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The Indian Diaspora in Israel: Understanding the Past, Present and Future of Israelis of Indian Origins¹

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in July 2017 made headlines for being the first by an Indian prime minister. However, it was also noteworthy for the large turnout of the Indian diaspora in Tel Aviv at a community event to witness Modi deliver an address. While the Indian communities in other parts of the world like the United Arab Emirates and the United States are well documented, little is known about the Israelis of Indian origin and their current-day links to India. As such, what should one make of Modi's overtures to the Indian diaspora in Israel? What is its value to India and what role can it play in strengthening Indo-Israeli ties? This paper seeks to provide some insights into the past, present and future developments of the Israelis of Indian origin.

¹ This paper draws heavily from existing anthropologic publications, news articles and an exclusive interview with Mr Noah Massil, a respected leader of the Israeli-Indian community in Israel, as there is a dearth of literature on the Indians in Israel. Mr Massil was born in Mumbai, India, in 1946 and currently lives in Jerusalem, Israel.

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Historical Context: Who are the Indian Jews?

Historically, Judaism was one of the earliest foreign religions to arrive in India through the state of Kerala.³ There are three major Jewish groups in India – Cochin Jews, Bene Israeli and Baghdadi Jews.⁴ Despite being a minority group in India, the three Jewish groups are neither united nor homogenous. The migration of the Jews to India likely started with the Cochin Jews who arrived in Malabar in 70CE after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman Legions.⁵ The Cochin Jews got on well with the local maharaja and were regarded by the local populace as a “‘proper’ Jewish community”.⁶ The second wave of Jews that arrived in India was the Bene-Israel who, according to local history, were survivors of a shipwreck near the village of Navgaon in West India in 175BCE.⁷ The Bene-Israel were initially involved in oil-pressing but, with the establishment of the British rule of India, many served as high-ranking native officers in the Bombay army.⁸ Internally, the Bene-Israel community was split with some distancing themselves from local Indian culture and practices while others tried hard to affiliate themselves with high-caste Indians such as the Agris or Chitpavan Brahmans.⁹ Similarly, Indian perception of the Bene-Israel community is conflicted between regarding them in the religious capacity as Jews or, in their traditional occupation mould, as *Shanwar Teli* (Saturday oilmen).¹⁰ Compared to the Cochin Jews and the Bene-Israel, the Baghdadi Jews were late-comers to India and identified their outlook and interests to be closer to the Europeans rather than the Indians.¹¹ In fact, the Baghdadi Jews were officially classified as full-fledged “Europeans” in the initial stages of British rule.¹² While the Baghdadi Jews were later on reclassified as “Indians” in a policy revision, they were generally still respected and treated as Europeans. Naturally, the Baghdadi Jews have a higher socio-economic status compared to their Jewish brethren in India. Additionally, the three major Jewish groups lived in different parts of India and, over

³ Parul Kulshrestha, “The Jews of India”, *The Citizen*, 8 February 2017. <http://www.thecitizen.in/>.

⁴ Moses Raymond, “Here Are 5 Things You May Not Know about India’s Jewish Community”, *Lifestyle*, 14 March 2017. <http://www.indiatimes.com/lifestyle/>.

⁵ Yulia Egorova, *Jews and India Perceptions and Image*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp 81-82.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, p 83.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p 86.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 83-87. Note: As part of Jewish tradition, Saturday is a rest day for all Jews.

¹¹ Yulia, pp 90-91.

¹² Ibid.

time, assimilated into the local populace.¹³ As such, it is believed that they had little contact with one another.¹⁴ Maina Chawla Singh, author of *Being Indian, Being Israeli: Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Homeland*, goes as far as to describe them as having “existed in their own orbits”.¹⁵

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, most of the Indian Jews migrated to the Jewish state.¹⁶ As would be expected of the other Jewish groups around the world, a major proportion of the Indian Jews migrated to Israel to make the *aliyah* – “return home to the Holy Land”.¹⁷ However, Singh cautions that there are other motivations which encouraged this migration. One reason has to do with the search for economic opportunities. For example, many Karachi Jews migrated to Israel in search of better economic prospects within a few months of the partition of India and Pakistan which had caused much unemployment and displacement.¹⁸ For the younger Indian Jews in particular, making the journey to Israel was also an adventure on its own.¹⁹ Interestingly too, some parents encouraged their children to migrate to Israel to raise the prospects of them marrying a fellow Jew in view of the declining numbers back in India.²⁰

For all the initial excitement and fanfare of a homeland for all Jews, the Indian Jews were confronted with harsh realities upon their arrival in Israel. Accustomed to peaceful coexistence with other religious groups back in India, the Indian Jews were shocked by the discrimination against them vis-à-vis the other Jewish diaspora coming mostly from Europe. Firstly, the Indian Jews are clearly different in physical aspects. Given the racist mindset of that time, the brown skin tone of the Indian Jews gave rise to the perception and marginalisation that they were from the lower strata of society even though many paid for their own journey to Israel or were selected by the Jewish agency for their skillsets and professional background.²¹ Secondly, the Indian Jews did not share any common experience of anti-Semitism that their Jewish counterparts from Europe did. In

¹³ Maina Chawla Singh, *Being Indian, Being Israeli: Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Homeland*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2009), p 74.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, p 75.

¹⁶ Parul Kulshrestha, op. cit.

¹⁷ Maina Chawla Singh, op cit., p 94.

¹⁸ Ibid, p 92.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 104.

²⁰ Ibid, p 106.

²¹ Ibid, pp108-110.

any case, for one reason or another, the majority of the Jews from India were sent off to development towns far from the political capital Jerusalem and financial hub Tel Aviv.²² For this reason, many of the first generation of migrants from India ended up in vocation jobs in factories or agriculture.²³ The second generation and the later wave of Indian Jews, however, had better career prospects due to their higher educational background.²⁴ Even so, prominent Israelis of Indian origins over the course of recent history are few and far between. Some of the more accomplished Israelis of Indian origins include former Israeli politician Eli Ben-Menachem, famous Israeli cardio surgeon Dr Lael Anson Best and professional basketball player Eban Hyams.²⁵

Indian Diaspora in Israel Today

Today, the Indian diaspora in Israel is made up of approximately 85,000 Jews of Indian-origin, in addition to 12,500 Indian citizens working, mostly in the caregiving sector, in Israel.²⁶ However, the Indian diaspora in Israel has, traditionally, taken on a lesser priority for New Delhi in terms of political and economic importance. Firstly, in terms of size, the Indian diaspora in Israel pales in comparison to the Indian community in the Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman which easily number upwards of half a million respectively.²⁷ Secondly, the Indian diaspora in Israel is neither as politically influential nor economically important compared to their brethren in the United States and Gulf states. For example, the Indian community in the US played an important role in lobbying members of the Congress to support the monumental US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement.²⁸ On the economic side, more than 60 per cent of the remittance to India in 2015 came from the US and Arab states like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.²⁹ While remittance as a proportion of India's gross domestic product is not significant, yet it is

²² Ibid, p 124.

²³ Ibid, p 120.

²⁴ Ibid, p 150.

²⁵ Narendra Modi, "English Rendering of the text of PM's speech at Community Reception in Israel" Speech, Speech at Community Reception in Israel, Israel, Tel Aviv. Press Information Bureau, Prime Minister's Office, Government of India.

²⁶ "India-Israel Economic and Commercial Relations." Embassy of India, Tel Aviv, Israel. February 2017.

²⁷ Corinne Abrams, "This Map Shows Where India's Huge Diaspora Lives", *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 January 2016.

²⁸ Mira Kamdar, "Forget the Israel Lobby. The Hill's Next Big Player Is Made in India", *Washington Post*, 30 September 2007.

²⁹ "Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016 Third Edition", World Bank.

important for states like Kerala where it accounts for more than a third of the net state domestic product.³⁰ Thirdly, the complexities of domestic and international politics posed barriers for New Delhi to reach out to the Indian diaspora in Israel. Domestically, the political competition between the Congress Party and the Muslim League for the Indian Muslims vote resulted in a pro-Palestinian orientation.³¹ Furthermore, India's relations with the Soviet Bloc resulted in a slightly pro-Arab discourse.³² Therefore, India voted against the formation of the state of Israel at the United Nations in 1947 and, while it eventually recognised Israel as a state in 1950, it was only with the end of the Cold War 42 years later before New Delhi established consular relations with Tel Aviv.³³ Given the lack of diplomatic engagement between India and Israel, it should come as no surprise that Israel and, by extension, the Indian diaspora present there are barely on New Delhi's radar. Therefore, it is understandable why some Indians in Israel regarded Modi's visit as a "signal [of] an end to those decades where they stood on the periphery of India's outreach to its diaspora."³⁴

Taking into account the history of roadblocks and challenges of managing Indo-Israeli ties, Modi's visit to Israel and the engagement with the Indian diaspora there cannot come at a better time. Unlike the Congress party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has always been open in its support for Israel.³⁵ It certainly helped that the BJP won a simple majority on its own in the 16th Lok Sabha elections in May 2014, which not only did away with the complexities of coalition politics but ruled out the Congress party as an official opposition.³⁶ With relatively stable domestic politics then, Modi is able to pursue his own pragmatic conception of foreign policy and to devote a great deal of time for high profile overseas visits.³⁷ In fact, Modi's visit to Israel in the first place was largely driven by cooperation and deals on three areas of water, agriculture and defence.³⁸ On the international relations front, the Arab states have been relatively silent on Modi's visit to Israel. One possible explanation for this could be the preoccupation with the numerous civil wars and the threat of ISIS

³⁰ T K Devasia, "The Promised Land: How remittances from migrants account for 36.3% of Kerala's NSDP," *Firstpost*, 14 June 2017.

³¹ P R Kumaraswamy, "Israel: A Maturing Relationship", in. Vol. 1: Oxford University Press, 2015. 2

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Charu Sudan Kasturi, "Indian Israelis' Spy End to Identity Crisis", *The Telegraph India*, 4 July 2017.

³⁵ Tanvi Madan, "Why India and Israel are bringing their relationship out from", *Brookings*, 29 July 2016.

³⁶ Liz Matthew and Ami Shah, "Narendra Modi makes election history as BJP gets majority on its own", *Livemint*, 17 May 2014.

³⁷ Sumit Ganguly, "Has Modi Truly Changed India's Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2017): doi:10.1080/0163660x.2017.1328929.

³⁸ Jayanth Jacob, "Defence, Water, Agriculture on Agenda of Modi's Historic Visit to Israel", *Hindustan Times*, 30 June 2017.

(Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in the Middle East.³⁹ There is also the possibility that the Arab world is relying on a more benign and neutral geopolitical power like India to be their diplomatic intermediary between them and Israel.⁴⁰ Either way, Modi was certainly confident enough of his handling of foreign relations to not pay a visit to Ramallah.⁴¹ Hence, a favourable domestic and external environment made possible Modi's visit to Israel and, by extension, his engagement with the Indian diaspora in Israel.

One, of course, cannot discount Modi's personal popularity with the Indian diaspora. Part of this 'Modimania' can be attributed to the Prime Minister's efforts to speak directly to the diaspora either through physical visits or over social media platforms such as Twitter.⁴² For the Indian government, overseas Indians can be tapped on to positively shape international opinions and attitudes towards India.⁴³ This is especially so given that the overseas Indian community is the largest diaspora in the world at 16 million.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Indian diaspora is also of economic importance to New Delhi for its remittances. In 2016 alone, overseas Indians sent home a total of US\$72 billion (S\$98.4 billion).⁴⁵ As such, even though the Indian diaspora in Israel is by no means politically or economically important in its own right, engaging it reaffirms New Delhi's commitment to the wider global Indian diaspora. This is consistent with Modi's efforts to engage with the Indian diaspora in countries where he conducts an overseas state visit. Given the symbolic significance and broader relation to the global Indian diaspora surrounding the first ever visit to Israel by a sitting prime minister of India, Modi certainly did not go to Tel Aviv empty-handed.

At the community reception in Israel, Modi announced three gifts of an Indian cultural centre, direct flight connectivity and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) for the Indian diaspora in

³⁹ Prमित Pal Chaudhuri, "Why no one protests against Modi's Israel visit", *Hindustan Times*, 5 July 2017.

⁴⁰ Herb Keinon, "Arab World Surprisingly Mum on Modi's Visit to Israel", *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 March 2017.

⁴¹ Raphael Ahren, "India has 'Matured', So Ties with Israel are Flowering, Envoy Says", *The Times of Israel*, 2 July 2017. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/>.

⁴² Angela Stanzel, "Indians as a Source of Soft Power", European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 October 2015.

⁴³ Rama Lakshmi, "Narendra Modi urges the Indian diaspora to become an extension of foreign policy", *The Guardian*, 2 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/international>.

⁴⁴ Clare Menozzi and Bela Hovy, *International Migration Report 2015*. Report. Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, United Nations. 2016. www.unpopulation.org. By comparison, the Chinese diaspora stands at 10 million.

⁴⁵ Eric Bellman, "Indians Are Sending Home a Record Amount of Money This Year: World Bank." *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2015. <https://www.wsj.com/>.

Israel.⁴⁶ Overall, these gifts seem to address a major concern of the Indian government that the younger generation of overseas Indians in Israel has increasingly assimilated into Israeli society at the expense of weakening its bond vis-à-vis India.⁴⁷ In theory, the planned Indian cultural centre should provide an important platform for the Indians in Israel to (re)discover their roots. This is particularly important as an Indian Jew elder has lamented how the younger generation of Indian Jews is increasingly more Israeli than Indian. Enhanced flight connectivity should also play an important role in connecting them to their roots in India. The most tangible takeaway from Modi's visit is perhaps the promise to simplify the application process for the OCI cards. Due to a clause in the application for the OCI, overseas Indians, who are past or present military personnel, are not eligible for the OCI card.⁴⁸ In the case of Israel, this would exclude the younger generation of Indian Israelis from OCI status since military service is mandatory for all Israeli males and females. With this revision, the proportion of OCIs in Israel is expected to increase substantially.

Moving Forward from Modi's Visit: The Future of the Indian Diaspora in Israel

An analysis of the gifts announced by Modi suggests potential benefits for the Israelis of Indian origins. For example, the simplification of the OCI application for Israelis of Indian origin has potential business and strategic value for both India and Israel. After all, the OCIs possess both cultural knowledge and connections, in addition to the obvious ease of travel and residence in India that would be invaluable for any Israeli company seeking to expand its share in the Indian market. In particular, Modi expressed his wish that the Indian community in Israel can be the "bridge of technology and innovation between India and Israel."⁴⁹ Whether this will spur both the local Indian Israelis and Indian citizens working in Israel to gravitate to the technology sectors remains to be seen. For a start, the youths in the Indian Jewish communities have been encouraged to

⁴⁶ Nikhil Agarwal, "Modi in Israel: PM Promises Indian Cultural Centre, Flight Connectivity and OCI Cards to Diaspora", *India Today*, 5 July 2017.

⁴⁷ "Indian Community in Israel", Embassy of India, Tel Aviv, Israel. January 2016.

⁴⁸ "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)", Ministry of Home Affairs India. <http://mha1.nic.in/pdfs/oci-faq.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Narendra Modi, "English Rendering of the text of PM's speech", op. cit.

take up higher education and work in the high-technology industries.⁵⁰ In this regard, it would be interesting to observe the extent of the involvement of the Israeli OCIs in the defence sector, given the close defence relations between the two countries and the recent announcement of the “Strategic Partnership” initiative. Furthermore, given the dearth of direct long-haul flights to and from Israel, the entry of an additional carrier should lower the cost and increase the lure of travelling to India. Though how the Indian government will go about increasing direct flights to Israel is relatively unknown at this point in time. In the past, Air India discontinued direct flights from Mumbai to Israel for commercial reasons.⁵¹ Most recently, Air India’s plan to commence direct flights from New Delhi to Israel in May 2017, two months before Modi’s visit to Israel, was shelved over difficulties of obtaining overflight permission from countries with tensions with Israel like the UAE, Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵² Regardless, there is much reason to remain optimistic now that Modi has made an official promise of greater flight connectivity.

In the long term, the Indian Jews in Israel may function as an essential bridge between New Delhi and Tel Aviv. In an exclusive interview with Noah Massil, it is revealed that the Indian Jews in Israel have extensive connections to the Indian diaspora around the world. For example, the Indian Jews in Israel are responsible for publishing the ‘Maiboli’, the only Marathi publication regularly published in Europe and the Middle East.⁵³ Social media too seems to provide a critical platform for establishing links to other Indian Jews outside of Israel.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the 1st convention of The Organization of the Indian Jews is expected to take place on 14 January 2018.⁵⁵ Given the size of the Indian Jews in Israel in comparison to Indian Jews in other parts of the world, they may well assume leadership of the Indian Jews globally. Additionally, it is plausible that the Indian Jews in Israel can operate as a link bridge to the Jewish diaspora in the US, with support from the Indian government. It is, after all, in New Delhi’s interest to cultivate intermediaries that can develop ties to one of the strongest lobby groups in the US. It was not too long ago, in 2014, that the Jewish lobby in the US lobbied The US Congress to improve

⁵⁰ Email interview with Noah Massil, op. cit.

⁵¹ Girja Shankar Kaura, “Delhi-Tel Aviv flights to take off from May 16”, *The Tribune India*, 4 April 2017.

⁵² Faizan Haidar, “Air India’s new flight to Israel faces route hurdle over Pakistan, Afghanistan”, *Hindustan Times*, 18 July 2017.

⁵³ Email interview with Noah Massil, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Indo-US ties by linking their promotion of Israel-US issues with India.⁵⁶ In this regard, Massil reminds us that the Indian Jews in Israel can help the two societies understand one another better through their knowledge of both Indian heritage and Israeli mind set.⁵⁷

Of all the ways the Indian government can assist the diaspora in Israel, playing the role of a coordinator should be the most immediate task for New Delhi. It must be pointed out that such a role is not new for the Indian government. Most recently, the Indian Embassy was responsible for organising Modi's rally in Tel Aviv and chartering buses to ferry attendees from all over Israel.⁵⁸ Yet, despite the strong display of unity at Modi's rally in Tel Aviv, the Indian diaspora in Israel is not well-organised. Within the Indian Jewish community in Israel, Singh writes that "connections between networks were uneven and very sporadic" and that they have "little contact" with one another.⁵⁹ As a result, there is little record of their history and any activities organised by local Indian Jewish communities are dispersed and uncoordinated.⁶⁰ It is no wonder that Massil suggests that perhaps the Indian government could consider building an Indian Jewish community centre in Israel "for the studies of (the) historical period of Jews in India (in comparison) to all other Jews around the world."⁶¹ Moving on from the intra-Indian Jew community dynamics, Massil reveals that there is also little contact of the Indian Jews with Indian citizens working in Israel sans important events such as India's Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations organised by the Indian Embassy in Israel.⁶² That the Indian government, through the Indian Embassy in Israel, is able to organise well-received events and to provide the essential logistic support puts it in a good position to assume the role of coordinating and managing the Indian diaspora in Israel.

Conclusion

The Jews of Indian origins have come a long way since their initial migration and settlement in the state of Israel. Overcoming distance, hardship and discrimination, the Indian Jews have assimilated into the Israeli society at the expense of their Indian identity. While the Indian

⁵⁶ "Jewish lobby in US bats for India", *The Times of India*, 15 December 2014.

⁵⁷ Email interview with Noah Massil, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Anjana Pasricha, "Modi to Embrace India's Growing Ties with Israel", *VOA News*, 3 July 2017.

⁵⁹ Maina Chawla Singh, op. cit., p 190.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp 190-199.

⁶¹ Email interview with Noah Massil, op. cit.

⁶² Ibid.

diaspora may historically have taken up less prominence and continues to do so even today in India's geo-strategic calculations, when compared to the Indian communities elsewhere, it, nonetheless, holds tremendous potential as a bridge for technology know-how between India and Israel, especially coming on the heels of a prospering Indo-Israeli relationship. The visit and initiatives by Modi are a step in the right direction to link the Indians in Israel to India. It is equally important for the Indian government to continue the active engagement so that the younger generation of Israelis of Indian origins feel connected to the country of their forefathers and have the desire to want to contribute to India's development.

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