

Negotiating Identity: Being Indian and Jewish in America

By Joan G. Roland

At their peak, in the early 1950s, the Jewish communities in India numbered about 30,000. They were divided into three distinct groups: the Cochin Jews of the Malabar coast in southern India; the Bene Israel of Maharashtra (including Bombay, the Konkan, and Pune) and Gujarat in the west; and the Baghdadi or Iraqi Jews of Calcutta and Bombay. Having never experienced anti-Semitism or discrimination at the hands of their Indian hosts, the first two groups have maintained their identities as Jews over many centuries. (The Baghdadis arrived later.) After the Partition of India in 1947, followed by the emergence of the independent State of Israel a year later, the majority of Indian Jews emigrated voluntarily. Most, especially the Cochins and the Bene Israel, went to Israel, where there are now, at best estimate, perhaps 70,000 Jews of Indian origin. Others, especially Baghdadis, went to the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Now there are fewer than 5,000 Jews left in India.

The "minority label" of Indian Jews varies according to the country in which they live. In India they are Jews, a religious minority. In Israel they are Indians, an ethnic designation. Elsewhere, they could be considered a "double" minority; they are part of both the Jewish and Indian diasporas. They may also be viewed as transnationals for, as with other South Asians, there are very strong relationships and considerable movement and interaction among Bene Israel in India, Israel, the United States, and elsewhere, although the communities differ substantially in size and status. Peggy Levitt argues that "the term 'transnational' recognizes that religious people, practices, and institutions are 'rooted in particular places but also transcend their borders.'"¹ A number of Bene Israel who went from India to Israel and lived there for awhile, or some who were born there, later migrated to the United States. They are a subset of Indian Jewish immigrants in the United States, and their experience in Israel contributes to a transnational identity. Even more than some of their counterparts raised in India, they were quite Westernized and did not find American life difficult to adjust to.² Thus the perspective of transnationalism, which assumes that "social, cultural, and religious connections cross national borders," requires us to look at how Indian Jews are connected to communities and families worldwide, which is an important component of their identity.³

In the United States (as in India), Indian Jews constitute a tiny percentage of the Indian population, which, in 2012, reached 3.2 million. It is impossible to estimate the number of Indian Jews that are in the United States, but it is probably fewer than 1,000 persons of at least partial Indian origin, mainly Bene Israel, including the second and third generation. Books on Indian immigrants in the United States may not even mention the Jewish community! This article focuses on the Bene Israel in the United States who, although they are spread out all over the country, form a small concentration in the Greater New York area, including New Jersey and Connecticut.

Although, for the most part, fluent in English upon arrival, Bene Israel immigrants have faced a complex set of challenges: not only to become Americans, but often also to be accepted as Jews by the American Jewish community. Bhatia maintains that having "Indian ethnicity" affects the social networks, choice of spouses, and the way Indians organize their life in the diaspora.⁴ But the Jewishness of the Bene Israel has added an additional layer to their integration. Most work on Indian immigrants has examined the theme of Indian ethnicity in the context of evolving American concepts of race and identity, including religious identity.⁵ The construction of identity is particularly complicated for the Bene Israel in the United States for they can be considered a "double" diaspora or minority.

Their "otherness" could be defined both ethnically and religiously, depending on the reference group. Shukla argues that "membership in a diaspora, forged through migration, profoundly shapes what it means to be a subject, just as the process of becoming part of any constructed community, religious, national, or familial does."⁶ One has to ask to what extent have the Bene Israel retained, or transformed Indian and/or Indian Jewish identity? How has this been affected by their strategy of adaptation to align themselves with Jews in America? Religion, important in India, is also a powerful force and marker of identity for immigrants in formation and preservation of group identity in the United States. Leonard maintains that it is an important way of being different and yet integrating into American society.⁷ Bhatia reminds us that immigrants seek connectedness "to their community by participating in religious rituals and other social events that enable them to feel they belong."⁸ Places of worship serve as social and cultural centers as well as offering religious services.⁹ Their Jewish identity is particularly important for the Bene Israel. Have they faced religious or racial discrimination? Have they negotiated a transcendence of Judaism over Indian ethnicity? Are they bicultural? Multicultural? How is this affected by the marriage patterns of young immigrants who arrived single and of the second generation, who generally do not marry Indian Jews?

My research focuses on the identity, educational and socioeconomic status, religious observances, and degree of assimilation of both the original Bene Israel immigrants and the second generation. For this article I will present some preliminary material in a few of these categories, drawing on 85 responses to survey questionnaires, 28 in-depth interviews, and the community and general press. My informants range in age from 26 to 85. They have resided in the United States from 5 years to 58 years.

Early Immigrants

In the 1950s and 1960s, many Indian Jews who may have wanted to immigrate to the United States could not do so easily, due to foreign exchange restrictions by the Indian government and the U.S. national origins quota system, which effectively banned Asian migration. A Bene Israel who got a student scholarship or found a sponsor could go to the United States; otherwise one would have to select another destination, usually Israel. In 1965 the United States passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which enabled many more migrants, especially professional or highly skilled technical workers, from the so-called Third World to enter. Bene Israel—who were now able to migrate to America—were more likely to come from cities and large towns in India, while those from the villages generally went to Israel, which subsidized their travel and absorption expenses.

The first Bene Israel immigrant generation, those who arrived in the United States in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s (26 percent of my sample), formed a small community, especially in the Greater New York area. Few tried to integrate into American Jewish congregations. They practiced Indian Jewish culture in their homes, as do Hindus in America who, in addition to going to temples, perform *puja* prayers and rituals and transmit the religious culture to second-generation Indian Americans at home.¹⁰ Feeling somewhat marginalized, many of these early immigrants were not strong enough at first to come out and say, "Yes, I'm Indian, I'm Jewish and I'm proud to be that."¹¹ They, especially some of the women who did not go out to work, had few American friends; they basically stayed within an Indian or Indian Jewish environment, socially. In many religions, new arrivals from different races and ethnic groups are often seen as outsiders due to the persistence of the racial barrier in the United States.¹² Other Indian immigrants, non-Jews, have reported some hesitation to invite Americans to their homes, especially if they were fairly modest.¹³ One of the Bene Israel's more assimilated leaders tried to encourage the community to mix more with Americans, even suggesting they develop an interest in American sports so they would have something to talk about. Even today, although a few older Bene Israel attend Sephardic synagogues, many have never stepped inside an Ashkenazi synagogue because they feel that the liturgy and service are so totally different that they would not understand

anything or be able to follow the prayers. Most Bene Israel refer to themselves as Indian Jews, but a few occasionally identify themselves as Sephardic, mainly as a way of saying they are not Ashkenazi.

Shukla points out that "underscoring relationships to British rule frames the cultures of Indians abroad historically and also embeds them in a global framework."¹⁴ It is possible that the earliest Indian Jewish arrivals came to the United States, as they did to Israel, with attitudes of the colonized: deferential toward "whites" and perhaps feeling inferior as Indians and also not fully accepted as Jews. They encountered negative stereotypes of India as poor and backward. A marriage controversy in Israel in the 1960s, where the Chief Rabbinate questioned whether marriages and divorces among the Bene Israel in India had taken place according to Jewish law, affected some Bene Israel in the United States. Nevertheless, the early immigrants still retain the Indian Jewish culture and traditions they grew up with, of which they are increasingly proud.

The original Indian Jewish organization in the United States, Congregation Bina, started in the Greater New York area in 1981 with about 25 to 30 families, primarily—but not totally—Bene Israel, and a lot of American well-wishers. The goal was to preserve their special culture, traditions, and music.¹⁵ They put out a quarterly to bi-annual newsletter, *Kol Bina*, off and on for about 15 years and were quite active in the 1980s and early 1990s, with a mailing list of about 1,000, not all of whom were Jews from India.¹⁶ Congregation Bina organized prayers and held a variety of holiday functions in homes, rented halls, temples or vegetarian Indian restaurants in New York and New Jersey. In this respect they were similar to other small Indian immigrant communities, such as the Jains, who started meeting in family gatherings in the 1960s although they eventually found permanent space in Elmhurst, Queens.¹⁷

The Bene Israel gave talks to other organizations. As with other Indian religious communities, members who were active in religious worship frequently became spokespersons to explain their traditions to Americans.¹⁸ American newspapers often published long illustrated articles on their history, customs, celebrations of holidays, and special recipes.¹⁹ In the winter of 1985-1986, as part of a city-wide Festival of India, the Jewish Museum in New York mounted an exhibition of Indian Jewish religious items, artifacts, and photographs. This was enhanced by Bene Israel participation in several days of programming on their history, customs, and culture, including the presentation of a Bene Israel *Kirtan*, a drama with readings from the biblical text interspersed with music.²⁰

By the 1980s, some Bene Israel in the New York area belonged to American synagogues, usually Orthodox ones; a few sent their children to Conservative Jewish day schools or Orthodox yeshivas. In that period, Elijah Jhirad, the president of Congregation Bina, wrote that the Bene Israel were fully accepted by the Jewish community, and noted that Shearith Israel, a well-known Sephardic synagogue, loaned prayer books and a Torah Scroll to the organization.²¹ Unfortunately Congregation Bina succumbed to factionalism by the mid-1990s and sporadic efforts to resuscitate it were not very successful.

Lessinger and Khandelwal have commented that early Indian Muslim and Christian immigrants to New York who initially attended prayers at existing mosques and churches with coreligionists of other ethnicities preferred to create their own places of worship.²² For a couple of years, starting in 1983, the Bene Israel rented the Village Temple, a Reform temple in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, in order to hold Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services in their traditional Indian manner. After a hiatus of almost a decade when they did not hold services there, they resumed services at the Village Temple, which have been continuing now for the last 18 years. Somewhere between 40 and 80 persons attend, the larger number for Kol Nidre, the service on the eve of Yom Kippur. As in India, the prayers are entirely in Hebrew, with additional sheets supplementing the Sephardic prayer book, but many are recited according to Indian customs, melodies, and trope. When the Bene Israel prayer leader, Romiel Daniel, an ordained rabbi and a Yeshiva University-trained cantor, tried to introduce some Ashkenazi melodies for variation (his teachers at Yeshiva were surprised and proud that an Indian Jew could chant Ashkenazi melodies so well, with an

Indian touch), the Bene Israel congregation objected.²³ They came all the way into Manhattan for the unique Indian liturgy and melodies, they said. Otherwise, they could have gone to Ashkenazi synagogues in their own communities. Indeed, some Bene Israel in the New York area tend not to go to Bene Israel High Holy Day services. A few observe the Orthodox prohibition against traveling on Yom Kippur, the Sabbath, and most Jewish holidays. They (and less observant Bene Israel) might attend a neighborhood synagogue.

Those Bene Israel who settled in American cities and towns where there were no other community members near by, went to local Ashkenazi synagogues, mainly Reform or Conservative, and most found they were soon accepted. In addition to Hebrew, these services have a strong English component (as did the prayers in the Jewish Religious Union, the progressive synagogue in Bombay, to which some of their families had belonged), and the Bene Israel learned the prayers and melodies.

The issue of acceptance (are they "really Jews?") by American Jews is an on-going one in some places. Of my total sample, including more recent arrivals, 57 percent felt accepted by American Jews, 26 percent did not, and 17 percent responded "sometimes." One felt no need to be accepted by American Jews. In 2008, however, Romiel Daniel said, "The acceptance here has been more than what we all dreamed for. We want to integrate within mainstream Judaism, not assimilate."²⁴

The Community Today

Since 2006 there has been a new organization, The Indian Jewish Congregation of the United States, based in New York, with an international mailing list. It has an excellent website designed by professional younger members of the community and puts out a 12-15 page electronic newsletter periodically, with news of the community in the United States, India, Israel, and occasionally in other countries as well. The well-illustrated newsletter includes religious homilies by Romiel Daniel, the president of the organization, announcements, and accounts of community events such as births, weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvah (coming of age) ceremonies, and deaths (along with obituaries); historical reminiscences and maps; biographies of well-known Indian Jewish personalities; and Indian Jewish recipes.²⁵ The new organization has partnered a few times with the well-known Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Manhattan, which has agreed to help the community promote and integrate Indian Jewish culture while at the same time retaining its identity and to foster personal interaction with other Jews. The JCC has hosted events, holiday celebrations, including one for Indian Independence Day, a mock Bene Israel wedding, film screenings, etc.²⁶

The community has held Simchat Torah services (to celebrate the end of the annual cycle of reading the Torah and the beginning of a new one) and Hanukkah celebrations in various venues—the latter sometimes at the Indian Consulate General where Indian and Israeli dances are performed, twice at City Hall, or even at an Ashkenazi Conservative synagogue in Queens—a borough of New York City containing the highest concentration of Indians in the United States as well as Jews from all over the world. In 2009, the Bene Israel Purim celebration, featuring Bollywood dances and music, was attended by many ethnic Jewish communities in Queens.

The Younger Generation and Bene Israel Heritage

Older members of the community often feel that many of the more recent first generation, especially younger Bene Israel immigrants, seem less attached to their Indian Jewish heritage and are not well versed in it because the community in India itself had dwindled and they were not brought up with those traditions as intensely as the earlier generation had been. They were not exposed to the same traditions, values, and ways and therefore do not have a deep-rooted feeling about the value of retaining their heritage and/or the desire

to pass it on to the next generation. Younger people in recent decades were not observant, the older generation argues: They just went for prayers in India because they were told to, but didn't understand much about what was going on. This was also true of younger Bene Israel raised in Israel. Some members of the older generation feel that the younger people did not appreciate the effort that was put in by their forebears to retain the Jewish traditions in India, where even kosher meat was hard to obtain. Now in the United States, they find that their knowledge of their own culture and tradition is limited, and they would have to study them in order to preserve them. But many younger people, more recently arrived in the United States, have a different perspective on their identity. Rather than learn about Indian Jewish history and customs, they feel it is just easier to fit into American Ashkenazi Reform and Conservative synagogues. They understand the English services better than the Orthodox Hebrew ones and prefer them to what they had in India, so they abandon their own traditions. A few women are members of Hadassah, a major Jewish women's organization. Altogether, 44 percent of my sample attended Bene Israel services and 53 percent attended American synagogues—often the same people. Some 28 percent did not attend at all.

When asked how their practices have changed, 31 percent said they had become more religious, 22 percent less, and 47 percent remained the same, so it is hard to draw conclusions here. It is likely, however, that second-generation Bene Israel in the United States will be practicing a rather different form of Judaism than that of their immigrant parents.²⁷

Because the community is so tiny, it is rare that Bene Israel in the United States marry other American Bene Israel, although they may wed members of their community from other countries in semi-arranged marriages. Many recent immigrants or second-generation Bene Israel have married non-Jews (including Indians), and this intermarriage leads to a number of variations. Some play down their Jewish background. Others, especially those who have married Hindus, will celebrate festivals of both religions, particularly with their children. In other cases (as happens often among Jews in general in the United States), especially where the mother is Jewish, the children have been raised Jewish, whether or not the spouse converts to Judaism. When Bene Israel marry Jews from different backgrounds, the Bene Israel family hopes that some of the Indian traditions will be maintained. Most say they would like to pass down at least some of their religious customs to their children. Rudrappa and Khandelwal point out that many Hindu Indian families in America worry that their children do not seem to embrace Indian culture and send them to Hindu culture summer camps. Few members of the younger generation consider how they might pass on Hinduism or Indian culture to their own children.²⁸ Leonard maintains that the children are products of the American cultural context and are comfortable in the ways of that context.²⁹ Purkayastha writes,

The non-participation of the second generation in "religious activities" was recently apparent as one of the temples conducted a "youth survey" that tried to find out why the Hindu second generation did not attend the temple regularly.³⁰

Similarly, a few members of the original Bene Israel community in New York want so much to hold events that young Indian Jews will come to and thus develop an interest in the Indianness of their Jewish heritage, but it is an uphill battle. There are not that many children in the area any more, and families head more toward local synagogues, holding life-cycle rituals there, or not at all. Many younger Bene Israel who are practicing Judaism want everything to be American, not Indian. They want their children to adjust to and accept what American Jewish educational programs offer. Nevertheless, they may retain a few practices and melodies at home. Since the older generation is not strong and numerous enough to revitalize and transmit the tradition, the Greater New York community is not as vibrant as it was in the 1990s, when more people did come to Indian Purim, Simchat Torah, or Hanukkah celebrations and held communal seders, bringing young children. But at least

the older generation still comes for religious services on the High Holy Days and Simchat Torah. The Bene Israel sing and chant their prayers in Hebrew with gusto, using catchy Indian melodies. Outsiders have commented on the enhanced sense of community that seems to prevail.

Romiel Daniel stated, "American Jews need to know that there are communities where people have been practicing traditional Judaism for over 2,000 years. They need to learn about other cultures, incorporate them into mainstream Judaism, and get to know their rituals."³¹ In fact, most American Jews have become quite interested in "exotic" Jewish communities. Synagogues, Jewish community centers, women's organizations, and even schools will often have a lecture series on different communities: Ethiopian, Yemenite, Moroccan, Indian, etc. Often Bene Israel are asked to give a talk about the Jews of India and their customs (sometimes followed by an Indian meal!); younger ones will e-mail the president of the Indian Jewish Congregation of the United States, asking what can they read.³² A few Indian Jews have used their unusual backgrounds and talents to write, speak, make art, or perform traditional music professionally. Some have authored cook books. Bene Israel have staged mock weddings in their traditional style and other cultural programs for broader audiences. A very successful Bene Israel artist, Siona Benjamin, who immigrated in 1986, centers her paintings around the theme of "finding home," in which she blends imagery and symbolism from Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam as well as from pop culture. Not all Bene Israel appreciate this mixture, as they feel it implies that their community has assimilated to other Indian religions.³³ Other Bene Israel artists have exhibited work that does not necessarily draw on their Indian or Jewish experiences. Purkayastha argues that "ethnicity is not about the transmission of cultural templates through the generations. Instead ethnicity is actively constructed within situated contexts."³⁴ When asked if they think Americans have respect for Indian culture, 68 percent of my informants said yes, 22 percent said no, 11 percent said educated Americans do.

Issues of Identity

The question of self-perceptions of identity needs further exploration. Lessinger has pointed out that Indian immigrants construct identities that are complex and many-layered.³⁵ Bhatia has shown how the voices of the majority culture shape the racial and cultural identity of the Indian diaspora in the United States. He writes,

Migration, by its very nature of movement, has significant implications for how Indians view their personal and collective identity through the categories of nationality, ethnicity, and racial identity.³⁶

My survey questionnaire listed seven categories: Jewish, Indian-Jewish, Indian, Indian-American, American, American Jewish, and other, and asked people to rank them in order of priority of how they saw themselves. The options were perceived, I believe, as ethno-religious categories, rather than racial.³⁷ Across the board, not factoring in variables of age or length of stay, 33 percent of the Bene Israel saw themselves first as Indian Jewish, 17 percent as Jewish, and 22 percent as American. If one combines the categories that were selected as either first or second choice, 50 percent selected Indian Jewish, 37 percent Jewish, and 26 percent American. "American" could have signified citizenship or culture. Interestingly, very few (15 percent) put down Indian, Indian American, or American Jewish as first or second choice. No one wrote "Israeli Indian" or "Israeli American" in the "other" category, although quite a few had been born in or lived in Israel before coming to the United States. A number of respondents who have been in the United States for quite awhile but were not American citizens were less likely to choose an "American" category. Bhatia has pointed out that some Indians see "American" as "white Anglo-Saxon" and feel that they will never really be seen as one even if they have citizenship.³⁸ Thus the Bene Israel negotiate a multilayered ethnicity. One of the few who considers himself Indian first

and Indian Jewish second, even though he has been in the United States for 16 years and is a citizen remarked: "Wherever I go, people say, 'Oh, you're Indian' not 'oh, you're a Jew'." One young woman expressed it well: "If people are talking about religion, I say I'm a Jew. If they're talking about issues of ethnicity, I say I'm from India." In almost all cases, children who were born in the United States or who came before adolescence, consider themselves Americans. In college or university, however, although some may join Jewish organizations, a few find themselves involved with Indian or South Asian Student groups. I have not investigated the extent to which Bene Israel students consider themselves "people of color," a commonly referred to categorization by this age group. R. Radhakrishnan noted that second-generation Indian Americans felt they could not escape being *marked* as different by virtue of their skin color, their family background, and other ethnic traits, while Khandelwal mentions that Indian college students struggle with the concept of exclusive racial identity and even the role of religion in their identity as Indians with the rise of Hindu fundamentalism during the 1980s and 1990s.³⁹ Purkayastha suggests that "children of high-status professionals who appear to be integrated into the mainstream, are most likely to choose ethnic labels that acknowledge their parents' national origins."⁴⁰ They are comfortable with hyphenated labels because they are comfortable celebrating their cultural heritage in a pluralistic America. A study of Bene Israel college students might illuminate these issues.

Bene Israel share the "nostalgia for home" of the non-Jewish Indian diaspora. When asked what they missed the most about India, almost without exception, the Bene Israel—like other Indian immigrants—cite the warmth and sense of community they felt they had there.⁴¹ Most feel some affinity with other Indians. About 70 percent of my sample speak of a special connection with non-Jewish Indians in the United States; about 15 percent say somewhat. Those in business and computer industries are especially likely to socialize with other Indians. The same is true for those who live in small communities where there are few other Indians; they may seek each other out. None of my respondents belonged to the major Indian immigrant organizations (the Association of Indians in America or the Federation of Indian Associations in America) in the United States. Fenton argues that South Asian Americans "appear to have a strong interest in maintaining their Indian identity and looking within their own communities for cultural support."⁴² Bene Israel in the United States seem to want to retain many aspects of Indian culture but many look more to inclusion with the American Jewish community than with the broader Indian community.

Rudrappa argues that retention of ethnic cultures and networks "is now seen to potentially facilitate the social mobility of new post-1965 immigrants....*Today, being ethnic makes one a good American.*"⁴³ Consumption plays an important role in the retention of culture. As with other Indians, food prepared at home by Bene Israel women continues the tradition of Indian cuisine.⁴⁴ Most members of the community enjoy partaking of Indian food and some do so while maintaining kosher (according to Jewish law) kitchens. They may purchase the ingredients from shops in the Little Indias of the Greater New York area. Even those who have been in the United States for many years prefer traditional Bene Israel specialties—which they laboriously make at home—to Ashkenazi style food for Jewish holidays.

Many, but not all, Bene Israel like Bollywood films and rent videotapes and DVDs. The older generation watches Indian television programming on weekends.⁴⁵ They also read—in print editions or online—the American press, Indian immigrant weekly newspapers such as *India Abroad*, *News India-Times*, and the more recent *India Monitor*, as well as Indian papers published in India. It is worth mentioning that John Perry, for many years the editor-owner of *News India-Times*, which strongly supported Indian nationalism and the conservative BJP party, is a Bene Israel who had also worked for ten years as a journalist in Israel.⁴⁶ The younger generation is more likely to read the press online; those who have come from Israel may keep up with the Israeli press in this fashion. The more educated Bene Israel state that they enjoy reading books about India or by Indian authors and, a few, especially the first generation, may attend classical Indian dance or music concerts.⁴⁷ Unlike

many Indian American girls, few Bene Israel children study Bharatnatyam, an Indian classical dance form that is a marker of Indian and feminine identity, primarily because it has a Hindu religious repertory.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the Bene Israel, like other Indian communities, will sometimes have Indian classical dancers perform at functions (my sample was not large enough to comment on the extent to which Indian Jewish teenagers enjoy the latest Indian pop and fusion music such as Bhangra).

Many Bene Israel still speak Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi with others and some know enough to enjoy theatrical performances in these languages, especially in Marathi, which take place in areas of dense Indian population. Those in the Greater New York area have attended cultural events at the Indian Consulate, which has sponsored special Indian Jewish focused programs. Consular representatives attend Indian Jewish functions held elsewhere. The same relationship prevails between Bene Israel and the Indian Embassy in Washington, DC. Older women, and even some of the younger ones, will wear saris for such occasions as well as for weddings, synagogue attendance on the High Holidays, or other Indian functions. Men have worn kurtas.

Bene Israel have marched as a community, along with other Indian religious communities, in the India Day parades. Although they do not participate organizationally in the Diwali events held in New York City, because Diwali has Hindu religious significance, some individuals go to the annual Diwali festival held at the South Street Seaport in lower Manhattan sponsored by the New York chapter of the Association of Indians in America. They enjoy the food and crafts stalls and the performances at this fair which, according to Khandelwal, has become an ethnic festival and the leading cultural event for all Indians. It enables them to proudly represent their culture to other Americans.⁴⁹

Socioeconomic Factors

Because their economic status was partially determined by U.S. immigration regulations, which privileged educated and skilled migrants, the Bene Israel reflect the overall middle- to upper- middle-class position of most Indian immigrants. Ninety percent of Bene Israel in the United States see themselves as middle class (not including lower-middle) or above: 8 percent see themselves as upper class and 46 percent as upper middle. Only 10 percent reported they were lower middle or working class. This, of course, is self-perception and occasionally a married couple may even disagree on their status. It also partly depends on whether Bene Israel are comparing their standard of living to that in India, Israel, or the United States. Perhaps because the community is so small, there is less of a sense of class stratification than among the general Indian community in the United States. Most fit the stereotype of "model minority" community.⁵⁰ My respondents of all ages and both genders included accountants, engineers, lawyers, computer specialists, physicians, dentists, pharmacists, chemists, academics, school teachers, social workers, business executives, architects, educational psychologists, and electronics specialists. Sixty-four percent had masters degrees, doctorates, or medical or law degrees. This is at least equal to the profile of all Indian immigrants in New York, most of whom value higher education as a route to social mobility.⁵¹ Like immigrants from other countries, the earlier immigrant generation often took jobs that were below what they had had in India, but ended up with a better life style. Although Indian immigrants who arrived after the mid-1980s, especially under the family reunification laws, were more likely to be less educated and more concentrated in blue-collar jobs, only a few of the Bene Israel would be considered working class.⁵² Younger people, who came for school and/or with degrees, got good jobs quickly. They have more confidence in themselves and in India, they know that they're equal or better and will succeed. Therefore they mix more with other Americans than earlier immigrants' may have.

The vast majority of Bene Israel, especially those raised in the United States, say that they have encountered no ethnic or racial discrimination or prejudice, although a few report specific incidents. Those who have not succeeded as well as they would have liked will occasionally cite Indian ethnicity rather than religious belief as a factor. The fact that

they report so little prejudice is a little surprising, as many Indian immigrants in the United States do report having experienced discrimination of one sort or another, especially at work, either because of skin color, foreignness, or accent. Bauman and Saunders point out that many scholars believe that the early Indian immigrants may have "turned a blind eye to the racism they themselves face," but that the second generation is more likely to voice awareness of it.⁵³

Bene Israel as a Transnational Diaspora

As suggested above, the concept of transnationalism provides a different angle from which to view an immigrant community. Levitt argues,

...many immigrants don't trade in their home country membership card for an American one but belong to several communities at once. They become part of the United States and stay part of their ancestral homes at the same time. They challenge the taken-for-granted dichotomy between either/or, United States or homeland, and assimilation versus multiculturalism by showing it is possible to be several things simultaneously, and in fact required in a global world.⁵⁴

Bhatia has discussed how the experiences of the second generation and the more recent first-generation immigrants in the United States are shaped by the back-and-forth movement between multiple homes and societies, communication between the home and host cultures via media and technology, commercial linkages...the presence of a social network across borders, and the immigrant communities' emphasis on preserving their home culture.⁵⁵

Among Indian Jews, there seems to be an ethno-religious transnational solidarity throughout their diaspora. Many Bene Israel in the United States retain an active involvement with India and Israel and regularly exchange phone calls, Internet and social media communication, and actual visits among extended family and friends networks in all three countries as well as in Canada, the UK, and Australia. Occasionally marriages are arranged transnationally. They may seek work enabling them to travel to these countries where they have close connections. Accounts of trips to India are reported in the community newsletter.⁵⁶ As is true in the Hindu community vis-à-vis temples in India, some U.S.-based Bene Israel send substantial charitable contributions to Indian Jewish institutions in both Israel and India. They donate many books, CDs, and videos, and other materials to libraries in their home country. They are greatly concerned about the maintenance of Jewish cemeteries and schools in India.⁵⁷ The newsletter reports frequently on Jewish events in India (and occasionally on Bene Israel events in Canada) such as holiday celebrations, synagogue anniversaries, performances, and lectures.⁵⁸

The Bene Israel react quickly, often supported by non-Indian Jewish scholars, to speeches and articles from all over the world that they feel misrepresent or insult their community. They are particularly sensitive to references to the Bene Israel community in India as being "black." The occasional use of Hitler and Nazi-related iconography in India by persons who know little about the Holocaust has drawn the ire of the Bene Israel. They joined their coreligionists in Mumbai and others in a vigorous protest campaign in 2006, when a restaurant calling itself Hitler's Cross and displaying Nazi insignia, opened in Navi Mumbai. The restaurant withdrew the name and insignia. A similar objection was raised when a new line of bedspreads called the "NAZI Collection," using the swastika on a brochure (the promoters said that NAZI stood for "New Arrival Zone of India") appeared in stores. After receiving letters from India and other places abroad, the dealer apologized profusely and withdrew the line. A recent incident occurred in Ahmedabad in 2012 when an owner of a clothing store using Hitler in its name was persuaded to change the name. In these cases the local Indian governments have also supported the Jewish objections. Like all

other Indians, the American Indian Jewish community was horrified at the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 and participated in several memorial services, evenings of remembrance, and reflection forums. The fact that one of the places attacked was Chabad House, a (non-Indian) Jewish institution, and that several of the victims were Jews, including Israelis who happened to be there, made the massacres particularly poignant, and frightening, for them.⁵⁹ It took the Bene Israel awhile to understand that the attackers were targeting an institution that attracted Israelis, rather than local Indian synagogues.

The community has multiple linkages: With so many relatives and friends in Israel, and the constant trickle of Bene Israel migrating from Israel to the United States, the American Bene Israel community is also very much interested in Israel and Indo-Israeli relations and will occasionally sponsor a program on some aspect of this topic. Israeli-based Indian authors are invited to give readings. New York area-based Bene Israel have participated as a community in the annual Salute to Israel parades. In 2007, a celebration of India's Independence Day featured a program in New York, attended by representatives from the Israeli and Indian consulates, which included Indian and Israeli music and dance.⁶⁰ The *Indian Jewish Congregation of USA Newsletter [IJCUSA Newsletter]*, to which Bene Israel residents in Israel and India contribute, publishes many articles from the Hebrew press, often translated by the Israeli-raised editor, about Indian Jews in Israel and their activities such as festivals, cricket matches, youth activities, and dance groups, including events sponsored by the Indian Mission in Israel and synagogue celebrations, in India and Israel. It also has links to relevant websites in these countries and occasionally to those in the UK, Canada, and Australia.⁶¹ These websites may include explanations of holidays in Marathi, Indian Jewish cuisine, recordings of Indian Jewish liturgy, Indian classical dance and music, photographs and youtube videos, and articles and books about the community written by Indian Jews or other scholars. There has been attention to Indian and Israeli partnerships in culture, education, and industry as well as notice of interest by non-Indian Israelis in tourism and Indian spirituality.⁶²

Conclusion

Although it is possible to construct multiple identities within various social milieus in the United States, whether one sets aside tradition and culture or not, it is not easy for immigrants to fully adjust to and integrate into American life. Too small to create their own communities across the United States (except in the Greater New York area), where they could maintain their own traditions and values, many of the older generation of Bene Israel nevertheless were somewhat ambivalent about integrating with the American Jewish community. The predominantly Ashkenazi customs and liturgy were too foreign to adapt to, and they sometimes encountered doubts about whether they were "really Jews." The second generation, however, as well as the more recent arrivals—to the extent that their religious identity is important to them—have been more comfortable in the broader Jewish community, which is now more sophisticated about Jews from other backgrounds. Although the Bene Israel have retained, and become increasingly proud of, their Indianness, they are negotiating old and new understandings of identity: Jewish, Indian diasporic, transnational. As indicated earlier, these are preliminary findings and more research needs to be done, especially on second-generation Bene Israel, about issues of assimilation to American Jewish norms, intermarriage, preservation, and transmission of Indian culture and traditions.

Notes

¹ Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape* (New York: The New Press, 2007), p. 22, n.45 as quoted in Chad Bauman, "Out of India: Immigrant Hindus and South Asian Hinduism in the United States" (with Jennifer

Saunders), *Religion Compass* 3/1 (2009): 128. See also Paul Kennedy and Victor Roudometof, eds., *Communities Across Borders: New Immigrants and Transnational Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002).

² Shukla points out that the writer Abraham Verghese's status as a diasporic Indian, with roots in India but experiences in an Indian community in Africa, distinguishes him from an early wave of immigrants who had come directly from India. Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 168.

³ Bauman and Saunders, pp. 127, 128.

⁴ Sunil Bhatia, *American Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 204.

⁵ Johanna Lessinger, *From the Ganges to the Hudson* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), p. xv; see Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005). See also Khyati Joshi, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

⁶ Shukla, p. 10.

⁷ Karen Leonard, *The New Americans: South Asian Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 108. See also Raymond Brady Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 278, cited by Bauman and Saunders, p. 119, and John Fenton, *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

⁸ Bhatia, p. 232.

⁹ Lessinger, p. 47.

¹⁰ Bhatia, pp. 223, 232.

¹¹ Romiel Daniel, interview, Jan. 2011.

¹² See Emily Wax, "The New New Yorkers: A Mixed Reception," *Newsday*, Jan. 13, 1999. See also Joshi; see below, note 36.

¹³ Bhatia, pp. 170-71.

¹⁴ Shukla, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Kol Bina*, Vol. I, no. 1, Sept. 29, 1981, p. 3; Vol. I, no. 3, May 1982; Vol. I, no. 2, April 1984.

¹⁶ *Kol Bina*, Vol. III, no. 1, Sept. 1983; Vol. IV, no. 1, Sept. 1984.

¹⁷ Hindus can also have religious gatherings with others at home. Madhulika S. Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 76, 79-81; Purkayastha, pp. 95-96.

¹⁸ Khandelwal, p. 88; *Kol Bina*, Vol. I, no. 2, Dec. 1981; Vol. I, no. 3, May 1982; Vol. II, no. 2, March 1983; Vol. III, no. 1, Sept. 1983; Vol. III, no. 2, April 1984.

¹⁹ See Joshua Hammerman, "Indian Traditions Spice up Chanukah," *Daily News*, Dec. 5, 1982; Robert M. Shubov, "Israel is in the hearts, but India is still in their blood," *India-West*, Dec. 24, 1982; Cara De Silva, "Kofta curry and Kiddush cups," *Newsday*, Sept. 8, 1993; Steve Lipman, "Jews from India," *Jewish Week*, Jan. 13, 1984.

²⁰ See *Kol Bina*, Vol. V, no. 1, Sept. 1985.

²¹ *Kol Bina*, Vol. III, no. 2, April 1984.

²² Lessinger, p. 48; Khandelwal, p. 70.

²³ *Indian Jewish Congregation of the USA* (hereafter *IJCUSA*) *Newsletter*, Vol. 1, no. 5, July 3, 2007, p. 12.

²⁴ *The Jewish Press*, Feb. 15, 2008, p. 62. Noreen Daniel, wife of Romiel Daniel, says that her goal is to integrate the Indian Jewish community with the larger American Jewish community, while at the same time retaining Indian Jewish culture practices and identity.

She chairs the Women in Judaism group at the Rego Park Synagogue and runs a series of lectures on that topic. *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 3, no. 1, March 2009, p. 6.

²⁵ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 5, no. 1, April 2011, p. 4; Vol. 5, no. 2, Sept. 2011, pp. 2-3.

²⁶ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 2, no. 2, April 2008, p. 2.

²⁷ Bauman and Saunders note: "While Hindu immigrants have assimilated in many ways to American life, and while the nature of their Hinduism itself has changed remarkably, they have not, on the whole changed their religious affiliation or ceased to participate in the life of Hinduism," p. 119

²⁸ Sharmila Rudrappa, *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American: Indian Immigrants and the Culture of Citizenship* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 137; Khandelwal, pp. 35, 79.

²⁹ Leonard, pp. 152-53.

³⁰ Purkayastha, p. 98.

³¹ *The Jewish Press*, Feb. 15, 2008, p. 62.

³² Khandelwal has pointed out that a number of Hindu immigrants have made an effort to learn more about their religion to be able to explain it to Americans, and even to their own children, pp. 78-79.

³³ Another Bene Israel artist, who immigrated first to Israel and then to Houston, Texas, Ben Tzion Ben Yosef Yakov, has also combined Hindu symbols and Jewish religious iconography. In the 1990s, a Hanukkah program that he helped sponsor drew many Hindu families and priests. *Houston Post*, Dec. 11, 1993.

³⁴ Purkayastha, p. 114; a white art critic was startled that the Hindu Indian artist Kalpana Prakash did not draw on themes from her own cultural heritage. Rudrappa, p. 145.

³⁵ Lessinger, p. 25.

³⁶ Bhatia, p. 185.

³⁷ For a discussion of the discourse of racial identity among the Indian diaspora in the United States, see Bhatia, chap. 5.

³⁸ Bhatia, pp. 176, 212.

³⁹ R. Radhakrishnan, "Is the Ethnic 'Authentic' in the Diaspora," in Karen Aguilar-San Juan, ed., *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), p. 223; Khandelwal, pp. 4, 89.

⁴⁰ Purkayastha, p. 2; chaps. 2 and 4 *passim*.

⁴¹ Lessinger, p. 70.

⁴² John Fenton, *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America* (New York: Praeger, 1988), as quoted in Bauman and Saunders, p. 119.

⁴³ Rudrappa, pp. 168-69 (italics in original).

⁴⁴ Khandelwal, p. 37.

⁴⁵ See Lessinger, pp. 28-29, 41.

⁴⁶ Perry probably supported the BJP because of its pro-Israel, anti-Muslim stance. See Shukla, chap. 4, on immigrant newspapers in the United States. In interviews with Shukla, John Perry, who was instrumental in restarting the Bene Israel High Holy Day prayers and in renting the Village Temple in the early 1990s, drew parallels between the successful integration of European Jewish immigrants in the United States and that of Indian immigrants in general. He stressed the values placed upon education in both cultures that would lead to entry into the middle class. Shukla, pp. 202-3.

⁴⁷ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 1, no. 5, July 3, 2007, p. 4.

⁴⁸ See Lessinger, pp. 53-54, and Leonard, p. 135.

⁴⁹ Khandelwal argues that the Association of Indians in America strengthened the linkage of Indian culture with Hinduism by sponsoring a Goddess Festival at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in conjunction with Diwali. Progressive South Asians have

objected to the sectarian focus of this event presented to American audiences. Khandelwal, pp. 60-64.

⁵⁰ See Lessinger, p. 4; Bhatia, p. 187-89, Khandelwal, p. 6 and chap. 4.

⁵¹ Lessinger, p. 15.

⁵² Purkayastha, p. xii; see also Williams, as cited in Bauman and Saunders, p. 118.

⁵³ See Bhatia, chaps. 5 and 6 *passim*, p. 193 and Purkayastha, chaps. 2 and 4 *passim*; Bauman and Saunders, pp. 118, 124.

⁵⁴ Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 2, as quoted in Bauman and Saunders, p. 128.

⁵⁵ Bhatia, p. 22.

⁵⁶ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 4, no. 1, March 2010, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁷ *Kol Bina* Vol. IV, no. 1, Sept. 1984; *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 1, no. 8, Dec. 2007, pp. 2-4. On the transnational character of Hindu temple building and support, see Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 1, no. 3, April 1, 2007, p. 4; Vol. 1, no. 4, May 15, 2007, p. 8.

⁵⁹ See *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 2, no. 4, Dec. 2008, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 1, no. 5, July 3, 2007, p. 4.

⁶¹ *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 5, no. 2, Sept. 2011, pp. 4-5, 10.

⁶² *IJCUSA Newsletter*, Vol. 2, no. 3, Sept. 2008, pp. 9-10; Vol. 2, no. 4, Dec. 2008, p. 4.