Homing Desires of a Souvenir People: Displacement, Mediation and Identity Construction of Cochin Jewry

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This paper places in context Edna Fernandes' The Last Jews of Kerala to examine the unique ontological positioning of the Jewish Diaspora of Cochin. Located within a larger culturally diverse and heterogeneous group, the Cochin Jewry negotiates a precarious terrain to legitimize their survival. The aliyah, their spiritual return to their place of origin, is a manifestation of the homing desires of this historically traumatized race. The paper investigates how the homing desire patents itself variably among members of this dwindling community and argues that the trajectory of identity construction has been complex and challenging for the Cochin Jewry. Their unique spatial positioning within and across alien lands and cultures has led to the evolution of a racial and cultural identity that is plural, dynamic and is in process.

Keywords: Identity, Mediation, Displacement, Home, Diaspora

The Jewish Diaspora in India embodies an identity largely shaped by historical and social duress. As a community that has successfully mediated the subtleties of the Jewish and Indian aspects of their identity, the Jews in India represent a unique amalgamation of the Jewish immigrant self and the acclimatized Indian subjectivity, asserting its existence through cultural practices and ritualistic observances in their adopted home. "The Indian chapter," as Nathan

Katz observes, "is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora" (2012, 12). The manner in which the Jewish Diaspora adapted to the varied cultural and socio-political contexts of the Indian states, both before and after Indian independence, lays bare the adaptability and resilience of a traumatized race, persecuted and victimized in other parts of the world. The Jewish settlements in Calcutta, Bombay and Cochin gained social status and acceptance in the intensely hierarchical Indian society by conforming to their Judaic traditions and beliefs.

The Cochin Jews who claim to have their roots in the holy city of Jerusalem, arrived in the South Western Coast of India following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE at the time of the Roman invasion and later during the 16th century, as Jews fled Europe, following the Inquisition. Thriving on the benevolence of the native community comprising of Hindus, Muslims and Christians, they evolved a distinctive Indian Jewish identity spawning motif from both the Indic and the Judaic civilizations to legitimize their relocation and survival on foreign soil. *The Last Jews of Kerala* by Edna Fernandes revisits the ancient history of the Cochin Jews and recounts the reasons for the sad demise of a peaceful religious minority which was once the favourites of the Cochin royalty. The book offers a detailed account of the community's life in the Kerala coast, from its glorious beginnings to its less fortunate present, engulfed by "a kind of collective malaise, a brooding fatalism born of the realization that they may be the architects of their own downfall" (Fernandes 2008, 11). Towards the end, the book explores the lives of the Kerala Jews in Israel, of the life choices they had made and their struggle for survival in the Promised Land.

The Jews of Kerala are a people who "vanquished the treacheries of history" but "unwittingly contributed to their disastrous decline" (*ibid* 4). They precipitated their own extinction in spite of their proximity to the Maharajas of Cochin and the favours and privileges it engendered. They constructed a balanced identity for themselves, judiciously assimilating motifs from the local Hindu culture into the framework of their Judaic inheritance. Katz points out that in their legends and in their synagogue life, the Indian Jews, developed identities that reflected and generated high status. He considers this

process of identity construction as a reciprocal one which involves their neighbours as well. In order to carve out a space for themselves in the highly stratified and hierarchical Indian society, the Indian Jews sought the approval of the local prestige groups as ". . . proximity to and emulation of high-status groups confer status" (2000, 3). The Cochin Jews successfully navigated the process of acculturation where they acclimated admirably into a culturally diverse community while retaining their own cultural identity. In fact, the absence of serious anti-Semitism in the Indian subcontinent made this acculturation effortless and unproblematic.

The Cochin Jews, a religio-ethnic minority positioned within a larger and diverse cultural group, preserved their identity without being threatened or rejected by the dominant cultures. Even though a few other minority ethnic communities of India like the Parsis for example, who faced serious alienation and threat immediately after the independence due to their pre independence allies with the British raj, the Jews did not face any threat from the sons of the soil, nor would it be easy to conclude that there was any significant decline in their social or economic status due to the departure of the colonial masters. "Unlike people of the Diaspora elsewhere, the Jews of Kerala were feted, embraced by neighbours of all creeds. . . . [they] remained immune to the troubles that periodically threatened to endanger India's delicately poised religious equilibrium. . . . They were never a proselytizing people, but cultural chameleons who adapted easily" (Fernandes 2008, 5). In spite of their many advantages the dissent and rivalry that was allowed to breed within their ranks become their undoing. Fernandes explores the roots of this apartheid that was soon to sound the death knell of a race with claims of a rich heritage and ancient legacy. The narrative commences with the burial day of Shalom Cohen in 2006, a member of the dwindling White Jews Diaspora of Kerala. With the death of Cohen there remained only twelve of their clan. The funeral had traumatized the survivors, driving home the unmistakable truth of their impending extinction.

Tracing back their lineage to the era of King Solomon, the White, or the *Paradesi* Jews maintained a unique cultural and ethnic identity and distanced themselves from the Black, or the Malabari

Jews. The Black Jews had a skin tone akin to the native Keralites and propagated their own tales of acculturation and cultural integration through inter racial marriages. The Cochin Jews willfully violated the egalitarian norms of Judaism and embraced the strict, discriminatory and hierarchical local sensibilities to align themselves with the high-caste Hindu groups. The vertical mobility that the White Jews so desperately desired was secured at the cost of estranging their sister community forever. A bitter rivalry marked by discrimination, apartheid, claims and counter-claims defined the relationship of the two communities who could lay claim to an illustrious ancestry. Ethnic purity was considered paramount in the highly stratified Indian social/ caste system and both the sides were not ready to relinquish their claims. The adoption of the Hindu social hierarchy had turned one Jew against the other. The subsequent polarization resulted in the premature demise of a Diaspora community that had ". . . floundered in an earthly paradise. In the end, death came not at the hands of others, but one another" (*ibid* 28).

The Diaspora community in the Jew's ancestral home in Kerala, Shingly, known as Kodungalloor in Malayalam, Cranganore in Anglo-Indian and Muziris to the Romans had a well-balanced Indo-Jewish identity and had established a connection between India and Israel long before the arrival of the Paradesi Jews and the evolution of the Cochin community. Shingly was central to the Kerala Jewish diaspora and the Cochini Jewish identity. Joseph Rabban, the King of Shingly, who was extended a warm welcome by the local raja, enjoyed a status similar to that of King David in Jerusalem. The two cities of Cranganore and Jerusalem are intertwined in a mutual history of banishment and dispersal. As fate would have it, they were driven away from Cranganore by war and natural disaster. They regrouped and resettled in Cochin benefitting and thriving under the patronage of the Maharaja of Cochin. The Cochini Jews traced their lineage to Israel as well as the line of the first Jewish settlers in Shingly. The lineage conferred status and purity and the Diaspora was accorded with respect and privileges by the Brahmin classes of Kerala.

Fernandes' narrative is based on her visits to the Jewish settlements in the Malabar coastline and her conversations with the

surviving White and Black Jews in Synagogue Lane, Mattancheri and Ernakulam respectively. She deftly traces the roots of the enmity that threatened to overpower both communities. She recounts how the European Jews who arrived in India fleeing religious persecution during the Inquisition in Europe found it impossible to relate to the black-skinned Malabari Jews. The Paradesis deliberately distanced themselves from the Black Jews in order to maintain their purity and superiority in the caste-based Cochin society. Their white skin made them exotic and their story, romantic and legitimate.

> Their facility with European languages and trade links with the West positioned them well with the royal court, allowing them to propagate their version of history . . . In the four hundred years that followed their arrival in the sixteenth century, they would spread the story that the Black Jews, already well established in the region, were not 'pure' but the sons of slaves who had come on the ships of Solomon and then married local Cochini women, thereby polluting the Jewish maternal bloodline. (*ibid* 43)

Fernandes notes that the accusation of slavery proved detrimental to the self-respect of the Black Jews who had prided themselves as the descendants of King Solomon and Joseph Rabban. They were robbed off their history, inheritance and lineage. The betrayal by the Paradesis jeopardized their very subsistence and the Blacks "found themselves usurped in their own historical narrative" (*ibid* 43). They were barred from entering the Paradesi synagogue and holding weddings and circumcisions inside it and marriage between the two communities were strictly prohibited. The policy of colour separation that the White Jews introduced and practiced with fervor led to a Jewish apartheid that would last for four centuries, eventually culminating in the demise of the Jewish Diaspora of Cochin. The discrimination by White Jews against the Black Jews became, as J. B. Segal points out, "a permanent cancer on the body of the community" (1993, 22).

The narrative courses through the lives of Sarah, the last of the Cohens, Sammy Hallegua, the last warden of the Paradesi Synagogue, Gamy Salem, a Black Jew who had honorary White status

through marriage to Reema, a White Jewess and Babu, the aquarium-keeper. Their personal stories accentuate the tragedy of ruination and extermination. The strangest thing about Synagouge Lane, notes Fernandes, was that everything was on count-down mode (44). When the last young Jew and Jewess in the community refused to marry and bear children to save their race from extinction, the fate of the White Jews was sealed once and for all. "Soon, Synagogue Lane would no longer be home to the White Jews, but an anthropological curiosity, with boarded houses up for grabs to be turned into souvenir shops or cafes for the tourists. The prey and the predator shared Synagogue Lane, their fortunes entwined" (Fernandes 44-45).

The plight of the Black Jews, though slightly higher in number, was no different. Babu feared that the remaining young black Jews would follow in the footsteps of the youngsters of Mattancheri and leave their home in search of love and livelihood. The pull of the forces of economics and love was hard to ignore and defeat. "Ours is a dispersed community now", laments Babu (*ibid* 67). The young are unwilling to marry within the community and settle down in Cochin. In tune with the changing times, elders like Babu have given their consent to their young to seek Jews elsewhere as life partners. "Bring new blood back to Cochin. We have to make our choice. Or be like the others and simply die", reasons Babu (*ibid* 68). He is among the many who made the pilgrimage to Israel, the *aliyah*, but for him Israel was never the Promised Land. The rejection by the White Jews had forced the *aliyah*.

> But his *aliyah* provided neither the answers nor the acceptance craved by those Black Jews who left. Instead he (Babu) discovered an Israel torn asunder by religious insecurity, a land where peace was a stranger still . . . Israel was not the fabled paradise that held them spellbound in childhood, but a void of loneliness and rejection. India, for all its failings, remained home. (*ibid* 73)

The crusade led by the Black Jew A. B. Salem alias the 'Jewish Gandhi' effected a breakthrough and eventual change in the segregation practices of the White Jews. He won the Black Jews the right to enter and pray inside the Paradesi Synagogue by the year

1942. It was the beginning of Black Jewish emancipation. The birth of the state of Israel in 1948 witnessed a mass exodus to the new nation state amidst desert lands. The Cochin Jews were ardent supporters of Indian Swaraj as well as Zionism. But post-independence India brought drastic changes to the demographic, political and economic landscape of Cochin and "life became increasingly precarious for the relatively prosperous, minuscule minority" (Katz 2000, 27). Katz observes that the post independent period "which began with the greatest enthusiasm and the highest hopes, reversed itself and witnessed the dissolution and, ultimately the death of this proud outpost of the Diaspora" (*ibid*, 27).

The geopolitical landmarks – Indian Independence and the Formation of Israel – ushered in the compulsion for change in the lives of the Cochin Jews, like the Jews elsewhere in India and the world. The new secular India abolished the special privileges bestowed on Jews by the colonial administration and the rajas of the princely states. The newly formed Israel welcomed Jews of all hues to their nascent rainbow state as part of their nation-building process. The last part of the book recounts the experiences of the Kerala Jews who migrated en masse to Israel in the latter half of the twentieth century. Fernandes observes:

> The prospect of a new country, a Jewish homeland which needed people to build its infrastructure, industry, communities from scratch, was appealing to many of the Cochini Jews, particularly those with little money, land or prospects in India. Israel also represented a new beginning in another key way. It was a country for all Jews, regardless of colour or ethnicity. The Black Jews, in particular, saw a chance for a future unencumbered by the prejudices of the past." (2008, 167)

Eliahu Bezalel, a first wave Cochini immigrant, had very little to sustain himself when he embarked on the *aliyah*. Bezalel always wanted to live the Zionist dream even when they were comfortably stationed in a land that never persecuted the Jews. His first job on arrival did not proffer the assurance of triumph or greatness: "He was a shepherd, but he carried out his duties with diligence and pride,

for even the smallest task was part of the wider effort to build Israel. This was the homecoming the Jews had prayed for in Kerala for two thousand years" (*ibid* 161). The young émigré rose from being an ordinary shepherd to a soldier, a businessman and an ambassador for the Indian Jewish community by making the wastelands of Negev bloom. He brought roses to the desert and the Israeli economy woke up to its immense export possibilities. Bezalel was awarded the Kaplan prize for his work in agriculture by President Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 and the Pravasi Bharti Award in 2005 by the Government of India. He wished to disseminate the message of religious unity that he had imbibed from his birth place to a wider audience, but never wanted to return to Kerala, for Israel was their struggle for survival. He had made Israel "work for his family" (*ibid* 174).

Abraham, another of the Cochini Jews had made the *aliyah* with his family with hopes of a spiritual homecoming. But the influence of the western culture had brought about significant changes in the attitude of young Israeli Jews. Religion was secondary to survival for the modern Israelis. Abraham expected faith to be at the centre of the Jewish life in the Promised Land. The suicide bombings, shoot-outs and the hatred that brewed amongst the Muslims and the Jews made living the eternal dream less appealing. The Hindu, the Jew, the Christian and the Muslim lived as friends and neighbours back in Cochin, but ". . . in this new life he could not reconcile the clash between the ethos of his faith and culture and the political cost of realizing the dream" (*ibid* 189). Abraham was tired of the struggle and wanted to leave the land of the prophets and go home to Cochin to die in peace, "make a fresh *aliyah* back to India" (*ibid* 197). The spiritual dislocation and social insecurity of his life in Israel finally convinced him to return to Cochin after thirty years of struggle in their Holy Land and his "imminent return took the saga of the Kerala Jews full circle" (*ibid* 201).

Kerala was no more than an interim paradise for the Jews fleeing Inquisition in the early days of their arrival in the Malabar coastline. The absence of anti-Semitism in the Indian subcontinent and the patronizing attitude of the local nobility greatly aided the incorporation of the Jews into the cultural, political and religious fabric

of India. Fernandes argues that the Cochin Jews failed miserably in turning the head-start they received into a substantial win for their race. They abandoned one paradise for what they hoped would be another. Racial discrimination and mutual hatred had forced the younger members of the Diaspora to seek happiness elsewhere, away from home. For some, the *aliyah* had been a dream come true. They renounced their past to refashion a new one, retaining all that was finest from India in their Promised Land. For others, the Home Land offered only alienation and sorrow and "the old life in Cochin was beyond redemption" (*ibid* 202). The dissent and rivalry that bred among the ranks of the Cochin Jews erased the prospects of a glorious future despite the many advantages they had had. Having dreamt of spiritual fulfillment in distant Israel, the Cochin Jews answered the call of the new nation state leaving behind "a redundant few" (*ibid* 5). They have become "a people cursed by no marriages, only funerals. . . the embodiment of an exhausted history" (*ibid* 10). Fernandes explores the choices that the Cochin Jews had made over a period of two millennia and how it contributed to the demise of their line in their adopted home. They are destined to end up as "a souvenir people . . . immortalized in key-rings and other collector's items" (*ibid* 6).

The Cochin Jews, like any other ethnically and racially minority community, establish and retain links to their real homeland geographically and culturally distanced from their current location. Heather Robinson notes that diaspora and home are inherently interconnected: "Diaspora and home are both sites where past and future come together and are negotiated; they are sites where people navigate their desires and their identities, connecting the imagined possibilities of both diaspora and home with the possibilities afforded by the "outside" world" (2023, 2). Connecting to this homeland is crucial for the Cochin Jewry as a means to authenticate and validate their existence in a plural social order. As Stuart Hall observes Diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (1990, pp. 235). The Cochin Jewry embodies the resistance of a population to dominant cultural, religious pressures. Their amalgamation with other native cultures and the incorporation of diversity and heterogeneity ensured the survival

of the Jewish Diaspora in India. However, the Promised Land embodies their idea of 'home' – a material, lived space that is considered as the place of 'origin' – a return to which assures ontological security.

The Jewish Diaspora in India, particularly the Cochin Jews, reflects a unique fusion of Jewish and Indian identity shaped by historical challenges. *The Last Jews of Kerala* by Edna Fernandes delves into the history and challenges confronted by the Cochin Jews, now a diminishing community, emphasizing their formerly favourable status in Cochin. She provides insight into how the community while assimilating into the adopted land also embraced vertical hierarchical systems similar to those in the privileged communities. These hierarchical practices, fostering internal discriminations within the community, played a crucial role in the community's gradual stagnation and dissipation. The Last Jews of Kerala also includes the case of those individuals from the community who migrated to the Promised Land and became disillusioned, with some even expressing willingness to return to their adopted land. The work provides valuable insights into the precarious positioning of diasporic communities, specifically the Cochin Jews, illustrating the contrast between those who made a foreign land their home and others who travelled to the promised land only to realise that their struggles persist. For the Kerala Jews who made the *aliyah*, the place of origin offered, as Brah terms it, the lived experience of a locality. She differentiates between what she calls the "homing desire" (1996, pp. 194) and the desire for a homeland, as not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return. The multi-locationality of the diaspora across geographical, political, social and cultural precincts inscribes the diasporic experience, and engenders a conception of diasporic identity as "always plural, and in process" (*ibid* 194). The Cochin Jewry thus leads a divided existence, on the one hand, slowly stagnating on the shores of their adopted land and on the other, struggling to make meaning out of their lives amidst the spiritual displacement and uncertainty in their place of origin. A select few are ready to make the journey back to their 'home' in Kerala, disenchanted by the spiritual decadence of their Promised Land. The multi-locationality of the diaspora assigns a plurality to their identity shaped largely by their geo-social and cultural positioning across and

within different cultures. The diaspora's identity, both as a race and culture, reflects adaptability and persistence, acquiring new dimensions in their ongoing pursuit of legitimacy and survival.

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