



ASSIMILATED PRACTICES OF THE BENE ISRAEL JEWS IN INDIA

Dr. Lavanya Madagani

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Other Indian and Foreign Languages,

School of Applied Sciences and Humanities

Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research

(Deemed to be University) Vadlamudi, Guntur A.P.

e-mail: lavanya.3914@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper highlights the culturally assimilated practices of Bene Israel Jews residing in India. There are certain cultural references which are influenced from the Hindu and regional cultures. Primarily, some of the religious practices such as idol worship, offerings, language of prayer are different from modern Jewry. Secondly their Bene Israel Jewish cuisine also has regional influence. These intricate details are helpful in understanding the association of the Bene Israel with India. A keen observation on such practices throw light on the life a Jew adapting in a host land. The new adaptations also bridge the cultural gap between the Promised Land and the mother land.

Introduction:

India is a land of diverse cultures. It is hard to subject oneself to the influence of other cultures. It takes a lot of resilience for any religious community to uphold its values from outer influence. Ancient India had dominant Hindu culture. The rulers were able to repatriate those who tried to occupy the land. During Arab conquests there were instances of religious conversions. People struggled to resist them. There were long battles to establish Islam culture. In the chaos commoners were silent sufferers. Slowly the idea of co-existence started to prevail. By the time India got Independence, many religions and cultures are living together in the same place.

Bene Israel is a Jewish community associated with India for the times unknown. It has preserved cultural values for many centuries. Although their arrival was not marked, their presence was seen for centuries. Acculturation and Integration are some of the biggest threats faced by the community. Although they struggled to preserve their Jewish identity, they continued to assimilate in Indian culture. Some of the practices are similar to regional cultures.

Bene Israel Jews had lost their identity during their arrival to India. They preserved their culture by passing down orally to the next generation. In the process of safeguarding, they tend



towards Indian way of practice. Their tendency to make their place among Indian communities created a gap between other Jewish Diaspora. However, Bene Israel Jews are hybrid of both Indian and Jewish cultures. The community witnessed the transition in Jewish practices. They were strict in following dietary laws and celebration of festivals but it had taken liberty in practicing them according to the Indian resources.

Esther David projected the life of Bene Israel Jews in her works. She discussed the challenges the Diasporic community face while preserving the Jewish heritage. She expressed her idea of Home. She has an opinion that all the religions have good things to share and one must move forward with positive spirit. Esther David has bridged the gap between cultures.

The term Diaspora is derived from the Greek words 'Dia'- and 'Spora' which means people of two places. Historically, it referred to the Displacement of Jews. They were displaced from home and left with no identity. Their strength lies in the hope of going back 'Home'. 'When the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, Jews residing in Judea and North Galilee were dispersed...Since then, they have acquired the reputation of being called "Wandering Jews", because, very seldom were they allowed to put down their roots. Because of their dispersion, Jews are a mixed race.' [Evolution of Bene Israel's and their Synagogues in the Konkan, xiii]

Judaism survived cultural assimilation and integration for two thousand years because of the uncompromising nature of the followers. Jews had endured regional and cultural disparities with patience. They did not lose hope in going back to Home. Jews brought the idea of 'Home' and 'Belonging' to wherever possible. They lived in seclusion for years so as to keep intact their religious beliefs. Judaism became the oldest religion in the world and Jews were able to adapt to new age and thought.

'Judaism is the complete culture and civilization of the Jewish people. It possesses all the attributes of language, literature, art, music, customs, laws, institutions and history... Thinking has become a characteristic trait of the Jews as suffering is, or to be ore exact, it has been called "thinking rendered suffering"...Since then, they have become international.' [Evolution of Bene Israels and their Synagogues in the Konkan xiv]

Jews are scattered all over the world. They adapted to the traditions of the place where they had settled. They established good relation with the natives and that helped in their intellectual growth. Jews were able to adapt to new change in culture as they welcomed it with intelligence. The exile with suffering took turn as an opportunity for learning. Two thousand years of exile from motherland gave them time to explore various cultures. In return to Israel, Jews were able better themselves from the rest of the world. At present, the entire world is



looking at Israel for their well-developed Defence technology and Agricultural advancements. It is due to their settlements in various countries as the citizens following Judaism.

In India there are three main Jewish communities. They are Bene Israel, Cochin Jews and Baghdadi Jews. Cochin Jews had settled in the coast of Malabar. They are found in Kerala and Karnataka. Baghdadi Jews are mostly seen in Kolkata and other metropolitan cities. Bene Israel Jews had settled in Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Bene Israel Jews are settled on the Konkan coast in India. Their arrival to India dates back to two thousand years. According to the legend, in the Kingdom of Judah, there were ten tribes of Jews with different names. Bene Israel Jews hail from North Galilee in the kingdom of Judah. Bene Israel in Hebrew means 'Children of Israel'. After the fall of Solomon's First temple, in 175 B.C. Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes tried to persecute Jews from the Judah. In order to escape persecution, they fled in ships with no plan on destination. After wandering for months, they finally decided to land on India as they heard it was land of milk and honey. Unaware of the rocky treacherous sea, their ships got wrecked in rainy storm. They drowned near the Chaul port. All the books and religious relics were lost to the sea. Only seven couples were able to survive and reach the shore of Navgaon.

'When they fled their homeland and landed in India after the shipwreck, the Bene Israel had followed the dictum: mix with the people where you have found a new home. Keep your religion a secret. Let nobody know who you are.' [Book of Esther 199]

Although it was mysterious about the survival of only fourteen women and men, the natives of Konkan coast were helpful and accommodating. People of Navgaon helped them settle in the profession they were mastered. Bene Israel Jews took up oil pressing, farming betel nuts, animal rearing and carpentry as their professions. But earlier, oil pressing profession is considered as a low means of life in India. So they were considered Bene Israel Jews as of low caste.

Bene Israel Jews had remained obscure to the rest of the natives. They maintained the distance in order to secure the knowledge of their culture. They lived in seclusion when it comes to religious and cultural practices. The credibility of holding their roots goes to the Bene Israel women who remained strong during testing times. Women in the group were close to Jewishness. Hence, the community strived through centuries in India.

For many centuries Bene Israel families lead a peaceful life in India. They were given opportunities to flourish. There were doctors, actresses, politicians and prominent people who contributed to the development of Indian society. Esther David and her father Reuben David



were prominent people among the Bene Israel Jews. Reuben David is the famous zoologist and wildlife conservationist. He had established children park named Balavatika and Kamala Nehru Zoological park in Ahmedabad. He was honored with Padma Shri in the year 1975 by the Government of India. His daughter Esther David is a famous novelist and columnist. She worked as sculptor and later turned towards writing. She became the face of Bene Israel Jews in India. She had received the Sahitya Akademi award for English literature in the year 2010 for her novel *Book of Rachel*.

Prior to Esther David, not many writers came up with the idea of sharing the life of this Indian Jewish group. Her novels throw light on the sheltered Jews in India. She brought the much needed recognition for this dying community. By the time of Indian Independence there were around fifty thousand Bene Israel Jews. After Israel was formed, Jews around the world were asked make Aaliyah. Hence, the opportunity to return to the Promised Land was utilized and many people emigrated to Israel. Whereas some people decided to stay back in India to preserve their ancestral memories. After mass migration only few people remained in the villages. At present the community has only few families.

The shrinking population in the community is ringing alarm bells. This would possibly erase their ethnicity in India. There is a need to document the history of their existence in India. 'Without a community, what was the use of a house of prayer? It was just a monument, a relic of the past.' [Book of Rachel 13]

The study also reveals the extent of assimilation that was happened with Indian customs. All the traditions changed are for the wellbeing of the community. There are some positive outcomes which are mentioned in the writings of Esther David. In her work *Book of Rachel*, she mentioned the status of the Bene Israel women in the Konkan province.

'Rachel took pride in her new-found identity, which made her a part of their lives, not a stranger who belonged to a minor community. The way she dressed, behaved and spoke made it easier for them to accept her as one of them.' [Book of Rachel 5]

This already shows the status of women owning the land they lived for a life. India was no longer considered as a host land. It was seen as the place of their forefathers. Esther in *Book of Rachel* says

'She needed to be in the land she had known, a land where her other half, Aaron, was buried, the familiar land which belonged to their forefathers.' [Book of Rachel 3]

Earlier when the Bene Israel Jews started their life. They lived in seclusion. Their prayers were in the language not known to natives. Slowly, the language of prayers is changed from Hebrew to native language. Needless to say that after residing in one place for centuries made



the community to assimilate the religious practices in native language. Of course there is a clear line between the practice of Hindu and Jewish cultural practice. Yet they imitated the Hindu bhajan and Marathi language in their prayers.

'Rachel remembered the Lord by chanting *Deva re Deva*... Humming the Marathi version of *The Lord is my shepherd*, she tried to light a candle... Rachel swept the floor, singing a bhajan to the child Moses floating in a basket on the river Nile. It was a popular Marathi song about the child Krishna. An unknown Jewish poet had changed the name from Krishna to Moses, but the tune was similar to the one sung by Krishna devotees all over Maharashtra. Rachel preferred Marathi bhajans to the complicated Hebrew prayers.' [Book of Rachel 8-13]

Even the beliefs were changing. Judaism is a monotheist religion. There is only God and belief. It was believed that Prophet Elijah ascended to heaven from Mount Sion in Haifa in Israel. But the Bene Israel Jews believed that Prophet Elijah had taken halt on the hill in Khandala in India. The horse hoof marks and chariot wheels' marks are still visible on the rock. The place is considered holy and everyone visit the place with offerings. It is similar to Hindu pilgrimage. There is a belief that Jews had come up with the idea to show that they are no different from native Hindus. In whatever the reasons, the community had assimilated the practice by breaking the important rule of Judaism.

'Rachel believed that the Prophet Elijah had flown to India in his chariot, on his way to heaven from Israel and, as he passed by, he had left his mark on the rock.' [Book of Rachel 140]

Change in the cultural rituals also brought some challenges in the families of Bene Israel communities. Esther David in her work *Book of Esther* had narrated the transformation of a modern educated Jewish family living in urban settlements. When Dander's shifted to Ahmedabad, they were slowly drifting away from rigid Jewish life. They believed the change was towards uplifting the family from backward community to a recognized people in society.

'When David got involved with political and public life, the doors were opened to the outside world, and complications followed. His reformist zeal brought him into conflict with the Jewish community of Ahmedabad. David wanted to simplify rituals and make them easy to understand. But he faced opposition in the synagogue. He was disappointed and started distancing himself from the Synagogue activities. When he changed the method of religious rituals in his own house, he came under severe criticism. But David did not relent. He also felt differently on some other issues concerning the Jewish community. This was the beginning of the Dandekar's alienation from their community... David also became a great advocate of education. He saw to it that his children were all educated.' [Book of Esther 120]

There is a change in the lifestyle of Jews migrated to urban areas. It was due to exposure to modern life and education. The extreme humid weather in Konkan province made the

families choose lighter materials. Esther David mentioned that whenever she looked in the old photographs of her family during gatherings, the attires changed with time for generations. She had put the same detail in her work.

“In the family photograph of these days the men are dressed formally, like Englishmen, and some like Muslims and Parsis. The girls are in frocks and ribbons. The elder women are still in their nine-yard Maharashtrian saris or Parsi-style Gujarati saris. Only woman is wearing a Gujarati –style ghagra-choli with a half sari; the material of her blouse is the cotton and silk mashru which is still woven and worn in Gujarat.’ [Book of Esther 120-121]

After a careful observation on details of assimilated practices of Indian Jews, it is understood that they became part of Indian culture. Their life in India started in skepticism but they handled their fear with patience. The Bene Israel community is also building its own identity while contributing towards nations progress. At present the mass migration had resulted in shrinking population. There is a need in preserving the memories of great association. Their life in India is showcasing the liberal view of India towards Jews. They bridged the gap of cultures. Their assimilation in Indian culture proved India is a land of multiple cultures and the Bene Israel Jews are part of it.

References

1. Anushree Madhavan, & Anushree Madhavan. (2021b, May 29). *Inside the Indian Jewish kitchen*. *The New Indian Express*.
2. Basu, K. (2021, August 20). *Pass on those jumping potatoes and celebrate Jewish diaspora delicacies*. *The Telegraph*.
3. Borges, J. (2024, April 11). *India's Bene Israel food creates a fusion of coconut and kosher*. *New Lines Magazine*.
4. David, E. (2002). *The Walled City: A Novel*. Syracuse University Press.
5. David, E. (2002). *Book of Esther*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.
6. David, E. (2006). *Book of Rachel*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.
7. David, E. (2013, November 19). *I am a seed of the tree*. India International Centre. New Delhi.
8. David, E. (2021). *Bene appétit: The Cuisine of Indian Jews*. HarperCollins.
9. Desk, T. W. (2021, April 25). *Esther David's book showcases culinary heritage of Jews in India - The Tribune*. *The Tribune*.
10. Esther David. (2016, August 9). *Esther David introducing Bene Israel community of Ahmedabad [Video]*. YouTube.
11. Judah, I. (2017). *Evolution of the bene Israel and their Synagogues in the konkan*. Viswakarma Publications.
12. Katz, N. (Ed.). (1995). *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*. Manohar Books. New Delhi.
13. Lobo, J. (2021, July 29). *Bene Appétit: In a new cookbook, Esther David documents Indian Jewish community's largely unknown cuisine*. *Firstpost*.
14. Mollan, C. (2021, May 14). *Food, faith and Jewish tradition: Esther David on her new book* *Hindustan Times*. *Hindustan Times*.
15. Muthalaly, S. (2021, July 12). *Esther David collaborates with Indian Jewish communities to record recipes for 'Bene Appétit: The Cuisine of the Indian Jews.'* *The Hindu*.



16. Robbins, K. X., & Sohoni, P. (2017). *Jewish heritage of the Deccan: Mumbai, the Northern Konkan, Pune*. Jico Publishing House.
17. Roland, J. G. (1980). *The Jews of India: Communal Survival or the End of a Sojourn?* Jewish Social Studies.
18. Ram, S. G. (2023, September 11). *A Maha rock bearing mystical imprints binds Jews & Hindus*. *The Times of India*
19. Rawat, S. (2021, November 15). *Indian Jews live a very secretive life: Esther David on writing a book on Indian Jews' recipes "Bene Appetit."* *The Times of India*.
20. Weil, S. (2002). *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art & Life-cycle*. Marg Publications.