

## Marginality and Community Identity Disintegration among the Jews of India\*

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This paper is a study of the Jews of India—namely the Cochin Jews of Kerala, the Bene Israel of Maharashtra and the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> Based on interviews conducted in 1987-88 with one hundred and seventeen informants from these three communities (31 Cochin Jews, 46 Bene Israel, and 40 Baghdadi Jews), this paper explains the nature of marginality and community identity disintegration of the Indian Jewish communities in contemporary India. For such an analysis it is important at the very outset that we clarify how the concept of marginality is defined within the context of this paper.

The sociological literature on marginality has been restricted primarily to the explanation of the personality type and its application to sub-cultural or ethnic groups within the socio-psychological framework, or to explain urban and economic characteristics in Latin American countries.<sup>2</sup> Definitions of marginality have ranged from characterizations of the marginal man, one who is a 'cultural hybrid' in terms of his 'two different worlds', (Park, 1928), the 'crucible of cultural fusion', (Stonequist, 1961), the State 'where one has ties to two partially incompatible societies and one does not belong wholly to either' (Antonovsky, 1956), or the social situation where members combine the components of being economically

<sup>1</sup>For historical and ritual details of these communities see Strizower, 1971; Roland, 1989; Timberg, 1986; Johnson, 1985; Musleah, 1975; Fischel, 1962, 1961-62

<sup>2</sup>Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935; Dickie-Clark, 1966; Slotkin, 1943; Antonovsky, 1956; Mangin, 1967; Portes, 1972; Perlman, 1976.

boundaries were a function of the caste structure. The principles governing the caste structure had been internalized by all communities, including the Indian Jews, thereby allowing the smooth flow of social interaction. The nature of this interaction was changed by the British. Through their quota system for the minorities and their patronage on the basis of minority status, they had stimulated among the Indian Jews a sense of distinctiveness vis-a-vis the Hindu and the Muslim population. Under the British, the Indian Jews were encouraged to manifest and articulate an ethnic identity which could not be defined within the caste framework. Religious differences became the focal point in defining ethnic identity and the marker for cognition and behavior in social interaction.

The economic opportunities provided by the British and their access to education under the missionaries had placed the Indian Jews in an advantageous position. The attainment of this position was also a visible marker of the ethnically defined differences between the Indian Jews and the rest of the population. In return for the patronage they received from the British, the Indian Jews remained loyal to the British. Even the Cochin Jews were indirectly aligned to the British, since the Maharaja of Cochin had signed a treaty with the British in 1809 whereby Cochin would enjoy peace and protection under British suzerainty. Thus the departure of the British was perceived by the majority of Indian Jews as the end of a golden era—an era in which patronage had improved their socio-economic status.

The ethnicization of their Jewish identity and its reinforcement through the Zionist movement in India deflected the Indian Jews from active participation in the Indian nationalist movement. Having been the recipients of a privileged status under the British, the Indian Jews were reluctant to oppose them by joining the nationalist movement. The intense effort by Zionist leaders had influenced the Indian Jews to express their Jewish identity through the Zionist movement. The formation of various Zionist organizations in India from 1905 onward provided the necessary means to shift to a Jewish nationalism rather than an Indian one. The means and goals for the majority population and the Jewish

minority were not defined in any common terms. The identification with Zionism and simultaneous lack of active participation in India's struggle for freedom, at a time when it was the central issue for the dominant population, were to have indirect political and economic ramifications in Independent India. The privileged minority position of Indian Jewry under the British, their primary identification with the Zionist movement, and the articulation of a predominantly Hindu identity by the dominant Indian population in the struggle for an Independent India, thus provided the initial setting for the emigration which followed the establishment of Independent India and the creation of the State of Israel (Abraham, 1991).

Having briefly discussed the setting, we may now proceed to an analysis of the spatial, social, economic and political positioning of Indian Jewry in contemporary India.

### **Spatial Structure**

Geographically the dominant Hindu communities and the Indian Jewish communities are not separated on ethnic lines. Among the Cochin Jews, the majority are members of the Paradesi section and as such continue to reside on Synagogue lane in Mattanchery. The community has lived there for many centuries under the patronage of the Maharaja of Cochin. Since this area has a heterogenous population and the members of the community are not restricted in terms of geographic mobility, they do not perceive themselves to be spatially marginalized. However, today, except for the houses in which the present members of the community live, all the other houses which had Jewish occupants have been bought as shops by Hindus and Muslims due to the increasing commercial value of this area. Although it is fast becoming a commercial area, it is the desire of the members of the community to continue to reside in this area, close to their famous synagogue.

Both the Baghdadi and Bene Israel communities live in large metropolitan areas which are characterized by a mixed population where economic factors are the basic criteria for determining

group locations. Hence neither the Bene Israel nor the Baghdadi Jews can be defined as spatially marginalized on ethnic criteria. Due to the exorbitant cost of housing, the majority of the Bene Israel, like lower middle class members of other communities, have moved to the suburbs and outskirt towns of Bombay. The wealthy among the Bene Israel continue to live in the city; those not so well-off live in poorer neighborhoods. In the case of the Baghdadi Jews, too, economic criteria determine the nature of housing, though in many cases they continue to reside in homes that have been owned by their family for many years. Thus we may say that the Indian Jewish communities are not spatially marginalized on ethnic lines.

### **Social Structure**

In the social structure of India today, the Cochin and Bene Israel communities do not perceive themselves to be marginalized. There is considerable social interaction between them and the non-Jewish population. This is indicated by the nature of social interaction and each community's perception of their own status. Among the Cochin and Bene Israel informants, more than 80 per cent have frequent or some interaction with non-Jewish communities. Similarly their closest friends tend to be both Jewish and non-Jewish Indians. In terms of their community's social status vis-a-vis the social structure, the majority of the Cochin informants placed their community's social status as "somewhat high". In the case of the Bene Israel, the perception of the community's status was perceived by the majority as "somewhat low". Although both the Cochin and Bene Israel have social interaction with the dominant community, their differences in perception of status stemmed from their previous historical circumstances and were also related to their respective economic situation. The following quotes, by a Cochin and a Bene Israel Jew respectively, demonstrate this:

"In Kerala, our community has quite a high status because from early times, we were protected by the Maharaja and

given many privileges. Some of our people had important economic positions. Today, though most of our people have left and we are so few who remain, we are still treated with respect. This is because of our long tradition of a good position in Cochin."

"I think that we Bene Israel don't have a very high social status as a community. Some individuals may have but not the whole community. In early times our people did not have a high caste job... then with the British there was some improvement, but the Baghdadi Jews said all kinds of things about our community which were not good for us. Also, we don't have lots of wealthy people in our community. So neither way we could really have a high position. It is not easy to change a community's social position. It cannot happen in a few years."

Among the Baghdadi Jewish community, there appears to be the strongest sense of marginalization. This is indicated by the nature of their social interaction with non-Jewish communities and their perception of their community's status in India today. Among the Baghdadis interviewed 80 per cent "rarely" or "never" socially interact with the non-Jewish Indian community, nor do they interact socially with members of other Jewish communities. Over 88 per cent of them perceive their community's present status as "somewhat low" or "extremely low". This is considered by the informants a consequence of their loss of prestige, with the departure of the British and the wealthy Baghdadi members of the community, coupled with the rise of a big business community among Hindus.

Thus we see that socially the Cochin and Bene Israel do not perceive themselves to be marginalized, while the Baghdadi community do. This is primarily due to the nature of their articulation of their identity in the context of India today. In the case of the Cochin and Bene Israel, their Indianness has helped in their partial social integration. On the other hand the Baghdadi community manifests an identity which is in disharmony with the dominant culture and as such is quite marginalized.

## Economic Structure

There has been substantial industrialization and technological development in India since India's independence in 1947. Yet India's economic structure today is still characterized by tough competition for scarce economic resources, inflation, over-population, poverty, insufficient employment opportunities and housing problems in the major cities. Attempts by the Hindu majority to establish its hegemony, despite a constitution which promises equal rights for all citizens, has resulted in the economic marginalization of the minority groups. For minuscule minorities like the Indian Jewish communities, among whom a large percentage had previously prospered under the British patronage, open competition with the numerically dominant majority has resulted in their being squeezed out of the economic system. Hence, the majority of them have perceived emigration as the best alternative, thereby drastically reducing the number of members in each of the Jewish communities of India today.

In the overall economic structure of India today, the Indian Jewish communities as an ethnic minority are almost totally marginal. They do not play any significant role in India's economy and have been relegated to a peripheral position. Among the Cochin and Baghdadi Jewish communities, a large percentage of the members are retired and hence without any occupation.

Among the Cochin Jews, more than a third of the sample have no formal occupation. This has further lowered the standard of living in this community. The household incomes indicate that with the exception of a small percentage who have a high household income, the majority are in the lower middle range in the economic structure. However one has to remember that today the Cochin community primarily comprises the Paradesi Jews who have always been economically better off than the large Malabari section of the Cochin Jewish community who emigrated *en masse* to Israel. Hence in today's India, the Cochin Jewish community cannot be defined as totally economically marginalized. This is also reflected in the members' perception of the community's

economic status. The informants appear to be divided in their perception of their community's status in the larger economic structure. Approximately half view the community's economic status as "somewhat high" and the other half view it as "somewhat low". The former view can be attributed to the few wealthy members in the community, whose economic prestige is perceived by informants as enhancing the community's economic status. In the words of one informant:

"Previously we had a high economic status but I don't think that is the case today. Our community is too small to have any economic significance. Although there are the ... who are well known and rich, that does not mean that the whole community has a high economic status today. Many of us are retired and the few youngsters are leaving [emigrating] and one of the reasons is for better economic opportunities. Today there are a number of other very rich people in Kerala and our economic importance has almost disappeared. Those who tell you otherwise are living in the memory of the past."

We may then state that although the economic situation of the Cochin Jewish community has declined, the members who comprise the community today, unlike the majority of those who emigrated, are not totally economically marginalized. Rather it is their small numbers coupled with an ageing population that have affected their economic situation.

Among the Bene Israel, the majority are concentrated in occupations in the lower and middle economic ranges. The high cost of living has necessitated many families to have more than one earning member in the household to provide an adequate income. As an ethnic community, the Bene Israel have a relatively low economic position. As in all communities, there are those members of the community who earn high incomes or hold prestigious jobs and at the individual level have a high socio-economic status, but these members are few in number and do not necessarily identify or interact with the larger Bene Israel community. Ninety-one per

cent of the Bene Israel informants perceived their community's economic status as "somewhat low" or "extremely low" vis-a-vis the dominant communities, thus indicating their economic marginalization.

In the words of a Bene Israel informant:

"Our economic position as a community is not high because here there is too much competition and our community is too small to be able to compete with many of the other groups. Also, today influence and money are both very important in getting a high status. Our community don't have either. Each community only tries to help their own people."

For the Bene Israel then, a perception of economic marginalization vis-a-vis the dominant community in the economic structure still persists. However this may also be due to the high cost of living in Bombay and the lack of correspondingly high incomes.

Today the economic situation of the Baghdadi Jewish community in Calcutta has deteriorated to a large extent. Among the Baghdadi informants, 73 per cent had no occupation. Sixty-three per cent had no earning member in the household and were supported by the Baghdadi Jewish Trust founded earlier by the wealthier members of the community. Today funds from this trust are distributed among the needy members of the community, though a considerable portion of it is tied up in litigation with the Indian government. Approximately 60 per cent have a total annual income of less than \$999 which has resulted in a very low standard of living for the majority. There are still a few wealthy members in the Baghdadi Jewish community and some of these members play an important role in helping out the poorer and ailing members. Today, as an ethnic community, 37 per cent and 63 per cent respectively of the informants perceive the economic status of the community as "somewhat low" and "extremely low". There is a strong feeling of economic marginalization. Most of the members feel that their community was much better off under the

British. There is a common sentiment among the community that the Indian government has not looked after its interests and that it is the dominant Hindu population that controls most of the economic power. As stated by a Baghdadi informant:

“Most of us Baghdadi Jews today are in a bad economic situation. There are many old, ailing and poor among us. Only some of our own people like the ... help the poor and sick. The Indian Government does not make it easy for this community. It has withheld our own community trusts. At present the case has been taken to court. Some of the members will most probably die before it is all settled. Just because we are a small minority they can do this to us. We are too old to leave this country now. Besides who will want to accept old and sick people? There is nothing left for us here.”

We see that among the Baghdadi community in India today, there is a strong sense of economic marginality. In general, we see that in today's overall economic structure, the Indian Jewish communities as an ethnic minority are economically marginalized, though the extent varies with each community.

### **Political Structure**

The political marginalization of the Indian Jewish communities since India's independence was one of the causal factors for their emigration. The departure of the British, and the subsequent shift in the Indian political structure from a system based on the patronage of the minorities to one based on adult franchise, signified the end of preferential treatment for minorities. Communities which were numerically strong and could draw upon the loyalties of their members could attain political power. On the other hand, minuscule minorities like the Indian Jews were marginalized due to their insufficient numbers. With most of the Indian Jews having opted out of the Indian society through emigration, the political status of these communities in India has

deteriorated considerably. Today, it is apparent that the Indian Jewish communities are unable as an ethnic minority to act as a viable political entity. The communities are characterized by a high degree of powerlessness and political apathy. This is indicative in the informants' lack of membership in organizations, either Jewish or political, and in their perception of their community's status vis-a-vis the dominant community in the political structure.

Among the Cochini and Baghdadi informants, 94 per cent and 90 per cent respectively are not members of any Jewish organization but among the Bene Israel there is a lower percentage of informants who are not members of such organizations. None of the Cochini and Baghdadi informants and 87 per cent of the Bene Israel participated in any political organizations or activity. With reference to their community's status in the political structure of India today, a high percentage in all three communities expressed it as "somewhat low" or "extremely low".

For the Cochini and Baghdadi informants, lack of membership and perception of a low status vis-a-vis the dominant community in the political structure is based on their view that their respective communities are too small, with a predominantly aged population, who are no longer in a position politically to revitalize these communities. This view is expressed in the following statements by a Cochini and a Baghdadi informant respectively:

"Look, most of the Cochin Jews have left. The few young ones remaining will also leave soon. With only a few members and most of us being old, there is no meaning in getting involved in any organization. Politically we can assert absolutely no influence even if we do get involved, so what is the use? Politics in India today is for those who can influence lot of people and often votes are bought off by parties. There is nothing that a handful of us can do and neither do we have the energy or the means. Today the Cochin Jews have no position in politics."

"Today our community is a dying community. We are old and are unable to do anything. Political parties know they can get nothing from us, we are too small a community to make any

difference to them. It is sad that today we are no longer an important community in India... there was a time under the British when our people were close to those in power, but that has all changed. Now we have no connections with those in power, they are more interested in those communities whose vote will make a difference in winning or losing. There is no doubt that the political position of our community is very very low. In fact it can be said that today the Baghdadi Jewish community is politically dead!"

Among the 46 per cent of the Bene Israel informants who are members of Jewish organizations, participation is confined to socio-religious activities revolving around the synagogue. This too is infrequent and tends to be for the organization of the cultural activities of the community for specific Jewish occasions. Eighty-seven per cent of those interviewed were not members of any political organization, thus indicating a high level of political apathy. Here lack of participation in political organizations or political activity was based on the perception that the political parties were not interested in such a small minority. Informants felt that their involvement in political activities would not change anything since the dominant Hindu majority asserts all the control and power. As put by a Bene Israel informant:

"Our community has no power and the political parties don't trouble us. We are no threat to them. Our people don't want to get involved in politics. They know so few of us will not change anything and instead create problems for us only. Today our community has given up any hope of having any political power."

Thus today these communities have become non-viable political entities in articulating their interests. This perception of their non-viability as even a pressure group was indicated by informants when mentioning the Government of India's attitude to Israel. India's large Muslim minority, coupled with India's

economic interests in the Arab world, have negated any chance for this microscopic Jewish minority to bring pressure on the Indian government to change its foreign policy with respect to Israel. As stated by a Cochin informant:

“Being Jews, we would like India to improve its relations with Israel. With such a large Muslim population and the government’s trade relations with the Arabs, they are being too cautious. Sometimes we wish as a community we could influence the government but we know that that is impossible, there are just too few of us to make them change their policies.”

Thus we see that all these Jewish communities in India experience a sense of powerlessness in the present Indian context and this powerlessness is strongly related to their numeric insignificance. There is a perception that the smallness of their numbers has increased their political marginalization. This has resulted in many demonstrating political apathy and thus opting out of the political structure.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we may proceed to the last section of our paper. Having referred to their varying degrees of marginality, we can now turn to community disintegration. This is best explained through a discussion of the problem in the sphere of marriage and religious practices among the remaining Indian Jewry. It is important to examine these two dimensions as they were the primary channels through which the Jewish identity of these communities was maintained as the basis for community integration.

<sup>3</sup>As this research was conducted well before the establishment of full diplomatic relations between India and Israel in February 1992, it remains to be seen how this significant development will affect the Indian Jews’ sense of political marginalization. See “A time of joy for Indian Jews”, *Indian Express Sunday Magazine* (February 16, 1992).

## COMMUNITY DISINTEGRATION

### Marriage

For the Indian Jewish communities, prior to the emigration of the majority of their members, marriage was a means of boundary maintenance. The normative order among Jews prescribes marriage and building of a family governed by the Judaic principles and as such places a high value on marrying Jews as opposed to Gentiles. The adherence to the normative structure by marrying members of one's own community thus reinforced community solidarity and was a boundary marker. Today among the Baghdadi Jews it is no longer a means of articulating a Jewish identity since there are no young, unmarried members in the community. In the case of the Cochin Jews, the desire of the few young members left in the community to marry Jews, preferably members of their community, has partially influenced their decision to emigrate, and this indirectly demonstrates their desire to adhere to the Jewish normative structure as well as to reinforce their Jewish identity through marriage. In both these communities in India there has not been a marriage in the past ten years. This itself speaks for the disintegration of the community structure.

Among the Bene Israel marriage is indicative of both their Jewishness and Indianness. The Bene Israel in India prescribe marriage within their own community. In those cases where the woman is not Jewish and is selected as a partner in marriage by a Jewish male, she is first converted to Judaism. However many of their marriage customs are similar to those practised by the Hindus and Muslims of their region, and as such are defined by them in terms of their Jewishness and Indianness. Among the younger generation today, there is increasing secularization of marriage. While conversion to Judaism of the spouse does take place, the religious strength of those converted is sometimes perceived as questionable.

## Religion

During their centuries of stay in India, especially in the eighteenth, nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, it was the Judaic content of their culture which made the Indian Jewish communities distinct from the mainstream Indian society. Although incorporating some customs from the core culture of Indian society, it was the manifestation of their Jewish identity through synagogue attendance, observance of Sabbath, Jewish holidays and dietary regulations, which differentiated the Indian Jewish communities from all others. The synagogues were the pivotal axis around which the organization of the community revolved. High holidays were observed by the members of the communities and were socio-religious occasions which expressed the social solidarity of the communities.

Today, it is still through the observance of rites and rituals that community solidarity is maintained. Moral commitment is expressed through the adherence to the normative order of Judaism, though there has been some degree of adaptation to external and internal forces of social, economic and political change. Among my Cochini informants, 77 per cent strictly observed Sabbath while 23 per cent did so partially. As for synagogue attendance, 65 per cent went every week. Today, due to the sharp drop in their numbers, the Cochin Jewish community has a problem obtaining a *minyan*. However, for high holidays and other festivals there is full attendance. It is during these holidays that the community visibly articulates its solidarity.

During Passover, strict boundaries are maintained between Jews and others (Katz and Goldberg, 1989). It is a key festival in sustaining the family and community solidarity. The moral commitment of the members of the community is expressed in their adherence to Passover despite the difficulties faced by them in obtaining the necessary ritual ingredients. Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Succoth, and Simchat Torah are all observed by the Cochin Jewish community. Today there have been some modifications necessitated by their small numbers and the unavailability of

certain materials essential for Jewish ceremonies. However, despite the changes brought about by the constraints that have arisen over time, the Cochin Jewish community still observes these holidays. The consequence of adherence to these rites is a reinforcement of community solidarity and the identity of the community. Unlike the Cochin Jews, only 26 per cent of the Bene Israel informants strictly observe Sabbath, 63 per cent partially observe it, and 11 per cent do not observe it at all. This changing pattern among the members of the community is a result of the constraints imposed by the urban environment in which they live. For example, in India Saturday is a part of a six-day work week and therefore it becomes difficult to observe it as a day of rest. Synagogue attendance among the Bene Israel community tends not to be too frequent. Among my Bene Israel informants, the majority went either several times a year or only for the high holidays. The holy days for the Jews are observed by the Bene Israel, and it is during this period that the community come together and articulate their community solidarity through collective social action.

Through the collective celebration of the religious ceremonies, members of the community become conscious of the social and moral force of the collectivity. There thus occurs the recreation and reaffirmation of social solidarity, making these occasions important markers of a Jewish community identity. Today the Baghdadi Jewish community is not as observant as the Cochin and Bene Israel. Among the Baghdadi informants, 32 per cent strictly observe Sabbath, 50 per cent partially observe it and 18 per cent do not observe it. Those who partially observe are not particular about switching on lights or cooking. As put by an informant,

“Earlier our community used to be very, very orthodox. Now this is not the case. For example, I cook and switch on lights. Most of the members of the community don't observe Sabbath strictly. It is hard these days. Many of us live alone, have to do own work. There does not seem to be much choice.”

The holidays are still observed by a majority of the members.

The preparations are not elaborate but it is the only time when most of the members get together and when there is some degree of community solidarity.

An important part of the religious norms of Judaism are the dietary regulations. It has been said, "The dietary laws have proved an important factor in the survival of the Jewish race; and are, in more than one respect, an irreplaceable agency for maintaining Jewish identity in the present" (Hertz, 1954:960).

For centuries, an important dimension in the articulation of the "Jewishness" of the Indian Jewish communities has been in the observance of the dietary regulations prescribed by Judaic law. Today it continues to be one of the most important ways through which two of the three Indian Jewish communities articulate their Jewish identities.

For the Cochin Jewish community today, the observance of the Judaic dietary regulations plays a very important role in articulating their Jewish identity. Among the Cochin informants, 70 per cent stated that they strictly observed dietary prohibitions while 30 per cent stated that they partially observed them. Here partial observance was indicated by not observing all the dietary laws or deviating from them on occasion. All who were interviewed strictly observed the separation of milk and meat and 87 per cent strictly observed the restrictions on seafood. Religious orthodoxy and the strong desire to maintain what they perceive as an important aspect of their Jewishness is demonstrated by the Cochin Jewish community who, because they have no *shochet* (the ritual slaughterer who is qualified to butcher cattle), abstain from eating mutton or beef. The separation of milk and meat and the restrictions on eating only those fish that have fins and scales are also strictly observed by the members of this community.

The use of alcohol in traditional Judaism is an important prescriptive norm: so it is incorporated in the activities of the social group and used as an expression of family and community solidarity (Snyder, 1973:6-19). In the making of wine for ritual purposes, the Cochin Jews are extremely particular about separating the sacred from the profane. According to the Judaic

law, wine used by Jews should be made only by Jews. This stipulation stemmed from the fact that in other religions, wine was used to consecrate idols and as such was forbidden to Jews. It is assumed that if Gentiles make or touch the wine, they may possibly dedicate some of this wine to their Gods (Asheri, 1983:138). Among the Cochin Jews, wine for ritual purposes is made by the members of the community. Since the wine is for ritual purposes it is treated as if it were sacred. Hence if this wine were to be touched by a Gentile or even the table or shelf on which the wine is kept is touched by Gentile, the wine is perceived by the Cochin Jewish community as "profane". Thus, since the separation of the sacred and the profane is perceived by the members of the community as the avoidance of contact between the wine and the Gentile, it becomes a boundary maintenance marker. Yet it is these very important rituals that are becoming increasingly difficult for the Jewish community to maintain.

The observance of the dietary regulations for Passover represent important rites for all Jews. Through their strict adherence to the dietary norms of Passover, the Cochin Jewish community expresses and reinforces the important sentiments of community solidarity and boundary maintenance. Central to the observance of Passover is that anything that has leaven, chamets, or hamas as the Indian Jews pronounce it, or which may come into contact with hamas, is forbidden. The Cochin Jews, primarily the women, are extremely careful in cleaning all of the items of traditional food which will be used during Passover. Preparations to observe the dietary regulation and the other requirements for Passover, start about three months prior to the event.

Among the Cochin Jewish community the dietary regulations concerning the avoidance of hamas are strictly adhered to despite the difficulties and expenses involved in it. Their dietary regulations during this period heighten their articulation of a Jewish identity. The extreme concern with "purity" during Passover tends, in certain ways, to resemble the principle of purity, pollution as observed by the Hindus (Katz and Goldberg, 1989:301-325). However, the members perceive it as their strict

adherence to the normative order of Judaism. It is apparent from the above that the Cochin Jews do articulate their Jewishness through their observance of the dietary norms and maintain social boundaries with the other communities through tangible expressions of avoidance of the profane. Yet today this community struggles to maintain these manifestations of their ethnic identity and have had to make some compromises in these processes of purification.

For the Bene Israel, too, dietary regulations play a central role in boundary maintenance and social solidarity. Among the Bene Israel informants, 77 per cent strictly observed dietary prohibitions while 23 per cent observed them partially. As in the case of Cochin Jews, there were no informants who did not observe any of the dietary prohibitions. Since this community is still large enough to support the services of *shochets*, the Bene Israel continue to eat mutton. However, it has retained the Hindu custom which had been adopted by the earlier settlers of abstaining from beef. Although it was prohibited earlier, prior to the discovery of their Jewish identity, despite their knowledge of the Judaic dietary laws they voluntarily avoid eating beef today. However, besides the adoption of this Hindu practice in their dietary regulations, the Bene Israel strictly adhere to the Jewish dietary laws and as such reinforce their Jewishness in a predominantly Hindu social environment.

The separation of meat and milk in cooking and eating is strictly followed by the members of the Bene Israel community. Among my Bene Israel informants, 90 per cent claimed they strictly observed the separation of meat from milk and 10 per cent said they observed it partially. As regards prohibition of seafood, 87 per cent said they strictly observed it and 13 per cent said they observed it partially. However, where they differed from the Cochin Jewish community was that many of the members did not maintain two separate sets of crockery for eating. This was explained as resulting from financial and space constraints. In the words of an informant,

“Among the poor, they cannot afford two different (sets). It is

also difficult to keep separate plates where there is no space, children come and mix it up. Besides meat and milk things are never cooked at the same time and each time anything is used it is washed carefully so there is no mixing. We are careful about seeing to this.”

With reference to seafood, the Bene Israel once again, like the Cochin Jews, articulate their Jewishness by eating only kosher fish. They kept this practice even during the period when they were isolated from mainstream Jewry.<sup>4</sup> In fact it is perceived by them as an important indicator of their Jewishness. As an informant put it :

“Even when our forefathers forgot parts of our religion, they still kept to the practice of separating fish that have fins and scales and those that did not. It is an important part of our history (as it contributed to their re-entry into Judaism). Today we still follow this law carefully. We do it because it is said in our holy book that we must do it.”

In accordance with the Judaic law, for ritual purposes the Bene Israel use wine solely made by Jews. The making of wine is done both at home and communally, the latter done frequently with the mutual cooperation of the members of the synagogue. Here too, great care is taken by the members to preserve the ritual purity of the wine. In a communal setting in which women make the wine, there is a strong proscription against participation of women who are ritually impure. No members outside the Jewish community are involved in the wine making. This assures the purity of the wine. It also becomes a boundary maintenance marker. Passover dietary regulations are also carefully observed by the Bene Israel.

The Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta, although an orthodox community that strictly adhered to the Judaic dietary regulations for many centuries, are no longer as strict today in their observance of the

<sup>4</sup>This “fish story” can be read in Israel, 1984:12, 56 or in Roland, 1989:12.

Judaic dietary laws. Among the 40 Baghdadi informants, 35 per cent claimed they strictly observed dietary prohibitions, 35 per cent said they partially observed them and 30 per cent said they no longer observe them. Similarly, regarding maintenance of a kosher kitchen, 37 per cent strictly observed it, 30 per cent did so partially and 33 per cent did not observe it at all. Today there are no *shochets* left in this community so kosher mutton or beef is not available. There is, however, one man who is qualified to kill chicken.

Thus, among the few families who are still orthodox, only chicken is eaten. Unlike the Cochin Jews, many of the members do not observe the fish restriction and in some cases they also eat non-kosher meat. However it must be remembered that today a large percentage of the Baghdadi community cannot afford to eat meat and fish on a regular basis due to the high cost of these products. Those who partially observe some of the dietary prohibitions tend to do it by the separation of milk and meat or by not eating leaven at Passover. Only those who strictly observe dietary prohibition, maintain a kosher kitchen.

In this community, wine making is not a communal activity, nor is it done in the homes of most of the members. Those few who can afford wine get it from abroad. Passover among the Baghdadi Jewish community is not as important as in the other two communities, though it is observed by the members. Little is done by the majority, except abstaining from eating leavened food and having a Seder. The lack of observance of the dietary laws is attributed by this community to the constraints of old age, ill health and economic necessity. Today there is a weakening in the bonds between the members and the community. Most of the members who remain in India are single. Hence the family as the mediating structure between the individual and the community no longer exists. This has indirectly contributed to a weakening in community bonds.

## Conclusion

We can conclude that in the culture of the Jewish communities in India today, there are varying degrees of observance of

the Judaic content. Maintaining religious practices has become increasingly difficult despite attempts to retain them. In general, there is a decline in the articulation of a Jewish community identity. This decline is most apparent among the Baghdadi community as a result of the weakening of community bonds. In all three communities Passover is still a key festival in sustaining the community identity, yet it is only a shadow of what it used to be prior to the large scale emigration from India.

We may then conclude that all the Indian Jewish communities express a dual identity within the present Indian context, although the nature of this duality varies to a certain extent, thus resulting in different degrees of marginalization across these communities. An ethnic minority, marginality is most visible in the economic and political structure. Their dwindling numbers and the preponderance among the Cochin Jews and the Baghdadi Jews of the elderly has resulted in a social disintegration of the Jewish communities in India. It is apparent that within a short period of time there will be a total disintegration of these two communities. Although the Bene Israel in Maharashtra, especially in Thana, have tried to maintain their Jewish identity, forces of urbanization and secularization may result either in their gradual assimilation into the dominant culture, may resurge as a viable and active Jewish community or like the rest of their members, they may emigrate to Israel. Only time will tell.

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