

# Book Review

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***Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, Nathan Katz (ed.), New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 1995, 203pp, Indian Rs. 295.00**

In the post-cold war era, ethnic identity is considered to be both a divisive and a unifying force. People separated by ideology but united by culture come together, as the two Germanys did and as the two Koreas are beginning to. Societies united by ideology or historical circumstances but divided by civilisation either come apart as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Bosnia did, or are subjected to severe strain, as in the case with Ukraine, Nigeria, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, and many others. In this context, studies on ethnic identities assume great significance.

Nathan Katz's edited volume *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity* portrays the process by which Indian Jews a small ethnic community, gradually diminishing in numbers, maintain their cultural identity in an otherwise deeply divided society such as India. Jews are believed to have come to India as long as two thousand years ago and now find themselves divided into different small groups. Being a microscopic endogamous community with strict religious and social traditions, most of the Jews find it difficult to maintain their unique culture and therefore, either acculturated with the larger Indian communities or migrated to foreign countries, mainly Israel. There are now barely five thousand Jews, in an Indian population of approximately nine hundred million in all. But those Indian Jews who still live in India or migrated to other countries, however small their number, struggle to maintain their distinct cultural identity—the Indian Jewish Identity. The volume under review, therefore, is an attempt to

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establish what the Indian Jewish identity is and how it is different from the general Jewish identity and, of course, Indianness.

The Jews are known for their self-consciousness, curiosity and pride. Around the world, wherever they went, the Jews showed a fierce passion to have their children educated and become professionals. Also wherever they went many of them became businessmen. The opportunities were different, but in each case, arriving with no money and few skills, beginning as workers or small tradesmen, they have achieved remarkable economic success. Owing to their rapid economic rise, the Jews have considered themselves to be of higher social status and resisted all temptations to integrate with the mainstream society. Inter-marriage, an important sign of integration, remains low among Jews. Also, there is a strong tendency toward residential integration. Most Jews would prefer an all-Jewish neighbourhood, and most would agree that they are not comfortable being a minority. This book explores the distinct traits of the general Jewish culture, and how the Indian Jews create and maintain their identity in a hierarchically organised Hindu society in India.

The seven essays in this volume are grouped into four parts, focusing on the Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel, the Baghdadi Jews and a general survey of the Indian Jewry since independence. There is also an introduction by Nathan Katz. The first part contains two essays, one of which is co-authored by Nathan Katz and Ellen S Goldberg. The essay starts with an analysis of the identity crisis of the Cochin Jews. The Cochin Jews themselves are perplexed on the question of whether they are Jews or Indians first. The essay draws the similarities and dissimilarities between the Jews and various castes in Kerala, South India, in their ritual enactments and life styles. The authors argue that while the Cochin Jews have adapted creatively with the Hindu practices they have taken care to see that such practices do not violate Jewish legal or ethical principles.

It has been a major challenge faced by the Jews all over the world to maintain their particular group identity in their long history of migration from one cultural setting to another. Barbara C Johnson's work on Cochin Jews of Israel examines this phenomenon by concentrating on a particular

ritual event—the community party or *Peshta*—and shows how a group of Cochin Jews who have migrated to Israel maintain their community identity. With a lot of fieldwork experience among Cochin Jews in Israel, who number around 200 at most, Johnson illustrates how they preserve their Cochin connections and practices with a sense of nostalgia.

The section on the Bene Israel consists of two essays by Shirley Berry Isenberg and Joan G Roland. The Bene Israel were the inhabitants of the villages in Kolaba district (now renamed as Raigad District) on the Konkan coast of the Maharashtra state in India. The Bene Israel were believed to be a caste of oil-pressers in their native villages but most of them moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) where they became workers, clerks, civil servants and soldiers.

By analysing discussions with elderly Bene Israel, as well as official documents, Isenberg's enquiry into the history of pre-modern village life of the Bene Israel, gives us a clear picture of the culture and life style of the Bene Israel prior to their migration to Bombay. Isenberg maintains that the Bene Israel, who have totally severed their rural identity, have fully integrated with the urban Indian life.

Joan G Roland has documented the early history of the Bene Israel in India, the shift in their attitudes under the British *Raj*, and the process of a new identity formation in independent India. The author talks about the social transformation that has taken place within the Bene Israel community which started as a caste-like group in villages within a hierarchically organised society, having little contact with the Jewish world beyond India, and had become increasingly religious and had identified themselves with Jewish ethnicity and world Jewry.

The third section of the book deals with the Baghdadi Jews, the descendants of Arabic-speaking immigrants to British India following religious persecutions and the forcible conversion of the Jews in the early part of the 19th century Persia. The Baghdad Jews were industrialists, traders and financiers who settled in British India's leading port cities: Bombay, Cochin, Calcutta and Rangoon (now in Myanmar). Unlike the

Cochin Jews or the Bene Israel, this group distanced themselves away from Indianness or even from the Jewry and identified with the British.

Thomas Timberg, in his paper, describes how the Baghdadi Jews dealt with the rise of modern Indian nationalism. Ruth Fredman Cernea's study focuses on the hardships undergone by Baghdadi Jews in Rangoon before and after independence and the social rift between themselves and their co-religionists, the Bene Israel, who were somewhat distinct ethnically.

The concluding section by Margaret Abraham explores where the Indian Jews stand, socially, economically and politically in contemporary India. Examining the situation, through the concept of marginality, she shows how the identity of this minuscule ethnic group has begun to disintegrate. She tells us the story of how their ethnic consciousness grew under British patronage and how it disappeared after independence. She argues that while the Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel do not consider themselves to be socially marginalised, the Baghdadi Jews do, and all the groups are deprived economically and politically mainly due to their insignificant numerical strength.

The book, no doubt, is worth reading for all those who are interested in the studies of Indian Jews. The scholars who have contributed papers in this collection are all known for their works on Jewish identity. Nevertheless, the overall impact of this book would have been much more stronger had there been a sound theoretical framework under which the questions of Indian Jewish identity could be addressed. The well-discussed theories of ethnic identity formations have not been given the importance they deserve. But for this shortcoming, I believe that this book will be welcomed by all students of ethnic studies.

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