Hindus-Jews Relationship from Ancient to Modern Times: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *The relationship between Jews and Hindus represents one of the longest sustained encounters between two ancient religious civilizations. Unlike Jewish experiences in Europe and parts of the Middle East, Jewish communities in India lived for centuries without large-scale persecution, forced conversion, or institutionalized anti-Semitism. This article critically examines Hindu–Jewish relations from ancient times to the present, tracing commercial contact, social accommodation, cultural adaptation, colonial transformation, nationalist debates, and contemporary geopolitical re-signification. It argues that Hindu–Jewish relations were shaped less by theology and more by social pragmatism, political patronage, and plural religious ecologies. At the same time, the article cautions against romanticized narratives and emphasizes the role of hierarchy, colonialism, and modern nationalism in redefining this relationship.*

Keywords: Hindu–Jewish relations, Indian Jews, diaspora, pluralism, India-Israel relations

1. Methodology

This study uses a **qualitative historical–analytical method**. It examines Hindu–Jewish relations from ancient to modern times by analysing secondary sources such as scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, edited volumes, and official government publications. The **historical method** is applied to trace continuity and change across different periods—ancient, medieval, colonial, nationalist, and post-independence.

The study also adopts a **comparative and critical approach** to understand why Jewish communities in India experienced relative security compared to other regions, while avoiding romanticised interpretations. Key texts, including writings of Mahatma Gandhi and modern scholarly works on Indian Jews and India–Israel relations, are critically interpreted to assess social accommodation, hierarchy, and political re-signification. The research is interpretive in nature and aims to provide a long-term analytical understanding rather than empirical or statistical measurement.

2. Introduction

The contemporary portrayal of Hindu–Jewish relations often emphasizes civilizational affinity, shared values, and political convergence between India and Israel. While such narratives have gained prominence in diplomatic and popular discourse, especially after the normalization of India–Israel relations in 1992, they risk projecting modern political meanings onto a far more complex historical experience.[1] A critical historical approach requires moving beyond slogans of harmony to examine how Jews actually lived among predominantly Hindu societies over two millennia.

Hindu–Jewish relations did not develop through theological debates or missionary encounters, as in Christian–Jewish history, but through everyday coexistence within plural social systems. The central argument of this article is that Jewish survival and relative security in India resulted from pragmatic accommodation within Hindu political orders rather than abstract tolerance or equality.[2]

1) Early Contacts and Indian Ocean Trade Networks

The earliest phase of Hindu–Jewish interaction is closely linked to Indian Ocean commerce connecting the eastern Mediterranean, Arabia, and the western coast of India. Jewish merchants participated actively in long-distance trade involving spices, textiles, and precious stones, embedding themselves in port cities governed largely by Hindu rulers.[3] These economic interactions created the conditions for settlement, community formation, and cultural adaptation.

Jewish oral traditions often trace their arrival in India to events as early as the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE or even earlier periods associated with King Solomon's trade routes. While such claims cannot be fully verified, they function as collective memory narratives that assert antiquity and legitimacy.[4] What is historically significant is not the precise date of arrival, but the fact that Jews were perceived as long-standing inhabitants rather than outsiders.

2) Medieval South India: Cochin Jews and Political Incorporation

The most documented early Jewish community in India emerged in Kerala, where Cochin Jews developed a stable presence by the early medieval period. Their relationship with Hindu rulers was formalized through royal charters, most notably the copper-plate grants attributed to the ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varman around the 10th–11th century.[5] These grants conferred economic privileges, ritual honors, and a degree of autonomous community governance.

Such recognition demonstrates how Hindu political systems incorporated minorities through patronage and hierarchy rather than legal equality. Jewish leaders were granted symbolic markers of status- such as ceremonial lamps and umbrellas—reflecting incorporation into the existing order of ranked communities.[6] This arrangement ensured security and continuity, but it also embedded Jews within caste-like structures of social differentiation.

3) The Bene Israel: Local Integration and Boundary Maintenance

The Bene Israel community of western India represents another important strand of Hindu–Jewish interaction. Concentrated primarily in Maharashtra, the Bene Israel developed a distinctive form of Jewish life deeply embedded in local culture. They spoke regional languages, adopted Indian dress and food habits, and participated in village economies, while maintaining endogamy and core Jewish rituals.[7]

Their experience illustrates how Jewish identity in India evolved through adaptation rather than isolation. At the same time, Bene Israel history also reveals internal stratification and external perceptions shaped by caste logic. Their position was neither fully marginal nor fully equal, demonstrating the ambivalent nature of minority inclusion in Indian society.[8]

4) Colonial Transformations and Baghdadi Jewish Networks

British colonial rule significantly altered Hindu–Jewish relations by reshaping economic structures, social classification, and communal identities. Baghdadi Jews, arriving mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries, established influential communities in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. They benefited from imperial trade networks and British legal protections, building synagogues, schools, and charitable institutions.[9]

Colonial modernity introduced new hierarchies within Indian Jewry itself. Baghdadi Jews often occupied higher economic and social positions than older communities such as the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, reflecting proximity to colonial power rather than indigenous acceptance alone.[10] Thus, Hindu–Jewish relations during this period were mediated indirectly through imperial structures.

5) Refuge, War, and the Limits of the "Safe Haven" Narrative

India is often described as a land where Jews never faced anti-Semitism. While this claim has some empirical basis, it must be critically examined. During the Second World War, India served as a refuge for certain European Jews fleeing Nazism, particularly in Bombay and Calcutta.[11] However, colonial wartime policies sometimes treated Jewish refugees from Germany as enemy aliens, subjecting them to surveillance or internment.[12]

These experiences reveal that Jewish security in India depended not only on Hindu societal attitudes but also on state power. The absence of popular anti-Semitic violence did not guarantee freedom from political vulnerability, especially under colonial regimes.

6) Indian Nationalism and the Palestine Question

The nationalist period introduced a new dimension to Hindu–Jewish relations by shifting the focus from local coexistence to global ethical politics. Mahatma Gandhi's writings on Jews and Palestine exemplify this transformation. Gandhi expressed deep sympathy for Jewish suffering in Europe, stating that "my sympathies are all with the Jews," yet he opposed the creation of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine.[13]

Gandhi's position reflected broader Indian anxieties shaped by colonialism and Partition. He feared that religious nationalism, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish, would legitimize violence and displacement.[14] This ethical tension influenced India's cautious approach toward Israel in the early decades after independence.

7) Independence, Migration, and Diplomatic Distance

India recognized Israel in 1950, but maintained limited engagement for decades.[15] During this period, most Indian Jews migrated to Israel, especially between 1948 and 1960. Bene Israel migrants encountered challenges related to racial hierarchy and religious legitimacy within Israeli society, complicating idealized notions of Zionist homecoming.[16]

These migrations transformed Hindu–Jewish relations from lived coexistence into memory and nostalgia. Jewish heritage in India became something remembered, curated, and eventually celebrated even as communities dwindled.

8) Post-1992 Reconfiguration: Politics and Civilizational Rhetoric

The establishment of full diplomatic relations between India and Israel in 1992 marked a decisive shift. Cooperation expanded across defense, agriculture, technology, and intelligence.[17] Public discourse increasingly framed the relationship as a natural alliance between two ancient civilizations facing similar security challenges.

However, this re-signification often instrumentalists history. Narratives of "eternal friendship" risk obscuring the everyday social realities of Indian Jews and reducing minority experience to geopolitical symbolism.[18] The historical Hindu–Jewish relationship was sustained not by ideology but by local social negotiation—a lesson relevant to contemporary pluralism.

3. Conclusion

A two-thousand-year perspective reveals that Hindu–Jewish relations were neither utopian nor conflict-ridden. Jewish communities in India experienced remarkable continuity due to flexible Hindu political systems, economic integration, and cultural pluralism. At the same time, hierarchy, colonialism, and modern nationalism shaped the limits of inclusion.

Understanding this relationship critically helps resist both romanticization and politicization. The deepest Hindu–Jewish connection emerged not through state alliances, but through shared civic life, mutual accommodation, and everyday coexistence. Preserving that legacy today requires protecting pluralism rather than merely celebrating history.

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