

■ Vishnu Pandya

The sight of a 'Synagogue' will lead one to think about the Jewish community. The ambassador of Israel to India once said that this was the only country where the Jews can live in peace, happiness and have mingled well with the mainstream. In most other countries, the Jews are looked at with contempt and hatred.

It is a bit surprising that the Jews, who have almost got themselves absorbed as an integral part of the Gujarati community since the days of the Moghul rule, have simply not been mentioned as a distinct community in the census report. Should one think that the status of a minority community is being accorded to those who are very vocal, have separatist tendencies, hardcore religious fanatics or enjoy sizeable numbers?!

**Jews – a respectable minority**

The census report of India has figures of religious majority and minorities. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists find detailed mention. Federal minister for minority affairs, Mr. Abdul Rehman Antulay aspires to give minority status to the Jain community. The government of India is also per-

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haps going ahead with the idea, preparing a bill to that effect, even though most of the Jain Acharyas and leaders of the community have condemned the move very strongly. But none seems to think about the Jews. This is a very respectable community, a minority at that.

Just to give a brief comparison – there are a lot of things common between the Hindus and the Jews. Both have a culture that is very old. Both the communities had and are even today facing aggressors, that are Jehadis – religious fanatics. The Jews and the Hindus are highly courageous and have a very high self respect. They are staunch believers of democracy (India and Israel both have a vibrant democracy). The two always had a learned leadership with great wisdom (India had Mahatma Gandhi, while Israel had Ben Gurian), both the countries had exceptionally strong woman leaders as well as daring ministers (Indira Gandhi/Golda Mir and Sardar Patel/Moshe Dayan respectively). They both face hostile neighbours and have fought a number of wars.



A traditional Jewish wedding

**Jew families in Gujarat**

An attempt was made to gather details of the Jewish community settled in Gujarat, by Mr. Vishnu Pandya, a columnist of the flagship publication of ABPL – Gujarat Samachar. He had a student, Ms. Pearl who is a Jew. All of them are very much a part of the mainstream Gujarati lifestyle. While their language is Gujarati, they have kept their social customs and

traditions intact. As per history, the first batch of Jews had landed on the Konkan coast, now of the Maharashtra state. (Like the Parsis who had landed at Sanjan port of Gujarat in the tenth century.) Some of them came all the way to Gujarat and settled down here. While their names give an impression of having descended from the ancient Judo-Christian legacy, but the traditions have a local reflection. The surnames that they have adopted give a local –

Marathi sounding, such as Dandekar, Bannolker, Agarwaker, Killekar, Arulker etc.

Like India in 1947, the Jews also got an independent country as their motherland in 1948. The community had been praying for many years "Next year in Jerusalem," which was ultimately answered. The country was named 'Israel'. Ben Gurian was the architect of the Jewish nation and he gave an open invitation to the fellow Jews all over the world to come and settle there. Jewish Scientists, Philosophers and Professionals from all over the world responded to his call and settled in Israel. A number of the Jews settled in Gujarat also headed home.

**Allround achievements**

Those who chose to stay back are known at 'Ben Israelis.' They got their education here and also had some exemplary achievements in various fields. The aggregate population of Gujarat today is around 55.60 million and the Jewish community has a very miniscule presence here. But the way they have mingled with

Gujarati and Indian culture and lifestyle is simply superb. Dr. Asther Solomon was one the distinguished Jewish citizen of Ahmedabad city. She passed away just a couple of years ago. She was highly regarded as a scholar of Hindu religion. She was considered an authority on the subject, just next to Acharya Anandshanker Dhruv.

Mr. Vishnu Pandya had once asked her – "You have a chance to get a highly respected post in Israeli University. Don't you ever feel like going there?" Ms. Asther, who had remained unmarried all her life laughed off at the suggestion, saying just no. "For me, my Dholku is fine." (Dholka is the name of a small town near Ahmedabad, and is used to symbolize Gujarat and the Gujarati lifestyle).

Reuben David – this name is almost synonymous with the famous Kankaria Zoo. Reuben David had been the head of the Kankaria Zoo, and had dedicated his entire life for the welfare of the Zoo and it's inmates – the animals kept there.

Another lady, Ms. Sheela Rohekar is a name highly regarded in Hindi literature these days. Asther David is also a leading novelist and art critic.

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I just recently came to know that Reuben David had also written a book on Ahmedabad. And the common factor among all the people mentioned here is that they all are Gujarati-Jews!

### Ahmedabad to Kutch - a community scattered

There is a Synagogue in Ahmedabad and also another one in the border district of Kutch. The number of Jews in Gujarat is very negligible. As per the 1961 census, the state had 515 Jews. But as per old records there were a large number Jews having settled down in places like Ahmedabad, Vadodra, Deesa, Surat, Vadhvan, Rajkot and Bhuj, right since the Moghul era. Mr. Pandya said he also remembers to have seen a Jewish graveyard in the cantonment area of Vadodra city. But that area have been transformed into a busy precinct with a lot of structures.

The Magen Abraham Synagogue in the largest city in Gujarat has completed 74 years of its existence. It was established in 1934. The foundation stone of the place was laid by Dr. Mrs. Abiyagal Bai Benjamin Issazac Bhonkar, says a plaque found there. In the pre-independence era, the then Governor of the Bombay state, Lord Brabourne, paid a visit to the synagogue when he came to Ahmedabad in 1934.

This religious place has been named after Dr. Abraham Aslaker (1822 - 1887) who was also a leading Jewish citizen of the state. He had set up the synagogue first at home, and then went on to build a

public one. He as well as Dr. Joseph Bamnolkar, Elayja Killokar, Dr. Joseph Soloman Dandekar and other leading Jews also made significant contribution and made Gujarat proud.

A Jewish graveyard in Ahmedabad, just outside the walled city has around 400 graves. The shapes of the graves are different. And being pretty old, the graves have almost disintegrated, but some old inscriptions give an impression of Hebrew, Gujarati and Marathi writings on them.

### Barely 125 families

In 1948, Gujarat had around 8,000 Jews. As per the 2001 census, the total population of Jews all over the world was 14,31,3000. In Israel, some 6.6 million Jews reside in an area of 20,772 sq. km. Their official language is Hebrew. Ninety five per cent of the Jews are well educated. Their currency is "Shakel", and the per capita income of the Jews in Israel is \$18,070. The gigantic efforts of purifying the salty sea water to make it potable water has paid rich dividends to the Jews. Israeli 'Kibutz' is a more successful democratic process than the Chinese 'Commune'. Israel is also a key player in the diamond trade like Belgium. The Jews here are also shouldering their part of the responsibility of the national life.

Even though only a few Jewish families are present in Gujarat, ideally the rest of the Gujarati population and the Government should show some genuine interest in their educational, professional and lifestyle aspects of the community.