

JEWS IN INDIA: A STUDY OF HISTORY AND CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Three groups of Jews experience acceptance in Indian society: the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews. All three groups arrived at different times in India's history, but the essential foundations of the society that welcomed them remained the same. Each group remained essentially Jewish, the Bene Israel less so and the Baghdadi more so than the Cochin Jews, without persecution or assimilation in their adopted country in a process called acculturation.

This occurred due to a few factors. This first is the Indian philosophical tradition of tolerance. This is, in part, affected by India's long history and natural diversity, embraced even by India's Muslim rulers. Akbar putting in place this system of toleration, that even Aurangzeb could not destroy. Not only was toleration a help, but the caste system contributed in that it helped form the expectation that different groups of people have different religious practices. The third factor is the nature of Judaism itself as a religion that does not exclude others from ultimately attaining heaven.

Three time periods are examined to give evidence for the acculturation of the Jews in India. The first is the period c500 BCE to c900 CE where early Indian philosophical traditions were formed and the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews arrived. The second is c900 CE to c1650 CE when Muslims invaded and began to rule parts of the subcontinent. The third time period covers Colonial rule to Independence and the arrival of the Baghdadis from

c1650 CE to c1960. Each period is examined philosophically, politically, and historically to look for reasons why the experience of the Jews was indeed acculturation and not assimilation. Finally, the conclusion is made that India still provides opportunities for acculturation to groups such as the Tibetans.

“We always hear about the Jews being ill treated all over the world in one way or other... The Muslims and Christians as well as the Jews have stamped the Hindus as idolaters. But if you want to know what is humanitarianism you must go to them. You must look at a group of Jews who lived under the regimes of these Hindu rajas for the last two thousand years without knowing discrimination. The Hindu rulers protected them when they came under attack by the Portuguese and Muslim rulers. In his petition to Oliver Cromwell before 1655 for the resettlement of the Jews in England... Manasseh Ben Israel pleaded and gave the example of the tolerance enjoyed by the Jews of Cochin under the Hindu regime. The Jews of Cochin should be grateful to those Hindu rajas and the people of Cochin for their very existence as Jews in their country forever and ever.”

Ruby Daniel

“If there is one place on the face of this earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India.”

Romain Rolland

“I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I remember having repeated a hymn from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: “As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths with men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.” ... The wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita [says]: “Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.”

Swami Vivekananda, speech at the 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions

JEWES IN INDIA

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Jews in India

Introduction

One March day, in India, a tour guide stood up on a bus of Saginaw Valley students and mentioned that India was not only the host to all of the world's major religions, namely Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, but also Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. Not only have all of these religions existed in India for centuries, the guide also remarked that India was the only country than had not persecuted its Jewish population.¹

While debatable, the guide's statement was based on the simple observation that the experience of India's Jews has been very different from the more commonly known European, Middle-Eastern or even American Jewish stories. Indian Jews, in general, were never forced to assimilate into Indian society, never persecuted by Indians (generally Hindus and Muslims), and were able to preserve their traditions relatively free of interference. This is markedly different from the experience of the ghetto Jews in the Pale region of Russia and Eastern Europe, the long exile of Jews from England that ended under Oliver Cromwell, and the experience of persecution in the Middle East.²

Historians in the last 50 years have begun to look at India's Jews and have attempted to chronicle their experiences. Nathan Katz has written a rather comprehensive book called *The Jews of India* that takes into account traditional stories and other historical narratives. He introduces two terms that will be part of the discussion in this paper. He discusses the differences between assimilation and acculturation,

¹ The journal of my experience in India, and in particular the day mentioned above, can be found at this address: <http://puma.gotdns.org/usr/kaila-sikes/india/journal.html?daytwo.html>.

² Ruby Daniel, *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995, 123.

defining assimilation as the process of giving up elements of native culture in order to fit into a society and defining acculturation as the adoption of sufficient practices from the host culture in order to maintain a separate identity. Furthermore, he discusses the three groups of Jews, the Cochin, the Bene Israel, and the Baghdadi, that this paper will focus on, highlighting the most important aspects of their experiences. The definitions of acculturation and assimilation used in this paper come from Katz's work.³

Joan G. Roland and Sadok Masliyah cover the experience of the Jews under the British Empire. Roland's book, *Jewish Communities in India: Identity in the Colonial Era*, discusses the policies of the British in regard to the Jews and their treatment under the Colonial rule, the East India Tea Company, and the British Raj. Masliyah and Roland both also discuss the relationship between the Baghdadi and the Bene Israel that developed into mutual hostilities that developed soon after the Baghdadis arrived. One way of examining the acculturation or assimilation of the Jews into Indian society is through comparing these two groups because one was exposed to Indian influences far longer than the other and the developing hostilities illustrate the differences between the Bene Israel and later-arriving Baghdadi groups.

Another way to examine the question of acculturation or assimilation is through narratives. Three books, written recently, function as windows into three distinct Indian Jewish societies. Since all three were written by women of Indian Jewish descent, the books function both as autobiographical narratives and cultural histories of the various groups. Carmit Delman's *Burnt Bread and Chutney* focuses on the experience of her grandmother, a member of the Bene Israel community in Bombay as well as on her own experiences growing up in the United States. Ruby Daniel's collection of memories

³ Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?*, Berkeley: University of California Press: 2000, 3-4.

entitled *Ruby of Cochin: Memoirs of an Indian Jewish Woman*, recalls a community of superstitious, deeply divided, but ultimately very Jewish people and their interactions with the larger community in Kerala where they lived. And Jael Silliman's *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* offers a look at the Baghdadi Jews under the British Raj and during the Independence movement through the experiences of her foremothers living in Bombay. All three books lend insight into one of the only societies to accept its Jewish population and not require assimilation as a pre-requisite, but through the vision of an ordinary member of that community. All three books provide cases for acculturation as defined previously.

Just recently, Jews living in India reached the international press in a November 13, 2006 article on the Reuters Online International news page. This article chronicles the story of a group of Northern Indian Muslims that claim to be descended from the lost tribe of Menashe, better known to Westerners as the tribe of Manasseh. Science has been unable to prove the claims of the Bnei Menashe, but they practice some ancient Jewish traditions including those surrounding animal sacrifice and they sing of "crossing the Red Sea," an experience peculiar to the Jewish tradition. Thus, the Bnei Menashe join the other groups of Indian Jews, the Bene Israel, the Cochin, and the Baghdadi, as survivors of ancient traditions on the Indian subcontinent.⁴

Many of India's Jews left India for Israel in the uncertain political environment surrounding the partition of India and the regaining of a homeland with the independence of Israel.⁵ From India came both the Bene Israel and the Cochin. The experience of a

⁴ Sunil Kataria, "India's 'Lost' Jews Set for Long-awaited Homecoming," International, *Reuters.com*, November 13, 2006. (accessed November 13, 2006).

⁵ Sadok Masliyah "The Bene Israel and the Baghdadis: Two Indian Jewish communities in conflict." *Judaism*, 43, no. 3 (July 1, 1994): 279-294. <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed November 1,

family of the former group illustrates some of the interesting qualities of Indian Jewish life. The article that chronicled the experience of one Yuval Abraham, tells of the family's immigration to Israel in 1999, only to return to India by 2001. His reason was that they had felt discriminated against by European Jews in Israel. His point is further driven home by the statement, "In India we never experienced any discrimination from Hindus or even Muslims. As Israel was a Jewish state, we thought our lives there would be even better. In fact, it was worse."⁶

Incidental as the above story may be, it does provide a reason for speculation. What was the experience of the Jews in India? Why was it so different that some, such as Yuval Abraham, found it hard to adjust to a uniquely Jewish society? What makes India itself so different from other countries that also hosted Jewish refugees following the conquest of Israel by successive Palestinian Kingdoms? How did the Jewish diaspora sustain itself in India, keeping alive its own culture while at the same time gaining a measure of acceptance into the mainstream life of the Indian cities and villages to which they traveled? Was the Jewish experience in India one more marked by acculturation or assimilation?

To answer these questions, there is a need to explore how there came to be a Jewish population in India in the first place. This is often higher on the side of myth and slightly lower on the side of fact, especially in the case of the Bene Israel. Equally important is the way the history and philosophy of the Indian subcontinent shaped, changed, and accepted to varying degrees the various groups of Jews arriving over time. Also important is an exploration of the Jewish culture that existed at the time each group

2006), 8. Masliyah's figures indicate that between 1950 and 1980, the Jewish population fell by 77%, mostly by immigration to Israel.

⁶ Sejal Mandalia, "Not Welcome in the Holy Land," *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 32, October 4, 2004.

arrived in India as well as a basic understanding of the predominant Hindu culture and the way the two cultures and religions interacted with each other.

To accomplish this aim, three main time periods in Indian history will be explored. The first will comprise the years between the earliest arrival date for the Bene Israel in approximately 500 B.C.E. and end with the invasion of the sub-continent by Muslims based in present-day Afghanistan in approximately 900 C.E. The second period will span from here until the decline of the Mughal Empire in the mid-1600s. The third period, of colonial control, will extend from the mid-1600s through until the 1960s, after Indian Independence. Each of these time periods will be examined culturally, politically, and philosophically to attempt to prove that the experience of Jews in India was indeed one of acculturation and not one of assimilation.

Out of necessity, because of available resources and length, this paper will focus primarily on three groups found in different locations on the Indian subcontinent and migrating at different times to these locations. The Bene Israel, from the present day state of Maharashtra, have the most liquid arrival date and least definite story of arrival. Their folk legends date their arrival on the subcontinent as early as the sixth century BCE. The Cochin, of modern-day Kerala, arrived after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, and have a few more concrete proofs of their legends. The last community discussed herein is that of the Baghdadi Jews. These were so-called because of their middle-eastern origins and most arrived concurrently with or after the British during the eighteenth century. As such, their roots in India are slightly less permanent and their experience has been different.⁷

⁷ Katz, *Who Are*, 13, 93, 128; Masliyah, 2.

Early Origins and Beliefs (c500 BCE to c900 CE)

The Bene Israel and Cochin Jews

There is no doubt that India has had a Jewish population for several centuries. There is considerable controversy as to the arrival dates of the Bene Israel and the Cochin, but a survey of the possible dates places the arrival of the Bene Israel anywhere from the sixth century BCE to the seventh century CE.⁸ This group, called the Bene Israel or Children of Israel, tells a legend of arrival by sea and shipwreck. The story tells of how seven men and seven women swam ashore after their ship was wrecked off the coast of India near present-day Bombay. These survivors founded the Jewish community that became a caste of oil-pressers that would spread through the coastal villages near present-day Bombay. Most of the Bene Israel story takes place before the creation of a unified India and certainly before the India of today was created at the end of the British Raj. The various times of their arrival to the subcontinent coincide with the fall of Ashoka's Mauryan empire, the rising of the Gupta society, or the periods of disunity and local kingdoms that fall in between and after these two areas. Thus the Bene Israel were likely unaffected by national politics and their interactions with the local Hindus likely remained on a more personal village and community level.

Either way, this small group that seemed to have formed its own caste along the coast of modern-day Maharashtra was likely unnoticed in the larger scheme of things as there is little or no record of their existence prior to the tenth century when they are recorded as an established group by Maimonides.⁹ The Bene Israel had blended well into society by this time. They spoke the local Marathi language, adopted certain Hindu

⁸ Masliyah, 2.

⁹ Katz, *Who Are...*, 92-97, 108-111; Rhoads Murphey, *A History of Asia*, 5 ed, New York: Person Longman, 2006, 65.

customs involving marriage and caste, and aspired to the advancement of their caste through marriage, good deeds, and clean living. They also observed only certain Jewish practices, as they were cut off from the rest of the Jewish world until much later and had no knowledge of the Talmud. They knew only the Pentateuch, and then only remembered fragments that had been passed orally. It is certain, however, that they kept the Sabbath, followed strict dietary restrictions, used circumcision, and kept the Passover.¹⁰

The Cochin Jews can be traced through the existence of two plates that record the land deeded to them by the Hindu ruler of Malabar in the fourth century CE. This is the date claimed by the community, but other sources suggest it may be as late as 1000 CE. The Cochin Jews claim they are descended from a group fleeing persecution after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. This group landed on the Malabar Coast, in present day Kerala, and was given the right to govern themselves under the local maharaja. The gift of the plates recording the deed to land proves at least a tolerant interest in the community by the local prince. The arrival of the Cochin Jews on the subcontinent coincides with the Pandya Kingdom in Southern India, a time of disunity in the North, and a time of local authority in the South. However, according to Rhoads Murphey, a distinctively Indian culture of Hinduism and the associated values, arts and philosophy had come to exist over the whole subcontinent.¹¹ Therefore, the climate for the Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel may have been quite similar at first. As these Jews were not victims of shipwreck, their historical traditions and Jewish Law observations were not as vague as those of the Bene Israel.

¹⁰ Katz, *Who Are...*, 93-97, 108-111.

¹¹ Walter J Fichel, "The Exploration of Jewish Antiquities of Cochin on the Malabar Coast," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 87, no. 3 (July-Sept 1967): 230-248; Nathan Katz, "Contacts Between Jewish and Indo-Tibetan Civilizations through the Ages," *Judaism*, 43, no 1 (Winter 1994), <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed November 6, 2006), 6; Katz, *Who Are...* 12-13; Murphy, 65, 78, 121.

Early Indian Philosophy and Tolerance

During this time period, the influences on the Indian sub-continent were those of the Vedic period, and then the later Epic period. These two periods influenced later Indian philosophy to a large extent, and thus, this portion of the paper will be considerably longer as an explanation of these particular influences will only be given once. An exploration of religion is necessary however because, as the foreword to a series of books with the goal of exploring different religions states, people “need basic knowledge of religions to understand other people.” Nowhere is this more important than in studying issues surrounding religions like Hinduism and Judaism that have such a large impact on the personal lives of their followers.¹²

The basic premises of Hinduism rest on the ideas of *dharma*, or behavior appropriate to one’s station in life; reincarnation, or the idea that when one dies they will eventually be reborn; *karma*, or the idea that what a person does and how he or she acts in the present life will affect which life-form they are born into in the next; and the caste system, or the idea of a rigid social structure. In addition, Hinduism encompasses the fact that each person worships in his or her own way. Even though the realm of the Gods and Goddesses is quite large, most Hindus worship one in particular, making it both a polytheistic and monotheistic religion at the same time. Yet another path for Hindus involves seeking a union with the ultimate force, *Brahma*, through meditation and life-style choices. This form of religion is called monism. All three forms strive to break

¹² Martin E. Marty, “Forward” in James B. Robinson, *Religions of the World: Hinduism*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, vi.

from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth or *samsara* and achieve *moksha*, or union with the ultimate force.¹³

Another uniting feature, not only of Hinduism, but also of other religions that grew out of the Indian subcontinent during this time, including Buddhism and Jainism, is a tendency to view all life as spiritual in essence. Thus, for a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Jain, to separate his or her spiritual life and practices from his or her everyday practices is impossible. The religion and accompanying philosophy completely governs day-to-day action and thought. In the introduction to a sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, editors Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore describe this phenomenon, unfamiliar to practitioners of Western religions, as “the practical application of philosophy to life... (seeking) the truth, not as academic ‘knowledge for its own sake,’ but to learn the truth which shall make all men free.” The two firmly stress that philosophy and life in India are so intertwined that to separate them is impossible. “The truth must be *lived*,” and not simply known about.¹⁴

Indian philosophy, and by inclusion Hinduism, also relies on intuition rather than reason. This idea resonates well with the more Western religious ideas surrounding Faith that would have been brought to the subcontinent by the early Jews. Reason can be employed to illustrate ultimate truth, but ultimate truth can never be proven by reason, it must be experienced and thus lived. It also, like the more Western traditions of Judaism and Christianity, builds upon what came before. The ultimate truth as discovered by previous sages and seers is commented upon and respected as truth by those coming

¹³ James B. Robinson, *Religions of the World: Hinduism*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, 2-11.

¹⁴ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, xxiii-xxiv.

after. Every document written in the past is respected and looked at as a way toward understanding ultimate truth.¹⁵

Perhaps the most relevant aspect of Hinduism to this paper is the “synthetic tradition” that allows for the combination of many ideas into the search for ultimate truth. As Radhakrishnan and Moore state, “Religion and philosophy, knowledge and conduct, intuition and reason, man and nature, God and man, noumenon and phenomena, are all brought into harmony.”¹⁶ The two make the point that this is precisely why India can afford to be so tolerant both intellectually and religiously toward its minorities. It also explains the tendency that Rhodes Murphey describes when he notes the way that every conqueror of India took on more and more Indian aspects of life the longer they ruled over the subcontinent. A synthetic mind will take any knowledge, any ideas and attempt to fit them into the existing mold, and no matter how opposite it appears to be, will fold it into their conception of the world.¹⁷

Tendencies toward toleration, which is defined in the literature more along the lines of an acceptance of differences, can also be seen in the textual traditions of Hinduism. Most notable is the tendency toward personal reflection over concern for others as well as reminders of something akin to the Western tradition of brotherly love, that of being kind to and loving everyone. The Vedas, or hymns to the Gods and Goddesses dating from the early Aryan invasion of India, quickly evolve to fit this model. Several in particular, collected by Radhakrishnan and Moore, echo the sentiments of cleansing from wrong, “What sin we have ever committed against an intimate, O Varuna,

¹⁵ Ibid, xxv-xxvii.

¹⁶ Radhakrishnan and Moore, xxviii.

¹⁷ Ibid, Murphey, 188.

against a friend or companion at any time, a brother, a neighbor, or a stranger, that O Varuna, loose from us.”¹⁸

This tendency toward personal reflection is also markedly noted in the Upanisads. This collection of deeply philosophical works is, according to Radhakrishnan and Moore, probably some of the most influential of the earlier works on Indian philosophy today and throughout history. They contain many references to the unification of the individual *atman*, or self, with the ultimate creationary force, or *Atman*. Here, the idea is espoused that the ultimate truth lies within a person, and thus there is no need to look outward to other people. Implied, is the sense of neglectful thoughtfulness toward others found in the Vedas, only it is amplified as the personal goal of the individual to attain the ultimate Self is magnified through a desire for spiritual freedom. This is illustrated in the course of the *Katha Upanisad* where a man by the name of Naciketas chooses knowledge of the Self over any other desire in the world, even though he may die the next day.¹⁹ Another of the Upanisads brings out the differences between the two types of knowledge, the knowledge of the Vedas as the “lower” and the knowledge of the ultimate Self as the “higher.” This higher knowledge is the goal of the Upanisads as an entire unit.

Since the arrival of the Jews in India occurred sometime after the sixth century B.C.E., the Epic Period and the writing of the Bhagavad-gita and the Mahabharata are also of interest. It is during this time period that Indian philosophy and way of life attempts to translate the deeply philosophic Upanisads into practical application through the introduction of dilemmas. It is this time period also when the caste system becomes

¹⁸ “To Varuna” v.85, translated by Edward J. Thomas in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 29.

¹⁹Ibid., 37-39; “Katha Upanisad” in Ibid., 42-50; “Mundaka Upanisad” in Ibid., 51.

codified under the Laws of Manu and the tradition that had been present in the Vedas becomes a permanent fixture of Hindu society.

The Bhagavad-gita deals primarily with the struggle of a young prince named Arjuna with conflicting duties. It also focuses more on the inward desiring to find the self and, in the absence of desire, to make the right decision. The epic does make mention of other people but merely to call attention to Arjuna that his actions serve as an example to others and that he is responsible to do his part in preserving the moral character of the society. But he should not force others to his way; he should only act properly himself and set an example for others to follow. Thus, the very evident tendency toward toleration in Hinduism is mostly indicated by implication, as a person is supposed to look toward themselves and perfect their own life. Nowhere is the implication to then look at another, even after perfection has been reached. An example is to be lived, but once attaining the goal, a person should simply continue to live it. That is how he will help others to attain the same goal. Nowhere should there be direct intervention in another's life.²⁰

Caste and India's Jews

Toleration and the caste system could almost go hand in hand. Caste is defined, for the purposes of this paper, as it would have appeared to the average person living in what is now India sometime around the first millennium. By this definition, caste, as a word does not exist. What is called caste in this paper is simply a way of life that is inherited at birth, cannot be changed, and governs what the possibilities are as far as career, marriage choice, religious observances, and status in life. It is possible that the

²⁰ "The Bhagavad-gita," 3:20-26 in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 114.

unique setup of the caste system enabled so many distinct minorities to live and prosper in India until the present time. This caste system is found as early as the Vedic period with a creation hymn that mentions the division of the first man in that, “the *brahmin* was his mouth, his two arms were made the *rajanya* (warrior), his two thighs the *vaisya* (trader and agriculturist), from his feet the *sudra* (servile class) was born.”²¹ This same passage is mentioned in one of the Upanisads as well. Over time, it developed into a complex system of sub-castes governing a person’s station in life as well as his or her mode of employment, and the persons with which one could associate.

The Bhagavad-gita also codifies the ideas of caste. It assigns to each caste duties and responsibilities with the characteristics of a wise religious sage going to the *brahmin*, those of valor, heroism and ruling to the *ksatriya* (also known as the *rajanya*), those of stability and farming to the *vaisya*, and those of service to the *sudra*. Each caste has its own law to fulfill, and perfection is attained through remaining “devoted each to his own duty.” Additionally, there is an exhortation to only attempt to carry out one’s own law because, “Better is one’s own law though imperfectly carried out than the law of another carried out perfectly. One does not incur sin when one does the duty ordained by one’s own nature.” This is yet another example of the tendency of Hinduism toward the insight obtained by the individual leading to the ultimate insight and goal of unification with the Self.²²

The Laws of Manu offer another, farther reaching, definition of caste. In this book, specific tasks are assigned to each caste, revealing the supposedly essential differences between them. The *brahmin*, the *ksatriya*, and the *vaisya* all belong to what is

²¹ “To Purusa” x.90 translated by Thomas in Ibid., 19.

²² “The Bhagavad-gita,” 18:40-48 in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 160-1.

known as the “twice-born” castes and therefore have the opportunity to study religion. The *sudra* must only fulfill his duties the best he can and hope for rebirth into one of the twice-born castes in his next life. But caste is not simply limited to the four mentioned here. Within each of these castes exist many sub-castes, with more specific duties and groups. It is these sub-castes that are of primary concern in this paper.²³

The subject of caste is discussed at length in a book by G. S. Ghurye. According to Ghurye, caste has several major features. Prominent among them is the significance of the name. Often, the caste name indicates what profession its members belong to or a description of the caste as a whole. Thus, the assignment of the caste-name “*Shanwar Telis*”, meaning Saturday Oilmen, to the Bene Israel refers both to the fact that they observe the Sabbath as their rest-day and press oil to make a living. Additionally, the laws, both written and observed, governing caste behavior were well established by the end of the Vedic period. Therefore, a member of one caste would not associate personally with a member of another caste. Thus, once attaining a caste identity as *Shanwar Telis*, the Bene Israel would be expected to marry within their own caste, expected to follow their own practices of worship, and keep themselves separate from the rest of Indian society except in the realm of business.²⁴

Nathan Katz tackles the issue of Jews fitting into the caste system in his book, *Who Are the Jews of India?* In fact, he recounts the experience of one of the groups who created, not their own caste within their adopted society, but divided into separate sub-castes. The Cochin Jews divided themselves into sub-castes based on skin color and parentage. The divisions were called by those names. White Jews were the only ones

²³ “Laws of Manu” in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 172-192.

²⁴ G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969, 31-42, 114-116.

allowed to worship in the most important synagogue while the Brown Jews and Black Jews were forbidden to marry into the White Jew division and vice versa. The sub-caste structure remained in place until immigration to Israel so depleted the size of all three groups that they were forced to come to terms with each other, and in modern Cochin the sub-caste structure has completely disappeared.²⁵

Early Judaism

Even though the separation between Hindu tradition and Indian Jewish life is not always necessarily clear-cut, a look at Jewish culture with respect to certain aspects is necessary. One of the theories of the Jewish survival is that of the adaptability of the people as a culture group no matter where they end up living. This paper has already explored one of those ideas, that of how they were adopted into the caste system and then adopted the system themselves. The Jews that arrived in India fail to resemble modern Jews in many ways. Most significantly, the Cochin and Bene Israel communities had separated from the main body of Jewry before the creation of some of the major rabbinical schools and works. Even more significantly, the Bene Israel were completely cut off from their co-religionists for centuries.²⁶

Katz records the observation that “it was not so much that Jews kept *Shabbat* but that *Shabbat* kept the Jews,” and observes that in India it seems to have helped the Bene Israel to retain their identity. The source of this phrase is the remarkable tendency of Jews to survive many different environments and still identify themselves first as Jewish and only second by their adopted nationalities. The Bene Israel especially observed the

²⁵ Katz, *Who Are...*, 59-68.

²⁶ Masliyah, 2; ²⁶ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, customs, and Rituals*, New York: Pocket Books, 2000, 175-7.

Sabbath as a manner of preserving their religion, as they did not have a single Torah among them and could not even begin to read Hebrew during this time. Indeed, many modern observers had a hard time believing them to be of Jewish ancestry except for their unique observance of the Sabbath and their usage of one basic Hebrew prayer that had been passed down through countless generations. No other group in India observes the Sabbath as a holy or rest day, and Hebrew is certainly not a language common to the subcontinent.²⁷

To look at the issue of the separation of the Jewish people from those around them is to look at the religion itself. Both Hinduism and Judaism are considered ways of life by their respective followers. This means that the religion directly affects and governs everyday life. This was especially true in India before the Europeans arrived. Much like Hinduism defines a clear separation between castes; Judaism defines a clear separation between Jew and Gentile. Unlike a non-Hindu, a Gentile can convert and become a Jew. The process is somewhat lengthy, but generally allows the convert the same status as if he or she were born a Jew. The archetypical convert is found in the person of Ruth, whose mother-in-law attempted to persuade her to not become Jewish, but she continued in her desire to convert. However, there is no proselytizing requirement in Judaism as there is no belief that Jews are the only ones that will be saved. This enabled Jews to live quietly under persecution in many locations all over the world after their dispersal.

Since anyone that follows the set of promises made by Noah contained in the book of Genesis will be numbered with the “righteous of all nations,” there is a definite advantage for a Jew living in an alien environment. He or she does not have to feel that

²⁷ Katz, *Who Are...*, 96-7.

the people around him or her are going to a lost eternity, as is present in Christianity.²⁸

The specified laws given to Noah form the Noahide Laws, a basic set of principals that, according to the Talmud, governs who can be accepted into heaven. These laws include things that would have been familiar to people practicing Hinduism as well, such as prohibitions against murder, against theft, against cruelty to animals, and an exhortation to establish a system of justice.²⁹

The relations between Jews and Gentiles are also mentioned in the Torah. Not only are Gentiles friendly to Jews supposed to abide by the promises given to God by Noah, but they can enter into covenantal relationships with their Jewish neighbors as long as both parties believe in and are able to swear to the God that is acknowledged as the universal Creator. This allowed the Patriarchs of the Old Testament to make treaties with neighboring groups of people of mutual respect. This mutual respect was to exist even if one of the two covenanting parties was subordinate to the other.³⁰ Thus, there was an existing framework for the mutual arrangement that living under the Hindu Caste system imposed upon the Jews that found themselves on the Indian coast between the sixth century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. This also perhaps lends credibility to the story of the Cochin Jews that they had been given a contract to own certain land by the Raja of Cochin at some point prior to the eleventh century CE.³¹ This would have been right in

²⁸ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, customs, and Rituals*, New York: Pocket Books, 2000, 175-7; “The Book of Ruth” in any translation of The Bible gives the same story of Ruth desiring to accompany her mother-in-law Naomi into Israel against Naomi’s telling her to remain with her own people.

²⁹ Robinson, 178.

³⁰ David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract: An Essay in Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 56-8.

³¹ Katz, *Who Are...*, 13; The legend actually states the fourth century, but Katz believes that the tenth or eleventh centuries are more likely origination dates for the bronze plaques that decree the status of these Jews, and Ruby Daniel puts the date at 1000 CE.

line with the patriarchal traditions in existence before the destruction of the second temple that likely resulted in this group's flight to India.³²

Of course, these beliefs were not completely static. The Cochin Jews, in particular, retained some access with the rest of the world through trade networks set up as far back in time as the rule of King Solomon. Thus, as rabbinical thought developed beyond simply the Torah into the Talmud and beyond it reached the Jews of Cochin, although years later than most of the rest of the world. The Bene Israel remained frozen in time with simply portions of the Torah remembered and handed down from generation to generation until the arrival of European missionaries in the eighteenth century. Thus, the framework for interaction between Hinduism and Judaism was established prior to the first Jews setting foot in India. The Hindu tradition of toleration and the Jewish tradition of creating covenants with non-Jewish peoples could have functioned as a base for the further development of relations between the two groups.³³

During this time period, both assimilation and acculturation can be seen. Among the Bene Israel, assimilation is first noticed because they had lost their native Hebrew language and began to speak the local Marathi language. They had also, successfully, incorporated themselves into the Caste system by being labeled "Shanwar Telis" likely by others living in the villages they moved into because the name is derogatory. However, they had also retained the *shema*, a basic Hebrew prayer, the practice of circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath, and their longing for a return to Israel. These last four items also create a case for acculturation. For the Cochin Jews, assimilation is most visible in the creation of sub-castes based on skin color that certainly

³² Novak, 95; Katz, *Who Are...*, 12-13.

³³ Katz, 27-31.

existed prior to the next time period discussed herein. However, the Cochin, as a group, never developed a coherent caste among their fellow citizens of the Malabar region, and retained the ability to read Hebrew, practice almost all the Jewish traditions associated with early holy days and celebrations, and in general, retain their own separate identity. This provides a strong case for acculturation rather than assimilation.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid, 88, 91.

Outsiders and the Beginnings of Unification (c900 CE to c1650 CE)

India's Muslim Rulers

While origin stories and slightly fuzzy dates involve both early communities of Jews, it is certain that Jews were in India by the time of the arrival of the invading Muslim Turks, with their base in Afghanistan during the closing years of the first millennium. However, these rulers brought little change that would have affected the small, outlying Jewish populations. They came to tolerate and depend upon local Hindu rulers already in place, and thus little changed, especially in the outlying areas. Scattered records do refer to Jews during this time period. During the eighth century, a Jew brought Hindu mathematics back to the Muslim Caliphate, and in the ninth century, trade documents tell of an extensive network involving Jews in the Malabar Coast. In 1336, the South was unified under a Hindu ruler into the kingdom of Vijayanagar that ruled on the basis of tolerance and good will toward his minority subjects. The idea was to encourage his subjects to plunder the enemy of the empire rather than turn their energies towards their fellow subjects. This policy could not but help the Jews that by then were a big enough presence to cause the Raja of Cochin to refuse to fight battles on the Sabbath.³⁵

But other than scattered footnotes in history, Jews in India were largely ignored at the higher levels of government during this time. The various Muslim capitals in Delhi and Agra were unable to exercise direct control over the peripheral areas in which the Jews lived. Even though India's Muslim conquerors failed to exert much direct control over the areas around present-day Bombay and Cochin where the Jewish populations

³⁵ Murphey, *History...*, 124; Katz, *Who Are...*, 30, 37.

were primarily concentrated at this time, it is important to note that also by this period, there were Arabic, and therefore Muslim, trading centers set up in those areas. By the beginning of the ninth century, Arabic settlements had appeared near the likely already existing Jewish ones near present-day Bombay and in Malabar. The settlement in Malabar, present-day Kerala, appears to be the largest in India during the time period outside of the areas directly under Muslim control.³⁶

Beginning in the early 1500's, the Mughals invaded, consolidated their rule in 1526 under Babur and continued to expand their empire. Akbar, arguably the greatest of these rulers proved an extremely tolerant man toward all the religions in his empire, proving this by marrying a Christian, a Muslim, and two Hindus, and encouraging them to retain their own religious practices at court. He also encouraged discourse on religion in court and attempted to establish a new religion based upon all the religions spanning his empire. According to Nathan Katz, there is ample proof that Jews were also at court during this time, and that one served as councilor to Akbar's great-grandson, Dara, as heir to the throne before he was murdered by Aurangzeb, his younger brother.³⁷

Aurangzeb himself plays an interesting part in Indian history. As a Muslim ruler, his goal was to unify India and subjugate the Hindu population. To this end, he attempted to destroy most of Northern India's Hindu temples. The sources used in this paper do not expressly mention the relationship between Aurangzeb and the Jews that were in India at that time beyond the execution of Dara's Jewish mystical advisor, but certain extrapolations can be made based on what is available. The most important one is

³⁶ S.M. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, 19-21.

³⁷ Murphey, *History*..., 187-192; Nathan Katz, "Contacts Between Jewish and Indo-Tibetan Civilizations through the Ages," *Judaism*, 43, no 1 (Winter 1994), <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed November 6, 2006).

due to location. Aurangzeb, the farthest-reaching Mughal ruler, never succeeded in reaching the part of India where the Cochin Jews had established themselves. Thus, only the Bene Israel, by this time located near British Bombay and deep within the rebellious Maratha territory, would have been affected by Mughal policies. Since they did not have any synagogue during this time period, there would have been nothing to destroy, and possibly nothing to note any difference between them and those of other religions around them. It is also significant to note that the Marathi people were in constant rebellion against the Mughal empire, and, especially under Aurangzeb, the Mughals were successfully kept from reaching the coastal areas under Marathi control where the Bene Israel lived.³⁸

Philosophy, Religion, and Politics

India's early Muslim rulers often adopted a secular government for their conquests. The reason for the lack of a theocracy was because of the mixed nature of the state to begin with. Thus, at the peripheral areas of governance, the (Hindu and presumably Jewish as well) "peasant must have led much the same kind of life as he did before the coming of the Muslims."³⁹ The Muslim rulers believed that while Muslims were governed by the *Shariat*, all non-Muslims did not have to follow the uniquely Islamic code of law. Thus, Hindus and other minorities were left to govern themselves in day to day practices and observances, according to their own laws. Thus, the Hindu villages located far from the sphere of Muslim influence were left with local patterns of governance and inter-dependence in place.⁴⁰

³⁸ Katz, *Who Are...*, 120.

³⁹ Ikram, 111.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 109-111.

On the other extreme from Aurangzeb is his great-grandfather Akbar. The policies of toleration and freedom of religion laid down under Akbar are very forward-looking. Although he was a Muslim ruler, he embraced *sulahkul*, or universal tolerance and acceptance of responsibility for all peoples falling under his control, irrespective of religion. This was indicated in his marriages to two Hindu princesses, his appointment of capable administrators, irrespective of their religion or beliefs, and his patronizing of the traditional forms of Indian art and poetry. Akbar also seems to have accepted the Hindu notion that the ruler was to be both mother and father to the people. This meant that while he was an autocratic ruler, he was also to be benevolent and kind. Ikram points out that this system survived Akbar to be the basic pattern for all Mughal rulers except Aurangzeb. Thus, the patterns that would be followed at the local level in treatment of non-Muslims were established under Akbar and even Aurangzeb's violence could do little to change those patterns.⁴¹

During this period also, the philosophical influences important to this paper also remained much the same. Indian philosophy has a long tradition of establishing new traditions on the base of the old. Thus, the toleration and synthetic mindset exhibited in early Hinduism still existed in India under the Muslim rulers. Caste also persisted, perhaps given a leg up by the growing importance of the merchant traders. Nathan Katz records the observation that the caste-like separation between Jews of different skin color in Cochin was definitely alive and well by this time period. Four separate times, between 1512 and 1951, the White Jew community asked world wide rabbinical leaders to endorse the process. Each time, they received a negative response and thus ignored it. The sub-caste structure remained in place until immigration to Israel so depleted the size of all

⁴¹ Ikram, 146-151.

three groups that they were forced to come to terms with each other, and in modern Cochin the sub-caste structure has completely disappeared.⁴² This division also plays a role in Ruby Daniel's semi-autobiographical book, Ruby of Cochin, about a woman from the darker skinned group of Cochin Jews.

Daniel's story embraces the differences between the original Jews of the Malabar region and ones that settled later after the persecution of the Jews began under the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively. These new additions to the region established their own synagogues and refused to associate with those that had found a place in Malabar society over a millennium earlier. These already established Jews were marginalized by their more European and lighter-skinned counterparts, called "black Jews" and given them the name *meshuhrarim*, meaning "freed slaves," by their European co-religionists. Daniel's own family comes from the daughter of one of these so-called "White Jews" and his "Black Jew" first wife. She bore him five children in the course of a forty-year marriage which was never accepted by the rest of the White Jew community. These children were given the name *meshuhrarim* and never accepted into the community at large while his second wife's child was given legitimacy by the community.⁴³

⁴² Katz, *Who Are...*, 59-68.

⁴³ Ruby Daniel, *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995, 10-13.

Colonization, Independence, and Narrative Accounts (c1650 to c1960)

European Arrival, the British Raj, and the Baghdadi Jews

The coming of the European powers to the Indian subcontinent began with Vasco de Gama and the Portuguese in 1498. The Cochin Jews undoubtedly suffered persecution under the Portuguese administration of Cochin, but the subsequent Dutch were much more tolerant and the local Hindus also took the part of the Jews against the Portuguese. The Jews, joining the Hindus and Muslims, were ready helpers to the Dutch in throwing the Portuguese out of the Malabar region. This combination allowed the Jews to continue their trading practices without the burden of persecution and extra taxes. When the British took over the administration of the subcontinent, they increasingly instigated a policy of discrimination against Indians. This, however, did not affect India's Jews for the most part. Cochin was safe in the south as part of a nominally independent kingdom left intact under British administration that would remain so until India's declaration of independence. Bombay, by this time the location of preference for many of the Bene Israel, was solidly within a sphere of control of the British Empire, and the Bene Israel were assured of Anglo-Indian status due to their religion.⁴⁴

The third community of Jews, the Baghdadi Jews, came to India, specifically the Bombay and Calcutta areas, after suffering persecution in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking locations during the eighteenth century almost at the same time the British placed India under the protection of the Empire. Often they were offered positions in factories run by one of the first immigrants, David Sassoon, and therefore ensured profitable employment even before arrival. These Jews fit into their roles as traders and merchants that they had

⁴⁴ Murphey, *History...*, 278; Katz, *Who Are...*, 48-49.

brought with them from various places in the Middle East. They looked first to the Armenians and others already established, and second to the British, often scorning the “native” Bene Israel, also living in Bombay by this time. The British Empire offered the Baghdadis a significant role in the opium trade, and later in textiles and manufacturing.⁴⁵

The British offered a leg up to not only the Baghdadis, but also the Bene Israel. The Bene Israel, as long as they classified themselves as Jews, were not affected by the racially discriminatory policies of the British Raj. They were able to capitalize on their previous experience in local armies to gain positions in the British Army, and the status of both the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel as “Anglo-Indian” guaranteed a higher rate of pay. When the British withdrew from India in 1947, the Jews that had risen to prominence under them felt they had everything to lose and instead of chancing their fortunes, most immigrated to Israel.⁴⁶

The Baghdadi Jews had then invested a lot of their energy in the British Empire. They had scorned anything relating to assimilation, or even acculturation, into Indian society, refused to pick up any language other than English, possibly Hindustani for communicating with servants, and dropped Arabic forms of dress for European clothing. The Bene Israel, in contrast, had spent centuries living side by side with the Marathi Hindus and had picked up the language, dress, and vegetarian diets of their neighbors. In fact, the Bene Israel were reluctant to let go of their Indian heritage, and thus ensured considerable debate over how much to retain and whether or not to become more European in actions and dress. Most Bene Israel scholars, in fact, felt the community was

⁴⁵ Katz, *Who Are...*, 126-158; Masliyah, 3-5

⁴⁶ Katz, *Who Are...*, 126-158; Joan G. Roland, *Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989, 34-35.

more Indian than European, and identified increasingly with the non-Anglo populations around them, especially the Hindus, Muslims, and Parses.⁴⁷

Changes in Indian Society and Narrative Accounts

Changes in Indian society during the British Raj and the period shortly after India's Independence can be seen through the eyes of three Indian-Jewish women. These three books are very different in purpose and in intent. Carmit Delman wrote her story, *Burnt Bread and Chutney*, as the result of a personal desire to discover more about her grandmother's life and come to terms with her own heritage. Ruby Daniel committed her thoughts to paper as the result of being approached by Shirley Isenberg and Barbara Johnson, two anthropologists studying the Cochin Jews to come up with *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*. And Jael Silliman wrote her account, entitled *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, as a feminist look at the Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, in dialogue with her mother.⁴⁸ However different these books are in intent and accomplishment, they are also very similar. Each book has, at its core, the story of a group of Jews that survived within a friendly, but distinctly separate culture to eventually make the aliyah to Israel. Each book also offers a window into history, from the point of view of a particular family. While generalities cannot be made from these specific narratives, these women do show some ways that each group of India's Jews identified themselves and underwent the process of acculturation up until shortly after Independence. Daniel's and Silliman's books especially stress the interplay of cultures

⁴⁷ Roland, *Jews in...*, 37-46, 56-57;

⁴⁸ Carmit Delman, *Burnt Bread and Chutney*, New York: Ballentine Books, 2002, xiii; Daniel, xiv; Jael Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001, 3-7.

and events surrounding World War Two and the gaining of Indian and Israeli independence.

Carmit Delman's book is perhaps the one of the three least directly connected to India. Much like the group she claims heritage from, her story is one of acculturation into a host society. Born to Bene Israel parents in the United States, Delman spent a portion of her life in Israel, and through her grandmother's journal, recounts what life had been like for a the Bene Israel woman under the British rule in Bombay. Delman's story is also tainted by the color of her skin, brown, as opposed to most American Jews of European descent. Her parents had married across racial lines, an Indian Jew marrying a European Jew, and thus ensued a life of confusion for Delman and her siblings. Nana-bai, as Delman refers to her grandmother, was a single school-teacher of the age of twenty-five when she was married off as a second wife to her younger sister's husband. Because of this, there was a divide in the family, between the first family, and the second family.⁴⁹

This practice of marrying a second wife was formally banned in Jewish tradition wherever Jews were not so isolated from their co-religionists, but it does illustrate a unique experience of the Bene Israel. The Bene Israel did not likely pick up this custom from their Hindu neighbors, but retained it as a part of the patriarchal Hebrew tradition, adding on certain Indian elements making it indicative of long-term acculturation. This experience is further illustrated as she Delman brings up the effect of bigamy on the present-day family. One side holds it over the head of the other that they are descended from the beautiful wife while the other is descended from the darker one. One side is proud to claim beautiful, prized Rebecca as their matriarch, while the other is equally

⁴⁹ Delman, 85-92.

proud to have despised and beaten Nana-bai. It created divisions in the family that showed up at weddings, gatherings, and social events when the two sides would get together and inevitably make reference to the characteristics of either side. Imbedded within this story are the Indian traditions of prizing beauty and light skin over darker skin, of a son-in-law doing his duty for his suddenly impoverished parents, and of inherent inequality between the first wife's descendants and the second wife's children.

Delman describes the differences and similarities between her Russian and Indian foremothers, comparing the stories that they passed down to their descendents. Great-great-great-great-grandmother Anna passed down a story of escape from Cossack soldiers by the fortune of a spider web spun over the mouth of a cave she and her children had hidden in. Auntie Eliza solemnly told of a saffron-colored dog that was foolishly killed because it was assumed that it had killed a baby, when it had really been protecting him from a venomous snake while the occupants of the house were all outdoors and the baby boy slept. Delman contrasts these two women, one whose story tells of divine providence and the other of foolishness, one very proper and formal, the other outlandish, and yet manages to find similarities in her heritage. These similarities echo the traditions of Jewishness the world over, and speak strongly for acculturation as they come from the same ancient tradition in two separated communities. The two women both function as matriarchs in their respective families, expecting their stories to be passed down to future generations and remaining unquestionably accepted as truth.⁵⁰

Ruby Daniel's book is much different. It chronicles the story of a family from Cochin that belonged to the sub-caste of darker skinned Jews. She tells of her childhood, the superstitious beliefs of the people as well as their determination to make a life out of

⁵⁰ Delman, 25-33.

what they had been given. She also tells of the sharp caste-like divisions between the White Jews and the others in the community of a darker skin tone, and the result of a policy like that on the decision of the younger community members to marry or remain single. Some, like Daniel herself, choose to remain single.

Daniel discusses cross-cultural traits that were adopted by the Jews of Cochin from their mostly Hindu neighbors. She talks rather frankly about the origins of the sub-castes of Jews in Cochin, at least according to tradition. When the original Jewish people showed up, they gained a higher place in society, relative to the local population. This meant that local low-caste women ended up working for them, and so the children born of these women and Jewish men were given a lower place and not allowed the same privileges as the true White Jews. They were not allowed access to the main Paradesi Synagogue and intermarriage was strictly forbidden. In this way, the relationship between the Black and the White Jews was much like that of the caste relationships between other Indians.⁵¹

Other cultural references come in Daniel's childhood memories. She remembers being called the "daughter-in-law" of her family because she was always worried about there not being enough food and so would serve herself last. She explains this reference by saying that the "daughter-in-law is the one who always comes last" in India. She also attributes the community's superstitious nature to living among Hindus for hundreds of years. She describes a community that actively believes in ghosts and where ancestors regularly intervene on behalf of their living descendents or reveal future events such as deaths. Daniel attributes this to the Hindus who "believe in reincarnation, and ghosts, and spirits." She also briefly mentions living next door to a Muslim family, and, despite

⁵¹ Daniel, 10-11.

the thin walls, neither family considered the religious rituals of the other disturbing in any sense. Oddly enough, the synagogue that Daniel's family attended was located right next door to a Hindu temple and the same religious acceptance and level of toleration is observed between them and their Muslim next door neighbors. Yet another anecdote involves Daniel's sister. During World War II, when supplies were scarce, she offered to buy a pencil from a classmate if the classmate could get her one. The classmate's father, described as a "high class Hindu," refused to take money for it, because of all the good deeds Daniel's father had done in his lifetime.⁵²

Daniel also devotes a significant portion of her book to her experiences working in the Indian Civil Service before independence. Because of the quota system, only one percent of the civil service jobs were available for "Anglo-Aryans" as Jews were often classified. The requirement to receive a pension was to enter by the age of twenty-four, and Daniel managed to get in, first as a teacher, then as a clerk, and eventually involved in the army during World War II. She recounts that it was low-paying, but that men and women both received equal wages and that advancement was based on seniority. Then, at the age of thirty, Daniel joined the Woman's Royal Indian Navy where she would work for the duration of the war. There, she was treated fairly by both her male and female superior officers as both a Jew and a woman.

Jael Silliman's book, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, brings to life the changing meaning of Judaism for Baghdadi Jews from Calcutta. Her book concentrates on her own life as well as those of her three immediate foremothers as they experienced life in the Baghdadi community in Calcutta and elsewhere. She describes herself as first Indian, then Jewish, then as a current American citizen, which is a contrast to Daniel's vision of

⁵² Daniel, 30, 31, 36, 79, 134.

herself as both Jewish and Indian at the same time. Her story is deeply rooted in the history of the Baghdadi Jews. This group of Jews followed the British to India seeking economic opportunity and freedom from persecution that had happened in their native Middle Eastern home. India, and especially Bombay and Calcutta, offered a home for gifted traders, and the Baghdadi Jews were no exception with the trading network they had built up of relatives and business relationships all over the world. Silliman refers to this network as the Calcutta Jewish community. She states in her introduction that the community looked to Baghdad for religious support, Calcutta and Bombay for economic strength, and many other cities around the Asian and Mediterranean world for trade. Her book takes place against the backdrop of British rule and Indian Independence and the fortune and then fear that these events brought the community.⁵³

Silliman contrasts the lives of her great-grandmother Farah and grandmother Mary. Farah grew up in Baghdad as the daughter of a merchant and was sent to Calcutta at the age of fifteen to be the wife of a middle-class Jewish merchant. As such, she never received much formal education, but managed to provide for her family when her husband no longer could. Silliman states that her life is a prime example of how the Baghdadi Jews attempted to create their own identity through adhering to their religion and refusing to become Indian or a part of the caste-system. However, there is a hint that they failed in this desire. There is a marked stress on the importance of the richest Jewish families in Calcutta that they would not marry beneath them, nor accept socially their middle or lower class co-religionists. There is a sharp sense of separation in both women's lives. As a child, Mary, attended Jewish schools, learned English, and was schooled in how to be a Victorian woman. The family became more Anglican over time,

⁵³ Silliman, 12-20.

as they struggled to separate their identity from the other groups around them and gain the acceptance of the British.⁵⁴

Silliman tells of the lack of Indian decoration and influences in her grandmother's home. The house was furnished with copies of expensive European furniture and her grandmother enjoyed watching American movies when she could afford them. Her great-grandmother may have spoken Arabic most of the time and Hindi on occasion to the servants, but her grandmother preferred to use English for most forms of communication. About the only Indian influence allowed into Mary's home was the cooking. Her family enjoyed Indian spices and often their cook would alter a middle-eastern recipe to include Indian spices. In fact, Silliman states, this was typical of this generation of Baghdadi Jews. These people were not interested in forming attachments to the country that had welcomed them in. Instead they wanted to form attachments to Western culture, where they saw their economic future. And yet, in a way, the caste system of society in India allowed them the freedom needed to stick together, remain separate, and retain their own identity. Even after the civil disobedience movement began to take off in Calcutta in the 1930s, Mary and other Baghdadi Jews saw no need to participate. They saw themselves as loyal supporters of the British government, as the British were the best hope for the economic success of the community. They were glad to be able to clearly define the line between themselves and "the others."⁵⁵

The Meaning of Independence

Thus the experience of India's Jews was not uniform after independence was gained in 1947. A Jewish man, Major General J.F.F. Jacob, served as the general

⁵⁴ Silliman, 58-60.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 58-76.

accepting the surrender of Pakistani troops in East Bengal after the Bangladesh War in 1971, adding to the history of military service that Jews had long since began on the subcontinent. Kerala, in particular, offered the Jews more than simply a chance in Independent India, as the state did not have a primary religious group, but was divided between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others about equally and had been for several centuries. Kerala, as mentioned earlier, was the home to one of the largest settlement of Arabic Muslims outside of the areas directly under Muslim governmental authority in early India. This put the Jews in Cochin, the largest single community in India, in the unique position of living in a state that had a long history of diversity and had proved to value diversity and differences.⁵⁶

Here belongs the story of a group of Bene Israel that gathered in 1930 in Bombay with the desire to help the cause of Indian Independence. This group was small, short-lived, and reached national news only once, but it did exist. Perhaps the greatest deterrent to the active participation of Jews, especially the Bene Israel, in the Indian Independence movement came from their dependency on the British Civil Service for employment. If they actively joined the independence movement, their economic future would be adversely affected. Yet another deterrent came from Mohandas Gandhi when he suggested that the Jewish community in India should remain in the sidelines in the Independence struggle, “lest it be crushed between the giant conflicting forces of British imperialism, Congress nationalism, and Muslim League separatism.” The most interesting part of this story, however, is the tendency toward assimilation that is quite noticeable, especially in the face of earlier acculturation. After remaining a people apart,

⁵⁶ Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997, 53, 68-9

the Independence movement began to draw Indian Jews to it, helping them to realize the Indian portion of their heritage.⁵⁷

Here also belongs portions of both Daniel's and Silliman's narratives. Both of their stories tell of the events surrounding the Jews during the Independence movement, as well as the exodus of India's Jews returning to Israel. Daniel discusses this pull of Zionism to herself and her fellow Indian Jews. As mentioned before, many of India's Jews left for Israel when independence was won for both countries in the late 1940s. Daniel was no exception. She joined the Zionist movement in Cochin after the war and tells of how their group prayed for the state of Israel during the war that secured its independence and how they sang to memorialize Gandhi by adding his name to memorial songs instead of the Jewish person that had been there. For Daniel, and many others in her community, it was not persecution and the hope for freedom that a homeland would offer them, it was the collective memory of Israel as a holy place that was sacred to them by their religion and so it was their homeland. The Cochin Jews ended up emigrating in two waves, with most of the White Jewish population waiting until the 1970s to leave. Daniel estimates that there are only about thirty Jews in Cochin today. This remaining pull of Zionism is strongly indicative of acculturation rather than assimilation.⁵⁸

In many ways, the closing chapters of Ruby Daniel's story echo the words of Yuval Abraham mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Her story, once she reached Israel, is one of discrimination. She was placed in a kibbutz on her own request, but found the European Jews to be loud and very discriminatory. She recounts having to bathe in a communal bath house when most Cochin Jewish girls hadn't even showed their

⁵⁷ Roland, 107-108.

⁵⁸ Daniel, 89-101, 141.

own mothers their bodies since reaching puberty. Her mother, joining her at the kibbutz, was often referred to as “an old woman from the Orient,” was discontented and often desired to return to her “castle” back in Cochin. Daniel was also passed up for a position as cook for the kibbutz twice because of discrimination, but eventually found her place she grew older.

Like Ruby Daniel’s story, Silliman includes portions that speak to the diversity of the population surrounding the Jews. She is telling her mother’s story when she speaks of celebrating Yom Kipper during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja and recounts her mother marveling that God could hear the Jews praying silently, the Hindus entreating with drums and cymbals, the Christians with spoken prayers and church bells, and the Muslim muezzin all at once and all so insistently. It speaks to the larger world that Flower found herself in, and that she couldn’t deny like her mother Mary had done before her. Flower came of age during the civil disobedience movement, the Muslim-Hindu riots, and Indian Independence. Flower attended the Jewish Girl’s school across the street from a Gujarati school and told one story to her daughter that is indicative of the separation between ethnicities during that time period. While the two different groups of children would see each other walking to and from school each day, there was no desire to even get to know them, and neither group ever spoke to the other. There was an “acceptance of differences but no desire to know about... the differences that separated them” from each other.⁵⁹

These differences are acutely shown in a story involving the Muslim-Hindu riots that Flower told of the time during the war. Two Jewish men, her brother and a member of the British army, were driving through the riot-torn city to fetch their laundry in an

⁵⁹ Silliman, 106.

army jeep. Along the way they saw a pregnant women being attacked by a mob and stopped to prevent it. The mob immediately stopped and warned the men that since they were definitely not Hindu, Muslim, or British, they should just stay out of it altogether or they would have to join the unfortunate woman if they insisted on taking sides. Silliman takes this story as an example of how the Jews not only perceived themselves as distant from the other groups in Calcutta, but were perceived that way by others as well through their distancing actions over the past century and a half.⁶⁰

Present in Flower's story are elements of Ruby Daniel's and Carmit Delman's narratives. These elements signify a woman that has learned to identify with both her Indian roots and her Jewish faith in a manner such that they did not contradict each other. Attending college, she often attended religious celebrations and festivals of the other faiths represented at the school, and learned to appreciate Indian culture and food. She also was exposed directly to the Hindu-Muslim riots occurring after independence was announced and she was close by when Gandhi was assassinated. This cemented in her the desire to remain Indian once she had found that identity. In doing so, she was leaving behind years of precedence in her family of retaining middle-eastern roots and looking to Britain for the future. Flower's story is illustrative of a generation of Indian Jewish people that left behind acculturation in favor of becoming an active part in her adopted country.⁶¹

Also present in the family's story is the story of the aliyah to Israel. Mary was instrumental in helping raise funds for poor girls to make the journey, thereby diminishing the community she had loved as a child and middle-aged woman. Her

⁶⁰ Silliman, 117.

⁶¹ Ibid, 120-128.

daughter, Flower, Silliman's mother, also moved to Israel in 1978 and Mary joined her and died in Israel. Flower recounted details of meeting Polish Jewish refugees in 1941 when they reached Calcutta on their way to Israel. This would also prove to be a sad chapter in the life of the Calcutta Jewish community. Much like the Cochin and the Bene Israel, many Calcutta Jews choose to immigrate to Israel following Independence for both India and Israel. Others choose to travel to Australia or America to seek new lives, and ultimately, Silliman describes the situation in the 1960s as one where there were few Jews left in Calcutta, and those that remained had lost the stubborn streak required to maintain their separation from the general Hindu society. She describes a situation of assimilation, of intermarriage, and of an uncertain future, this being a marked contrast to the experiences, that up until the Independence movement, is considered one of acculturation and not assimilation.⁶²

⁶² Ibid, 140-141.

Conclusions

While the situation for India's Jews shortly after independence movement may have been one of assimilation and uncertainty, the experiences leading up to Independence argue strongly in favor of acculturation. This paper has tried to illustrate two of the possible reasons why India accepted her Jews and gave them, not a homeland, but a country, not demanding assimilation, but allowing acculturation. The first is to be found in the deep philosophical traditions of the sub-continent that remained constant throughout history, namely those surrounding the idea of toleration. The second is found in the historical narrative of the sub-continent and the great measure of diversity offered to each successive ruler.

The different time periods in Indian history have been examined with the goal of explaining both the continuity of philosophical thought and the treatment of the Jews by those living side-by-side with them in the coastal villages. This has resulted in a story of acculturation, with the retention of an essential Jewish identity. Even though the overall conclusion is one of acculturation, this term is not one that implies an absolute. Acculturation is a variable term, covering a wide spectrum of cultural behaviors. It also exists in continuum with assimilation. On one end of the spectrum is assimilation and the subsequent loss of fundamental cultural identity. This may mean the identification of a group with their new location and country before their own cultural or ethnic background. But acculturation is marked mainly by the opposite effect. Acculturation is the idea that a group can be identified first by their cultural or ethnic identity and second by their location. Yet, on the other end of the acculturation spectrum is the idea that location is much less important than cultural or religious identity. This is still acculturation to the

extent that part of the host culture is adopted for ease of communication or advancement in society, but it is also easily dropped when moved to a new context. It never becomes a part of the group identity. For the Jews in India, each group managed to fit this definition to one extent or another.

In this paper, at one end of the spectrum is the Bene Israel. This group retained just enough of their religion to view themselves essentially first as Jews and only second as Indians. Their oral history story of arrival probably helps to explain why they did not retain more of their religious identity as they supposedly lost literally everything in the shipwreck that began the community. Also, unlike the Cochin Jews to the south, the Bene Israel had little to no contact with fellow co-religionists before the Europeans arrived on the subcontinent. Their main identifying feature was keeping the Sabbath as a rest day, and celebrating the Passover. They did, however, adopt Indian dress, Hindu marriage customs, and the local Marathi language, putting them at one end of the spectrum of acculturation.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Baghdadi Jews. This was a group determined to keep themselves completely separated from their fellow Indians. To this end, they retained their middle-eastern forms of dress until they adopted Western styles, and continued to look toward their religious leaders in Baghdad for both religion and culture. The extreme form of acculturation is marked by the use of Arabic and English as languages, with the only use of an Indian language, Hindustani, being communication with servants. Flower's description of walking to school with a group of Gujarati school children illustrates this point. The Baghdadi Jews wanted little to do with the other

Indians, and when given the opportunity, many moved away from India to Israel and Great Britain.

The Cochin Jews are perhaps the best example of acculturation as seen among the Indian Jews. They remained culturally tied to Judaism, established synagogues, and remained socially separate from their fellow Indians. They were able to live side-by-side with their fellow Indians, as one of their most important synagogues was located next door to the Raja's personal Hindu temple. Since they retained their ties with the rest of the Jewish world, there was a constant trickle of information and trade going in both directions. Yet, they adopted the sub-caste system to create division within themselves and adopted Indian dress and superstition. Thus, though the Indian Jews before the advent of the Independence movement can largely be classified as a people having experienced acculturation, there are variances. Yet perhaps the strongest argument for acculturation is the eventual aliyah to Israel made by a majority of the Indian Jewish population in the middle of the twentieth century.

Even though this aliyah is a strong indicator of acculturation, in an ironic twist, it is after the independence movement that a shift from acculturation to assimilation occurs. This shift could be explained in part through the stories of people like Ruby Daniel and Silliman's mother, Flower. Both of these women found themselves in an India that actively engaged them and required them to think of their Indian roots as well as their Jewish ones. In Flower's case, this led her, and then more so her daughter, to identify herself increasingly as Indian first and Jewish second. Another answer can be found in the almost simultaneous independence movement in Israel. There is a kind of solidarity between Indian Jews and the Zionists in Israel, reflected in the Indian Zionist movements

seen in both Daniel's and Silliman's books. But Indian Zionism was tempered by the non-violent resistance movement, as an example is seen in the altered songs sung by Zionist societies to honor Gandhi. A third answer can be found in the experiences directly after Israeli independence. As stated before, many of India's Jews chose to join their co-religionists in Israel. Yuval Abraham is an aberration in his return to India and the Indian Jewish population was left literally handicapped. Many towns and even cities, such as Cochin, no longer had the full compliment of adult males necessary for proper synagogue ceremonies, and had to rely upon travelers and visiting scholars to effectively practice their religion.

Thus, in the larger picture, perhaps India still remains friendly to the process of acculturation. Many of the problems faced by the Jewish communities after independence are due to the depleted size of the community. India still today, carries that tradition of toleration and diversity present in her earlier history. According to Shashi Tharoor and 1997 estimates, India is roughly 74% Hindu, 12% Muslim, 7% "tribal," 2% Christian, 2% Sikh, 1% Jain and Buddhist with the remainder accounting for Jews, Parsis, and others. To complicated matters, India's supposed "majority" Hindu group is not united by much else. They speak many different languages, seventeen officially recognized, and belong to countless castes and sub-castes. Thus, no Indian truly belongs to a majority. Furthermore, India lacks three uniting impulses that formed the European nations, those of religion, language, and ethnicity. Thus India itself is built on the principal of being both Indian and an individual at the same time.⁶³

Tharoor also mentions the philosophy behind today's secular India. He states that Hinduism is "almost the ideal faith for the twenty-first century: a faith without

⁶³ Tharoor, 113-127.

apostasy... (that) responds ideally to the incertitudes of a post-modern world”⁶⁴ and draws the connection between this and even those Hindus that have left their religion behind. His sketch of Nehru, an admitted and committed atheist, brings out the idea that the core values and symbols of Hinduism have been adopted by the country and its people at large, no matter their religion. This is especially visible in Nehru’s request to be cremated and have part of his ashes buried in the Ganga River, traditionally the most sacred river to Hinduism. His request, mentioned in his will, was because he saw the Ganga, not as a religious symbol, but as a symbol of India’s past becoming its future. This is indicative of the larger ideas of toleration, or pluralism as it is called today, that have transcended the realm of religion and entered the world of common interaction and governmental practice.⁶⁵ This is a climate that is very welcoming to any minority that might happen to reside there, even today. This is aptly illustrated by Roger Kamenetz in his book *The Jew in the Lotus* that discusses yet another addition to India’s tradition of diversity.

Kamenetz’s book describes the exile of the Dali Lama and the Tibetan Buddhists and their subsequent sheltering in the Indian city of Dharamsala. When China invaded Tibet and exerted their cultural supremacy, the Dali Lama and his followers fled to India and re-established the center of their way of life in a small village in Northern India. Here, they have re-established their traditional monistic way of life, and see themselves as facing a long sojourn within an essentially foreign nation. They have found a welcome in India, perhaps due to the same reasons that the original Jews found a welcome in the Konkin coast and in Cochin, the rich tradition of toleration and expectation that each

⁶⁴ Tharoor, 129.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 133-134.

group of people has their own traditions. Like the Indian Jews view Israel as their homeland, the Dali Lama and his followers see Tibet as their homeland and envision a return to it sometime in the future. Perhaps what India offers to them is what it offered to the Jews, a country, but never a homeland. India still today offers the same opportunities for acculturation and preservation of culture as it did centuries ago, and the Tibetan Buddhists are taking advantage of that opportunity to preserve their own society until the day they have a homeland again.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994, 1-3.

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