CHAPTER V

INDIAN JEWISH IDENTITY
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Studies on immigrant groups in Israel have long neglected culture and ethnicity with an ideological aversion to these ideas. In the early sociological analyses of immigrant absorption led by Eisenstadt, culture became a background variable. The argument was that the real differences between the so-called Oriental and Ashkenazi Jews were not primarily cultural but sociological. These Orientals came from traditional societies to modern Israel. Their integration into Israeli society, therefore, entailed their resocialisation: learning new roles, acquiring new skills appropriate to a modern society. Here, the sociologist’s model of immigrant absorption is linked up with the Zionist’s vision of fusion of exiles. This chapter argues that in the process of absorption of immigrants, the cultures of Oriental Jews were denigrated and the salience of ethnicity can be attributed to the structural pattern of absorption in Israel. In the specific case of Indian Jews, though they immigrated on the basis of their Jewish identity they are ethnicised in terms of "Indianness" in Israel. This chapter analyses the Indian Jewish identity as it gets defined in Israel and the emergent patterns of identity in the process of absorption.
Ethnicity and Community in Israel: Some Terminological Clarifications

Maintaining group identity in the process of transition from one cultural world to another was a challenge which the Jews faced through their long history of migrations, from country to country, from continent to continent. If in the Diaspora, their basic identity was that of Jew, in Israel one group distinguishes from another on the basis of their country of origin. The situation of immigration and absorption in Israel has created a fundamental division of identities contrary to the expectations of fusion of exiles. While Jews of European and American origin are commonly known as Ashkenazim, the Jews from Asia and Africa are called Mizrachim (Orientals). Sometimes, the word Sephardim is used to denote Jews of Eastern origin; it is originally the term for Jews originating from Sepharad (Spain), who lived in various parts of North Africa, Turkey, Greece, Egypt etc.¹

Though the Sephardim form a category by themselves with marked differences from other Jews of Orient, they are included among the Oriental Jews and the term Sephardim is at times interchangeably used for Orientals in general. Although the distinction between the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi is an old one, its major referents had to do with the different traditions, mostly ritual and liturgical, which developed

historically between the two broad divisions of world Jewry. Like other aspects of Jewish history, however, the distinction was transformed in contemporary Israel.

Usage effectively constitutes a typology of communities—the higher status ‘Western’ or Ashkenazi Jews, on one hand and the lower status ‘Eastern’ or Sephardi Jews on the other. As designated by the Ministry of Education, the latter are disadvantaged and so “in need of fostering” (te’-unei tepuach), a fairly obvious transformation of “in need of modernisation”. The binary division of Jewry on the basis of traditional and modern was carried on with the recognition of ethnic stratification, in the phrase, “the second Israel”. It has been enshrined by the Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel, which dichotomises the Jewish population into African/Asian and European/American divisions, these correspond with the Oriental/Ashkenazi division.

Also, in the Israeli context, an eda represents a Jewish ethnic community (pl. edoth). This term distinguishes the Jewish ethnic communities in Israel from major non-Jewish ethnic groups such as the Arabs or Druzes who live in Israel and also it distinguishes them from Jews who constitute an

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ethnic group in their countries of origin. By this reasoning Jews of Moroccan origin are an ethnic group in Morocco but, they are an eda in Israel, in the same way as Turkish Jews who are an ethnic group in Turkey also constitute an eda once they have immigrated to the Jewish State. Eda implies a measure of continuity from country of origin to Israel which has meaning so long as individuals continue to define themselves and continue to be defined as members. Thus, the Indian Jews in Israel are an eda separate in certain social and even geographical ways from other Jews.

However, those who are presumed to have arrived from “modern societies” in Europe and America are not usually designated by their community but those who are associated with “traditional” countries of origin in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and those who are born in Israel but whose ancestry is traceable to Spain, are all assigned to ‘edoth’. There is thus, a Yemenite ‘eda’ but no Polish or French or South African eda giving rise to its perception as ‘racial’. Oriental Jews in general are known as edoth ha mizrakh. As against eda, the Arab ethnicity in Israel is referred to as miutim which means ‘minorities’. Separately labeled, they are often dealt with as separate subjects.


Ethnicity: An Emergent Phenomenon during Absorption

Ethnic identity is the type of identity which may acquire primacy in one situation and may recede in importance in another. In much of the literature on ethnicity and ethnic identity, the individual is said to be faced with a choice; whether to abandon his ethnic allegiance and conform to dominant norms of how to live and how to act, or whether to continue to stress his identity or find new ways of expressing it in the changing world in which he finds himself. These two alternatives are usually viewed contradictory modes of adoption: 'detribalisation' is opposed to 'retribalisation'; 'absorption', in the Israeli jargon, is opposed to 'ethnicity'. By all the former, an ethnic group give up the symbols of their ethnic identity in order to adopt the ways of life of other, more dominant, group; by all the latter processes, members of ethnic groups stress ethnic symbols in order to enhance their distinctiveness. The two types of processes are usually portrayed as mutually exclusive.

However, the manifestation of ethnicity in different spheres of life where the individual is encouraged to deny his ethnic allegiance requires explanation. One type of explanation is to claim the uniqueness and the primordiality of ethnic identity. Geertz suggests that ethnicity is based upon 'primordial attachments';
By a primordial attachment is meant, one that stems from the 'givens'—or more precisely as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens'—of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the 'given' ness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, and following a particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves.⁵

The view that the ethnic solidarity is a primordial sentiment, has been disputed by proponents of the reactive theory of technical change such as Barth, Gellner and Hechter. According to these theories, ethnic solidarity in modern society is primarily a response to structural discrimination. Hechter, on the basis of social, electoral and demographic material for the countries of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, tries to demonstrate that ethnic identity is not a primordial sentiment and that it becomes salient only when cultural distinctions are the basis for, or coincide in, social stratification.⁶

In Israeli society, one can find a correlation between social status and ethnic origin, particularly for lower statused or Oriental groups such as the Indian Jews. Primary data on the Indian Jews reveal that they are concentrated in clearly defined occupational strata and represent an ethnic

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class clustering. The absorption processes have resulted not only into the creation of ethnic neighbourhoods but into the marginalisation of communities on the basis of ethnic origin. Margarat Abraham rightly points out that ethnicity and marginality are closely linked.\(^7\) She writes,

"The Indian Jewish immigrants were ethnicised and marginalised in Israel. Though they immigrated to Israel on the basis of their Jewish identity, they found themselves marginalised. European Jews formed the core and determined the basis of absorption. Since the Indian Jewish Culture was perceived by the dominant group as incongruent with the core culture, there was boundary maintenance between the core and the Indian communities resulting in the latter’s marginalisation. The primordial and cultural characteristics of the Indian Jewish communities vis-a-vis the dominant community become visible markers of differentiation. Ultimately, their “Indian-ness” become the basis of identification by the dominant communities.\(^8\)

The rise of Oriental ethnicity in Israel is linked with the absorption ideology and practice. It has been variously expressed as assertion of cultures, communal upsurges, revival of distinctive religious practices, voices and movements of marginalised people etc. The first upsurge of ethnic protest was in Wadi Salib in 1959. The immediate cause of the uprising was the granting of comfortable housing to immigrants from Poland when thousands of Wadi Salib’s Oriental immigrants, mostly

\(^7\) Margarat Abraham, “Ethnicity and Marginality: A study of Indian Jewish Immigrants in Israel”, *South Asia Bulletin*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1995, p. 112.

\(^8\) Ibid. p. 122.
Moroccans, were still living in slum conditions. Soon the protest assumed violent dimensions and spread to other Oriental camps.

Oriental Jewish ethnicity in Israel made a political expression in the early 1970s in the Black Panther Movement. This was the first significant protest movement of Oriental Jewish youth which challenged the premises of the dominant ideology concerning the absorption of immigrants, emphasized the particular Oriental Jewish values and identity and blamed the establishment’s policy for the predicament of disadvantaged Oriental youths. Though the movement slowly vanished into insignificance, ethnic resentment which continued to simmer beneath the surface during the difficult years after the 1973 October War, it made a forceful comeback in Israeli politics, challenging the whole ideology of absorption of immigrants and at a mere radical level, the fundamental values legitimising the State. Its most salient expression was the formation, in 1980 of the distinctly ethnic Tami party, headed by Aharon Abu -Hatzeria, scion of the one of the most illustrious North African Jewish families, ex-Mayor of Ramle and a minister in Begin’s cabinet.

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Tami emphasizes the distinctive North African cultural past, and its leaders appeared on the national political stage with full assurance and legitimacy. It suggests that a thoroughgoing ideological transformation and ethnic polarisation have taken place. Erik Cohen has coined the term ‘new ethnicity’ to denote the Oriental ethnic expressions in the 1980s. According to Cohen,

The principal objection of the new ethnicity against the old, Ashkenazi dominated establishment is that the ideology of ‘absorption of immigrants’ decultured (them)…. The main effort of the new ethnicity is thus to establish Oriental Jewry as an equal but distinct partner with the Ashkenazim, however, some of the more radical ethnics discard such pluralism as too moderate and advocate the formation of a new establishment, dominated by the Oriental Jews.\(^{12}\)

It is pertinent to underscore the weight given in his analysis to symbolic and cultural themes, on the one hand, as well as to politics and power on the other. These themes have come to the forefront of analyses of absorption dynamics in Israel only in the 1970s. In an article published, in the 1970s Shlomo Deshen posited that, in Israel, a kind of “inverted correlation” existed between what he termed “cultural ethnicity” and “political ethnicity”; from the vantage point of the early 1970s, it appeared that “political ethnicity” was on the rise.\(^{13}\) It would be inaccurate to

\(^{12}\) Erik Cohen, op.cit., n.9

prognosticate that political ethnicity is on the wane in Israel. On the contrary, cultural and political features are equally a part of over all social process. The correlation between them is direct and potent-changes or developments in ethnic politics hinges upon changes in ethnic symbols and ceremonies, and vice versa. The swift rise to power of politicians such as David Levy or Aharon Abou Hatzeria is connected closely with the prominence given to new cultural celebrations such as the mimouna (North African religious festival) or the resurgence of the tradition of Hilluloth (festivities commemorating the memory of famous rabbis). Thus, in Israel, where the 'business of ethnicity', to use Deshen's term, is in contradiction to Deshen, far from 'finished'.

Ethnic group divisions and communal tensions became the central, almost dominant topics, in an increasingly volatile electoral politics in Israel. Since late 1970s, in the Israeli elections the two major political parties followed along ethnic lines. As the Israeli Political Scientist, Asher Arian puts it, "the 1981 elections witnessed an unprecedented crystallisation of ethnic differences in Israeli politics" and again "the 1981 elections witnessed the two major parties clearly identified with ethnic groups – the Alignment of Labor with the Ashkenazi and the Likud with the Sephardi." The Labor Party received the bulk of its support from


Ashkenazi voters, while Likud drew heavy supports from the “edoth mizrakh” or voters from Eastern countries in the 10th Knesset elections. Ethnic parties like Tami became highly successful during these elections.

Many Oriental Jews made gradually the transition into Israeli society. Many had acquired a relatively better economic status than they had in the past. However, there still exists wide socio-economic gap between Ashkenazi and Oriental Jews.

**Israeli Orientalism and Cultural Stereotypes**

With the creation of the Israeli State, new immigrants from Afro-Asian countries started arriving en masse. To the veteran Zionists, mass immigration suggested both promise and problem. In each newcomer, the historic process of return was enacted, the prospect of individual and collective redemption enhanced. Yet, the new immigrants were tarnished by diaspora experience. Articulated in the folk concepts “primitive” and “lacking culture”, the ethnic category of Oriental Jews was created and filled with negative cultural connotations.

Examining the ethnic imagery in leading Israeli newspapers in the early 1950s, Raphael Patai has catalogued a host of negative stereotypes associated with the ethnic category “Oriental Jews”. These include instability, emotionalism, impulsiveness, unreliability, incompetence, habitual lying, cheating, laziness, boastfulness, inclination to violence,
uncontrolled temper, superstitiousness, childishness, and lack of cleanliness.\textsuperscript{16} This array of negative characteristics are summarised in the terminologies of “primitivity”, implying cultural inferiority and “lacking culture”, suggesting an absence of social characteristics positively associated with being civilised.

Although accepted unequivocally as Jews, and thus on principle welcomed to the Zionist enterprise it was evident that in most ways, in a word, culturally, these immigrants were worlds removed from the Zionist pioneers of European background. Arnold Lewis notes that to the ambivalence with which Zionism viewed diaspora Jews in general was added the ethnocentric prejudices of the Ashkenazim towards these immigrants, resulting in negative stereotyping of these “Oriental Jews” that went beyond the ambivalence of Zionist imagery.\textsuperscript{17} Goldberg goes further, suggesting that it was specifically the perceived “Arabness” of these Oriental immigrants which so troubled the Ashkenazim, who were anxious to establish the “Jewishness” of their new society beyond any doubt.\textsuperscript{18} In any case, the fusion of exiles as an ideological tenet was inimical to the recognition of cultural or ethnic differences among Jews as


\textsuperscript{17} Arnold Lewis in Alex Weingrod (ed.), \textit{Studies in Israeli Ethnicity: After the Ingathering} (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1985), p.34

\textsuperscript{18} Harvey Goldberg, in Alex Weingrod (ed.), ibid.
being either permanent or indissoluble. At worst, the immigrants were referred to as “the generation of the desert”, likened to the Israelites who were forced to wander until a new, purified generation arose to able to enter Canaan. More optimistically, it was argued that even the adults might become Israelis. But the definition of ‘Israeli’ was a decidedly European, Ashkenazi one.

Self perception of the Indian Jews

By looking closely at the ethnicities that are subsumed under the category Oriental, some scholars found that they individually don’t consider themselves as Orientals. Arnold Lewis, during his field work in Sharonia, a North African Jewish settlement, found that “when on occasion Sharonians do use the term Oriental, they do so to refer to “low status Israelis”, usually excluding the speaker, in much the same way that this image is projected by non-residents when referring to Sharonians”\(^\text{19}\). Hence he confirms that “the ethnic category of Oriental Jews had little relevance to Sharonians”\(^\text{20}\). From the outside looking in all Sharonia, it is a typical Oriental community. From the inside, to the Sharonians the Orientals are seen to be elsewhere.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{19}\) Arnold Lewis, op.cit, n.20.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Among the Sephardim, Jews of European origin, such as Bulgarians, were attributed a high social status. In the middle of the hierarchy were those from the middle eastern countries such as Iraq, Persia, Syria etc. and at the lower range of the hierarchy were the Indian and the African Jews. However the Moroccans had a higher status than the Indians and the Indians a higher status than the African Jews. This was not a rigid hierarchy and could vary according to who was doing the ranking.

It is rare that the Indian Jews define themselves as Orientals. Their self-definition is as Cochinim or as Bene Israel. However, we-Sephardim/they-Ashkenazim are the general way of distinguishing themselves from Ashkenazim. With regard to the Orientals in general, the Cochin Jews assert their superiority in religious terms. They consider themselves as religiously orthodox. With regard to communities that faced controversies over religious authenticity ("purity" in religious sense) like the Beta Israel ("falashas" literally meaning “strangers” or Ethiopian Jews) or the Bene Israel itself, they share a general cynicism with other Israelis. Though the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews have a historical consciousness dating back to nearly 2,000 years of existence and thus forming originally an ancient Jewish diaspora in India, they had little interaction between each other in India. The Cochin Jews consider themselves as relatively more devout and knowledgeable Jews than the Bene Israel. They were Zionists only by the mid-20th century. Hence, there has been a distance not only in the geographical sense, between the two, but, remained as distinct
communities. This distinctness has been maintained in Israel too. There are almost no intermarriages between the two, with a rare exception of one or two isolated incidents of Cochini women marrying Bene Israel men. They have separate settlements, separate prayer hall, separate associations to deal with communal issues. Cultural contents of these two communities exhibit their own concept and traits of Indianness.

Cultural Expressions of Being Indian

The Cochini Indian Symbols

Material symbols which have traditionally held an important position in the culture in Cochin and are continuously being used in both traditional and innovative ways show that they have continued to have symbolic significance within the community. They include,

1) The interiors of Cochin synagogues, built on the classic Cochin Synagogue design which has two reading stages (tevoth) and the actual sections transported from Cochin.

(2) Torah Scrolls encased in gold and silver covers brought over from India in 1975.

(3) The manara or the booth for the Torah scrolls as in the Simhat Torah.
The topi, the Cochini styled pillbox silk or cotton print ritual head covering.

Male ritual clothings like the coloured silk cloak or kapah worn in the synagogue, men’s white synagogue clothe and coloured vest to safriyah (rarely worn in the contemporary period, but shown as exhibits) and Purim costumes.

Musical expressions of parallel symbolic value to the material objects mentioned above are the songs known as Shire Kolas. The song book which the Cochinis call kolas has the same importance to their cultural identity as the diwan does to the Yemenite Jews. This small physical item, seen at most Cochini traditional activities, contains within it their main Jewish cultural legacy outside of the basic Jewish Orthodox ritual. Shire kolas is a cultural heritage for both men and women in the Cochini community. It is a continuing tradition, although the popularity of certain songs within its corpus and singing style has changed. Interestingly when the community celebrated 30 years of immigration in 1984, the name for the committee for celebration was Kumu B’rina (‘rise in joy’), the title of a song in the collection, kolas.

In the case of ritual clothing, women do not continue to maintain their traditional synagogue clothing as the men do. In India, the women wore a long silk shawl and had holiday blouses of silk with bands of embroidered
sequins on them. However, Cochini women continue to maintain special features of head-coverings. They have a special manner of fastening a headscarf in a large square. All females, including unmarried women and little girls, cover their heads in synagogue though without really attempting to hide their hair. This is a Cochini custom which continues exclusively in the sanctuary of their synagogues. In addition, women continue to have reproduced special delicate flower-like designs for necklaces and small, diamond-like earrings. Many of the older women wear large fold stars of David, possibly derived from their former *tali*, a native wedding sign. These are all symbolic of both Cochini group identity and its asthetic values. The wraparound cloths, *purdiva* and *mundu*, worn by the older generation are distinctive dress markers; while this clothing is still worn in India, and among recent immigrants in their homes, they are considered basically 'old-world' clothing style. Noticeably older men and women do not wear the *purdiva* and *mundu* when travel to a festivity such as a wedding in a commercial hall in town, although in their own communities they wear various types for anything from agricultural labor to holiday events in the synagogue and home. Saris, the classic Indian attire are sometimes worn at formal events.

All of these symbols, it should be noted, have been shown to have importance within the Cochin community, and almost all have been incorporated into the more contemporary reflexive ceremonies. All are almost in the religious sphere but also embody the concept of
"community", these concepts having been contiguous in India, as they generally were among diaspora Jewry.

Apart from these items mentioned which have key symbolic value, there are several other things still in use, though sometimes only maintained by the older generation, which continue to be a sign of being Cochini, like Cochini food and use of Malayalam language. Besides the common Keralite Cuisine, some holiday foods of Cochin Jews in Israel. Cooking utensils, tourist chart, photos of ancestors, books, audio and videocassettes of Indian (both Hindi and Malayalam) films found in the homes, all express some aspects of Cochini ethnic identity. In the celebrations examined they were primarily visible in exhibits.

Marcia Walerstein recorded some of the changes which occurred in the Cochini wedding in Israel which she consider as a logical development of culture change in order to adapt to Israeli situations. She observed that Cochini wedding ceremony in Israel is restricted to one or two days whereas it was a week-long affair in Cochin. She writes,

As to what has happened to the two basic unique points about the Cochin wedding – its writings in Hebrew and Aramaic ritual and its symbolic re-enactment of the high status accorded to the Jews in Cranganore during the reign of the Jewish being Joseph Raban... Of the latter, as far as I can tell, there is not a trace of re-enacting the historical rites. No one would be seen in Israel carrying a lighted lamp by day, an umbrella, having trumpets or canon blast announcing their marriage. The songs slorifying Joseph Raban have faded
from the women’s folk memory, and if writers in their note books, have not been popular enough to continue singing in Israel.  

The Bene Israel Indian Symbols

(1) The use of *sari* among old generation Bene Israel women.

(2) The persistence of Marathi cuisine in Bene Israel households such as *roti, dal, chaval, pav bhaji* etc.

(3) The prevalence of Marathi surnames ending in ‘Kar’

(4) *Malida,* the ceremony of blessing and thanksgiving. This is a unique Bene Israel Indian ceremony, which accompanies almost all rites of passage and major occasions: Joyous life-cycle events such as birth, circumcision, *bar mitzvah,* marriage and housewarmings. The blessings recited during the ceremony include thanksgiving to God for granting fertility, health and peace along with blessings and prayers addressed to the prophet Elijah. While the blessings are being recited, sweet foods- also known as *malida-* are offered to those present, symbolising the meal offering in the temple.

Some scholars hold that the word *malida* comes from Persian and refers to the Muslim custom of making a sweet offering at a saint’s grave\(^23\). Others believe that although the term was adopted by the community as a result of contact with Muslims, the practice itself can be traced back to the sacrificial rite of the Temple as prescribed in the Torah\(^24\). However, the commonly accepted explanation notes the similarity of *Malida* to a Hindu ceremony in which an offering of food, called *prasadam*, is made to the God and then distributed among the worshippers\(^25\).

\(^{(5)}\) *Mehendi*, the henna ceremony: Celebrated on the eve of wedding, it consists of smearing henna on the bride’s and the bridegroom’s ring fingers. It takes place simultaneously in two separate locations— the homes of each member of the couple or in one of the synagogue’s social halls and is attended by family member. During the ceremony, some of the groom’s henna paste was carried by a messenger to be mixed with some of the bride’s paste. The Bene Israel, continue to observe *Mehendi* scrupulously. This is a contrast from standard Israeli wedding, but can be found among Jews of Muslim Lands also.


\(^{25}\) Shalva Weil, op.cit., n.3, Chapter 12.
Apart from these religio-cultural expressions, Indianness is expressed in public functions also. Cochinis are often requested to make cultural presentations within larger multi-cultural events in Israel. As a result of this, certain 'Indian' or more specifically Kerala arts are presented as being Cochini. These are primarily in the area of song and dance performances. This phenomenon is similar to those which result in the presentation of an idealised national culture, often not related directly to the national sub group's own cultural experience in the country of emigration.

During a meeting organised by the Israel India Cultural Association (IICA), a Bene Israel tabla artist was wearing north Indian type pyjama and kurtas as well as a locket with "om" written on it. As a person trained in Indian classical tradition, he is still sticking on to such vivid Indian symbols. This general national identification with Indian culture, though not necessarily with India as a political entity, continues even in events that are not related to official cultural presentations. The abundance of Indian themes expressed in Purim costumes, for example, show that the Indian Jews have expanded their cultural representations of ethnic identity to include elements of the popular and folk cultures of India.

**Cochini Behaviour Patterns in Public Celebrations**

Cultural symbols which are expressed mainly through material objects may upon examination, reveal certain basic group values and cultural
patterns. They may not however, necessarily reveal anything about behavior as practiced or idealised, which is the area of concert for culture and personality studies. Thus, for example, while Cochinis and Yemenites have certain religious customs which are similar and which have important ritual value, such as the pronunciation of Hebrew in the liturgical sections known as "minhag Shingly", It is generally observed that the behavior of the two groups is otherwise radically different.

'Being Cochini' is also seen as behaving in a certain way. An allusion to this was evident in the reflexive celebrations, both through jokes about themselves and through praise given by dignitaries. The Cochinis have been termed "the quiet people". This was noted by Eliav, moshav instructor, in his first encounter with them at the immigration station in Israel.26 A more cryptic comment was made in the report of the observing doctor who came to examine them in India. He commented on how amazing it was to see the quiet, gentle, passive people become agitated when the subject of synagogue funds was brought up.27

Most of the Cochini tended to look with ambivalence in Israel whom they considered hot-tempered. A burst of emotion (except at funerals or with infants) is considered to show a lack of culture and maturity. Talkative

26 Interview with Eliav, January 1997.
people are also not highly respected. The good behavior of most Cochini children has been a source of amazement to those used to working with other Israeli children who are usually more boisterous or aggressive. However, this behavioral trait of quietness is not always valued by outsiders such as teachers, since it is often seen as being at the expression. Marcia Walerstine noticed that while often considered gentle' by those outside the community, members of the second generation have assured her that the critical vocabulary used by those from Cochin, not loudness of voice or physical, is a very effective means of social control within their families and community. The Cochini themselves reflected this image of their behavior in the Purim skit, in which the call for the tug-of war was "the quiet Cochini, the lazy Cochini." This self image was also expressed in the musical play, "The Legend of Cochin," when the children told of an ethnically divided football match in which they, the Cochini "stand on the side and don't interfere." The laudations to the community by visiting dignitaries at the synagogue dedications included the words "modesty" and "being able to do with little."

28 Ibid.
29 From the videocassette of the celebrations for thirty years of Aliyah (1984) in moshav Navatim
30 From the musical play, "The Legend of Cochin" (Videocassette, moshav Navatim).
While this behavioral norm could not be expressed in symbols, it was evident in the tone of all events from the memorial for Namyah Motta, to the weddings. Generally, the people came quietly, did aggressively grab for food or attention, began to sing softly and gradually warmed up to a louder, more intense vocal level.

The production of "The Legend of Cochin", musical, however, reflected a completely different mood. This was one reason for the claim that the production in itself was "cathartic". It changed not only a public image, but a self-image of what they were capable of producing as group. The ability of the Cochini to successfully change their behavior had already been shown in the agricultural and economic fields. The change illustrated by the musical production was in the manner in which they conveyed an image of their community, tradition and history, both in India and Israel.

**History and Identity**

**Past as a Legitimising Resource**

Constant reference to the Indian past and invocation of history has been a dominant behaviour of the immigrant generation Indian Jews in Israel. A community which prayed for Jerusalem throughout their centuries of existence in India, today after 45 years of immigration and settlement in their promised land, look towards India for their cultural lineage. In the absence of written documents, history, then, is presented as legend as well as social history. The Cochin Jewish
background is also presented as being contiguous with general Jewish history – refugees to Cochin are described as being part of the major Jewish exiles (the destruction of the Judean state, the exile from Spain etc) and the Bene Israel background as one of the lost tribes who set sail from ancient Israel in order to escape persecution by enemy conquerors. The emphasis is on the antiquity of the community as well as the peace and harmony they enjoyed in India. In moshav Nevatim, an old Cochini informant argued with great emotion that ‘the right history of the Indian Jews is yet to be written; to tell the world how we lived and two ancient our tradition are’.

Ethnicity, writes George De Vos, relates not only to one’s place in the status system, but also to internal conflicts over the priority to be given to past-present-or future-oriented forms of self identity. An individual can lean toward one of the three orientations: (1) a present-oriented concept of membership as citizens in a particular state (2) a past-oriented concept of the self as defined by one’s ancestry and origin (3) a future-oriented membership in a transcendent, universal, religious or political sense.”

32 Ibid,
Constant references to the past life in the diaspora have been noted by researchers on other immigrant groups in Israel as well. Moshe Shokeid defines this factor in the immigrant’s behavior as ‘reference situation’ which is an attempt ‘either to re-establish or to reverse their system of social differentiation of the past’.33 In his study among the immigrants from the Atlas mountains in an Israeli village, Romema, he elaborates.

I was struck by the Romemites constant references to the past. At that time I thought that people probably brought it up in my presence so as to impress me and improve the image I had formed of them. I was much aware of this phenomenon when I returned to Romema for a long period a few years later and realised the significant role that the past played in the every day life of the Romemites-in the secular as well as in the religious domain.... I defined this factor in the Romemites behavior as the ‘reference situation’, having in mind Merton’s use of the concept of ‘reference groups’.34

David Mandelbaum summarises this kind of phenomenon in much simplified terms as ‘nostalgia’. He writes about the Cochin Jews; “their nostalgic tales of life in Kerala indicate that although they have gained much in Israel, they have lost something precious that was rooted in their way of life in Cochin”35 Shirley Isenberg has made similar comments about the Bene Isreal. “Concerning Bene Israel identity as Indian, the

34 Ibid.
following generalisations suggest themselves: The Bene Israel who remain in India are full-fledged citizens of India in name, in deed and in self-perception. For the Bene Israel who have emigrated from India, their Indianness is a matter of nostalgic affection for and appreciation of India, but without regret for having chosen a different national identity."

In fact, this remembered past is configured as an immediate felt reality. Narratives of Indian past is often juxtaposed with the social isolation in Israel. My Cochin Jewish informants spoke, of course nostalgically, about the harmonious inter-community relations in Cochin where as in Israel, no virtual interactions exist between communities. Cochin, here, is not a mere history of peaceful diaspora, it is an idealised existence. To quote Ashis Nandy,

> The communities in Cochin do not swim together in a steamy melting pot. Indeed, their lifestyles, while being intertwined, are also partly autonomous of each other. These sectors of autonomy, which can be called community affairs, subsume under them ‘legitimate’ differences in religion, caste and sect. These differences in the city have not lost their meanings, value and sense of continuity with the past, either in the communities or their neighbours. As a result, after a point, despite ideological pretences, nobody seems particularly disrespectful towards or defensive about them. The communities can afford to take the moderate

hostilities of other because their self-esteem has not been badly damaged. 37

This self-esteem had been severely damaged in the whole process of absorption in Israel. The Indian characteristics have readily fallen into the category of negative attributes. During an early work conducted by Schifra strizower among the Bene Israel immigrants in Bershaba, she frequently heard complaints such as “they don’t esteem us; that is the people that count in this country do not esteem us at all- the white-skinned Israelis from Europe do not love our Bene Israel. But in India we were loved and esteemed.” 38 They explained that white-skinned Israelis were completely ignorant of their position in India. So whenever they encounter Bene Israel, they treat them as Orientals of whom they are accustomed to then only in condemnatory terms.

One of the major concerns of the elderly members of the community is the lack of awareness among the young generation about their own history. The Indian children born in Israel have only a touristic attraction towards the country of origin of their parents. This is more so in the case of

37 Ashis Nandy, “Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin”, Unpublished draft of a paper written for the multiculturalism project of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, and done at the committee for Cultural Choices, Delhi, 15 April, 1999, p. 7.

Cochinis than the Bene Israel. Many elders would agree that they themselves had to be blamed for this. They explain that in the attempt to build their lives in Israel, there was no time for anything.

A museum was opened in 1995, named as the Heritage Centre of the Cochin Jewry with several exhibits of cultural and historical remnants from Cochin. Photographs reflecting life in Cochin, traditional Cochin attire, cooking utensils, ceremonial lamps used in synagogues and various other cultural items are exhibited here.

There had been difference of opinion among the members of the community regarding the rationale of the museum. Some even claimed that “culture is not just a museum.” However, the Chief organiser of this museum feels much satisfied as many young Indians who saw the museum told him that they never knew before about the richness and variety of their own traditions.

To sum up, the major drawback of the absorption dynamics in Israel was that it sought to de-culture the Afro-Asian Jews. Although immigrated on the basis of their Jewish identity, the Indian Jews found themselves ethnicised and marginalised on the basis of their Indianness. These immigrants were required to cast away their popular legends, their folk narrative, and their convictions in order to become members of Israeli society. They had to hide their culture, their songs, their music, their
origin. The policy was one of "absorption through rejection". In fact, the oriental ethnicity also sought absorption but through acceptance. No Jewish ethnic political group, even the radical Israeli Jewish Black panthers of the 1970s ever espoused separatism but was symbolically dominated by the goal of fusion.