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Minority Status for Jews May Help Other Religious Minorities

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The Maharashtra government's recent decision to grant 'minority' status to the microscopic Jewish community in the state opens an interesting debate. It should have a larger impact not only on how the Union Government looks at the Jewish community but also its overall attitude towards other smaller religious minorities in the country.

The decision by the Devendra Fadnavis government would enable the Jewish community to benefit from various concessions and privileges that are currently available to members of other religious minorities - Muslims, Christians or Parsis in the state.

Maharashtra is the second Indian state to grant the minority status to Jews after West Bengal accorded the minority status a decade ago. The number of Jews in West Bengal is less than 50.

The move should enable the educational institutions run by the Jewish community in Maharashtra to be eligible for the minority status, and as Fadnavis indicated the members of the community could now avail scholarship from the government or set up educational institutions. The step would also ease procedural issues like recognition of Jewish marriages, issuance of birth and death certificates or marking of Jewish holidays.

Jews would also be eligible for financial support for religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Besides the nation-level Hajj subsidy to Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca, Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem get financial support in states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Jews of Maharashtra could now get similar support.

The presence of Jews in Maharashtra, especially in Mumbai, was the principal reason for the

presence of the Israeli consulate since the early 1950s. Initially, it facilitated the migration of Jews from or through India to Israel. Gradually the consulate emerged as the only Israeli representation in India during the long years of non-relations between September 1950, when India recognized the Jewish state, and January 1992, when India established full diplomatic relations with Israel. The presence of Jews has also been a bridge between Maharashtra and Israel and chief ministers and other leaders, including Sharad Pawar, have been taking part in Marathi conventions held periodically in Israel. Indeed, 1 May is marked as Maharashtra Day by the members of the Indian Jews community in Israel.

Jewish presence in India is traced back to the period before the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple by the Romans. The oldest functioning synagogue in the Commonwealth is in Cochin and was established in 1567. Despite the historic association, the Jews are a microscopic but diverse community that includes Bene Israelis, Cochin Jews, Baghdadi Jews as well as Bene Menashe.

In 1948, when the state of Israel was established, Jews population in India was estimated at about 30,000, large portions of them being refugees from Europe as well as Islamic countries in the Middle East and most immigrated to Israel. Family reasons compelled significant number of Baghdadi Jews, who came to India during the British Raj from the present day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan to emigrate to Israel.

According to 2001 figures, India has about 4,650 Jews and out of whom 2,466 live in Maharashtra, with the rest in other parts of the country.

It is not widely known that amid the nationalist struggle former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru argued in favour of India providing asylum to a limited number of Jewish refugees from Europe, and for their employment. He faced opposition not only from the British but also from a powerful section within the Congress party. Nehru felt that the Jewish refugees could contribute to India's growth and progress, but in the late 1930s, he had to face opposition from the then Congress President Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Some of the European Jews, who took refuge in India during the inter-war period, married prominent personalities like B K Nehru, a cousin of India's first prime minister and later India's ambassador to the US and Shiv Rao, one of the principal organizers of the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi during March-April 1947.

Over the years, despite being small, members of the Jewish community have made rich contributions to the social, educational, cultural and literary landscape of India. Since the early 19th century, the Sassoon family has been active in promoting various educational and philanthropic institutions in Mumbai, including Sir Jacob Sassoon High School that was established in 1908. Some of the notable members of the community include poet, playwright,

editor and art critic Nissim Ezekiel, who was awarded the Padma Shri in 1988; Vice-Admiral Benjamin Abraham Samson, who served in the British Indian Army during the Second World War and his daughter Leela Samson, a Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer, and former head of Kalakshetra and Sangeet Natak Academi.

The most widely-known Jewish face in the county has been Lieutenant General J F R Jacob, a key architect in the liberation of Bangladesh in December 1971, who died early this year. Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, who volunteers as the rabbi in the Judah Haim synagogue in New Delhi, has been an active member in various inter-religious and inter-faith dialogues in India and abroad.

This issue of Jewish welfare has become a non-partisan affair for the parliamentarians representing Maharashtra as well as states like Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. Cutting across party lines, for example, during the previous session of parliament, Supriya Sule (Nationalist Congress Party), Heena Vijaykumar Gavitt, Sunil Kumar Singh and Chandel Kunwar Pushendra Singh (BJP), Rajvee Shankararao Satav (Congress) and Anil Desai (Shiv Sena) wanted to know if the Narendra Modi government at the Centre “has received any proposal from the Jewish community demanding grant of minority status”.

Admitting that such a proposal was received, Minister of State for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, informed the Lok Sabha on 4 May: “Office of the Registrar General, India, has intimated that the Jews/Judaism religion is classified under the category ‘Other Religion and Persuasion’ in the census of India. No timeline has been fixed by the Central Government to take a decision to declare Jewish community as minority community.”

An early move by the Modi government in this direction would have a wider impact and would extend the benefits of some of the official policies aimed at the minority communities. For example, fellowships for students in institutions of higher learning under the Maulana Azad National Scholarship for Minority Students are available only to “minority communities notified under Section 2 (c) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992” and not to the Jews.

The move by the Fadnavis government could spur a similar move at the national level. As has been argued recently in the pages of *Swarajya*, the National Commission for Minorities addresses the concerns of only the majorities among the minorities. It considers only Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsis and recently Jains as minorities. The Jews are the notable and glaring omission.

Time has come to do the morally and politically correct thing and tilt the balance of the commission, its mandate and focus in favour of the smaller religious minorities. Recognizing Jews as a national minority would be the first step in this direction.

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