



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

1

**A Multidimensional Identity: Tracing the Journey of Bene Israel Jews in a Foreign
Homeland in Esther David's *The Walled City***

Smita Singh

Abstract:

Jewish Diasporas have been part of several nations where they have established their homes for ages and have assimilated into the local culture. India remains the only place where there have been absolutely no traces of anti-Semitism and where the Jewish communities have made peaceful dwellings adopting the local culture and accepting India as their homeland. India is home to three major distinct Jewish communities classified according to the places of their origin, from where they came to India. Each community, apart from following the basic tenants of Judaism, are very distinct from each other. This paper focuses on the changing identity of the Bene Israel community which is concentrated in Maharashtra. It looks into their changing identity and the journey they have traversed so far living in a foreign homeland which they have now adopted as their home. The paper studies the life of the Bene Israel Jews in the context of writer Esther David's book *The Walled City* which is a fictional account of a Bene Israel family living in Ahmedabad and how they adjust to their strange identity in an alien atmosphere.

Key Words: Identity, Reference Groups, Religion, Ethnicity, Hebrewization.

The concept of identity for Jewish diasporas living in various parts of the world has always been complex and multidimensional. The question remains how the Jews living in diasporic settings view their Jewishness and their nationality in the nations which have been home to them for thousands of years. It also takes into consideration how the Jews living as minority communities in different nations view themselves with regard to the others. India has been home to at least three prominent Jewish communities classified on the basis of the places from where they came and settled in India. The first is the Bene Israel Jews, who are numerically the largest group of Jews residing in India ever since probably 175 B. C. E., according to records available in Haem Samuel Kehimkar's book *The History of Bene Israel in India*. The other two major Jewish communities are the Cochini Jews and the Baghdadi



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

2

Jews. The Cochini Jews are concentrated on the Southern tip of India whereas the Baghdadi Jews who were the last to come to India are concentrated in Kolkata and Mumbai.

This paper will trace the multidimensional changing identity of the Bene Israel Jewswith reference to Esther David's fictional account of this miniscule minority in her novel *The Walled City*. Esther David is an Indian Jewish writer who had beautifully traced the lives of Bene Israel community to which she belongs in her novels. *The Walled City* was David's first novel in which she also tries to figure out her own Jewishness in an Indian cultural backdrop.

Esther David writes of a Bene Israel family living in Ahmedabad who though live together with their Hindu and Muslim neighbors, yet maintain their distinct identity. The narrator as a little girl tries hard to understand the difference between her family and the others. She is extremely fond of her best friend Subhadra who is a Hindu but she cannot understand the differences that the two neighbors have and why the Jews are not accepted as their own. She is not allowed to eat in her friend's kitchen as a lamp burns for the family deity. Her meat-eating community is impure to her neighbours. Though there is no animosity, there is no acceptance either. "Between us there is a wall of dead animals and birds....I am ridden with guilt for the ways of my ancestors. I wish I had been born to Subhadra's mother, I would have then been accepted," (David, 21).

The novel chronicles the lives of three generations of a Jewish family and how they manage to survive with a distinct identity in the shifting moods of Ahmedabad. It traces the life of a young narrator and how she grows up in an alien atmosphere trying to reconcile her Jewishness with the people around her. It also aims to study how this minority community over periods of transformations came to self-realization and established themselves as Jews living in India, keeping their distinct identity intact. Over a period of time, social and historical agencies have interacted with each other to create an identity for the Bene Israel Jews which marks them as completely Indian and at the same time completely Jewish. "Creating this identity was a reciprocal process involving their neighbours as well as themselves" (Katz, 3).



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

3

The first ever mention of the Bene Israel Jews in written records dates back to 1199-1200 by Maimonides. In a letter he mentions a Jewish community living in India who have nothing much of their religion except of the fact that they observe the Sabbath and circumcise their male child on the eighth day, two most important customs followed by the rest of the Jews worldwide.

The other important document which mentions the Bene Israel can be traced to 1738 in the form of a letter by a Danish missionary Rev. J. A. Sartorius who reported a Jewish group living in Western India. However, it is not ascertained that the reference was to the Bene Israel Jews. Sartorius also mentioned that the community has no religious books neither did they know the Hebrew language. The only identifier he suggests was their recitation of the Shema (a prayer which Jews recite expressing their faith in their monotheistic religion) and that they practice circumcision of the male child on the eighth day. “They practice circumcision as a part of their religion. They wear turbans and a long dress reaching to their feet, and long trousers, just as the Mohammedans do. They do not intermarry with other Indians, but keep to their own people” (Katz, 92).

As legend has it, the Bene Israel came to India in around 175 B.C. E. and were shipwrecked on the Konkan coast. Only seven men and seven women were said to have survived this disaster. “...it was a shipwreck off the coast of Navagaon in District Raigadh (about 20 miles south of Mumbai island) in Maharashtra in 175 BCE that brought them to India. They trace their descent from the fourteen survivors of that alleged shipwreck, seven men and seven women,” (Aafreedi, 2). The dead bodies from the shipwreck which were washed ashore were buried in a cemetery here where two mounds stand to this day. The male members were buried in the north portion of the graveyard and the female members towards the south. The Bene Israel still visit this place treating it as a pilgrimage to seek the blessings of their ancestors.

The name Bene Israel when translated simply means children of Israel but as there are no suitable documentary evidence about the origin of the community in India, it is not clear when and how this name was adopted. The community claims its ancestry to the ten lost tribes of Israel as their ancestors reportedly left Israel during the Greek rule in order to escape



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

4

religious persecution. Kehimkar “claimed that the community took the name from the Koran (Banu Israel of the Hijaz) so that its members would not suffer at the hands of the Muslims as they might have had they been known as Jews, or *Yahudis*” (Roland 332). However, there is another assumption by Benjamin J. Israel, another prominent writer of the community, suggests, “the Bene Israel might have originated in a country dominated by Islam or that they took their name in India while under Muslim rule” (Roland 332).

Nathan Katz writes in his book *Who are the Jews of India?* about a research which was recently conducted by two researchers at the University of London’s Center for Genetic Anthropology which links the ancestry of the Bene Israel Jews to Yemenite Jews. Katz writes, “the same study reveals genetic kinship among Jews from Yemen, Lembatribespeople of Southern Africa, and the Bene Israel” (2). Katz further adds to this observation, “What for years had been assumed to be merely a myth, this DNA research suggests, has a scientific basis. If the Bene Israel are related to Yemenite Jews, then their story of a shipwreck is credible. The study gave oral history itself unanticipated confirmation” (2).

Some historical claims also suggest that the ancestors of the Bene Israel might have come to India during the reign of King Solomon somewhere around the tenth century B. C. which could be long before Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern kingdoms separating the ten tribes from the rest of the two. Scholars suggest that they might have come from Yemen somewhere in the first century A.D. hence linking their ancestry to the Yemenite Jews. Claims also suggest that they might have come to India around 70 A. D. when the second temple was destroyed. Possibilities are there that there might have been more than one migration. “B.J. Israel...seemed to favour a theory that the Bene Israel came to India in the fifth or sixth century A.D. from either southern Arabia or Persia,” (Roland 319).

Speaking about the formation of Bene Israel identity Katz further writes:

They clung to highly attenuated, vestigial Judaic observances and, through a series of serendipitous encounters with other Jews, Christian missionaries, British colonists, and Indian nationalists, were transformed from an anonymous, oil-pressing caste of the Konkan coast into modern, urbane Jews.



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

5

Their transformation is so unlikely that one is tempted to see therein divine, rather than human, agency. (Katz,91)

There are several interactions which the Bene Israel Jews had with different reference groups while surviving in India with a distinct identity. The Bene Israel remained a group lost in oblivion soon after they landed on the Indian coast in Konkan. One important aspect that has given them a distinct identity is their following of the Jewish dietary law Kashruth. Though the modern Jewish families have abandoned the practice due to the problems in following such rigid customs, they still try and keep it as far as possible. Like eating kosher meat or refusing to eat fish which has no fins or scales. “He [Uncle Manachem] winks and says it is not permissible to mix milk and meat.... His son Samuel explains to us the rules of traditional cookin... ‘In our house we do not marinate meat in curd. We do not cook the lamb in its mother’s milk. In a way we obey the law, or at least try to’” (David, 13). Sabbath is also observed at the Bene Israel homes though most families now are unable to adhere to the full requirements of the law as Saturday is a working day for most of them.

Uncle Menachem is not listening to me, his attention is focused on Granny lighting the Shabbat candles. A white silk tablecloth embroidered with the word shalom is kept aside for Shabbat and the kaddish prayers. We always look forward to the days when we cover our heads with handkerchiefs and stand, pushing against the table, while Uncle Menachem says the prayers and lifts the crocheted cloth to bless the flaked rice, washed well and mixed with rose petals, raisins and sugar. (David 29)

In changing times and as the Bene Israel shifted to bigger cities adopting various professions it was difficult for them to observe the Sabbath. First the synagogue services were shifted to enable them to keep up with their busy schedules. Then in every home it became difficult for people to recite the Hebrew prayers from the scriptures as the younger generations were hardly acquainted with the ancient language. Esther David’s narrator echoes the same sentiments as she narrates how the younger generation was either unaware or ignorant towards the ancient rituals,



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

6

There are dates to remind us of the desert, bananas and apples, unsalted omelettes and sweet purismade of wheat flour and jaggery, deep fried in pure ghee. The jar is full of wine made from black currants soaked the night before, then boiled, cooled and crushed with Granny's own hands. The bread, freshly baked in the clay oven, is on the table and the salt is in a small blue plate. With each Hebrew sentence we pick up the dates and the apples, just the way Uncle does, one after the other. The words mean nothing to us. (29-30)

The Bene Israel would have remained completely isolated from the rest of Jewry had it not been their accidental discovery by the Cochin Jews who identified them through the vestigial Jewish customs that the Bene Israel still followed like observing the Sabbath, following the kashruth and saying the Shema Israel.

They completely assimilated into the Indian culture adopting the dressing style and even the language of their neighbours. The local Marathi language became their mother tongue as they forgot their ancestral Hebrew language. Gradually they spread out to various villages along the Konkan coast adopting the occupation of oil pressing and came to be known as ShanwarTeli.

The survivors [of the shipwreck at the Konkan coast] were offered hospitality by the local Hindus, and the Bene Israel took up the occupation of oil pressing, coming over the years to be known as ShanwarTeli, Saturday Oilmen, because they refrained from work on the Jewish sabbath. Many became skilled carpenters. In time, they adopted village surnames, with the suffix- *kar*, indicating the Konkan village in which they were settled. They also adopted local styles of dress and the language of the region, Marathi, for all secular and social purposes. (Weil 13)

The narrator of David's novel speaks of the family name the Bene Israel had acquired after they had landed in India. She is questioned about the name Dandekar by her friend Subhadra when she acknowledges that how her ancestors had taken the village names as family names. The Indian part of their identity was symbolized by the adoption of the names



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

of the villages which gave them shelter but after the British period, the Bene Israel gradually reverted to their Jewish names though they still have their village names but most of the youngsters started keeping their Biblical names as their surnames rather than the village name which had earlier given them an identity:

It says Dandekar. She asks me the meaning of the name. I hesitate; it is my family name. Quickly I tell her that we do not use it. It hangs somewhere in the inner world of my memory, with the tales of ancestors shipwrecked on the Konkan coast, reciting Hebrew prayers silently and becoming one with the people there, wearing Indian clothes, speaking the local language and taking a new name, the name of the surrogate village that had adopted them. (David 22)

The Bene Israel adapted to the local customs, dressing style and practices. Given their isolation for so many years, they became more and more Indianized. Even their names became completely Indian as they substituted their Hebrew names for Indian sounding names. "First names were Indianized: Samuel became Samaji; Ezekiel, Hassaji; Isaac, Issaji" (Roland 344). Esther David's protagonist describes a typical Bene Israel family by referring to their family portrait saying, "Black hats, fez caps, turbans, long beards and tight black suits dominate the family photograph" (9). She further adds describing the women of the family, "The girls are in long flowing dresses with large bows in their hair and chains of beads around their necks, and the women in nine-yard saris secured between the legs. They wear nose-rings and heavy anklets, and under the frilled sleeves of their blouses their armlets gleam" (9-10).

Speaking about the essential Bene Israel identity, they were simple, uneducated, Marathi-speaking villagers till at least the eighteenth century settled in villages along the Konkan coast whose traditional occupation was oil-pressing. Some of them were also engaged in local agriculture, peddling and carpentry. They were ordinary villagers who lived just like their Hindu and Muslim neighbours. "The Bene Israel were distinguishable from their neighbours only because of certain Bene Israel specifically Jewish observances" (Isenberg 85).



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

8

Exploring the identity of the Jews in the Indian context, caste and ethnic pluralism has to be taken into consideration. Scholars are of the view that in studying any group of India, caste cannot be overlooked. As far as the majority Hindus were considered, they are born into a caste where “Ideas of purity and pollution are extremely important concepts in the caste system...,” (Roland 198). However, as the Bene Israel were a non-Hindu minority, caste was not a matter of consideration but because of their profession as oil-pressers, they were designated to a relatively lower level in the caste hierarchy equating them with other *telis*. Writing about this caste hierarchy Schifra Strizower says:

...a member of the Bene Israel community...told me, ‘We Bene Israel get on well with the Hindus. Hindus are gentle people and kind,... Yet twenty years ago the Hindus in the Konkan still thought that if Bene Israel touched the utensils which Hindus used for food the utensils became polluted. The Hindus thought of us as Teli caste, and oil pressing is very humble work.’ (Strizower 22-23)

Though *telis* was not a caste but it was a caste-like designation which was given to them placing them considerably at a very low position in the social ladder since farming and oil pressing were not considered as very prestigious occupations at that point of time.

The occupation of oil-presser and the concept of pollution that determined the relations between the Bene Israel and Hindus made it difficult for the Bene Israel as a group, despite their adoption of higher caste practices, to raise their status in the caste hierarchy in the Konkan. (Roland 225)

To increase their status in the caste hierarchy, the Bene Israel tried to imitate the practices of the higher castes of the majority community. They refrained from eating beef expressing solidarity with their high-caste Hindu neighbours. They also did not support widow remarriage and often Bene Israel women offered their allegiance to several Hindu deities specially when they wanted some wish to be fulfilled.

Apart from the Hindu caste system which was followed and accepted in the Konkan, the Bene Israel were divided amongst themselves, distinguishing between the Kala and Gora



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

Jews. The colour based distinction had nothing to do with the skin pigmentation but symbolized the concept of purity. “The influence of the Hindu caste system divided the Bene Israel into two caste-like groups, which bore no relations to the colour of their skin: ‘Gora Israel’ claimed descent from the original settlers in the Konkan, while ‘Kala Israel’ were offspring of intermarriage between the Bene Israel and other communities,” (Aafreedi 5). The Bene Israel accorded a higher status to the Gora Jews considering they were offspring of pure ancestry who came from a Jewish mother and a Jewish father. Goras were supposed to be the descendants of the original seven couples who survived the shipwreck while Kalas were said to be offspring of the marriages outside the Jewish community which had resulted in the so-called impurity of bloodline. The Gora Jews considered the Kala Jews to be impure as they believed that they were born of non-Jewish mothers who had been converted. The two groups abstained from intermarriage and they would never eat together. The Black Jews were prohibited by the Whites from coming near their cooking utensils as well. In the synagogues also they were not accorded equal status. “...Kala were not permitted the same honours as Gora. For instance, Kala could not be offered wine for Kiddush until all Gora had drunk theirs,” (Katz 100).

They lived as an isolated community amongst their Hindu and Muslim neighbours following the practices of their unique religion until they were discovered by David Yechezkel Rahabi, who was from the Cochini Jewish community. With this began a different phase in the identity formation of this minority community as they were realigned with their ancestral religion. The Bene Israel it seems had lost all connection with their religion as their religious books were lost during the shipwreck when they reached India. Over generations, they passed on the knowledge of their religion orally as they could just remember the few vestigial Jewish practices due to which Rahabi identified them as Jews. “Bene Israel tradition speaks of a David Rahabi who around 1000 A.D. came to the Konkan and “discovered” the Bene Israel, recognizing them as Jewish from some of their practices: observance of circumcision and the Sabbath, and the refusal of women to cook fish without scales” (Roland 332). But scholars suggest that they might have been discovered either before or somewhere during the eighteenth century. The exact date cannot be ascertained.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

10

Rahabi selected three men from the Bene Israel and trained them in instructions of Judaism and *Halacha* (Hebrew word for traditional Jewish law which is accepted a rabbinical traditional law). These men when they finished their training were called Kazis and they were instructed to visit the Bene Israel families throughout Kolaba district teaching and instructing the Bene Israel in Jewish law and ritual. Small congregations met at different homes and rituals took place at different homes until the first Bene Israel synagogue was established in Bombay in 1796. "...several dedicated Jewish teachers, mainly from Cochin, and Hazanim [cantors who led in prayers and read the liturgy] came to the Konkan in order to introduce to the Bene Israel synagogue worship, synagogue administration, actual Torah scrolls, and the full range of *Halacha*" (Isenberg 92). The interaction with the Cochini Jews gave a new dimension to their religious identity establishing their contact with their co-religionist and being once again united with the tenants of their ancestral faith which they had almost forgotten after they lost their religious books in the shipwreck.

As the Bene Israel came in contact with the Cochin Jews, then the Baghdadis, then the Zionist movement, and finally Israeli society, their points of reference changed. The role that Higher caste Hindus once played came to be filled by various Jewish groups. As the Bene Israel became acculturated to Jewish norms, they modified their self-understanding and their sense of place within India. (Katz 100)

The interactions with their co-religionists gave the Bene Israel a new sense of religious identity. Gradually they understood their important position in the context of world history. Their identity saw a sense of belongingness to a larger community which was spread across the world. This new perspective for sure brought about a change in how the Bene Israel viewed their own identity. Earlier they were just a small community living in the Konkan region who followed an alien religion and so were different from majority of their neighbours. Now they had a new sense of belonging to the world Jewish community.

Their religious identity was further strengthened with the first Bene Israel synagogue coming up in Bombay in 1796. The synagogue was built by Samuel Ezekiel Divekar (SamajiHassaji), a British Army officer, as a fulfilment of a vow which he took when he was



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

11

held captive by Sultan Haider Ali of Mysore during one of the three Anglo-Mysore wars. Divekar had vowed to build the synagogue if he was safely released from captivity and very miraculously Haider Ali's mother warns his son against holding the Bene Israel captive since she believed that they were the people of God and they had been mentioned in the Holy Koran. Haider Ali took his mother's instructions and released the Bene Israel and therefore Divekar decided to build the synagogue as a reminder that God helped the Bene Israel in a miraculous situation as they found favour with the Mysore Sultan. The street leading to the synagogue has been named as Samuel street after the name of Divekar.

But the real religious awakening came when the Bene Israel came in contact with the Christian missionaries and from here began the process which Nathan Katz terms as Hebrewization. Christian missionaries started coming to India after 1813 when the British government lifted its ban on missionary activities. American, Scottish and British missionaries came to India to evangelize the Indian people. They established their schools for providing secular education and specially focused on the Jews because of the monolithic nature of their religion.

...throughout Kolaba District various Christian missionary societies, in hope of converting Indians to Christianity, set up several free schools, making available to Indian children (Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian alike) a knowledge of the English language, and affording them a secular as well as a Christian education. (Isenberg 92)

The missionaries translated their religious books from the traditional Hebrew language and made it available to them in English and also in the local Marathi language. At this time the Jewish Bible or the Old Testament was also translated into Marathi. Access to the Bible in their own local Marathi language gave a new dimension to their religious identity. The missionaries also made arrangements for Hebrew to be taught at the missionary schools. This enabled the Bene Israel to learn their ancestral language and also translate their Hebrew prayers into Marathi. This gave an opportunity even to the Jews who were not highly educated to gain access to their religion. Inspired by their Hindu neighbours, the Bene Israel



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

12

also wrote and put to tune Indian style *kirtans* substituting the Hindu stories with stories from the Bible and their religious texts.

In these missionary schools, the Bene Israel children studied English which became their access card to the modern world and also to other Jewish diasporas based in different parts of Europe and other foreign countries. This created a global awareness about their Jewish identity strengthening them in the teachings of their ancient religion. But unlike the anticipation of the Christian missionaries that the Bene Israel would easily convert to Christianity after they read the Bible, the community refused to convert and maintained their Jewish identity.

This identity transformation from humble village dwellers to English speaking Jews marked a milestone in the journey of the Bene Israel in India. Education opened new avenues for them granting them job opportunities in the cities. “Bombay offered educational opportunities as well as employment....They enlisted in the regiments, took up skilled trades, became clerks in government service and with private firms...,” (Roland 120). This also changed their hierarchy in the social ladder where earlier they were mere *telis* considered to be counted very low in the caste hierarchy, now their social position was counted according to their professions in bigger towns and cities. “The contemporary Bene-Israel press frequently stated that the establishment of British rule in India had provided an opportunity for the Bene-Israel to serve in the army and thus, eventually, to change their traditional occupation, oil pressing,” (Egorova 83). This period also saw mass migrations of the Bene Israel from the Konkan villages to towns specially Bombay (now Mumbai) and Pune and their adjoining districts.

As Bene Israel migrated to Bombay, entered the civil service, and assumed lower-middle-class professions, however, their Shabbat observances became attenuated....Thus, Friday night rather than Saturday morning became the focus of Shabbat- much as happened among many western Jews....Saturday morning services...began at 7:00 A.M. and concluded by 9:00 A.M. to allow for a full day’s work after prayers. To facilitate such an early conclusion, much of the Musaf (“Additional”) service was deleted. (Katz 97)



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

With their new found education in the British missionary schools, the Bene Israel started moving towards bigger towns specially Bombay. In bigger cities they developed a new identity of English-speaking westernized community. Somewhere the Indianized identity of the community was gradually overpowered by a Westernized identity. They were heading towards modernization under the British rule. Their life in Bombay was completely different from their earlier humble rural dwelling in the Konkan.

However, with the wave of modernization hitting them, several Bene Israel families gave up their ancient joint families and settled as nuclear families in the larger cities. As families disintegrated their Jewishness was also affected. It was usually the elders who had kept the Jewish customs intact. Esther David's protagonist also feels the same dilemma. Hebrew, the language of her ancestors seems ancient to her. "We go to the synagogue on Friday evenings with Granny....It is very difficult to tell her that the Hebrew prayers bore me. I do not understand the meaning of the words....Subhadra sings her prayers...and she knows what they mean," (David 21-22). After the missionaries left, it was difficult for Bene Israel families to find schools or places where they could learn their traditional language and gradually the younger generations were distanced from the traditional religion.

Those who shifted to bigger cities away from the Konkan belt, were more and more distanced from their religion. Several Bene Israel families made their way to Gujarat as well. They formed a small cluster in Ahmedabad where a synagogue was built and all Bene Israel families chose to stay in close vicinity. However, later as jobs and new opportunities demanded, the families started dispersing for greener pastures. The older generation, since they migrated from the Konkan belt, kept their Maharashtrian customs. "Granny wears the nine-yard sari in the Maharashtrian style and covers her head. She speaks to us in Marathi...It is our mother tongue she says," (David 22). The younger generation has a modern way of dressing as the protagonist avers, "Hannah and Naomi wear the sari in modern Indian style, with a pallav on the left shoulder....On festivalsand weddings a string of small chrysanthemums decorates the bun, a sign of their Konkani tradition," (23).

The Bene Israel's interaction with the Cochin Jews was a pleasant one and to a certain extent the Cochin Jews were responsible for building their religious identity. However, the



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

14

interaction with the Baghdadi Jews was different. When initially the Baghdadis came to Bombay, the Bene Israel welcomed them into their synagogues but gradually their relations became sour as the Baghdadis started doubting the purity of their ancestry.

The millennia long stay of the Bene Israel Jews in countryside India in absolute isolation from the rest of the Jewish world resulted in their complete acculturation, which later made the Baghdadi Jews doubt the correctness of their religious observances when they came in their contact in the nineteenth century. (Aafreedi 72)

The two communities refused to intermarry and the Baghdadis even demanded that the Jewish cemetery should have a wall erected so that the Baghdadis could be buried separately. In Baghdadi synagogues, they did not count the Bene Israel for the *minyan* (a number of ten adult men who are required for any important religious ceremony). Bene Israel were also prohibited from reading the scriptures in the Baghdadi synagogues.

Meanwhile, under the patronage of the British, the Bene Israel flourished. British colonists had a policy to treat different castes and groups in a separate way when employment was concerned. Bene Israel enjoyed favour of the British in several government services where they were considered better than the other Indians. They were dependent on the British for employment. Meanwhile, the call for Indian nationalism strengthened and most Bene Israel gradually moved to support the non-violent policies of Mahatma Gandhi. At the same time another part of their identity was blooming. Though they were completely Indian as far as their fidelity to the country was concerned, they were also aware of the fact that they remained a religious minority in India.

Several Bene Israel tried to adopt the anglicized identity like Daniel Dada in Esther David's novel who has been portrayed as a man of liberated views who was not obsessed with the stringent rules of Judaism. "Being like the British' obsesses my grandfather Daniel. He used to work for a British-owned company and affected the mannerisms of his bosses. Yet in a strange way, Indian life and customs too fascinate him," (David 27).



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

15

As the Bene Israel had by now established relations with their co-religionists across the world, they were part of a greater Jewish consciousness. They now knew that they were part of a bigger ethnic group which was determined to have a home of their home. Jews all over the world united for their demand for a separate nation and with the help of the United Nations, the State of Israel came into being in 1948.

The emergence of an independent Israel was an enormous lure. The economic uncertainties expected for all Indians after independence, coupled with the special opportunity for emigration provided by the birth of the State of Israel, enticed many Jews to leave. But it was a strong sense of an ethnic Jewish consciousness that had developed during the British Raj that enabled them to embrace this option. (Roland 129)

For the Bene Israel, the gap between the Indian part of their identity and their Jewish identity was always a matter of contention. The protagonist of David's novel as a young girl keeps on questioning the various differences which she is unable to understand. She compares her belief in an unseen God with her Hindu friend's faith in idols which they could at least see and worship. She cannot make sense of her mother's hatred for the red Kumkum dot which married women applied, a symbol of identity for them. "For my mother Naomi, the bindi is an abyss," (David 2). At the temple when she is with Subhadra, her forehead yearns to apply the *tika*. As a little girl she fails to understand why her family was different and why applying the Kumkum was such a taboo for the Jews. She is even afraid to question her own mother about the difference.

Later, when Mani is alone, I look at her bare forehead and tell her that she'd look beautiful with a dot. She is shocked and convinced that Subhadra is an evil influence on me. 'Our religions,' [she refers to the monotheist religions of Islam and Judaism] she says, 'do not permit such rituals.' I dare not ask why. (David 23)

One distinct part of their identity which separated them from the rest of the Jews across the world was their importance for the Prophet Elijah and the rituals that they followed



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

16

which had been borrowed from the Indian community. The Bene Israel believe that the Prophet was the protector of their community. “EliahuHanabi is said to have appeared among the Bene Israel in ancient times at the Konkan village of Khandala and to have promised them redemption....One boulder is emblazoned with white scars they say are marks left by the wheels of Eliahu’s chariot....” (Katz 102). Nathan Katz also suggests that this particular legend was probably borrowed from their Muslim neighbours as the Bene Israel were supposed to be close to them. “...the appeal of this theme was enhanced by the Bene Israel’s proximity to Muslim culture, with its emphasis upon the legend of the Prophet Mohammad’s ascension to heaven from Jerusalem,” Katz notes adding that “Eliahu is propitiated in the Malida rite, which clearly derives from local Muslim and Hindu customs,” (102).

The Bene Israel even after migrating to Israel have kept their reverence for EliahuHanabi (Elijah the Prophet) intact. This belief is restricted to the Bene Israel Jews. Even their synagogues have a special chair for the Prophet and a place is left vacant for him at dinner tables and a goblet of wine is kept in his name during rituals in Bene Israel homes. “The folk tales and notions about EliahuHanabi and his propitiation in the *Malidarite* are unique to the Bene Israel. The unique complex is central to their religion and emblematic of their identity,” (Katz 101). Writer Shalva Weil who has a huge body of research work concerning the Jews of India, reestablishes the notion of Nathan Katz. Katz quotes Weil’s ideas in his book saying,

“Although many other aspects of Bene Israel religious life differentiate them from their co-religionists, no single item plays such a central role in defining their exclusiveness....[EliahuHanabi] has become one of the core symbols of Bene Israel identity....It has become synonymous with defining one’s ‘BeneIsraelness,’ and is believed in by even the most indifferent.” (qtd. in Katz 101)

Now with their growing Jewish consciousness, most Bene Israel families have migrated to Israel and to other European nations for better opportunities. Those who remain continue to search for an equilibrium between their Indianness and Jewishness.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

17

Works Cited

- Aafreedi, Navras J. "Between Indianness and Jewishness: The Ambivalence of Indian Jews as Reflected in Literature, Cinema and Art." *Beyond Strategies: Cultural Dynamics in Asian Connections*, edited by Priya Singh et al., Knowledge World Publishers, 2014.
- . *Jews, Judaizing Movements and the Traditions of Israelite Descent in South Asia*. Pragati Publications, 2016.
- David, Esther. *The Walled City*. Westland Ltd, 2009.
- Egorova, Yulia. "Jews as an Indian Minority." *Jews and India: Perceptions and image*, Routledge / Replika P, 2006.
- Isenberg, Shirley B. "The Bene Israel Villagers of Kolaba District: Generations, Culture Change, Changing Identities." *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, edited by Nathan Katz, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2011.
- Katz, Nathan. *Who are the Jews of India?* University of California Press, 2000.
- Roland, Joan G. "Indian Jewish Identity of the Bene Israel During the British Raj." *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, edited by Nathan Katz, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2011.
- . *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*. Routledge, 2017.
- Strizower, Schifra. *The Children of Israel; the Bene Israel of Bombay*. Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1971.
- Weil, Shalva. "The Heritage and Legacy of the Jews of India." *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art, & Life-Cycle*, edited by Shalva Weil, Marg Publications, 2002.