



religion. Initially, they were known as Hebrews. They have a long history of exile and persecution and are often referred to as the Israelites. Thousands of years ago, a section of the persecuted Jews fled to India from Israel through the sea route. They came to be known as the Indian Jews. Esther's book deals specifically with them. The nomenclature "Indian Jews" marks them as an Indian community. In India, their number has been constantly decreasing since the creation of Israel in 1948. Many Jewish families emigrated to Israel as well as to Western countries. Particularly, the Bnei Menashe Jews (the Jews of the Northeast) emigrated to Israel in large numbers and those that are left in India "have plans to emigrate, so that they can be closer to their families" (145). David looks upon the present demographic condition as the primary threat to the cultural existence of the community. She, therefore, rightly points out, "When a community decreases in number, its traditional food becomes a memory" (1). Her detailed representation of the recipes of each Indian Jewish community is a gesture towards archiving the traditional cuisine associated with their festive occasions such as Shabbath (seventh day of the Jewish week), Purim (celebrating the liberation of the Persian Jews), Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles), Malida (thanksgiving), Shavout (the reception of the Ten Commandments), Passover (spring festival), and Hanukkah (festival of lights).

These festive occasions are associated with the ancient history of the community. David's book highlights this fact and shows that the festive platter plays an important role in connecting the past with the present through the celebration of festivals. Across the globe, the Jews observe Shabbath from Friday evening to Saturday evening. The Shabbath table consists of two candles symbolizing peace and togetherness, bread, a goblet of wine for Kiddush (blessing) and other food items. The Shabbath of the Jews in India is marked by uniqueness because the "Indian Jews make *sherbet* with blackcurrants for Kiddush prayers whereas in most Western countries, wine is used for the prayers" (16). The Shabbath meals of the Baghdadi Jews, whose forefathers hailed from West Asian countries, exhibit a great variety: "aloo makala, fish curry, hameen, roast chicken or lemon-coriander chicken, and mahasha or stuffed vegetables" (98).

The idea of choosing food as the mnemonic agent for narrating the community's history is unique because it broadens the scope of their representation in a culturally diversified nation like India. The images of the ingredients and the table accessories on the book cover are familiar to most Indians. Yet, these may generate curiosity among readers who are keen on knowing about the five distinct Jewish communities in India: The Bene Israel Jewish community in western India (Mumbai, Alibaug, Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Rajkot, Rajpipla, and Palanpur); the Cochin Jews in Kochi and its surroundings (Kerala); the Baghdadi Jews in Kolkata, (West Bengal); the Bene Ephraim Jews

in Vijayawada and Machilipatnam (Andhra Pradesh); The Bnei Menashe Jews in Aizwal (Mizoram), and in Imphal and Churachandpur (Manipur). The book is divided into eight chapters, out of which each subcategory of the Indian Jews and their geographical location is discussed separately in six chapters. The first two chapters offer a general introduction to the culinary culture of the Jews in India.

Due to local influences, each Jewish community developed a culinary sub-culture of its own. The Mizoram Jews make soupy curries and the Calcutta Jews have *agar-agar* or China grass jelly for dessert. The Cochin Jews prefer to have bananas at the end of the meal. In spite of these subtle differences, the Indian Jews are “bonded by their heritage of food” (3). They strictly adhere to the community’s dietary law “of not mixing meat with dairy products” (2). “Separate utensils are allotted for milk and meat in their kitchens” (2). Laws of *kosher* are followed while slaughtering an animal for meat. According to the dietary rule, animals without cloven hooves cannot be killed for meat. If *kosher* meat is not available, the Indian Jews would eat vegetarian food. In her chapter on the Bene Ephraim Jews, the author says “if by mistake, meat is cooked in a vessel used for milk, the vessel is washed with warm water and not used for twenty-four hours” (125). The staple food of the Indian Jews is fish and rice: “In Jewish religion, fish is a symbol of protection, good luck, fertility and abundance” (2).

David makes a sincere effort to describe the distinctive practices of each Jewish community. She candidly points out that the Bene Israeli Jewish community, the largest in India, has an “unusual feature” which distinguishes them from the other groups. Members of the Bene Israel Jewish community believe strongly in Prophet Elijah, “a Biblical hero whose miraculous ascent to heaven is connected with the much-awaited arrival of the Messiah” (13). She says that “[h]e is a beloved folk hero of the Bene Israel Jews of India” (13). Although Judaism prohibits idol worship and is based on the Torah (Scriptures), in Chapter 2 (“A Secret Life: Being Indian and Jewish”) she states that “the Bene Israel Jews have taken the liberty of worshipping Prophet Elijah, whose poster can be seen in their homes” (5).

The Indian Jews converse in the regional languages but they say their prayers mostly in Hebrew. They adapted themselves to the geographical and the socio-cultural conditions of their habitat. The Bnei Menashe Jews, for example, “use their tribal name as a surname” (145). The community narratives in the well-structured chapters show that the Indian Jews have well-preserved their community history in the Indian subcontinent. In this context, David’s chapter on the Cochin Jews is very interesting. In Kerala, they have a Jew Town on the Synagogue Street, which once upon a time was the Jewish hub of the spice trade. In the early days of colonial invasions, the Portuguese were a threat to their spice trade and they could not live in peace till the Dutch merchants under

whom many Jews worked came to their rescue. The Cochin Jews adjusted their recipes to the South Indian culinary regimen and “started using curry leaves, tamarind juice and coconut milk, along with a variety of bananas and chillies” (59). They follow their community tradition of covering the Shabbath bread with a ceremonial cloth and at the same time, they prefer eating vegetarian meal on a plantain leaf or steel *thali*(plate). In this manner, cultural hybridity has become a part of Jewish life in India.

Esther David’s book has much more to offer than an ordinary cookbook. It is an outcome of a research project funded by the Hadassah Brandeis Research Award, USA. Her study is based on interviews and fieldwork. It combines ‘food’ and ‘memory’ as research methods for narrating the cultural history of the different Jewish communities in India. The geographical details add to each community’s distinct linguistic and culinary orientations. It also underlines their regional affiliation, which is crucial for claiming one’s political representation in a federal state. This book shows that community food is not only a culinary affair but also a discourse on collective memory that includes the laying of the table according to the dictates of an ancient religion. In this regard, *Bene Appétit* has a multidisciplinary appeal. It makes a significant contribution to the fields of Cultural Studies, Jewish Studies, and Memory Studies. It will interest a layman as well as a scholar.

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