organisation. Upon immigration to Israel they assumed that they would
be integrated into a religious organisation which is common to all on the basis of their Jewish identity. But, the religious organisation appeared to be differentiated on the ethnic basis. Due to cultural particularism in the rituals, Hebrew pronunciation, prayer songs, and ceremonies, these communities have built their own synagogues. An informant said, I go to our synagogue only because only there I feel satisfied. Our customs and our tunes...in other synagogues I feel like an outsider".

In fact, in Israel, the dawn-to-dusk routine of farm work prescribed by the instructors prevented the Cochin Jews from being as punctilious in their religious observances as they had been in Cochin. One reason for the refusal of these Jews to stay in Kibbutzim was the lack of religiousity in these settlements. The secular ideology of the Kibbutz was alien to these observant Jews. Cochinis who went to Kibbutzim had soon left those places in favour of moshavim. An informant said that in the common dining hall of the Kibbutz, it was hard to get Kosher (food prepared according to the religious dietary regulations) food. He and his family moved to a moshav of Cochinis where they could have their own synagogues and private kitchen.

The formation of synagogues on ethnic lines has contributed to the maintenance of boundaries and social distance between other communities. On the occasions of synagogue ceremonies and other functions, mainly members of one's own community would be attending.
There would be very few members from other communities. In moshav Nevatim, when they celebrated their 30 years of immigration in 1984, there were some Arab visitors from nearby villages, but no other Israelis were present. The then President of Israel, Chaim Herzog who inaugurated the celebrations had commented, "tolerance and peaceful coexistence should be learnt from the Indian Jews".

The synagogue occupies a central place in the community life of Indian Jews in Israel also. In the afternoon, the older residents assemble for the minhah prayer service, and then sit and chat until it is time for evening prayers. On Sabbath and on holidays, the younger generation also attends the prayer services, and the synagogue is packed.

Synagogue is a place where the Cochini traditions are kept intact. This is an important "cultural reference point". An informant said, "I have not attended any other synagogue but only the Cochini one. In other synagogues (of other communities), I would feel strange, especially in the Ashkenazi synagogue. I have heard that there are some similarities between the Cochini traditions and those of the Yemenites. I feel satisfied only when I hear our own prayer tunes and sing the songs written by our forefathers".

The Nevatim synagogue interior is an exact replica of the synagogues in Cochin. After the frame of the building was constructed the moshavniks learned that the condition of the Thekkumbhagam synagogue (Southside
synagogue) in Ernakulam was deteriorating. The few Jews who were still left in Cochin initially refused to part with the Torah Scrolls and decorative objects. But they eventually gave in, and a delegation from Nevatim set out for Cochin to rescue the community's remaining treasures. With the help of the Israeli consulate in Bombay, they brought back part of the section that encompasses the Ark of Law and the tevoh (the platform on which the Torah is read). Later more of its antique decorations were brought to Israel. The dedication of the Nevatim synagogue was attended by a large crowd, including all the members of the community.

Disintegration and Re-organization of Community Life in Israel

A major change in the community life of Indian Jews in Israel is the scattering of the community to different parts of the country. It was an integral part of the policy of population dispersal to distribute immigrants throughout the social structure in order to facilitate the 'mixing of immigrants'. This policy, however was applied to the new immigrants only thereby creating new habitats in remote areas. The predominant population continued to retain their land holdings and residences whereas the new immigrants, mostly Orientals, were shuffled into different settlements. However the process and pattern of absorption gradually led to the creation of settlements populated by people on ethnic basis contrary to the expectations of fusion of exiles.
Thus, there are Cochini moshavim as well as areas of Bene Israel ethnic clustering in development towns. The interaction between these settlements of the same communities is minimal due to the nature of spatial structure.

In moshavim, a moshav committee with an elected President and seven members is supposed to officially run the affairs of the moshav. The synagogue also plays a vital role in the decision-making processes. The hold of the Settlement Department over the moshav has reduced considerably over the years. In the beginning madrichim (officials from the Settlement Department) used to visit the moshav frequently and they used to supervise the affairs of the moshav. Today, however the residents have much more autonomy and freedom characterising a transition from moshav olim to moshav ovdim. Holders of key positions and the membership of moshav committee will be changed every two years through elections. Persons of 18 and above can vote in the moshav committee elections. Nevatim has 450 votes. In political affiliations, the moshav was known as the vote bank of Labor in the period of Ben-Gurion's leadership. However the young generation Cochinis moved closer to Likud which is a general trend among the Orientals as a whole in Israel.

In Bet Avi, when Kushner conducted his study in 1960s, he observed that the old dominance of the elders in the community affairs had lost its base.
The *Vaad*, the elected village council, was then composed of five young men who were successful farmers and who spoke Hebrew well. Those who worked hard and efficiently earned more and so could buy more of the household furnishings, farm equipment and electrical appliances which were now the insignia of eminent, respectable status in the group. While this is a growing trend in the case of secular affairs of the *moshavim*, in religious matters and rituals, elder members retain their prominence. For example, the *Simchat Torah* honors the eldest at the end of the ceremony, and he in turn blesses the community. Families show their kinship alliances by standing in synagogue when one of the elders of their family has the honor of reading. In the everyday rituals and prayers in the family, the head of the family conducts the prayers. The honor and respect of the youngsters towards the elders are quite obvious during *Pesach Seder*.

The Indian inheritance of caste-like stratification is no more relevant in the life of Indian Jews in Israel. However, one cannot conclude that such attitudes have completely gone. During my fieldwork in Israel, I had seen some members of the community, making occasional references to the lineage of others on the basis of sub-grouping which existed in India, like, white Jews, black Jews, *meshuhararaiam* etc. Though there are a few intermarriages between the Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel, marriages between the so-called white and black Jews or with the *meshuhararim* are totally absent in Israel also.
Dispute over political, financial or religious matters, or between families are common in the community. Dr. Aviva Menkes noted in 1973-74, that in Bet Avi, there was a good deal of factional disputes, which prevented them from getting as much government funds and other funds as they could have if they were more united.\textsuperscript{27} In moshav Nevatim, there were still divergent opinions in the 1990s regarding the opening of a museum, and later the reconstruction of the damaged museum building which had slowed down the release of insurance money to the moshav.

Though there are many organisations represented by the Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel, with an umbrella organisation for the entire community, the Indian Jews could hardly make it a political success unlike the Moroccans or Yemenites. Many informants pointed out the lack of unity among the Indian Jews as the reason for this. There has never been a consensus on a common candidate during elections.

**The Young and Old: Generations and Attitudes**

Three generations of Cochin Jews live in Nevatim. The immigrant generation is generally in the age group of 60-70 and those who were young children at the time of immigration are now parents in their fifties. Their children have now reached the age of

\textsuperscript{27} Cited in David Mandelfaum, "Social Stratification Among the Jews of Cochin in India and in Israel", *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol.17, no.2, 1980, p.198.
conscription to the army. The Cochin Jews are known for their quiet nature. Teachers can easily distinguish the Cochini children from others as quiet and calm. Though they have much respect and obedience to their parents the young Cochinis have acquired new attitudes and lifestyles. In every aspect of life there are divergent interests between the old and new generations. The old generation still speak Malayalam among themselves. The younger generation, though most of them can understand what their parents speak, they speak only Hebrew. However, the old as well as the young had given up their Indian attire in favour of Israeli styles. Women wore skirts and blouse where men wear pants. In the matter of food there is markedly different taste. Most households in Nevatim cook two types of food everyday. The old people not only prefer but stick to the Cochini food. They eat rice everyday with fish curry prepared in Kerala Style. The Kerala delicacies like dosa, upma, appam (rice-cake), mango pickle etc. are still preserved in the moshav. The young generation however, don't have much enthusiasm about Cochin cuisine on the grounds that they are too hot and spicy for them. They prefer bread, pitahs, milk products, chicken, vegetable salads which are standard food items in Israel.

In religious matters, the young Cochinis are not as observant as their parents. They are becoming more and more reluctant to sacrifice their pleasures of smoking, travelling, partying etc. on Sabbath which is an
offence in the eyes of their parents. However, the youngsters in Nevatim don't attempt to offend their feelings by doing such things in public.

**Economic Status**

In the overall economic structure of Israel, the Indian Jews are in the lower rungs. This is contrary to their expectations about Israel before immigration. They had envisioned Israel as the source of the religious as well as economic fulfillment. But they, like other oriental communities, found themselves occupying the lower echelons of the Israeli society. This is explained by many. Israeli social scientists and politicians as natural and only possible result of the immigrants demographic, occupational and educational characteristics. At the same time the Oriental immigrants 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. This description of Israeli society into which the Oriental immigrants entered as a 'modern industrial' society is at least inaccurate. The large-scale economic development which turned Israel into a highly industrialised society, with a modern and sophisticated managerial apparatus supported by a relatively large scientific technological structure, took place only during the first decade after the Orientals consequently modernisation is not something they met as a finished process, but rather something in which they participated. The bulk of Ashkenazi Jews came from areas of
Eastern Europe which were on the periphery of the capitalist centres; acquaintance with industry, for instance came only very late in the nineteenth century. At the same time the Indian Jews, like the African and Middle Eastern Jews had acquaintance with capitalism in its colonialist versions. Arriving in Israel as an unorganised mass with most of their capital and goods left behind, they depended on the Ashkenazi dominated institutions for all their needs. They were in no position to form or maintain an alternative institutional framework. They constituted relatively cheap, manipulable labor force. While the majority of the Cochin Jews' occupation was farming, the Bene Israel had low status occupations or no occupation.

The Indian Jews found agricultural work extremely difficult. Most of them were never agricultural farmers in India. Some of them were petty merchants who traded in agricultural products. Most were small shopkeepers, government employees, and teachers, while a few had been well-established merchants. The land which were allocated for them was mostly arid land. To the persistent struggle with the meagre soil, was added the need to watch continually over their crops and lives, since the borders were not far having the synagogue’s endowment or Maharaja’s protection to rely on, they now were dependent on the instructors assigned to them by the settlement agency, who in turn, had to depend on a complex network of remote governmental agencies. These instructors had none too bright a view of their charges; some thought the Cochin Jews were too slight in physique for heavy farm work; others believed
that they were too irresponsible about the time schedule necessary for successful farming, energies went into religious and domestic celebrations. In the initial days, language problems made it very difficult for the immigrants to understand their instructors.

In Israel, immigrants' own background was considered as hindering their absorption. Eisenstadt in his study on the absorption of immigrants attached considerable importance to the kind of motivation which led to immigration as it was this which led to immigration as it was this which often exerted, critical influence on the process of the immigrants integration in his new country.28 Moshe Shokeid's study on a Cochin Jewish settlement indicated that, their immigration should be seen against a background of prolonged communal discrimination within the Jewry which was internally divided in a caste-like manner into black and whites, and failure to adjust to the new economic circumstances prevailing in post-Independence India.29 He writes, "We can deduce that these immigrants hoped, in particular, to find social equality and suitable economic opportunities in the state of Israel and the blocks in the realisation of these goals resulted in frustration and crisis."30 This viewpoint illuminates one aspect but ignores the structural inequalities of absorption.

29 Moshe Shokeid op.cit, n.3, p.112.
30 Ibid.
The Israeli bureaucratic agents may have operated on the assumption that these new immigrants desired to implement Zionist values of hard work and self-reliance and would, therefore learn their new occupations and adopt their new way of life as quickly as possible. But arriving as an unorganised mass in this new land, the immigrants themselves may have understood the situation in more familiar cultural terms.

In Bet Avi, a Cochin Jewish settlement, Kushner found that the bureaucratic agents had not discovered the “felt needs” of the community, know little about Cochini culture and therefore had not designed the development program to encourage full participation. However, over the years, many had had made their occupation an economic success through hard work and perseverance.

**Table 4.1: Age-Sex Distribution in Moshav Nevatim**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>18-25</th>
<th>26-35</th>
<th>36-45</th>
<th>46-55</th>
<th>56+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Work in Israel, 1996-97.

**Table 4.2: Source of Income in Moshav Nevatim**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Income</th>
<th>Flower cultivation</th>
<th>Chicken farming</th>
<th>Village services</th>
<th>Work outside the village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of families</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field work in Israel, 1996-97.

Today the Cochin immigrants in Israel feel that they had fared better economically than they would have in India. They have acquired various
material possessions such as refrigerators, ovens, televisions, good modern furniture and in some cases, cars. However, they are still not economically integrated with the dominant communities. Since farming involves manual labor, it is not allocated a high socio-economic status. Thus while in terms of income they have attained a certain amount of economic mobility, it has not corresponded with total socio-economic integration. While many informants talked proudly of their achievements, the low prestige attributed to such occupations and the arduous nature of the work resulted in their desire that their children should not continue in this occupation and should try to attain a better socio-economic status. The younger generations, hence attach much importance to higher education in universities and every year the no. of University goers are increasing.

Unlike the agricultural settlements where the Cochin Jews are settled, the development towns where the Bene Israel Indian Jews dwell in Israel are characterised by far greater degrees of social and occupational heterogeneity. These are locations in the urban areas inhabited by immigrants from Afro-Asian countries. Within the context of high unemployment, minimal incomes and large families, immigrants in such towns were especially prone to pervasive anxieties which emerged from the continuing social frustrations they experienced in competing for limited resources distributed by the welfare bureaucracy.
Most of the Bene Israel who immigrated to Israel had an urban living background before immigration. Their traditional occupation as oil-pressers in Konkan villages in India almost ended during the period of British rule. The spread of education and the movement of the community to the urban centres of Bombay in search of jobs have resulted into radical changes in the socio-economic life of the Bene Israel. At the time of immigration to Israel, there were professionals including doctors and teachers, nurses, clerks, mechanics, electricians and artisans among the Bene Israel.

The new urban life in Israel was extremely frustrating for the Bene Israel. Their development towns are located in areas such as Negev and frontier areas. Giladi refers to such towns as ‘cheap labor camps’ whereas Joseph Massad compared the living conditions of inhabitants similar to ‘slum conditions’, which are highly ‘undeveloped’, with poor health and educational services. Most of these towns depend on a single factory owned by the state, or Ashkenazi businesses. In Lod, where there is a large Bene Israel concentration they were occupied as fitters, sweepers or cleaners. This is in sharp contrast to the Bene Israel expectations regarding a higher standard of living in Israel.


_Joseph Massad, ibid._

_Shalva Weil, op.cit. n.13, p.20_
The case of Bene Israel is worse even today. None of my informants talked satisfactorily about their occupation or family income. In the words of a Bene Israel lady who was nurse in India, "I have left my job in India and came here. But here they told me that I was not qualified enough for the same job. So I had to contend with little odd jobs. This is the case of many people in our community. We had a good life in Bombay. We left it all for Israel. But what did we get? Only hardships!'

Similar resentments were aired by majority of my Bene Israel informants. A very popular story told to me by some Bene Israel in Bombay about a doctor from their community who immigrated in the early 1950s is striking. When this high status gentleman from Bombay immigrated to Israel, he wanted to live in the holy city of Jerusalem itself. This was unthinkable for a Bene Israel at that time because Jerusalem was so saturated by the dominant communities. However, he decided to live in Jerusalem only and took up the job of sweeping the streets of Jerusalem! Later in few years time some other Indian Jews found him and arranged a better job in a restaurant for him. This story clearly indicates the Bene Israel passion for the holy land, however difficult the path towards it is.

However the Bene Israel perceive themselves as unfairly treated by the mainstream society. Also, unlike the Cochinis, they got scattered in development towns, wherein they had to compete with others to earn their living. The majority are in extremely low status jobs such as skilled and unskilled labor. For the Bene Israel who were economically privileged under the British in India, this was defined as a case of
downward economic mobility. Though the majority felt that they had a few more material possessions than they would have had in India, they saw the economic situation of other communities in Israel as the basis of comparison.

According to most Bene Israel informants, all the good positions were monopolised by the Ashkenazim who had protectia (influence). Some Bene Israel felt that their lack of economic opportunity had been detrimental to the education and hence the economic success of their children also. The sense of economic marginalisation was stronger among the Bene Israel than the Cochin Jews.

**Discrimination in Employment- “M’s” Experience**

‘M’ hails from an agricultural settlement near Jerusalem, predominantly inhabited by Cochin Jews. His father was a petty merchant in India who immigrated to Israel in 1954. In Israel he earned his living from farming. Apart from a small-scale cultivation of citrus fruits, he has a small chicken farm. ‘M’ has four sisters and two brothers. He is a very religious person and follows all customs and regulations thoroughly. At his age of 37, ‘M’ is still unmarried. He always thought of securing a good profession and then getting married. Also, his future partner should be religious. However he believes that there is less affinity for religious practices among the young generation Cochinis. He studied Business
and Commerce in the Hebrew University. Now works in an agricultural company.

He remembers how his parents generation suffered in Israel. There was colour bar in Israel. Things have changed a lot since then. His own sisters have married Ashkenazis. But, there are occasions when you feel discriminated even now, he said. Once his boss wanted to give an important assignment and chose his Ashkenazi colleague although 'M' had the same qualifications and seniority over his colleague. According to 'M', Ashkenazis have protekzia (sl. For influences and contacts). "They are more pushy than us and they have political clout too".

To sum up, the socio-economic absorption of the Indian Jewry in Israel paved the way for their marginalisation in that society. As new immigrants, they were channeled into the periphery of the socio-economic structure where they remained ever since. A very generalised impression about the low socio-economic background of all the Indian immigrants irrespective of their many varied occupations in India, resulted into an ethnic division of labor and there by made their entrance into the lower echelons of life in Israel. Although over the years, they had achieved many economic gains, they are still marginalised from the mainstream. There has been sharp boundary maintenance between communities based on racial characteristics, which had restricted the community's socio-economic mobility in the upward direction.