Indian Foreign Affairs Journal Vol. 6, No. 1, January–March 2011, 104-110

BOOK REVIEW

Ginu Zacharia Oommen***, Ethnicity, Marginality and Identity: The Jews of Cochin in Israel*** (New Delhi: Manak, 2011), Pages: 337, Price: Rs. 495.00.

"In India I was a Jew, in Israel I am an Indian." These words of a Cochin Jew, now an Israeli citizen, encapsulate the collective experience of a minuscule minority that had lived for centuries in India before their advent to their "promised land" of "milk and honey" in faraway Palestine. Cochin Jews, inhabiting the Malabar coast in southern India, had been an indelible part of the great mosaic that is India. Their origins are shrouded in antiquity. According to legend they came to India from Israel during the reign of King Solomon. (It is possible that they were ethnic Indians who adopted Judaism.) Though a very religious community, whose life and work revolved around its synagogue, the Jews of Cochin nevertheless merged with the fabric of India, incorporating many local Hindu Malayalee customs and rites. Wrapped in itself, this simple and mild-natured community went about its daily life, keeping a low profile. Its participation in the political and socio-cultural life of India was minimal. A testimony that they led peaceful, if uneventful, lives is the fact that the state of Israel has officially acknowledged India to have been one of the few countries without any record of anti-Semitism, though Jews have lived in the country for almost two millennia.

Yet, when after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, David Ben Gurion gave a clarion call to Jews across the globe to migrate to their promised land in order to change its demographic composition, the Jews of Cochin immediately responded to it. A community that had rarely travelled out of their town made that long and arduous journey to the land they believed their forefathers came from. Some later came back to exhume the mortal remains of their relatives and transport them for burial in Israel!

What motivated this community to leave the land of their domicile of centuries and seek a home in an alien and faraway place among strangers? And how did they fare in their new homeland?

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was an outcome of Zionism – an ideology that affirms that the Jews are a people or nation and should gather together in a single homeland. In 1950 the government of Israel enacted

the Law of Return, which allowed any person of Jewish origin anywhere in the world entry to Israel and the right to automatically acquire citizenship.

Zionism, formulated by Theodore Herzl, was the ideology of European Jewry – a natural outcome of centuries of anti-Semitism which found its bestial culmination in the Holocaust. As their persecution intensified, the Jews in Europe looked for an alternative homeland and settled on Palestine, the ancient homeland of Jews where once a kingdom of Israel had existed. The first Jews and Zionists to arrive in Palestine from the diaspora were those from Europe, known as the Ashkenazim.

They created the kibbutz and the moshav which formed the initial basis of the Israeli economy, established the Irgun and Hagganah to terrorize the British to hasten the implementation of the UN partition plan for the land, laid the foundation of the Israeli state, engaged in nation building and participated in the defence of the newly founded state in the war of 1948. The Ashkenazim were also the architects of the aliya – the return to the promised land – of thousands of Jews from across the world to Israel thereafter, in order to give the state its Jewish character. The Ashkenazim came to dominate the political, economic and socio-cultural scene of Israel, superimposing European culture and values on Israeli society.

The Law of Return motivated thousands of Jews in Arab and other Asian countries to migrate to Israel both for greener pastures and also for reasons of security. Known as Mizrachim, they "were not Israel's first choice but there was no alternative than to accept them." As immigration of Jews from Europe decreased "Zionist leaders … changed their position in order to satisfy the economic, demographic and military needs of the newly created state with its Ashkenazi elite." "The immigrants came to Israel with their different norms, culture, values and lifestyle", which led to principles of absorption and assimilation to underpin Israeli society. The Mizrachim have always been viewed by the Ashkenazim as culturally, religiously and intellectually inferior. Golda Meir said, for instance, about the Jews from Yemen who migrated to Israel: "We do not want Yemenite way of life. We shall bring the immigrants to Israel and make them human beings."

Historian Ilan Pappe once told this reviewer that human engineering was conducted on the Mizrachi Jews by the state of Israel in pursuit of its policy of homogenizing Israeli society – where homogenization meant mainstreaming Western culture and values. The outcome was "marginalization of the Mizrachim in the cultural sphere and discrimination against them in the

economic sphere". This is the collective experience of the community.

Israeli intelligentsia considers Jewish immigration to Israel as unique, being based on ideology and not contingent on economic imperatives, which migration usually implies. The author's contention, however, based on fieldwork done in Israel, is that the migration of the Cochin Jews was based not on ideological conviction alone but factored in economic calculations too. In 1948 there were about 2500 Cochin Jews in India, divided into Malabaree and Pardesi; currently there are no more than 30. The Malabarees, who are the subject of the present study, were economically backward, with low levels of education, their lives centring around their synagogue. The "great majority" of them "were poor, chiefly engaged as fishermen, book binders, peddlers, petty traders, wood choppers and unskilled labourers." "The first group left for Israel in December 1949 … from Chendamangalam village … consisting of 17 families of around 100 people". By the mid-1960s, most of the Cochin Jews had migrated to Israel "except for a few well to do families".

The Malabarees were not involved in the Zionist movement. Neither did they know Hebrew. Their understanding of Zionism, according to the author, was a Messianic one – that is belief in the Messianic Era, which will bring "release from exile, the return to Zion, the rebuilding of the holy temple." On their arrival in Israel (and apparent release from exile) they were sprayed with DDT to disinfect them. Perceived to be primitive and poor, they were put in "Mabaarot" or transit camps (much longer than the Ashkenazim had been) and were then settled in unfertile, hostile environs in distant kibbutz and moshavs in the Negev Desert and near border areas. They were "spatially marginalized by the Israel settlement projects, whether in the isolated periphery or in poor and stigmatized neighbourhoods of the country's major cities. This limited the Cochin Jews' potential (sic) economic, social and cultural participation." They were handicapped by lack of knowledge of Hebrew, cultural differences, low level of education, extreme religiosity (unlike the Ashkenazim, most of whom consider themselves to be secular), geographic isolation, and lack of connections within the Ashkenazi elite and political hierarchy. They were first assigned to agriculture and, when that failed for many, to lowly paid jobs within the remote moshavs where they were settled. The settlement authorities, suspecting that they carried contagious diseases, "forced them to settle in remote areas. Most of the Cochini Moshavs had no proper water supply and electricity in the beginning." There were other unhappy experiences as well: "One of the Cochini settlements, Kefar Yuval is on the Israeli Lebanon border, where they had a horrific life due to the enemy raids from Lebanon. In late

1970s, the(y) attacked the Moshav and around ten Cochinis were killed."

Most other Jewish communities – the Bene Israelis and the Baghdadi Jews – too have similar narratives, though racially and culturally they consider themselves superior to the Cochin Jews. Nevertheless, domicile in Israel, the assertion of Mizrachi power after decades of neglect and marginalization, and their increasing participation in the country's political life have helped to improve their status. The younger generation that was born in Israel has helped to instil self-confidence in themselves and in their identity. With the establishment of full-fledged diplomatic ties between India and Israel and with bilateral relationship improving dramatically over the last two decades, the Cochin Jews have begun to assert their distinctive cultural identity. The community had lived in India for over two millennia and it was inevitable that local customs and traditions would creep into their cultural practices. Thus, they removed shoes while entering the synagogue. Married women wore the mangalsutra; on important festivals like Passover people touched the feet of their elders seeking blessings. In Israel while some of these customs have disappeared, others remain. Many Cochin Jews, for instance, still speak Malayalam, listen to Malayalam music and watch Malayalam TV channels. They remain a community who do not pack off their elderly parents to homes for the aged, preferring to have them in their own homes.

With the deepening of India-Israel relations and with the huge number of Israeli tourists visiting India, many Cochin Jews have also begun travelling to the country that had once been theirs. Some prefer to spend winter in the warmer climes of the Malabar rather than in Israel, while others have bought property in Kerala. They have welcomed the decision of the Indian government to grant dual citizenship. India must, through its representative mission in Israel and other organizations, reach out to the community, who can become an excellent bridge of culture and friendship between the two countries.

This is an informative and original piece of work. It sheds light on a community about whom little is known here. Further, it also unfurls the process of nation building in Israel. It is rich in data, culled from both primary and secondary sources. The author has ably grasped the various nuances and dynamics at play within Israeli society and lucidly explained something that is so alien to an Indian readership.

A leftist bias recurs in the book from time to time, with generalizations like "fascist ideology" and "colonial settler state". Nation building has never been easy, especially while fashioning societies of multi-cultural and multi-

racial groups. Racial and cultural tensions are bound to underlie such an enterprise. Since its founding, Israel has been hemmed in by wars, hostile neighbours and security issues, some of which are its own doing. The status of different, especially marginalized communities, has nevertheless been steadily improving – an outcome of a combination of various factors. Finally, no fascist state would have allowed the author to undertake this extensive research as Israel has.

The data analysis method based on questionnaires is a sound way to collect information and the statistics presented are impressive. However, more case studies and personal narratives would have imbued the work with the human element.

The book otherwise merits the attention of students of migration, ethnicity and ethnic formation in society. It will also be useful for policymakers in both Israel and India.

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Jagannath P. Panda, ***China's Path to Power: Party, Military and the Politics of State Transition*** (New Delhi: IDSA, Pentagon Security International, 2010), Pages: 234, Price: Rs. 695.00.

The core dynamics behind the changing People's Republic of China (PRC) has for some time been a matter of intense study in contemporary international relations. To the world, the 2008 Olympics held in Beijing symbolized the positive aspects of this change whereas the recent disputes regarding the South China Sea represent the negative aspects of a confident, self-assured China. The book under review, being an attempt to understand the multitude of changes currently taking place in China, is a timely addition to Chinese studies from an Indian perspective. This book is an outcome of the author's research at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). Therefore, IDSA also must be commended for this research.

The book focuses on how the Communist Party of China (CPC), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese State influence each other in policymaking and implementation. The introductory chapter lays out the framework of research. The first chapter discusses the way the Chinese regime is changing, with focus on the structural aspects of regime functioning. The presentation is largely confined to a state-centric view. The author discusses the elements of democratization taking place in China under the direction of the CPC and the rule of law and civil society. However, he has refrained from discussing alternative perspectives on issues like civil rights, religious rights and the right to property, the demands for which are reflected in the changing nature of the society and the simmering tension between society and state.

The second chapter discusses the decision-making structures and actors inside China: leadership styles, actors like the PLA, new influences and so on, and concludes with a discussion on China as a great power. This chapter provides a mix of data and arguments of scholars from around the world on China. The author, however, makes certain statements without factual backing, such as that China's embrace of capitalism as a developing country "reduces the risk of its resort to coercion" or that China "has become committed to global rules and norms" (p. 67). There is enough literature that argues that China would follow international rules as long as they benefit China and only till the point it is in a position to change them. The Senkaku incident of September 2010 exemplifies this approach of ready resort to belligerence. China has resorted to multilateralism only to the extent to which it has helped China's national interest. Contemporary China is easily truculent, perhaps because it thinks that its time has come. If, as the author argues, there is a problem for an observer in explaining the Chinese strategic thinking (p. 71), then a caveat of the danger involved due to fragmented interests in an authoritarian system must be laid out clearly. Even so, the author has fairly successfully analysed the complex process of decision-making in China.

The fourth chapter studies Chinese economic policies and explains how the leadership's thinking about the nature and role of economy has changed over time. The character of the economy has also changed with the emergence of private enterprise. The chapter documents the changes in the government's policy preferences along with changes in the Party's thinking. Especially when the author mentions that the reforms are also "bottom-up" (p. 95), there is a need to study the tension between the top-down and bottom-up policy desires.

There is also hardly any discussion on how the economic actors are influencing policy, especially with the membership of the private entrepreneurial class of the National People's Congress, the supreme legislative body of the Party. Repeatedly, local party authorities have defied central regulations on issues like environment and energy administration in favour of the economic benefits emanating from local enterprises. This has caused a big gap in legal administration leading to the emergence of watchdog NGOs within certain limits. The book would have done better to take a closer look at this aspect.

The subsequent two chapters deal with the PLA, one on the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and the next on civil-military relations. The former documents the Chinese thinking following the Gulf War of 1991 where the US used information technology to maximum advantage. Especially given China's huge human tragedy in the Korea War, this event led to a sea-change in strategy and doctrine. From a guerrilla-warfare-capable organization, today's PLA aims at the capability of fighting "limited wars under informationization". In the next chapter the author successfully shows that there is a constant power struggle between the PLA and its political leadership as the CPC's idea of the role of military in maintaining that power has changed. These two chapters are conceptually clear and well argued. A few documents are presented in addition to complement the discussion in the chapters.

In general, the book takes a close look at the complexity of the Chinese political process. The detailed discussions are quite useful for the new as well as old researchers on China. Perhaps another chapter on the Chinese society would have given a more rounded look to the discussion on the elements of change because the Chinese society is the most volatile of the Chinese forces for the moment.

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