Rediscovering the Jewish Dalit Past

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Abstract and Keywords

The chapter engages with the phenomenon of the Indian caste system and situates the Bene Ephraim community's life in the context of the socio-economic situation of other Dalit groups in the village and in the state. We explore the community's main origin narratives and religious practices against the backdrop of wider Madiga traditions. We suggest that by adopting an Israelite account of Bene Ephraim lineage community leader Shmuel Yacobi re-interpreted Madiga experiences of untouchability in light of Jewish history and offered a new way of celebrating Madiga heritage. The chapter also discusses how the Jewish practices adopted by the Kothareddypalem congregation allow the community to consolidate their boundaries and to make a claim to a different status in the local society. At the same time, we argue that they resonate with the efforts of other Madiga aimed at developing a sense of pride for Dalit traditions.

Keywords: Dalits, Madiga, untouchability, caste system, religious practice

> Thirty to forty years back, in the same place where we are sitting now, my grandmother once said that we would soon go back to Israel. Though she said this in response to our complaint of the intolerable noise from the adjoining Hindu temple, I became serious and asked why we don't return to Israel now. I already knew through the newspapers that two of the Tribes (Judah and Binyamin) were returning to Israel since 1948 and so I asked my grandmother. She said we—the Bene Ephraim—are chosen for

taking sufferings on us. We have to stay back and fulfill the Covenant. That was the first oral tradition that I have heard of.

This is how Shmuel Yacobi described to Shahid his first encounter with his grandparents' oral tradition about their community's Israelite origin. Building upon this narrative and his own research, Yacobi suggested that the entire Madiga population of Andhra Pradesh and possibly even other Dalit groups were of ancient Hebrew descent.

In this chapter we will explore the narrative and practices of the Bene Ephraim community against the backdrop of wider Madiga discourses and in the context of caste relations in the village. We will argue that the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim can be read as the community's way of celebrating not only their Israelite, but also their Madiga and more general Dalit heritage. The first part of the chapter highlights the historical and ethnographic background of the Madiga community from which the Bene Ephraim stem. We then focus on the Bene Ephraim origin stories and demonstrate that, like the Madiga and other Dalit groups, the community has made a claim to a higher status in the Hindu hierarchy by linking their ancestors to high-profile figures of Sanskritic sources. However, instead of directly associating themselves with these characters within the **(p.32)** framework of Hinduism, they created a narrative about a shared Israelite lineage, thus reinterpreting the Madiga past in light of Jewish history. We will show that Shmuel Yacobi's discourse about the community's Israelite descent portrays the Hebrew ancestors of the Bene Ephraim as rebels who had spoken up against caste discrimination in ancient India. We will argue that Yacobi's anti-caste and anti-Brahmanic rhetoric both makes his teachings akin to ideologies of Dalit movements and re-inscribes Judaism as a liberation tool for socially disadvantaged communities in India.

We will then consider how the Bene Ephraim both assert their Jewishness and celebrate their Madiga tradition through beef-eating and burying their dead—practices that are specific to the Dalits. We will argue that like the community's origin narratives, the performance of Judaism in Kothareddypalem is aimed both at helping the Bene Ephraim to make a claim to a different status in the village society and at developing a sense of pride for Dalit customs which are looked down upon by caste Hindus.

The second half of the chapter explores how the Bene Ephraim are perceived by their immediate neighbors in the village. We will demonstrate that despite their efforts at being recognized as Jewish and rejecting the status ascribed to them in the caste system, the Bene Ephraim are barely differentiated from other Madiga practicing Christianity, and are still subjected to caste discrimination. We will show that though the Bene Ephraim are acutely aware of caste inequality and are prepared to fight it, they nevertheless dissociate themselves from Dalit movements, arguing that Dalits need to seek support from abroad to get a

chance to improve their position in India. At the same time, we will suggest that though the Bene Ephraim explicitly distance themselves from Dalit political activism, their tactic to engage with foreign Jewish organizations rather than with local authorities is in fact reminiscent of other Dalit leaders' attempts to attract the attention of the international community to caste discrimination.

From Israel to Andhra

Kothareddypalem, where the Yacobi family lives and looks after the Bene Yaacob synagogue, is one of the three Panchayat villages of Chebrole[1] Mandal—the other two villages being Chebrole and Pathareddypalem. The villages are situated some 15 to 20 kilometers south of Guntur city, which is the administrative capital of the Guntur district.

The immediate community that the Bene Ephraim come from was Christianized about one hundred and fifty years ago by the Lone Star Baptist **(p.33)** Christian Missionaries of Valley Forge Pennsylvania. The Yacobi brothers come from a Madiga Baptist family that is well known in Chebrole—their parents and grandparents were well educated and ran a local school. The father of the Yacobis served in the British Army, a well-known route for partially breaking out of the rigid structure of the caste system for untouchable and low-caste groups (Zelliot 1996: 36). He provided his sons with English language education; and one of them, Shmuel, subsequently acquired a Bachelor's degree in Theology from Serampore University and an MA in Philosophy from the Open University in Hyderabad. According to the brothers, their parents privately identified themselves as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, passing on this knowledge to their children. However, in public they practiced Christianity, like the rest of their Madiga neighbours.

The Yacobi brothers do not possess any documentary evidence of their parents and grandparents practising Judaism, as, they argue, this had to be done in secret. Their father visited Palestine, while serving in the British Army during World War II, and this is where he may have encountered living Judaism for the first time. The history of "emerging" Jewish groups has a record of another example of British Army service providing a departure point for the formation of a Judaizing movement. In South Africa a Xhosa man, Vayisile Joshua Msitshana, met the Jews of Palestine while serving there with the British Army, and noticed the similarities between the Jewish and Xhosa traditions. On his return back home he established a new house of worship and led his congregation to Judaism (Bruder 2008: 175). It is possible that the father of the Yacobi brothers became more interested in Judaism after a similar encounter and started openly talking about Jewish practice with his family then.

Influenced by his parents, Shmuel Yacobi developed an interest in learning more about the Jewish religion. However, in the absence of an opportunity to study Judaism, he trained as a Christian preacher:

I made a decision to go to a Christian seminary to learn Hebrew … Unless I enrolled myself at the seminary as a student, they would not teach me. Just [the] Hebrew [language] they would not teach me. So I had to find a way to go to the seminary … Because they gave me the free seat scholarship, they asked me to service the caste for some time … I did it for some time and then I quit … In 1986 I opened a distance education Bible school and it gave me time to study the community.[2]

 (p.34) In the 1980s Shmuel visited Israel to attend a conference of Evangelical Christians and to see live Judaism for the first time in his life. After he got back home, he and his brother decided to declare openly that their family were the Bene Ephraim. Shortly afterward, a number of other Madiga families in the village joined them.

At the moment, the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem constitute about forty nuclear families that account for around 120 individual members, all of them well connected to the synagogue. These families are part of 150 Madiga families that have been living there for over a hundred years. Community elders recall coming to Kothareddypalem to work on the land of the Reddy caste. Most of them have continued to perform the same task for the landlords, with the exception of a few members who took to building contract work or to driving auto-rickshaws. None of them own any farmland.

Two observations could be made with regard to Guntur city to sketch the pattern of the village–city relationship in this part of Andhra. Firstly, the city houses a high concentration of learning and educational institutions resulting in heavy traffic flow during peak hours between the village and the city. Secondly, Guntur acts as a major channel for international exporting of cotton, chilies, and tobacco, which the farmers produce with the help of cheap labor. This would suggest an active social life in the village consisting of farmers and laborers instrumental in agricultural production and in the development of inter-linkages between the village and the city. However, because the farmer-laborer relations in South India had come to be organized around inter-caste relations (Alexander 1975), it is the farmers that come to own the lands and generally belong to upper castes, while the laborers remain landless and belong to Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Mukhopadhyaya 1980).

In the village where the Bene Ephraim are resident, upper-caste Reddys have occupied the role of farmers, while the Scheduled Castes of the Malas and the Madigas are historically brought in from other areas to work as *coolies* (agricultural labourers or sharecroppers). As a ruling caste of Andhra, they are in competition with the upper-caste Kammas who are economically advanced but politically disabled. In the social hierarchy of the Andhra region the Reddys are placed well above the most numerous but least influential castes of cultivators

and sharecroppers such as the Kapus, the Padmashalis, the Malas, and the Madigas (Shah 2002: 83).

The status of the Reddys in the village of the Bene Ephraim is reflected in its name—Kothareddypalem in Telugu[3] means "the new village of the **(p.35)** Reddys." It had been formed out of the Pathareddypalem—"the old village of the Reddys." In addition to the Reddys, there is a significant presence in the village of the Madigas (both Christian and Hindu), the Malas (Christian and Hindu), and a number of Backward Castes,[4] such as Hindu Togatti Kshatriyas, Hindu Padmashalis, Hindu Telagas (also called Kapus), and a range of smaller sub-caste groups. The village also has a small presence of a tribal group of the Lambadas and an even smaller community of Dudekula Muslims, a group of former Hindus who converted into Islam a few generations ago and retained some of their original practices.

The Madigas represent one of the poorest segments of Indian society and have been placed in the lowest status among other untouchable groups of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Demographically, the Madiga constitute 46.94% of the total Scheduled Caste population of the state, which, according to the 2001 census is placed at twelve million (Muthaiah 2004: 197–98). Their traditional occupations include mainly shoe-making and agricultural labor (Singh 1969: 1).

An ethnographic survey conducted in the region at the beginning of the twentieth century describes the Madiga as "the lowest caste found in the State. They are a settled people and generally live apart in ill-built thatched houses, in quarters outside the main village ... They are not allowed to use the common village well ... Madigas cannot approach Brahmans within the distance of about twenty paces. Any Brahman who has been touched inadvertently or purposely by a Madiga must purify himself by bathing, and washing all his clothes and renewing the sacred thread" (Nanjundayya 1909: 20–21).

The origin of the idea that low-caste people can contaminate the surroundings of high caste is as old as the Hindu caste system itself.[5] Although the practice of untouchability was outlawed in 1950 by Article 17 of the constitution of independent India, it is still present on the subcontinent, just like the caste system itself. Instances of discrimination against the untouchables—which have included restricted access to temples, water resources, the central parts of villages, and high-caste streets—have been widely reported in the national and international press. Recently the government decided to include caste identification on the national census, a practice which had been discontinued since 1931. This has been described as the state admitting to the fact that the caste system is still present in Indian society (Satyanarayana 2010).

Caste discrimination is a part of life for many Madiga even today. During one of Yulia's visits to Kothareddypalem in 2009, Sadok took her around **(p.36)**

Chebrole. This is an historic village, which was once a ruling fort for the Indian dynasties of the Cholas, Pallavas, Chalukyas, and the Kakatiyas (Devi 1993). The village is locally famous for its numerous Hindu temples. One of the main cultural places of interest in Chebrole is the Temple of Lord Brahma. As we drove up to the temple, Sadok looked through the gates and said, "A friend of mine is on duty here today. This means we will be able to see it. Otherwise they don't let in the untouchables." Later in the year, when Shahid settled in the village, Sadok told him that not so long ago, the Yacobis, like other Madiga, would not have been even allowed to walk along the "high-caste" streets of the village, lest their shadow might pollute everything around it.

It appears that Shmuel's research into the Israelite past of his community was partly motivated by his desire to free the Bene Ephraim from caste inequality. Shmuel often recounted to us how, like other Madiga, he was discriminated against in the job market with very few occupations being open to him, despite the fact that he had achieved good results at school. In the village, the dominant Reddy caste tried to prevent the appointment of his father to the post of English teacher. His mother told him stories of how she was made to sit separately in school, often outside the classroom, and forced to use the sand floor to write, instead of writing on a slate or a board. The local tea and food shop keepers in the village served them through the backdoor of the shop—if they ever served them at all—fearing a backlash from high-caste villagers. One of their neighbors on Sundays used to put his television set and a couple of cots outside of his house, so that the whole street could come and join him watching TV. However, if the Yacobis wanted to join him, he would turn the cots upside down and ask them to sit on the ground.

When Shmuel was a young man, he himself was once refused a glass of water by a Hindu neighbor who belonged to a higher caste. He describes this episode as a starting point for his research into the Bene Ephraim past:

> When I started my education, one day I was thirsty. I went to a nearby Hindu house and asked, "Give me some water." They know my parents, my grandmother. But some of them are uneducated Hindu people. They may not recognize me or my parents. They said, "Who are you?" It is a general question in Andhra Pradesh … We have to tell our caste. I said, "I am the son of the headmaster." They said, "Oh, you are Madiga." They brought some water and **(p.37)** poured it like this [to make sure I don't touch the cup]. That was the first time in my life to face those things. Before that my parents would tell me, but I did not know what it was like for them in practice … From that day I took it as a challenge. I started praying to God and I started asking several people, "What is this caste system? What is this discrimination?" In Babylonian exile the Jewish people had to say, "We are unclean." The same situation was here … So, that's how that began …[6]

The belief that the touch of a Dalit defiles and that sharing drinks with them is not acceptable appears to be deeply ingrained in the psyche even of the more liberal representatives of higher castes. For instance, Chris Fuller mentions how a well-educated Brahman informant of his who was a Communist representative in the Kerala Legislative Assembly admitted that though he is completely opposed to the caste system and would never discriminate between people on the basis of their caste affiliation, he still could not prevent himself from feeling uncomfortable if a lower-caste person touched him (1976: 48). The Osellas describe an episode when a young man from a Nayar community had an instinctive inclination to refuse a drink offered in the house of his Izhava friend (2000: 230). We agree with Fuller's observation that information like this, which comes from those few frank informants (1976: 48) (or from brief episodes elucidating prejudiced behavior, such as the one described by the Osellas), is probably more revealing of caste attitudes than the more readily available "party-line" assertions that belief in ritual pollution associated with low-caste status is losing its grip on public imagination. The incident with Shmuel's neighbor, brief as it was, therefore goes to the very core of time-old caste prejudices and indicates what an important role caste discrimination has played in the formation of the Bene Ephraim movement. However, instead of reducing the community's Judaization to an attempt to move up the social ladder, we will demonstrate how this process feeds from wider Dalit discourses and helps the Bene Ephraim to promote a sense of Madiga pride.

In the final section of this chapter we will discuss the extent to which Madiga status and experiences of untouchability are still affecting the social life of the Bene Ephraim and shaping their perceptions of the community's place in Andhra society. But first, let us explore how their earlier narratives of origin may have been informed by those developed in the wider Madiga community and by other Dalit ideologues. **(p.38)**

Castes and Jews

The early history of the Bene Ephraim is obscure just like the early history of other Madiga groups, as well as of other Dalits. Recorded accounts of the Madiga emphasize their ancient presence in South India. Some sources of the later British period describe the Madiga as the descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the Andhra region (Nanjundayya 1909: 3) and call them an "ancient tribe" (Rauschenbusch-Clough 2000 [1899]). Madiga legends connect the community to Jambavant, a figure in the *Ramayana*,[7] and explain that the low status of his descendants was due to a mistake or a curse (Singh 1969: 5–6). Another important figure of the Madiga mythology is Arundhati, who in the Sanskritic sources is the wife of Vasistha, one of the Vedic sages.[8] In the Madiga tradition, she belonged to their community and cursed her people when they tried to prevent her from marrying a Brahman (Rauschenbusch-Clough 2000 [1899]: 53–55).

As we noted in the previous chapter, in the twentieth century these narratives were revisited by Madiga leaders who developed more positive images of their community's history and social status. Some of the (re)discovered Bene Ephraim traditions are reminiscent of those belonging to other contemporary Madigas. Earlier stories collected in a typescript on the community's history and in a book published by Shmuel Yacobi in 2002 assert that all the Scheduled Castes of southern India and possibly even of the entire subcontinent are the descendants of the Bene Ephraim (Yacobi 2001, Yacobi 2002). Narratives presented in the book entitled *Cultural Hermeneutics* contain three main themes, all of which have informed the problematics of Bene Ephraim self-identification: the story of their migration from ancient Israel, accounts explaining how their ancestors had become untouchables, and representations of their relationship with caste Hindus. Each theme can be linked to broader discourses, which emerged outside of the historical and social boundaries of the community, such as the centuries-old Lost Tribes discourse, constructions of a higher status origin produced by different Scheduled Castes of India, and the anti-caste rhetoric of the Dalit movement.

As we discussed in chapter 1, the Lost Tribes tradition has been prominent in modern Western Christian discourse and has effected the emergence of a wide range of Judaizing movements. The Yacobis posit that the Christian missionaries who worked among the Bene Ephraim ancestors in the nineteenth century noticed that some of their customs appeared to be Jewish. No references to the possible Israelite origin of the Madiga **(p.39)** have been discovered in the records of the Lone Star Baptist Church so far; yet, it appears that the Yacobis were well aware of the Western Lost Tribes tradition. In the book Shmuel refers to *The Lost Tribes* by George Moore, a British writer, who argued that ancient Israelites were assimilated into different populations around the world, including those of India, and that Buddhism may be seen as owing its origin to the Israelite tradition (Moore 1861).[9]

The Yacobis both embrace this narrative and reaffirm it in their practice and interactions with their potential foreign audiences. They take their visitors to Amaravati, a small town on the banks of the river Krishna in Guntur district, which was the site of a Buddhist stupa built during the reign of the emperor Ashoka.[10] The Yacobis show off the town as a prominent place of interest in India's Israelite past.

It is not only Amaravati that holds symbolic significance for the Bene Ephraim and is presented as a material artifact of their ancient history, but also Tirupathi of Lord Venkateshwara, who, according to community leaders, was of Bene Ephraim lineage. In Tirupathi, a hill town in Chittoor district of southern Andhra, Lord Venkateshwara sits as the presiding deity of Tirupathi Venkateshwara Temple. According to a recent compilation of oral traditions of the Bene Ephraim, Tirupathi refers to the seven hills on which the temple is built, which is

an exact replica of the seven hills of Jerusalem the patterns of which the Hindus had copied. An apparently strong resemblance between the seven hills of Tirupathi and Jerusalem is reinforced by a locally prominent Madiga evangelist friend of Shmuel, who recently visited Jerusalem and expressed his surprise at the close resemblance between the two structures. Shmuel therefore conjectures that Lord Venkateshwara, who is worshipped by millions of Hindus, was a Bene Ephraim herdsman whose real name was Yaacob and whose life was dedicated to removing people's sufferings. According to Shmuel, the Hindus stole Yaacob's image from the Bene Ephraim and deified him for Hindu worshippers.

The Yacobis thus reinterpret India's ancient history and the Hindu tradition in light of the Lost Tribes narrative. This allows them both to construct a genealogical connection to ancient Israelites—a connection evidenced in two prominent sites of the Indian historical and religious landscape—and to reclaim the narratives and characters of the Hindu tradition, access to which had been denied to the Bene Ephraim due to their Dalit status. Shmuel's reinterpretation of the Lord Venkateshwara story also contains an open protest against the dominant Hindu ideology—he **(p.40)** contends that the Hindus had concealed the true origin of Venkateshwara, reinvented him as a Hindu deity, and thus stole him from the Bene Ephraim and other Madiga.

Discussions of the parallels between Telugu and Israelite cultures, as well as the rhetoric of anti-caste protest, permeate Shmuel's book on the Bene Ephraim tradition. *Cultural Hermeneutics* discusses different aspects of the community's history, which could be broadly summarized as follows. The Bene Ephraim are the descendants of some of the Ten Tribes, who in 722 BCE were exiled from the ancient kingdom of Israel by Assyria. After a sojourn in Persia they were moved to the northern part of the subcontinent, which was then populated by Dravidian groups, including Telugu-speaking communities. The Bene Ephraim established good relations with them and made an impact on their religions and cultures. In the seventh century BCE the subcontinent was conquered by the "Aryans" who moved the Dravidians and the Bene Ephraim down south.

Though the name "Bene Ephraim" implies that the community are the descendants of Ephraim, the son of Joseph and the grandson of Jacob, Shmuel Yacobi applies to this name a symbolic rather than literal meaning. In his interpretation, Ephraimites appear to stand for the Ten Tribes of Israel in general rather than specifically for the descendants of Ephraim. It is noteworthy that in the biblical tradition, Ephraim has a special significance. God chooses Jeroboam, a man from the tribe of Ephraim to lead the ten tribes out of Solomon's kingdom. Ephraim and Manasseh, both the children of Jacob's favorite son Joseph, receive a special blessing from Jacob; however, Ephraim's blessing is greater (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 9). It is not surprising then that Shmuel Yacobi chose Ephraim to stand for the whole of the Lost Tribes; though,

as we will discuss in the following chapter, recently his brother began to emphasize the connection between his community and that of the Bene Menashe on the basis of the biblical account.[11]

A large part of the book is devoted to the description of the alleged similarities between ancient Hebrew and Telugu languages. In his interviews with us, Shmuel also talked about the similarities between biblical practices and those of Telugu speakers, and specifically of the Madiga. In this respect, the Yacobis' tradition is reminiscent of the way different African and African American Judaizing communities have engaged with Jewish history through finding parallels between their religious practices and those of ancient Israelites (Chireau 2000, Bruder 2008). Like the Igbo of Nigeria, the House of Israel of Ghana, and the Lemba of South **(p.41)** Africa and Zimbabwe (Bruder 2008: chapters 9, 10), Shmuel Yacobi builds upon such parallels to affirm an ancestral connection with the rest of the Jewish world.

The typescript on Bene Ephraim history also contains a number of stories discussing the community's origin. Almost every one of them attempts to explain why the Bene Ephraim had forgotten the Jewish tradition, lived in poverty, and had a low status in the local hierarchy. For instance, according to one of these stories, after the Bene Ephraim left the ancient kingdom of Israel, they travelled to the North of India where local priests tried to convert them into the local religion and, having failed to do so, cursed them. As a result of this curse, the Bene Ephraim forgot Jewish customs and acquired the status of untouchables. Another story links the Bene Ephraim to Arundhati, who in the Sanskritic tradition, which we mentioned above, is the wife of Vasistha. In the Bene Ephraim legend Arundhati was an Israelite, who cursed her community for passing the knowledge of the Jewish religion to her husband (Yacobi 2001, for more details see also Egorova 2006: 122–25).

Anthropologist Robert Deliège has observed that origin narratives of different Dalit groups in India often explain how their ancestors had lost their higher status by mistake or as a punishment (1993). As we noted above, the myth about Arundhati being a Madiga is an important part of the general Madiga narrative and it appears that the Yacobis reinterpreted it in light of their own tradition. The Judaization of the Bene Ephraim is thus partly reminiscent of other Indian communities' attempts at reclaiming a higher status in the local hierarchy through a narrative about more distinguished origins, which for one reason or another has been forgotten.

More importantly, the book is full of anti-caste and anti-Brahmanic rhetoric, which also evokes Jewish history and tradition to make sense of the community's untouchable status. The author argues that in ancient times the Bene Ephaim had rebelled against the "Aryan invasion" of the subcontinent, and as a punishment were moved down south and were relegated to the position of the

outcastes (Yacobi 2002). In this respect, one could again draw a parallel between the narratives of the Bene Ephraim and those developed by other "emerging" Jewish communities. Like the leaders of African and African American Judaizing groups, Shmuel Yacobi finds analogies in the experiences of his people and those of the Jews. He interprets the values of Jewish culture against the backdrop of ancient Indian history and social inequality ascribing to the Hebrew **(p.42)** tradition a message of liberation, which allowed his ancestors to stand up to the caste system.

According to *Cultural Hermeneutics*, the Aryans relegated the Bene Ephraim to the position of untouchables, because the latter were against the very idea of caste hierarchy:

> The Bene Ephraim Communities detested this subtle branding ideology of the Aryans and stayed away from the Aryan caste-color system to this very day ... The Sages of the Bene Ephraim Communities openly declared that no one is superior or inferior to any one and all human beings are the children of Adam HaRishon[12] and Noah ... (Yacobi 2002: 260–61).

Shmuel Yacobi argues that the ancient texts that had laid the foundation of the current Hindu tradition contain the knowledge that was stolen by the Aryans from the Dravidians, who in their turn had been influenced by the Hebrew culture of the Bene Ephraim:

> All the stories of the Hebrews were copied and were translated and then became Vedas and Upanishads. The Chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah became the book of Rajatharangini meaning the waves of kings. The five books of Moshe Rabbenu became the four Vedas and Bhagavad-Gita [became] the fifth Veda (Yacobi 2002: 20).

Having appropriated this knowledge, the Aryans, according to Shmuel Yacobi, barred "non-Aryans" from it: "The Aryans never allowed the non-Aryans into their schools because everything they taught in their school was not theirs. They treated all the non-Aryans as Sudra slaves. The Sudra slaves were not even allowed to hear those teachings" (Yacobi 2002: 78).

The practice of depriving lower caste and untouchable groups of the right to learn, critiqued in this passage, is far from an outlived phenomenon. As Ciotti reminds us, drawing on Goody (1968: 12) and Parry (1985: 210), India can be described as a case of "socially restricted literacy," where Brahmans have played an important role in learning and the transmission of knowledge. Studying religious texts is traditionally associated in India with ritual purity and therefore was not accessible to the untouchables and other non-Brahmans (Ciotti 2002: 262). In the later **(p.43)** British period, the elites of low-caste groups started demanding educational opportunities from the colonial authorities. This to some degree increased these communities' upward social mobility, a good example of

which is represented by the Izhavas of Kerala (Ciotti 2002: 264, Osella and Osella 2000).

Shmuel Yacobi's writings transform the sacred sources of Hinduism into Jewish texts and thus (re)claim them for the Dalits. As we will discuss in the following two chapters, in the past decade Shmuel and Sadok have also been encouraging the community to learn Hebrew and to acquire a better knowledge of the Jewish tradition. Both stressed in their conversations with us how important in their opinion both Jewish and general secular education was for the empowerment of their community. The Yacobis see education as a key prerequisite for their community's social mobility—a position which has been noticed and discussed at length by anthropologists in respect of other communities of untouchables (Osella and Osella 2000, Ciotti 2002). However, while some other Dalit and low-caste communities appear to describe social mobility and educational development in "evolutionary terms" underpinned by the ideas of "progress" from degradation to social development (Ciotti 2002: 13), Shmuel Yacobi frames his group's potential for educational advancement in terms of an opportunity for reclaiming forgotten knowledge and bringing back the glorious days of the past.

The current state of affairs in the community is explained as an unfortunate result of the Aryan rule under which the Bene Ephraim lost their status and political significance, were reduced to extreme poverty, and, left with no means of maintaining their tradition, almost forgot it. The Judaization project that Shmuel Yacobi embarked on when he initiated a study into the Bene Ephraim, therefore, seeks to enable his community to rediscover their true history and to reclaim the rites that were part of their tradition to begin with. But who exactly are the people who are entitled to this tradition?

Madiga or Bene Ephraim?

Shmuel Yacobi argues in his book that at the time of writing there were about ten million Bene Ephraim living among the Telugu people, and most of them were registered as the Scheduled Castes of the Malas and the Madigas or were converts to Buddhism and Christianity. However, according to *Cultural Hermeneutics*, only 125 families identify **(p.44)** themselves as Israelite. The rest were not aware of their true origin (Yacobi 2002: 133):

> These 10 million members of the Bene Ephraim communities among the 60 million Telugu people do not remember the history as explained in this version unless someone reminds them. Both Bene Ephraim communities and the Telugu people forgot the history, the names, the traditions and stories of this presentation (Yacobi 2002: 133).

To borrow a notion from Hammerback (noted in chapter 1), Shmuel Yacobi "reconstitutes" the Mala and the Madiga groups of Andhra Pradesh into a community of Israelites. In some parts of the book Yacobi suggests on the basis of his research that all the Madiga and the Mala untouchables—and possibly

even the entire Dalit population of India—were originally Ephraimites. When Yulia first met Shmuel's brother Sadok in 2001, he suggested that all Madiga were probably Bene Ephraim, but was not sure about the Mala. In the following chapter we will see how in recent years narratives about the common origin of the Bene Ephraim and Dalits gave way to accounts dissociating the Kothareddypalem congregation from their Madiga neighbors, as well as from other Judaizing groups of Andhra Pradesh. However, it appears that in the first decade of the community's existence both brothers were ready to include the wider Madiga population in the Bene Ephraim story of origin.

For the vernacular reader a synopsis of the book is available in the Telugu language entitled "Who am I?" The title suggests that the book is aimed at the Bene Ephraim—or possibly even at the wider Madiga community—and is supposed to inform them what their true origin is. As we will show in chapter 3, irrespective of whether the book reached wider audiences abroad, in the village it is seen by "lay" Bene Ephraim, as well as by some other Madiga, as a document providing the ultimate proof of the community's Jewish origin.

Shmuel Yacobi constructs the Dalits of Andhra Pradesh both as objects of his research and as an audience which is expected to engage with his ideas about the Lost Tribes and possibly to become part of his community. He thus invites the Madiga and the Mala to grant his movement their recognition by altering their self-understanding and joining the ranks of the Bene Ephraim. This again calls attention to Hammerback's insight about the way agents use rhetoric "to change the self-identity **(p.45)** of audiences". Shmuel Yacobi seeks to turn the Madiga and the Mala from agents external to his community into his own group members, prompting them both to recognize the Bene Ephraim as a category and to alter their self-understanding. Indeed, if his efforts are successful, the endorsement of other Madiga will enhance the community's numbers. The Bene Ephraim's recognition on behalf of other Dalits of the state will be both an act of external categorization and of internal group identification.

At the same time, it is clear that the Mala and the Madiga are not the only audiences that Shmuel Yacobi is addressing in the presentation of his research. He is also keen on convincing other communities and organizations who will always remain external to his community, but whose recognition is just as important as that of other Dalits. That is why *Cultural Hermeneutics* is written in English, is presented as an academic treatise, and is offered to foreign visitors as evidence of the community's Jewish descent. The book transforms the oral tradition passed down to Shmuel Yacobi by his grandparents into a historiographic discovery. As Seth Kunin observes in his discussion of a similar engagement with personal history demonstrated by the crypto-Jewish groups in New Mexico, in such studies "[t]he tradition becomes the basis for historical or genealogical research, which then is employed to validate the tradition using a societally privileged form—the language and forms of evidence of academic

historiography" (2009: 29). To follow Kunin's analysis, it is not surprising that for foreign audiences Shmuel presents his book as a scholarly text. The author constitutes his overseas audiences as potential interlocutors who are not going to take his parents' tradition at face value, but will demand evidence to support it.

In the following sections we will discuss how the Bene Ephraim assert their Jewishness not just through their narratives, but also through religious practice, which involves celebrating major Jewish festivals, adopting Jewish dietary laws, and using symbols of Judaism to demarcate their possessions, houses, and burial grounds. We will suggest that in doing so, just like in the narratives articulated by Shmuel Yacobi, the Bene Ephraim celebrate not only their Jewish tradition, but also their Madiga heritage and attempt to assert a new status in the society of Kothareddypalem. As we demonstrate below, their first claim to a different position in the local hierarchy manifested itself in their very choice of place to construct a synagogue. **(p.46)**

The Synagogue and the Village

All community members, apart from the Yacobis and another Bene Ephraim family, live in the colony of the Madiga, called Madigapalli. Like most Scheduled Caste colonies in south India, Madigapalli is located on the outskirts of the main village. However, the synagogue of the Bene Ephraim is situated right on the entry point of the village. The Yacobi brothers managed to build the synagogue at this prominent site because their parents had succeeded not only in escaping the traditional occupations of the Madigas, but also in avoiding the social pressure to live in Madigapalli. When the Yacobis' father returned from the army, he was employed as a teacher in the village school, which allowed him to rent a house from a Muslim owner near Chebrole. In 1978, with the help of a government subsidy, he managed to buy and occupy a sizeable piece of land next to a Hindu temple in Kothareddypalem. When the parents of the Yacobi brothers died in the 1980s, the elder brother, Shmuel, moved out of the village and settled with his family first in Vijayawada and then in the coastal town of Machilipatnam, to be closer to his wife's family. Here he and his wife Malkah built a house and a second Jewish synagogue, which today serves his family and other close relatives (see fig. 2.1). In the meantime, Sadok Yacobi stayed back in Kothareddypalem to lead the community. He lives in a small house adjoining the synagogue, along with his wife Miriam, two daughters, and son.

The synagogue has a Hindu temple on its right and a family of a Hindu weavers' caste on its left. The road in front of the synagogue leads in and out of the village, while the backyard has an empty lot, which belongs to another Hindu family. The Yacobis have lately been discussing the possibility of buying this piece of land to be able to accommodate the increasing number of community members who come to the synagogue during festivals and other functions. The prominent position that the synagogue occupies in the topography of the village

symbolizes not just the new religious affiliation of the Bene Ephraim, but also their claim to a different status in the local hierarchy, a status that would classify them on a par with caste Hindus. As Clarinda Still demonstrates in her ethnography of the Madiga of the Guntur district, areas designated for untouchables are always spatially segregated in Andhra villages. Even if the quarters of the untouchables are not that different from other poorer areas, they clearly represent a *socially* different section of the village (Still 2007: 5–6). Drawing on the work of Andre Béteille and anthropologists who have **(p.47)**

discussed village spatial organization in other parts of India, Still notes that the topographic demarcation of the Madiga colonies is indicative of the untouchables' social position in relation to other castes in the village (Still 2007: 5). In the eyes of the villagers, "residential segregation reduces the chance of Dalits 'contaminating' the non-Dalits" (Still 2007: 13). By constructing the synagogue in the main part of Kothareddypalem and not in Madigapalli, the Yacobis are attempting to shed their community's untouchable status. The position of the synagogue also shows that

Figure 2.1 Synagogue in Machilipatnam. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

the Jewish practices of the Bene Ephraim are not hidden from the rest of the village. On the contrary, anyone coming to the village has to pass by the synagogue. When the community has a guest from out of town, a big banner is put up over the gate of the synagogue yard, making it known to everybody in Kothareddypalem who the Bene Ephraim are hosting. As we will discuss later, inviting guests from abroad and from other parts of India has proved to be an important empowerment strategy for the community, because such visits demonstrate to their neighbors from higher Hindu castes that the Jewish status of the Bene Ephraim is recognized by "outsiders."

The houses of the Bene Ephraim, most of which are thatched huts, are easily distinguishable from those of other Madiga in Madigapalli, because they generally bear the Jewish symbols of the Star of David and of the menorah (see fig. 2.2). In most Bene Ephraim houses one can find **(p.48)**

a book of the Torah and/or *siddur*, a *mezuzah* or, where it is absent, the word Shaddai[13] written on the doorpost. The Jewish houses of Madigapalli are thus clearly demarcated from the "non-Jewish" ones, and the artifacts of material culture that the Bene Ephraim possess also distinguish them from their neighbors, indicating that though the majority of the Bene Ephraim have not managed yet to escape the traditional spatial caste segregation, they did introduce a new dimension into the religious topography of the village. Anthropologist Shalva Weil

Figure 2.2 A Bene Ephraim house. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

demonstrated in her study on constructions of space in the history of the Cochin Jews that "Indian Jewish topographies" have in important ways extended traditional Jewish geographical horizons (2009). The synagogue and the Bene Ephraim part of Madigapalli have put the village on the world map of Jewish locations. Their pictures appear on the website of a foreign Jewish organization; they have been visited by rabbis from outside India. We have even received a few messages from members of the public interested in Jewish culture asking us how to get to the village, because they would like to include it in their tour of India. At the same time, while the Jewish signs and symbols are used by the Bene Ephraim to assert their Jewishness and to connect to the Jewish people worldwide, they also serve to remind their neighbors about their claim to a different account of origin—an account which initially aimed to include all Madiga Dalits and to challenge their position in the caste hierarchy. As **(p.49)** we discuss below, the Bene Ephraim also try to establish their link to Jews and Judaism and to communicate their message about the relationship between Jewish and Dalit cultures through their practices.

Festivals, Burials, and Dietary Laws
We will demonstrate in chapters 3 and 4 that Bene Ephraim practices appear to be steadily changing to take the shape of mainstream Jewish tradition. For instance, we will see that some festivals and ceremonies—such as that of the Torah scroll dedication which we described at the beginning of the book—were introduced into the community's life relatively recently by foreign Jewish visitors. We will also discuss how different community members have different views of the direction in which the Bene Ephraim tradition should develop and how the Yacobi brothers themselves do not always agree about which practices should or should not be observed by their congregation. However, here we will focus on some of those customs that the Yacobis describe as original. These are the customs that, according to the Bene Ephraim, were brought to the

subcontinent by their Hebrew ancestors and that are still practiced by all Madiga. These rites, some of which are specifically associated with the untouchables and are viewed by caste Hindus as ritually polluting, are presented by the Bene Ephraim as proof of their Israelite origin. This trope offers the audiences of the Yacobis what Eric Hobsbawm has famously called "invented tradition," understood as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983: 1). On the face of it, the Bene Ephraim leaders use Jewish practices to establish continuity with the community's Israelite past. At the same time, we will argue that the Yacobis' interpretation of these practices also aims at normalizing their Dalit past within the wider Hindu framework.

As we noted above, Shmuel Yacobi has conjectured that ancient Israelite theology and practices of his ancestors were stolen from them by the "Aryans" and thus shaped the whole of Hinduism. For instance, he argues that many Telugu Hindu festivals have their analogues in the major Jewish holidays—the Hindus first learned about these festivals from the Bene Ephraim, and once the latter came to be declared untouchables as a punishment for their resistance to the caste system, the Hindus prohibited them from practicing these rites. In Shmuel's view, by celebrating **(p.50)**

Jewish holidays, the Madiga are returning to their roots and reclaiming what was theirs in the first place (see fig.2.3). However, Shmuel also suggests that the Madiga and other Dalits did manage to remember and keep at least two Jewish traditions which later became the main markers of their untouchability—the customs of ritual slaughter and of ritually burying their dead. Most community members claim to command the knowledge of *shehitah*,[14] and say that they can make any meat kosher. However, in the discourse of the Bene Ephraim, *kashrut* means much more than Jewish dietary laws. When talking about the Bene Ephraim practice of eating kosher meat, the Yacobis particularly stress their knowledge of how to make buffalo meat kosher. According to Shmuel Yacobi, the fact that the Scheduled Castes of India possessed knowledge about
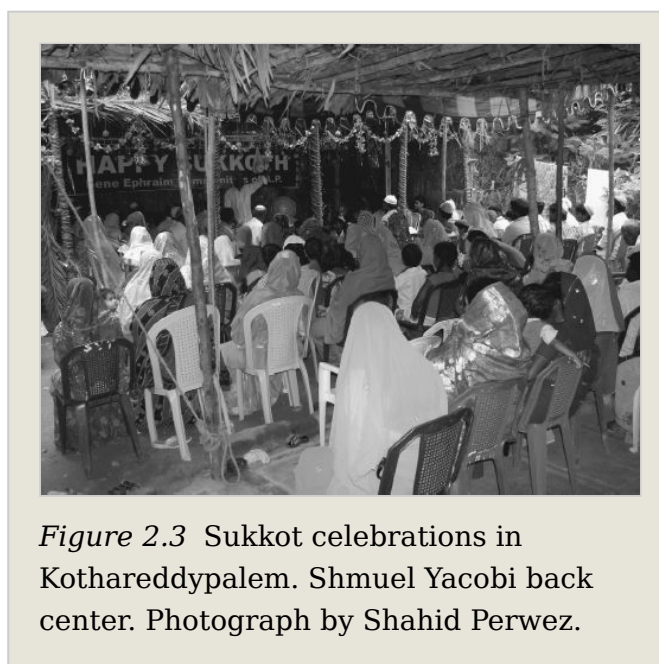

Figure 2.3 Sukkot celebrations in Kothareddypalem. Shmuel Yacobi back center. Photograph by Shahid Perwez.

beef-eating—a practice which caste Hindus consider to be ritually polluting—is further evidence of their connection to the ancient Israelites.

Similar instances of Dalit groups reinterpreting practices associated with untouchability into positive "identity markers" have been well documented by anthropologists of South Asia. David Mosse has described the way Christian Dalit thinkers participate in honoring Dalit cultures through the re-conceptualization of "outcaste" practices—for instance, introducing drumming into Christian liturgy and promoting beef-eating and **(p.51)** drumming in Jesuit schools (Mosse 2010: 254). Still has discussed how beef-eating is celebrated by the Madiga of coastal Andhra, who re-signify it from a repudiated practice into a positive symbol of Dalit culture (2007). Similarly, when the Yacobis speak about the importance of observing the laws of *kashrut*, they not only try to establish a ritual connection with other Jewish communities around the world, but also to glorify the Madiga tradition. Buffalo meat becomes both a symbol of their rediscovered Jewish past and a site of Dalit activism.

Marking the end of life with a burial is another practice that, according to the Yacobis, connects Dalits to Judaism. "This is what the Madiga used to do even before Christian missionaries arrived, and it is a Hebrew custom," Shmuel told us. We did not observe any funerals in the village, yet we were taken to the local Christian Madiga cemetery, where the tombs of deceased Bene Ephraim are marked with the same Jewish symbols as their houses—Stars of David, signs symbolizing the menorah, the words "Zion" and "Shaddai" written in Hebrew (see fig. 2.4). The Madiga cemetery in itself is described by the Bene Ephraim as further evidence of their Jewish origin. They pride themselves on their practice of burying their dead, which is different from the cremating practice of caste Hindus, reinterpreting this practice as a tradition passed down to them by their Israelite ancestors. As is the case with observing *kashrut*, the Madiga cemetery symbolizes for the Bene Ephraim both their Jewish past and their Dalit heritage. It becomes both a new site in what Weil describes as "Indian Jewish topographies" and a prominent place of Madiga cultural history.

As we noted in the previous chapter, Shmuel's attempts at establishing a connection of belief and practice between untouchables and Judaism could be considered in the context of other Dalit conversion movements, as well as against the backdrop of Dalit activists' rhetoric associating the cultures of Scheduled Castes with "non-Indian" traditions and dissociating them from Hinduism. As the Dalit activist Kancha Ilaiah put it, denouncing the Hindutva[15] ideologues' anti-Muslim and anti-Christian stance,

> What do we, the lower Sudras and Ati-Sudras … have to do with Hinduism or with Hindutva itself?… We heard about *Turukoollu* (Muslims), we heard about *Kirastaanapoolu* (Christians), we heard about *Baapanoolu* (Brahmins) and *Koomatoolu* (Baniyas) spoken of as people who are different from us.

Among these four categories, the most different were the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoolu. There **(p.52)**

are at least some aspects of life common to us and the Turukoollu and Kirastaanapoollu. We all eat meat, we all touch each other … (1996: xi).

Like Kancha Ilaiah, Shmuel Yacobi explicitly dissociates Dalit culture from Hinduism, but he also distances it from Christianity with its universalist message which did not help his ancestors to escape the stigma of untouchability. Instead, he offers his Madiga followers a religion that has its own

Figure 2.4 Madiga Cemetery near Kothareddypalem. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

tradition of applying different laws of ritual purity to different categories of persons. To return to the ethnographic context of the community's life in the village, insisting on eating kosher provides the Bene Ephraim with a mechanism to separate their congregants ritually from the Christian Madiga and ensures that their neighbors are more likely to become aware of their Jewishness. We could sometimes observe Bene Ephraim refusing to eat in the houses of other villagers on the grounds that the food prepared in their homes was not kosher. Just as caste Hindus refuse food prepared by the Madiga, the Bene Ephraim now have dietary prohibitions of their own to which they subject their non-Jewish neighbors. Toward the end of his fieldwork Shahid observed another example of the Bene Ephraim trying to gradually distance themselves from other villagers. Sadok Yacobi arranged for a separate building to be constructed in **(p.53)** the synagogue courtyard—the building was supposed to serve as an office where non-Jewish visitors would report upon arrival. Sadok explained to Shahid that it was not appropriate for the "outsiders" to enter the synagogue if they wanted to see him, and he needed to have a specially dedicated structure to accommodate such visits. He thus constructed a new spatial boundary to separate his house of worship from the rest of the village, which allowed him to grant entry rights to some villagers and deny them to others, just as the Hindus would refuse to let him into their temples.

Jews or Christians? Bene Ephraim and their Neighbors

Despite the fact that the Bene Ephraim have been openly practicing Judaism for the past twenty years, not many people in the village recognize them as Jewish or realize that they practice a religion different from Christianity. Their

immediate friends and neighbors from the local Muslim and Christian communities are aware of the Yacobis' congregation being Jewish and suggested to us that the Yacobis had to sacrifice a lot when they started practicing Judaism openly. One example of such sacrifice they mentioned was not being able to work on Saturdays—a practice that most employers would not accommodate. They also confirmed that many Bene Ephraim would refuse food in the houses of their Christian friends and neighbors because it was not kosher. However, the majority of villagers even today consider the synagogue to be just another Christian church and remember Shmuel Yacobi as a Christian pastor.

The idea that the Bene Ephraim could be anything other than Christian Madiga was rather badly received by some segments of the Dalit movement. In 2004 the *Dalit Voice*, a radical magazine published in Bangalore, featured an article vehemently denying that the Bene Ephraim were Jewish, arguing that they have chosen this path to seek donations from overseas Jewish communities, and expressing skepticism about the possibility of them ever being accepted in Israel (Bhupati 2004). That a Dalit periodical takes this position is not surprising. As we will demonstrate below, the Yacobis eventually chose to dissociate their community not just from the Dalit movement, but even from the entire history of Indian untouchables, which could not but cause resentment among Dalit activists.

Some people in the village learned that the Bene Ephraim were Jewish from the local and national press. In 2004 the community made headlines **(p.54)** in India when the police of Hyderabad uncovered a plot by alleged agents of an Islamic militarist organization based in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, to attack Americans in Hyderabad and the Jewish families in Guntur. According to the *Times of India*, it was the first time that anybody in Andhra Pradesh realized that there were Jews in this district (*Times of India* 2004). After this incident and subsequently after the Mumbai attacks of 2008, when the Chabad Lubavitch Jewish Center was taken over by terrorists and an Israeli rabbi and his wife were murdered together with other hostages, the community applied to the police to increase security measures for them in Kothareddypalem. The possibility of terrorist attacks remained a major area of concern for the Yacobis. In the past few years they have been inviting reporters from local and national newspapers and TV channels to tell them about the community and to share their fears about possible terrorist attacks (*see, for instance, Deccan Chronicle* 2008). It appears that it is only as a result of this publicity that some of their neighbors discovered that there was a Jewish community in their village.

We witnessed the Yacobi brothers communicating with local newspaper reporters throughout 2009 and stressing their need for more protection. Subsequently, a high-caste Hindu neighbor, who is also a prominent member of the Chebrole community, told us that he only found out about the Bene Ephraim from newspaper articles published in 2009. He was very surprised to learn that

there was a Jewish community in Chebrole and that they were under terrorist threat. In his view, they are Madiga untouchables who are trying to adopt a new tradition to improve their status in the village and to benefit from their engagement with overseas Jewish groups. His comments pertained just to the Bene Ephraim. However, it is noteworthy that high-caste Hindus often tend to be dismissive of the attempts of Dalit communities at raising their status in the local hierarchy, no matter what form these attempts take. Moreover, all over the country caste Hindus appear to be particularly threatened by those low-status groups that are trying to achieve some level of economic and social mobility (Kumar and Robinson 2010: 161). Therefore, a Madiga group led by a university-educated person who managed to establish a prayer-house on one of the village's main streets was very likely to receive the negative attention of caste Hindus, no matter what the content of their claims was.

The local authorities also view the Bene Ephraim movement with a degree of suspicion. Not many people in the village or the district realize that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion (or that it is not a branch of **(p.55)** Christianity for that matter). Shmuel and Sadok told us that they often had to explain to the police that they were not running a movement for mass conversion, and that their foreign Jewish visitors were helping them to rediscover their past and not to convert to a new religion alien to their tradition. The community is obliged to report all their foreign guests, and during Yulia's last visit Sadok had to assure the police that she was not there to facilitate their conversion into yet another denomination of Christianity (which are already numerous in the village). She was even followed by a local intelligence officer who assumed that she was a Christian missionary distributing foreign funds among the Madiga. Both brothers told us they were fearful that even if they were so lucky as to have rabbis sent to the community from Israel to have it formally converted, this would not be allowed by the Indian authorities, as it had been the case with the Bene Menashe.

Ironically, despite the fact that the Bene Ephraim practice Judaism and are perceived as Christian, on paper, like most of their Christian Madiga neighbors, they are still part of the Hindu caste system. When a Bene Ephraim child is born, he or she is given both a Jewish name and a Telugu Hindu name. The former is used in the family and in the community, while the latter becomes the "official" name used in their interactions with the authorities at school and other state institutions. Older community members go by their Jewish names only when talking to other Bene Ephraim, or to visitors like us, while using their Telugu names on documents as well as in their interactions with other villagers. Most Bene Ephraim also have Jewish surnames. It is a common practice in Andhra Pradesh to have the village name as a surname, called *intiperu* in Telugu. It appears that in many cases original Telugu *intiperu* of community members have

been translated or interpreted into Hebrew by Shmuel Yacobi in the light of his research into the similarities between the Hebrew and Telugu cultures.

The identification documents of community members bear only their Hindu Telugu names. Retaining these names (as well as remaining "officially" Hindu) is important for securing concessions reserved for the Scheduled Castes under the Indian law. The position that the judiciary of the Indian state has taken on caste inequality is that it is present only among Hindu groups, and that there can be no untouchability in communities practicing other religions. The provision of benefits reserved for Scheduled Castes has been extended to Sikhs and Buddhists, but Dalits who practice other religions, as it is the case of the Bene Ephraim, do not qualify as Scheduled Castes and are not eligible for any benefits. As Ashok **(p.56)** Kumar M. and Rowena Robinson suggest in their study of Lutheran Malas of coastal Andhra Pradesh, Christian Dalits have no option but to declare themselves as Hindu Malas or Madigas to fit into a category recognized as a Scheduled Caste. The structural inequalities that they are subjected to makes their position in coastal Andhra just as marginal and precarious as that of Hindu Dalits, which means that they cannot afford to refuse the benefits associated with their Scheduled Caste status. Moreover, keeping this status entitles them to state protection against caste-based crimes (2010: 158).

Kumar and Robinson's study also discusses how state functionaries openly advise Christian Dalits to register themselves as Hindu, a practice which resonates with the experiences of the Bene Ephraim. Sadok Yacobi told us that he had tried to make the Jewish names of their children become their "official" names—the names that will appear on all their documents. However, the local authorities advised him that doing so would put his children at a disadvantage. By becoming "officially" Jewish, they would lose access to places reserved for the Dalits in educational and state institutions. Sadok and his wife Miriam felt that they should not deprive their children of these opportunities, because, despite being Jewish, they were still subject to caste discrimination on account of their untouchable status. It would be even more the case for other Bene Ephraim, the majority of whom have limited means of livelihood and very low levels of literacy. At the same time, the Yacobis could not help wondering whether maintaining the Madiga status was worth the effort after all, given that reservations mitigated the social challenges faced by the Scheduled Castes only to a limited degree. As we will see below, though the Yacobis would not go as far as renouncing their untouchable status on paper, they have explicitly dissociated themselves from Dalit movements.

Jews or Dalits?
Community leaders appear to be very aware of their group's place in the caste society. Once Shahid asked Sadok's son Jacob if he would be interested in joining his uncle Shmuel in conducting research on the Jewish history of the Bene

Ephraim. Jacob was very pessimistic about the outcome of such searches, even if they could prove once and for all that the Bene Ephraim were of Hebrew descent: "We would still be under the four class [varna] system."

 (p.57) Shmuel Yacobi expressed his concern that local caste politics may affect his group's standing even vis-à-vis foreign Jewish communities and Israeli authorities. In chapter 6 we will explore other Judaizing groups of Andhra Pradesh who have embraced the Jewish tradition very recently. When we asked Shmuel what his position on these communities was, he expressed his concern, admitting to us that he would prefer to stay away from these groups, as they were represented by people from castes higher than Madiga and were likely to hijack his movement if he were to collaborate with them. As we will see in the penultimate chapter, these concerns were not unfounded. The new groups, who due to their higher status proved to be more resourceful, have already by far outnumbered the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. Moreover, they started seeking the support of foreign Jewish organizations themselves and have tried to undermine the claims of the Yacobis about the Jewish descent of their congregation. Not surprisingly, the Yacobis view such allegations as potentially damaging for the image of their group, which already struggles to be recognized as Jewish in the village.

At the same time, despite his strong anti-caste rhetoric, Shmuel Yacobi chose to dissociate his community not only from Indian religious cultures, but also from the Dalit movement. He told us that he was once approached by a radical Dalit activist and asked to join his movement. Shmuel's response was that to change the position of Indian untouchables his interlocutor needed support from abroad. In the case of the Bene Ephraim, this support is expected to come from Israel and international Jewish organizations. It is noteworthy in this respect that recently the Yacobis' anti-caste rhetoric appears to have given way to the "war on terror" discourse, and the role of the most threatening "other" in the village is now assigned to "Muslim terrorists." When Yulia visited the community in early 2009, she was shown faint traces of the Star of David and other Jewish symbols on the huts of the Bene Ephraim that had to be washed off for some period of time. This was explained as a strategy to avoid a possible terrorist attack on Jewish houses. When Shahid arrived in the village later in the year and assured the Yacobis that the possibility of such attacks was highly unlikely, the symbols appeared anew. When talking about their fears of terrorists, the Yacobis kept stressing that their relations with local Muslim communities were exceptionally good, and it is just the international terrorist groups from abroad that they were concerned about. Shmuel and his wife Malkah once jokingly told us that Lashkar-e-Tayyiba seemed to be **(p.58)** one of those (very few) organizations in the world to recognize the Bene Ephraim as Jewish. It is not surprising then that for the Yacobis portraying their community as victims of

international terrorism meant reasserting their Jewishness and establishing a connection with Jews worldwide.

However, despite the fact that the Bene Ephraim leaders have come to dissociate their movement from those of other Dalits, it is noteworthy that their strategy to describe the nature of their discrimination in terms which would be more familiar to Israeli and Jewish organizations resonates with the attempts of other Dalit groups to contribute to what Anupama Rao has described as the "internationalization of the problem of untouchability" (2005: 12). To give one such example, some Dalit leaders have tried to equate caste discrimination with racism. They have argued that the severity of their oppression is comparable to if not worse than that of black communities in the West (for a detailed discussion see Prashad 2000, Reddy 2005). This issue was debated in the preparations for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which was held in 2001 in Durban. The Dalits argued that caste discrimination should be considered racism and put on the agenda of the conference, while the Indian government insisted on it being unconnected to race (Sabir 2003, Hardtmann 2009).

Other Dalit ideologues have tried to capitalize on the idea that caste groups may be genetically different from each other with upper castes being closer to Europeans and lower castes representing the indigenous populations who were supposedly closer to Africans and Asians (Egorova 2009). In both cases, constructing a socio-cultural or genetic "bridge" between lower castes in India and African communities was supposed to illuminate similarities between caste discrimination, traditionally considered to be peculiar to the subcontinent, and racism, a concept that Western liberal audiences are more familiar with and unambiguously critical of.

Similarly, in the case of the Bene Ephraim, portraying the community as victims of international terrorism was supposed to attract the support of a foreign (Israeli) government and of Jewish organizations. Their expectation that the Israeli authorities would sympathize with potential victims of a terrorist attack was probably not all that far-fetched. John Jackson has noted in his discussion of the Hebrew Israelites that they claim they secured a more solid acceptance from the Israeli state only after one of their members became a victim of terrorism. As Jackson observes, "They were made to feel less foreign as a function of this tragedy, and it served as a mechanism for facilitating their further acceptance as a part of the **(p.59)** Israeli nation" (2009: 105). We would hesitate to speculate whether in the case of the Bene Ephraim the threat of a terrorist attack was perceived or real, but in any case, it appears to have provided the Yacobis with rhetorical ammunition to appeal to overseas Jewish communities for help and to distinguish their congregation from those of the Christian Madiga in the village. After the Mumbai attacks, the Yacobis applied to the local police department for protection against terrorism. Irrespective of whether this protection was

practically needed or not, their requests served to remind their neighbors and the local authorities that they were a Jewish community and that their house of worship was a synagogue and not another Christian church.

The story of the Bene Ephraim is rather unique when considered in the context of other Dalit movements. They are the first Dalit community to embrace the Jewish tradition and to seek the support of the State of Israel. However, what makes them akin to some of the other Dalit groups is that in their search for social liberation they are prepared to turn to overseas communities and organizations. Just as the Dalits who participated in the preparations for the conference in Durban felt that they could not succeed in their fight against discrimination without the support of the international community, the Bene Ephraim are more hopeful about the possible support of Israel and Jewish communities worldwide than about getting help from the local authorities or the Indian government.

To return to the wider context of Judaizing movements, this portrayal of the relationship with the Indian state is similar to the way Hebrew Israelites felt about their place in the United States. For instance, this is how dissatisfaction with life in the United States was expressed by a member of the Hebrew Israelites in an interview with anthropologist Merrill Singer: "I was always a good citizen in America, but it did not matter what I did; America is just a terrible place. I worked, I supported myself; my brothers went into the army. I even lost a brother in the army. Even so, America treated me terribly" (Singer 2000: 62–63). These words mirror a response that Yulia received from Shmuel Yacobi when she asked him whether he would be happy for his community to settle in Israel despite the numerous security problems that the Jewish State was facing: "In India [as Madiga] we have seen the worst of the worst,"[16] he replied.

Like the leaders of the Black Hebrews, Shmuel Yacobi is pessimistic about the future of his group in their country of birth and sees an open affiliation with the Israelite tradition as crucial for the social, economic, **(p.60)** and spiritual development of the Bene Ephraim. Just as the Black Hebrews decided to reconnect with their land of origin and to settle in the State of Israel in the context of extreme dissatisfaction with life in their home country, Shmuel Yacobi and his followers chose to encourage their congregation to prepare for *aliyah*. However, as we will see in the next chapters, this tortuous route has led the community on a wide range of paths for recognition, some of which have differed from the one that Shmuel Yacobi originally envisaged.

On Caste, Jews, and Status

Embracing (or reverting to) the Jewish tradition has proved to be an important channel for honoring the local cultures of Judaizing communities. For instance, as Bernard Wolfson has observed in respect to the African American rabbi

Capers Funnye from Chicago, for him and his congregation "being Jewish represents a return to selfhood and a celebration of black pride" (2000: 46). Myer Samra argues in respect of the Bene Menashe that the emergence of Judaism in the northeast of India and Burma was, in part, an outgrowth of the nationalist aspirations of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people, aspirations which arose during the British period and continued to grow in the second half of the twentieth century. In independent India, these communities did not feel sufficiently part of the nation-building project and hoped that they would have a better future in Israel (Samra 2008: 63). In this chapter we discussed the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim in the context of Madiga origin narratives and against the backdrop of the community's experiences of caste discrimination and suggested that the Judaization of the Kothareddypalem community could be read as a way of celebrating Madiga heritage, and in this sense it mirrors the attempts at cultural and spiritual liberation demonstrated by other Dalit groups and other Judaizing movements.

We also argued that though community leaders now explicitly dissociate themselves from Dalit movements, their desire to join a "foreign" tradition and to make *aliyah* to Israel are reminiscent of the attempts of other Dalits to engage the international community in their fight against caste discrimination, and is symptomatic of the exasperation of some Dalit groups at poor opportunities for social liberation open to them in India. However, we would hesitate to read the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim purely as an attempt at social mobility through renouncing Dalit heritage. On the contrary, we argue that it is a way of providing a positive context **(p.61)** for their Madiga practices, and particularly for those elements of these practices that were denounced by caste Hindus.

Quite apart from that, we suggest that so far the Bene Ephraim's Judaization has been more an outcome of the Yacobis' social mobility than an effective strategy to improve Madiga standing in the village. Constructing a synagogue in the middle of the "pure-caste" part of Kothareddypalem was bound to be seen by their neighbors as a bold claim to a new status and to attract comments about untouchables using the Lost Tribes discourse in the name of moving up the caste hierarchy. However, our analysis demonstrates that it is not the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim that has allowed them to make a claim to a higher status and a place for a house of worship outside Madigapalli. On the contrary, the Yacobis were in a position to embrace the Israelite tradition and to move out of the untouchable quarters thanks to their father's career in the British Army, which led to them acquiring a piece of land outside Madigapalli, and a higher status in the village. To draw on the observation made by David Mosse (noted in chapter 1) we suggest that the ability of the Bene Ephraim to develop new forms of self-identification has stemmed from their leaders' *prior* success in a project of social mobility. It is worthy to note that a similar observation has been made by Hugh Tinker in respect of the Judaization of the Bene Israel. Tinker argues that it is not the "newly discovered" Jewishness of the Bene Israel that allowed their low-

caste community to move up the social ladder of colonial society and to improve their economic situation, but that their improved socio-economic position was a prerequisite for the success of their Judaization:

> They might have remained an obscure Hindu caste with a vague folk-memory of foreign origin (like so many other castes and clans in India) had it not have been for the intrusion of the West. They were drawn into the military and civil service of the English East India Company; they moved to the island-city of Bombay, with its shipyards and factories, and in 1796 built a synagogue. They had to obtain rabbis and readers from more orthodox Jewish communities, for they had none of their own. Thus began their long bid to obtain recognition from international Jewry. Their progress was very similar to the 'caste-climbing' practiced by low and middle castes within Hinduism, as they obtained some economic advancement which enabled them to put in a bid for higher social recognition (Tinker 1972: 100).

(p.62) Tinker does not speculate about how and why the Bene Israel may have embraced the Jewish tradition in the first place, but implies that it is not the Judaization of the Bene Israel that enabled them to improve their social position in colonial India. Rather, he argues, it is their collaboration with the British and the relative socio-economic success that came with it, that allowed them to bring the Judaization project to fruition. As we will discuss in chapter 4, the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim did eventually bring the community to the attention of Jewish and Israeli organizations, who provided them with limited financial and cultural support, but (as was also the case with the Bene Israel) it hardly changed their social position in the caste system.

In this respect we also suggest that the case of the Bene Ephraim has a number of implications for debates about the way Dalit groups perceive the hierarchical structure of the caste system and see their place in it. This chapter has demonstrated that the Bene Ephraim are far from accepting their position in the local hierarchy and reference some of their Israelite practices and origin narratives not just as a way of expressing their affiliation to the global Jewish community, but also as a means for changing the perception of the Madiga and possibly even of the entire Dalit community in the traditional Hindu worldview. At the same time, we have shown that by asserting their Jewishness, community leaders are also beginning to separate their congregation from their neighbors and even from those Madiga who have not yet embraced their tradition. As we discuss in the following chapter, recently Sadok Yacobi started moving in the direction of bringing his congregation's practice more in accordance with mainstream Judaism and insisting on all community members developing stricter practices. It will be shown that tighter religious practices also brought the need for redefining community boundaries, and was accompanied by a revision of the narrative about their shared Dalit/Israelite origin. However, we will also see that

despite this revision the idea about Madiga being Jewish appears to be taking hold in the village, and many community members continue to identify themselves as both Jewish and Madiga.