

Civilisational Linkages and Cultural Diplomacy: Historical Foundations of India-Israel Relations

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ABSTRACT

Historical interaction between Jewish communities and the Indian subcontinent represents one of the earliest examples of long-term cultural coexistence between different civilisations. Jewish traders and migrants reached the western coast of India through Indian Ocean maritime trade networks and gradually established stable communities in regions such as Kerala and the Konkan coast. Communities including the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and later the Baghdadi Jews preserved their religious traditions while adapting to the cultural and social environment of Indian society. This article examines the historical foundations of India–Israel relations by analysing maritime trade, diaspora formation, religious pluralism, and cultural diplomacy. Using qualitative historical analysis and secondary scholarly sources, the study explores how Jewish diaspora communities interacted with Indian society over several centuries. The analysis shows that the experience of cultural coexistence and religious tolerance in India shaped positive historical memory within Jewish communities and later influenced cultural diplomacy between India and Israel. The study argues that these civilisational connections created a cultural foundation that complements contemporary political and strategic cooperation between the two countries. Understanding these historical interactions helps explain the broader social context of India–Israel relations and highlights the importance of diaspora networks and cultural heritage in shaping international relationships.

KEYWORDS: *India–Israel relations; Jewish diaspora in India; cultural diplomacy; Indian Ocean trade; civilisational interaction; religious pluralism.*

INTRODUCTION

Relations between India and Israel are often discussed in terms of contemporary diplomacy, strategic cooperation, and technological collaboration. However, the connection between these two societies has much deeper historical roots that extend far beyond modern state relations. Long before the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1992, Jewish communities had lived in different parts of the Indian subcontinent for many centuries. Their presence developed through processes of trade, migration, and settlement that linked India with the broader networks of the Indian Ocean world. These historical interactions created enduring cultural connections that continue to influence relations between India and Israel in the modern era.

The Indian Ocean served as an important region of commercial and cultural exchange from ancient times. Merchants from the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and South Asia travelled across maritime trade routes that connected different parts of the world. These networks enabled the movement of goods, people, and ideas across large distances. Jewish traders were among the communities that participated in these commercial exchanges. Through these trade networks, Jewish merchants reached the western coast of India and gradually established settlements in coastal regions such as Kerala and the Konkan coast (Ray, 2003; Tomber, 2008).

Over time, several Jewish diaspora communities developed within the Indian social environment.

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Among the most historically significant were the Bene Israel in western India, the Cochin Jews in Kerala, and the Baghdadi Jews who migrated during the colonial period to commercial centres such as Mumbai and Kolkata. These communities represent different phases of Jewish migration to the Indian subcontinent. Despite differences in historical background and migration patterns, they shared a common experience of cultural adaptation within Indian society.

One of the distinctive features of Jewish life in India was the ability of these communities to maintain their religious traditions while integrating into local cultural environments. Jewish communities adopted regional languages, participated in trade and economic activities, and interacted with neighbouring populations. At the same time, they preserved important aspects

of Jewish religious identity, including synagogue worship, dietary traditions, and communal institutions (Katz, 2000; Roland, 1998). This balance between cultural adaptation and religious continuity allowed Jewish communities to survive and flourish within a multicultural society.

The long presence of Jewish communities in India has often been cited as an example of the pluralistic character of Indian civilisation. The Indian subcontinent has historically been home to diverse religious traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. This diversity created social environments in which multiple religious communities coexisted and interacted. Historical evidence suggests that Jewish communities in India were able to practice their religion and maintain communal institutions without facing the systematic persecution that occurred in many other regions of the world (Johnson, 1987).

These historical experiences also contributed to the development of cultural memories within Jewish diaspora communities. Many Jews who lived in India for generations developed strong cultural connections with the country. Even after migration to Israel during the twentieth century, members of Indian Jewish communities continued to preserve aspects of Indian culture, including language, cuisine, music, and social traditions. Such cultural practices reflect the deep historical links that developed between Jewish migrants and Indian society.

While historical scholarship has examined Jewish communities in India in considerable detail, research on India–Israel relations has often focused primarily on the modern diplomatic and strategic dimensions of the relationship. Since the establishment of

diplomatic relations in 1992, cooperation between India and Israel has expanded significantly in areas such as defence technology, agriculture, water management, and innovation. These developments have attracted considerable scholarly attention within the field of international relations.

However, the historical and cultural foundations of India–Israel relations have received comparatively less attention within contemporary geopolitical analysis. The long-standing presence of Jewish communities in India represents an important historical dimension that contributes to the broader understanding of relations between the two countries. Civilisational interaction, diaspora identity, and cultural memory can shape perceptions between societies and influence diplomatic engagement

Literature Review:

Scholarly research on Jewish communities in India and the broader historical foundations of India–Israel relations has developed across several academic fields, including history, religious studies, diaspora studies, and international relations. Existing literature primarily examines three interconnected themes: the historical presence of Jewish communities in India, the cultural interaction between Jewish migrants and Indian society, and the modern development of India–Israel diplomatic relations. Although these studies provide important insights, they often address these themes separately rather than analysing them within a unified framework.

A significant body of historical scholarship focuses on the origins and development of Jewish communities in India. Katz (2000) provides one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject, examining the historical background, cultural practices, and identity formation of Jewish communities such as the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews. Katz argues that these communities maintained Jewish religious traditions while adapting to the cultural and linguistic environment of Indian society. The study also highlights how the absence of large-scale persecution enabled Jewish communities in India to maintain stable communal life

over long periods. Similarly, Roland (1998) analyses the social and economic life of Jewish communities in India, particularly during the colonial period. The author examines how Jewish migrants interacted with Indian society and colonial institutions while preserving their religious identity. Roland's work emphasizes the role of commerce, education, and urbanization in shaping Jewish community life in cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata.

Research on the Cochin Jewish community provides further insight into the cultural interaction between Jewish settlers and Indian society. Katz and Goldberg (1993) document the historical development of the Cochin Jews in Kerala and analyse how cultural exchange influenced community traditions, architecture, and language. Their study shows that Cochin Jews incorporated elements of local culture while maintaining Jewish religious practices, creating a distinctive cultural identity that reflected both Jewish and Indian influences. Another important strand of scholarship examines the broader historical context of Indian Ocean trade networks. Ray (2003) and Tomber (2008) demonstrate how maritime trade connected India with the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. These networks facilitated not only commercial exchange but also the migration of traders and the diffusion of cultural practices. The movement of Jewish merchants along these routes contributed to the establishment of Jewish settlements in Indian coastal regions.

Studies of the Jewish diaspora more broadly have also contributed to understanding the experience of Jewish communities in India. Cohen (2008) and Vertovec (2009) explore the concept of diaspora identity and examine how migrant communities maintain cultural ties with their places of origin while adapting to new environments. These theoretical perspectives are useful for understanding how Jewish communities in India preserved their religious traditions while participating in local social life. In addition to historical and diaspora studies, a growing body of literature examines the evolution of India–Israel relations in the modern period.

Scholars analysing international relations often focus on diplomatic developments, strategic cooperation, and economic relations between the two countries after the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1992. Studies highlight areas of cooperation such as defence technology, agriculture, innovation, and counter-terrorism. While these analyses provide valuable insights into contemporary geopolitical relations, they tend to focus primarily on strategic and political factors.

Although these various strands of literature contribute significantly to understanding Jewish communities in India and India–Israel relations, several important gaps remain. One major limitation of existing research is the separation between historical and political analyses. Historical studies focus primarily on the development of Jewish communities within India, while international relations research examines contemporary diplomatic engagement between India and Israel. As a result, relatively few studies

explore how historical civilisational interaction between Jewish migrants and Indian society may have contributed to shaping the broader context of modern bilateral relations. Another gap concerns the role of diaspora communities in cultural diplomacy. While scholars acknowledge that diaspora networks can influence relations between societies, limited research has examined how Jewish communities

of Indian origin contribute to maintaining cultural connections between India and Israel. The historical memory of peaceful coexistence in India continues to influence cultural narratives within the Indian Jewish diaspora, yet this dimension has not been sufficiently integrated into studies of bilateral relations.

Further, many existing works concentrate on specific communities or historical periods without examining the broader patterns of cultural interaction that developed over centuries. An integrated approach that connects maritime trade, migration, diaspora identity, and cultural diplomacy can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the historical foundations of India–Israel relations. This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between Jewish communities and the Indian subcontinent through a multidimensional perspective that combines historical analysis, diaspora studies, and cultural diplomacy. By analysing the long-term interaction between Jewish migrants and Indian society, the research highlights how civilisational linkages developed through trade, migration, and cultural coexistence. These historical connections provide a deeper cultural context for understanding contemporary India–Israel relations. Civilisational interaction, diaspora identity, and cultural memory can shape perceptions between societies and influence diplomatic engagement in the modern period.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative historical research approach to examine the civilisational linkages and cultural foundations of India–Israel relations. The research focuses on understanding how historical interaction, diaspora formation, and cultural exchange between Jewish communities and Indian society contributed to shaping long-term connections between the two civilisations. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because the research questions involve historical interpretation, cultural analysis, and social interaction rather than numerical or statistical measurement.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources of data, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical documents, and

scholarly studies related to Jewish communities in India, Indian Ocean maritime trade, diaspora identity, and India–Israel relations. Works by historians, anthropologists, and scholars of diaspora studies provide important insights into the migration patterns, settlement processes, and cultural practices of Jewish communities in India. These sources also help explain the broader historical context in which Jewish migrants interacted with Indian society.

A historical analytical method is used to trace the development of Jewish settlements in India and the evolution of their interaction with local societies. Historical narratives, archival references, and scholarly interpretations are examined to understand patterns of migration, trade networks, and community formation. This approach allows the study to identify long-term processes through which Jewish communities became integrated into Indian social and cultural environments.

In addition to historical analysis, the study employs interpretative analysis to examine cultural interaction and diaspora identity. Interpretative analysis focuses on understanding how communities construct and maintain their cultural traditions within different social contexts. By examining language use, religious practices, architecture, and social institutions, the study explores how Jewish communities in India balanced cultural adaptation with the preservation of religious identity.

The research is also informed by a constructivist perspective in international relations, which emphasizes the role of ideas, historical memory, and social interaction in shaping relations between societies and states. Constructivist theory suggests that shared historical experiences and cultural narratives influence perceptions between societies and contribute to the development of diplomatic relations. In the context of this study, the long history of Jewish presence in India and the experience of cultural coexistence provide an important framework for understanding the cultural dimension of India–Israel relations.

The analysis is organised around several thematic areas that correspond to the research questions of the study. These themes include the role of maritime trade in early Jewish–Indian interaction, the development of Jewish diaspora communities in India, the influence of religious pluralism and cultural coexistence, the role of diaspora networks in cultural diplomacy, and the significance of historical linkages for contemporary India–Israel relations. By examining these themes together, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding

of the historical foundations of the relationship between the two societies.

Limitations of the Study:

Although this study provides a detailed examination of the historical and cultural foundations of India–Israel relations, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research relies primarily on secondary sources of information, including existing scholarly literature and historical interpretations. While these sources provide valuable academic insights, the study does not include extensive analysis of primary archival materials or field-based ethnographic research. Future research could benefit from examining archival documents, community records, and oral histories of Jewish communities in India to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences. Second, the study focuses mainly on the historical and cultural dimensions of the relationship between Jewish communities and Indian society. Contemporary political, economic, and strategic aspects of India–Israel relations are discussed only in a limited way because the primary objective of the study is to explore the historical foundations of the relationship.

Third, the research concentrates primarily on three major Jewish communities in India like Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews. Although these communities represent the most prominent Jewish groups in the region, smaller or lesser-known Jewish communities in India receive less attention in the analysis. Further research could examine these communities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Jewish life in the Indian subcontinent. Fourth, the study adopts a long historical perspective covering several centuries. While this approach helps identify patterns of cultural interaction and migration over time, it may limit detailed analysis of specific historical events or regional variations. Despite these limitations, the methodological approach adopted in this research provides a useful framework for understanding the historical interaction between Jewish communities and Indian society and its significance for the broader cultural context of India–Israel relations.

Objectives:

The main objective of this study is to examine the historical and cultural foundations of India–Israel relations by analysing the long-term interaction between Jewish communities and the Indian subcontinent. The study seeks to understand how ancient maritime trade across the Indian Ocean created the earliest contact between Jewish traders and Indian society and how these connections later

developed into stable patterns of migration and settlement.

Another important objective is to analyse the development of major Jewish communities in India, particularly the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews. The study aims to examine how these communities preserved their religious traditions while adapting to local languages, customs, occupations, and social life. It also seeks to explore how language, food, architecture, and other cultural practices reflected the interaction between Jewish communities and Indian society.

The study further aims to examine the role of religious pluralism and cultural coexistence in shaping the experience of Jewish communities in India. It seeks to understand why Jewish communities in India were generally able to live without systematic persecution and how this experience differed from the historical experiences of Jewish communities in many other parts of the world.

Another objective is to investigate the role of the Indian Jewish diaspora in preserving historical memory and maintaining cultural links between India and Israel. The study seeks to analyse how Indian Jewish communities in Israel continue to preserve Indian cultural traditions and how diaspora networks, heritage sites, cultural associations, and tourism contribute to cultural diplomacy between the two countries.

Finally, the study aims to assess how civilisational linkages and shared historical experiences continue to influence contemporary India–Israel relations. By combining insights from history, diaspora studies, cultural diplomacy, and constructivist international relations, the research seeks to provide a broader understanding of the social and cultural foundations of the relationship between India and Israel.

Maritime Trade, Migration, and Early Jewish–Indian Interaction:

Ancient maritime trade created the earliest contact between Jewish communities and the Indian subcontinent. Long before modern states emerged, the Indian Ocean served as an important network that connected the Mediterranean world, the Middle East, East Africa, and South Asia. Merchants travelled along these sea routes to exchange goods, knowledge, and cultural practices. Jewish traders were among the groups that participated in these long-distance commercial activities. Through these interactions, early connections developed between Jewish communities and the coastal regions of India. Trade between India and western Asia expanded from the first millennium BCE. Indian ports located

along the western coast became active centres of international commerce. Ports such as Muziris in Kerala and Bharuch in Gujarat attracted merchants from different regions who came to obtain spices, textiles, ivory, and precious stones. These products were highly valued in markets across the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In return, traders brought metals, glassware, and other goods to Indian ports. These commercial exchanges created regular interaction between traders from different cultural and religious backgrounds (McLaughlin, 2014).

One of the key factors that supported this trade was the discovery of the monsoon wind system. Sailors learned that seasonal winds made it possible to travel across the Arabian Sea at predictable times of the year. This knowledge allowed merchants to sail from the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula to Indian ports and return safely during another season. The use of monsoon winds made long-distance maritime travel more reliable and encouraged the growth of trade networks across the Indian Ocean (Chaudhuri, 1985). Historical records from classical sources also provide evidence of these trade connections. The Greek text *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written in the first century CE, describes the commercial routes linking the Roman Empire with ports on the western coast of India. The document provides detailed information about trade goods, shipping routes, and trading centres in the Indian Ocean region. Such sources demonstrate that Indian ports were part of a wider international trading system that connected several civilisations (Casson, 1989).

Within this trading environment, Jewish merchants gradually developed links with Indian port cities. Traders who visited these regions repeatedly often established long-term commercial bases. Over time, some merchants chose to settle permanently in these areas. These settlements formed the early foundations of Jewish communities in India. Migration therefore became closely connected with trade networks, as commercial activity often encouraged long-term residence in foreign regions. Historical traditions within Jewish communities also suggest that migration occurred in response to political changes in the Middle East. One important event was the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Roman Empire. This event led to the dispersal of Jewish populations across different parts of the world. Some Jewish groups are believed to have travelled eastward through trade routes and eventually reached the Indian subcontinent (Ben-Sasson, 1976).

Once settled in India, Jewish migrants interacted with local communities through trade, labour, and social

relations. Economic participation allowed Jewish settlers to become part of local commercial networks. Many Jewish migrants were involved in occupations related to trade, craft production, and commerce. These activities created regular contact with other communities living in the region. Cultural interaction gradually developed through everyday social life. Jewish settlers began to adopt certain aspects of Indian culture, including the use of local languages for daily communication. At the same time, they maintained key religious traditions that were central to Jewish identity. Synagogue worship, dietary practices, and community institutions continued to shape the religious life of these communities (Stillman, 2010).

Archaeological and historical studies suggest that these early settlements formed the basis for later Jewish communities in regions such as Kerala and the Konkan coast. Over time, these communities developed strong social ties with local populations while maintaining connections with global Jewish networks. The presence of Jewish communities in India therefore reflects a long process of migration and cultural interaction that began with maritime trade. These early contacts illustrate how trade networks can lead to long-term cultural connections between societies. The Indian Ocean trading system enabled interaction between distant civilisations and created opportunities for migration, settlement, and social exchange. Through these processes, Jewish traders and migrants became part of the diverse cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

Jewish Diaspora Communities and Cultural Interaction in India:

Jewish diaspora communities in India developed through different waves of migration over many centuries. These communities formed an important part of the social and cultural history of the Indian subcontinent. Among the most well-known Jewish groups in India were the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews. Each community had a distinct historical background, yet they shared a common experience of adapting to Indian society while preserving their Jewish religious traditions. Their presence illustrates how migrant communities can interact with local societies and develop unique cultural identities.

The Bene Israel community is often considered one of the oldest Jewish communities in India. According to community traditions, their ancestors arrived on the Konkan coast of western India many centuries ago after surviving a shipwreck. Although historians debate the exact historical details of this migration, it is generally accepted that the Bene Israel were established in the

Konkan region by the medieval period (Katz, 2000). For several generations, they lived in villages along the coast and were involved in occupations such as oil pressing, agriculture, and small-scale trade. Over time, the Bene Israel became closely connected with the local social environment. They adopted Marathi as their everyday language and interacted regularly with neighbouring communities. Despite this cultural adaptation, they maintained key elements of Jewish religious identity. Observance of the Sabbath, synagogue worship, and dietary practices continued to play an important role in their communal life. This combination of cultural integration and religious continuity allowed the Bene Israel to remain a distinct community while participating fully in local society (Roland, 1998).

Another important Jewish group in India was the Cochin Jewish community, which developed in the coastal region of Kerala. Historical records suggest that Jewish traders reached the Malabar Coast through maritime trade networks linking the Middle East with South Asia. The spice trade, which connected Kerala with markets in West Asia and Europe, created favourable conditions for foreign merchants, including Jewish traders, to settle in the region (Ray, 2003). The Cochin Jews developed a stable community that maintained connections with global Jewish networks while interacting with local rulers and merchants. One of the most visible symbols of this community is the Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi, which reflects both Jewish religious tradition and elements of local architectural style. The synagogue illustrates the cultural interaction that developed between Jewish settlers and the surrounding society.

Members of the Cochin Jewish community adopted Malayalam for everyday communication while continuing to use Hebrew for religious purposes. Cultural exchange was also visible in clothing, food, and social customs. These practices show how the community combined local cultural influences with Jewish religious traditions, creating a distinctive cultural identity (Katz & Goldberg, 1993). A later phase of Jewish migration occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the arrival of the Baghdadi Jewish community. Many members of this community migrated from regions such as Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East. Their movement was closely connected to expanding commercial opportunities within the global trade networks of the colonial period. Baghdadi Jewish merchants settled in major port cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata, where they became active participants in international trade (Roland, 1998).

Baghdadi Jewish traders played an important role in commercial activities linking India with markets in the Middle East, China, and Europe. Prominent families such as the Sassoons became well known for their involvement in trade as well as philanthropic activities. They contributed to the construction of schools, hospitals, libraries, and synagogues, thereby influencing the social and cultural development of the cities where they lived (Silliman, 2001). Despite their engagement in global commerce and interaction with colonial institutions, the Baghdadi Jewish community maintained strong communal institutions and religious traditions. Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic religious practices continued to shape their community life, even as English became an important language of communication in their commercial activities.

The presence of these Jewish communities contributed to cultural interaction between Jewish migrants and Indian society. Language adoption is one clear example of this interaction. Jewish communities used regional languages such as Marathi and

Malayalam for daily communication while maintaining Hebrew for religious worship. This linguistic flexibility helped them interact easily with neighbouring communities. Food traditions also reflected cultural exchange. Jewish communities in India followed dietary laws associated with Judaism but incorporated local ingredients and cooking styles. As a result, distinctive forms of Jewish cuisine developed in different regions of India. Architecture provides another example of cultural interaction. Synagogues built by Jewish communities often combined traditional Jewish religious features with local architectural styles. These buildings demonstrate how diaspora communities adapted to their surroundings while maintaining their religious identity. The experience of Jewish communities in India illustrates how diaspora groups can develop strong social connections with local societies without losing their cultural heritage. Through trade, migration, and everyday social interaction, Jewish settlers became part of the diverse cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

Community	Main Region	Historical Origin	Language Adopted	Distinctive Feature
Bene Israel	Konkan and Maharashtra	Early migration through maritime trade	Marathi	Strong integration with local society
Cochin Jews	Kerala	Settlement through Indian Ocean trade	Malayalam	Synagogue culture and Kerala influence
Baghdadi Jews	Mumbai and Kolkata	Colonial-period migration from West Asia	English and Judeo-Arabic	Commercial influence and philanthropy

Religious Tolerance and Cultural Coexistence in Indian Society:

The long presence of Jewish communities in India is closely connected to the pluralistic character of Indian society. For centuries, the Indian subcontinent has been home to multiple religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. This diversity created social environments where communities with different beliefs often lived side by side. Within such a setting, Jewish migrants who arrived through trade and migration were able to establish communities and maintain their religious identity. Historical studies show that Jewish settlers in India were generally able to practice their religion without facing systematic persecution. They built synagogues, organized communal institutions, and preserved their cultural traditions while interacting with local populations. Scholars often highlight this experience as one of the distinctive features of Jewish history in India when compared with the experiences of Jewish communities in several other parts of the world (Katz, 2000). One example frequently discussed in historical literature concerns the privileges granted to Jewish communities in Kerala. Historical records known as copper plate

grants refer to rights given to Jewish merchants by local rulers. These grants recognized the position of Jewish leaders and allowed them to participate in trade and community governance. Although historians continue to debate the exact dates and historical context of these documents, they illustrate the presence of Jewish merchants within local political and economic systems (Katz & Goldberg, 1993).

Economic interaction played an important role in strengthening relations between Jewish communities and local society. Jewish merchants participated in trade networks that connected Indian markets with the Middle East and other regions of the Indian Ocean world. Their involvement in commerce brought them into regular contact with Hindu, Muslim, and Christian traders. These interactions created practical relationships based on economic cooperation rather than religious difference (Chaudhuri, 1985).

Cultural coexistence was also reflected in everyday social practices. Jewish communities adopted local languages for daily communication. In Kerala, Jewish settlers used Malayalam, while the Bene Israel community in western India spoke Marathi. These

linguistic adaptations allowed Jewish communities to communicate easily with neighbouring populations while preserving Hebrew for religious rituals and synagogue worship (Roland, 1998). Cultural interaction extended to other areas of daily life. Clothing styles, food traditions, and social customs often reflected influences from the surrounding environment. Jewish communities followed religious dietary rules but incorporated local ingredients and cooking techniques. These adaptations demonstrate how communities could integrate aspects of regional culture while maintaining their religious identity.

Religious architecture provides another example of cultural coexistence. Synagogues constructed by Jewish communities often incorporated elements of local architectural styles. Buildings such as the Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi combine traditional Jewish religious features with architectural forms common in Kerala. Such structures illustrate how religious communities adapted their institutions to local cultural settings. The experience of Jewish communities in India differs from historical experiences in many other regions. In parts of medieval Europe and the Middle East, Jewish communities were often subject to discrimination, expulsion, or violence. Historical studies frequently contrast these experiences with the relatively stable conditions that Jewish communities enjoyed in India (Johnson, 1987).

Scholars have therefore described the Indian context as an example of religious pluralism, where different communities interacted within shared social spaces. This environment did not eliminate all social boundaries, but it allowed minority communities to maintain their traditions and participate in economic and cultural life. Jewish communities were able to maintain synagogues, community leadership structures, and religious education while engaging with the wider society. Another important factor was the role of local political authorities. In many regions, rulers were interested in encouraging trade and economic activity. Merchants from different cultural backgrounds, including Jewish traders, were often welcomed because they contributed to regional commerce and economic prosperity. This economic motivation helped create conditions that supported the settlement of diverse communities in trading centres (Subrahmanyam, 1997).

The coexistence between Jewish communities and Indian society created a shared historical memory within the Jewish diaspora. Many Jews who lived in India for generations remembered the country as a place where they could practice their religion without fear of persecution. This historical experience later

became an important part of the cultural identity of Indian Jewish communities, particularly after many members migrated to Israel during the twentieth century. The long history of religious tolerance and social interaction in India therefore played a central role in shaping the development of Jewish communities in the region. Through trade, language adaptation, and participation in local society, Jewish migrants became part of India's diverse cultural landscape while preserving their religious traditions.

Diaspora Networks and Cultural Diplomacy in India-Israel Relations:

Diaspora communities often play an important role in maintaining cultural connections between societies separated by geography. In the case of India and Israel, the Jewish diaspora of Indian origin has acted as a bridge linking the historical experience of Jewish communities in India with contemporary cultural relations between the two countries. Migration from India to Israel during the twentieth century created social networks that continue to preserve memories, traditions, and cultural practices associated with Jewish life in the Indian subcontinent. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 marked an important turning point for many Jewish communities around the world. During the decades that followed, significant numbers of Jews from India migrated to Israel. Members of the Bene Israel community from western India and the Cochin Jewish community from Kerala formed the largest groups among these migrants. Although migration reduced the size of Jewish populations in India, it did not weaken the cultural links that had developed over centuries (Katz, 2000).

Many Indian Jews carried aspects of Indian cultural life with them to Israel. Language, music, food traditions, and community rituals reflected their long history in India. For example, members of the Bene Israel community continued to use Marathi in everyday communication and maintained songs and cultural expressions that originated in western India. Similarly, Cochin Jews preserved Malayalam songs and religious customs connected to their historical experience in Kerala (Weil, 2006). These cultural practices helped maintain a strong sense of identity among members of the Indian Jewish diaspora. In recent years, Indian Jewish communities in Israel have continued to strengthen cultural links with India through festivals, heritage events, and community organisations. Associations representing the Bene Israel and Cochin Jewish communities organise celebrations of Indian music, dance, cuisine, and religious traditions.

Associations representing the Bene Israel and Cochin Jewish communities organise celebrations of Indian music, dance, cuisine, language, and religious traditions. These activities help preserve the cultural heritage of Indian Jews, introduce younger generations to their historical connection with India, and maintain links with both Israeli society and Indian cultural traditions. Through festivals, social gatherings, and community programmes, the Indian Jewish diaspora continues to function as an important cultural bridge between India and Israel.

Diaspora communities also contribute to cultural diplomacy, which refers to the use of cultural interaction and heritage to strengthen relations between societies. Cultural diplomacy does not operate only through official government initiatives. It often emerges through social networks, cultural activities, and people-to-people interaction. The Indian Jewish diaspora has contributed to this process by preserving cultural traditions that highlight the historical relationship between Jewish communities and India (Vertovec, 2009). Cultural heritage sites associated with Jewish communities in India also play an important role in maintaining these connections. Historic synagogues in cities such as Kochi, Mumbai, and Kolkata represent important symbols of Jewish presence in the region. These sites attract visitors from Israel and from Jewish communities across the world. Heritage tourism and cultural visits provide opportunities for members of the diaspora to reconnect with places associated with their ancestral history. Heritage tourism has also become an important form of cultural diplomacy.

Many Israeli tourists visit places historically associated with Jewish life in India, particularly Kochi, Mumbai, and the Konkan region. Historic sites such as the Paradesi Synagogue and Jewish cemeteries in western India attract visitors interested in reconnecting with their ancestral heritage. Restoration projects involving synagogues and heritage buildings have further strengthened these cultural links.

In recent years, academic research and cultural institutions have also contributed to preserving the historical memory of Jewish communities in India. Scholars have documented oral histories, cultural traditions, and historical records related to these communities. Museums, archives, and heritage organizations have supported projects aimed at preserving synagogue architecture, community documents, and cultural artefacts (Roland, 1998). These initiatives help ensure that the historical experience of Jewish communities in India remains

part of both academic research and public awareness. Cultural exhibitions and educational programmes

often highlight the story of Jewish settlement in India as an example of peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange. Such narratives contribute to mutual understanding between Indian and Israeli societies.

Tourism and cultural exchange programmes have further strengthened these connections. Many Israeli citizens travel to India each year for tourism, cultural exploration, and spiritual experiences. India's cultural traditions, including yoga, music, and spiritual practices, attract visitors from Israel and other countries. These interactions contribute to the development of informal cultural links between societies. The role of diaspora communities in cultural diplomacy illustrates how historical migration can influence contemporary relations between countries. The Indian Jewish diaspora maintains cultural practices that reflect their long experience in India while participating fully in Israeli society. Through cultural events, heritage preservation, and social networks, these communities help maintain awareness of the historical ties between India and Jewish civilisation. These diaspora networks therefore represent an important dimension of the broader relationship between India and Israel. By preserving cultural traditions and historical memories, they contribute to people-to-people interaction and cultural dialogue between the two societies.

Historical Linkages and Their Influence on Contemporary India-Israel Relations:

The historical interaction between Jewish communities and the Indian subcontinent has played a meaningful role in shaping contemporary perceptions of India-Israel relations. Although formal diplomatic relations between India and Israel were established only in 1992, the long presence of Jewish communities in India created cultural familiarity between the two societies. The historical memory of peaceful coexistence and social interaction has influenced how both societies view each other in the modern period. Jewish communities lived in India for many centuries and developed strong social and cultural connections with local populations. Communities such as the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews participated in trade, education, and public life while maintaining their religious traditions. Their experience of living in a pluralistic society shaped positive memories of India within the Jewish diaspora (Katz, 2000). These memories became particularly important during the twentieth century when many Jews from India migrated to Israel.

Migration to Israel began shortly after the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. Members of Indian Jewish communities moved to Israel as part of broader movements of Jewish populations from different regions of the world. Although they settled in a new national environment, many migrants continued to preserve aspects of Indian culture. Language, music, food traditions, and community customs reflected their historical experience in India (Roland, 1998). The preservation of Indian cultural traditions within Israeli society helped maintain cultural awareness of the historical relationship between the two regions. Community organizations, cultural associations, and social gatherings frequently celebrate the heritage of Indian Jewish communities. Through these activities, historical memories of life in India remain an important part of diaspora identity.

These cultural memories also influence broader social perceptions in Israel. Many members of the Indian Jewish diaspora describe India as a place where Jews lived without experiencing large-scale persecution. Such narratives contrast with historical experiences in other regions where Jewish communities faced discrimination or violence. The memory of peaceful coexistence contributes to a favourable perception of India within Israeli society (Johnson, 1987). Historical scholarship and cultural heritage initiatives have further strengthened awareness of these connections. Researchers in both India and Israel have studied the history of Jewish communities in the Indian subcontinent and documented their cultural traditions. Academic research has helped bring attention to the role of Indian Jewish communities in global Jewish history and diaspora studies (Goldberg, 1992).

Heritage preservation has also played an important role in maintaining these historical links. Historic synagogues in cities such as Kochi, Mumbai, and Kolkata represent visible reminders of the long presence of Jewish communities in India. These buildings attract visitors from Israel and from Jewish communities across the world. Cultural visits and heritage tourism provide opportunities for members of the diaspora to reconnect with places associated with their ancestral past. Educational exchanges and academic collaboration have further contributed to strengthening these historical connections. Universities and research institutions in India and Israel support studies related to Jewish history, diaspora identity, and cultural interaction. Conferences, joint research programmes, and student exchanges create opportunities for scholars and students from both countries to engage with each other's history and culture.

Political leaders and diplomats from both countries sometimes refer to this shared historical experience when discussing bilateral relations. References to the peaceful coexistence of Jewish communities in India are often used to emphasize the cultural dimension of the relationship between the two countries. Such narratives highlight the idea that India-Israel relations are not based solely on contemporary strategic cooperation but also on historical interaction between societies. The contemporary importance of these historical linkages is also visible in official diplomacy. Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, cooperation between India and Israel has expanded not only in strategic and economic fields but also in cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Political leaders such as Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu have referred to the long history of friendship between India and Jewish communities when discussing bilateral relations. Such references show that the historical memory of coexistence continues to play an important role in shaping the cultural dimension of India-Israel relations.

At the same time, modern India-Israel relations are influenced by several additional factors, including economic cooperation, technological partnerships, and geopolitical developments in West Asia. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, cooperation between the two countries has expanded in areas such as agriculture, water management, defence technology, and scientific research (Kumaraswamy, 2010). Despite these modern developments, historical and cultural connections continue to provide an important social context for bilateral relations. The shared history of interaction between Jewish communities and Indian society contributes to people-to-people contact and cultural diplomacy. Tourism, academic exchange, and diaspora networks help maintain awareness of these historical links. The historical presence of Jewish communities in India therefore represents more than a chapter of diaspora history. It also forms part of the broader narrative that connects the societies of India and Israel. Through cultural memory, heritage preservation, and diaspora identity, these historical linkages continue to influence how the relationship between the two countries is understood today.

Findings:

1. Ancient maritime trade across the Indian Ocean created the earliest sustained contact between Jewish communities and the Indian subcontinent. Commercial networks linking the Mediterranean world, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia enabled Jewish merchants to reach the

western coast of India. Regular trade in spices, textiles, and other goods gradually encouraged migration and the establishment of Jewish settlements in regions such as Kerala and the Konkan coast.

2. Jewish diaspora communities in India developed hybrid cultural identities by combining Jewish religious traditions with local languages, customs, and economic life. The Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews preserved synagogue worship, dietary practices, and communal institutions while adopting regional languages such as Marathi and Malayalam and participating in local trade and social life.
3. The pluralistic social environment of India allowed Jewish communities to maintain their religious identity without systematic persecution. Unlike the experience of Jewish communities in many parts of Europe and West Asia, Jews in India were generally able to practice their religion freely, maintain synagogues and communal institutions, and participate in economic and social life. This experience of coexistence became an important feature of Jewish life in India.
4. The migration of Indian Jews to Israel during the twentieth century did not weaken the historical relationship between the two societies. Instead, members of the Indian Jewish diaspora continued to preserve Indian cultural practices, including language, music, food, and social customs. These traditions remain visible in community associations and cultural events in Israel.
5. Diaspora communities and heritage institutions function as important instruments of cultural diplomacy between India and Israel. Historic synagogues, community archives, heritage tourism, and cultural organisations preserve the memory of Jewish life in India and help strengthen people-to-people relations between the two countries.
6. Historical memory of peaceful coexistence continues to influence contemporary perceptions of India within Israeli society. Many members of the Indian Jewish diaspora describe India as a place where Jewish communities lived without large-scale discrimination or persecution. These positive memories contribute to favourable attitudes toward India and provide a broader cultural foundation for contemporary India–Israel relations.

Discussion:

The historical experience of Jewish communities in India differs significantly from that of Jewish

communities in many other regions of the world. In medieval Europe and several parts of West Asia, Jewish populations often faced discrimination, segregation, expulsion, and periodic violence. By contrast, Jewish communities in India were generally able to maintain their religious identity while participating actively in local social and economic life. The Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews adopted local languages, interacted with neighbouring communities, and contributed to trade and urban development, yet they continued to preserve synagogue worship, dietary customs, and communal institutions. This combination of cultural adaptation and religious continuity created a distinctive form of coexistence that was unusual in the wider history of the Jewish diaspora.

This distinctive experience is important because it helps explain why India occupies a special place in the historical memory of Indian Jewish communities. Many Jews who later migrated from India to Israel continued to remember India as a place of tolerance, coexistence, and social acceptance. These memories remain visible in Indian Jewish cultural associations, festivals, songs, cuisine, and community narratives in Israel. Unlike diaspora memories shaped mainly by persecution or displacement, the Indian Jewish experience is often remembered positively. As a result, historical memory continues to influence how India is viewed within Israeli society and provides a cultural foundation for relations between the two countries.

The discussion also suggests that India–Israel relations cannot be understood only through modern political and strategic factors. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, most studies have focused on defence cooperation, trade, technology, agriculture, and security. These factors are important, but they do not fully explain the positive social perception that often exists between the two societies. The long history of interaction between Jewish communities and Indian society created a sense of familiarity that existed even before formal diplomatic ties. Therefore, civilisational linkages and shared cultural memory complement contemporary strategic cooperation and make the relationship between India and Israel different from many other bilateral relationships.

The Indian case also demonstrates the importance of diaspora communities in international relations. The migration of Indian Jews to Israel did not weaken the connection between the two societies. Instead, the diaspora became an important bridge linking India and Israel. Indian Jewish communities in Israel continue to preserve Indian languages, music, food, religious

customs, and social traditions. Through cultural associations, festivals, and family networks, they maintain awareness of their Indian heritage while participating fully in Israeli society. This suggests that diaspora communities can influence relations between countries not only through political lobbying or economic links but also through the preservation of memory and culture.

The role of cultural diplomacy is particularly significant in this context. Historic synagogues, heritage tourism, restoration projects, museums, and cultural festivals function as symbols of the long relationship between Jewish communities and India. Places such as Paradesi Synagogue, Jewish cemeteries in western India, and heritage sites in Mumbai and Kochi attract members of the diaspora and Israeli visitors interested in reconnecting with their historical roots. These forms of cultural diplomacy strengthen people-to-people interaction and create a favourable environment for broader cooperation in areas such as education, tourism, trade, and technology.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the India–Israel relationship provides an important example for constructivist approaches in international relations. Constructivist theory argues that relations between states are shaped not only by material interests but also by ideas, identities, and historical experience. The case of India and Israel supports this argument. Historical memory, diaspora identity, and civilisational linkages continue to influence bilateral relations alongside strategic and economic interests. The relationship therefore shows that the past can remain an active force in international politics and that long-term cultural interaction can become an enduring foundation for diplomacy.

Theoretical and Policy Implications:

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to constructivist approaches in international relations by demonstrating that historical memory, cultural identity, and shared civilisational experience influence relations between states alongside strategic and economic interests. The historical experience of Jewish communities in India created positive cultural narratives that continue to shape perceptions of India within Israeli society. These findings suggest that bilateral relations are influenced not only by contemporary political decisions but also by long-term social interaction and collective memory.

The study also contributes to diaspora studies by showing how migrant communities preserve and transmit cultural identity across generations. Jewish communities in India maintained their religious

traditions while adapting to Indian society, and after migration to Israel they continued to preserve Indian languages, food, music, and social customs. Through community organisations, festivals, and heritage activities, the Indian Jewish diaspora functions as a bridge between the societies of India and Israel.

Finally, the article contributes to scholarship on cultural diplomacy by demonstrating that heritage, migration, and diaspora networks can become important instruments of international relations. Historic synagogues, cultural associations, heritage tourism, and educational exchange programmes help maintain awareness of the shared historical relationship between India and Israel. These forms of cultural diplomacy strengthen people-to-people contact and complement contemporary cooperation in areas such as trade, technology, and strategic partnership.

Future Research:

Although this study provides a detailed examination of the historical and cultural foundations of India–Israel relations, several areas remain open for further research. Future studies could examine primary archival materials, including historical documents, community records, and oral histories related to Jewish communities in India. Such research may provide deeper insight into the everyday experiences of Jewish migrants and their interaction with Indian society. Another area for further research involves the comparative study of Jewish diaspora communities in Asia. Comparing the experiences of Jewish communities in India with those in other parts of Asia could help scholars better understand how local social environments influenced diaspora identity and cultural adaptation. Further research could also explore the connection between historical cultural interaction and contemporary diplomatic relations between India and Israel. Integrating cultural, historical, and geopolitical perspectives may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of bilateral relations. Finally, interdisciplinary research combining history, anthropology, and international relations could offer new insights into the role of diaspora communities and cultural diplomacy in shaping relations between societies.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that the relationship between India and Israel is rooted not only in contemporary diplomacy and strategic cooperation but also in a much longer history of civilisational interaction. Ancient maritime trade across the Indian Ocean created the earliest contact between Jewish

communities and the Indian subcontinent. Over time, migration and settlement led to the development of the Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jewish communities, which preserved their religious traditions while adapting to Indian social and cultural life.

The study further shows that the experience of religious coexistence in India gave Jewish communities a distinctive historical memory. Unlike the experience of Jewish communities in many other parts of the world, Jews in India were generally able to practice their religion without systematic persecution. This environment of pluralism and cultural interaction shaped positive memories of India within the Indian Jewish diaspora and later influenced how India came to be viewed in Israel.

The article also demonstrates that diaspora communities and cultural heritage remain important instruments of cultural diplomacy between India and Israel. Indian Jewish communities in Israel continue to preserve Indian languages, music, food, and traditions. Historic synagogues, heritage tourism, cultural festivals, and community organisations help maintain awareness of the shared history between the two societies and strengthen people-to-people relations.

Therefore, the study argues that India–Israel relations cannot be understood only through the framework of modern geopolitics, defence cooperation, or economic partnership. Historical memory, diaspora identity, and civilisational linkages also play an important role in shaping bilateral relations. In the case of India and Israel, the past continues to influence the present by providing a deeper social and cultural foundation for contemporary relations. In an era when international relations are increasingly shaped by both strategy and identity, the India–Israel relationship demonstrates how historical memory and cultural coexistence can remain important foundations of diplomacy.

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