Maina Chawla Singh, with a foreword by Dipankar Gupta, Being Indian, Being Israeli: Migration, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Homeland (New Delhi, 2009) 250 pp.

In 1948, when the State of Israel was founded, waves of Jews from the three major centuries-old Jewish communities in India began to migrate to Israel, gradually increasing to a population of over 70,000 Jews of Indian origin in Israel today. Yet, strikingly, scholars of both Israel and the Indian diaspora have paid scant attention to the Indian Israeli community, and many in the public are also quite unaware of the story of Indian Jewish migration to Israel. Maina Singh's Being Indian, Being Israeli offers a rich, in-depth portrayal of the Indian Israeli community, exploring stories of migration and the complex ways that Jews of Indian origin have forged their identities as Indian, Jewish and Israeli. The engrossing, carefully-researched and highly accessible book illuminates our understandings of the immigrant experience in Israel, the Indian diaspora, and how cultural, religious, ethnic and national identities are crafted and experienced transnationally, across two or more nations.

Singh’s study focuses on the first generation of Jewish immigrants now living in Israel—those who were born in India and came to Israel as children, adolescents or adults in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. As the wife of the Indian ambassador to Israel, sociologist Maina Singh found that she had special access to the Indian Israeli community. Singh conducted intensive fieldwork from 2005 to 2008, interviewing in depth over one hundred respondents and spending time in Indian Israeli communities across Israel.

One of the key aims of Singh’s work is to highlight the heterogeneity in the Indian Jewish population, while examining the significance of class, ethnicity, language, region, gender and generation in the Indian immigrant experience. Singh argues as well that, despite their heterogeneity, Jews
of Indian origin form a distinct category within the Israeli multi-ethnic mosaic. Although Indian Jews are generally classified within the Mizrahi bloc—in the divide between Ashkenazim (Jews of European or American origin who are predominantly white) and Mizrahim (Jews of MiddleEastern, North African or West Asian descent)—one aim of Singh's work is to "argue that their South Asian origins make the Indian Jews civilizationally distinct." (45)

After its context-setting introduction, Being Indian, Being Israeli begins with a presentation of the three different communities of Indian Jews that came to Israel after the Jewish Homeland was established in 1948: the Calcutta Baghdadis, the Bene Israelis, and the Cochini Jews from Kerala. Singh outlines the main cities and towns where Indian Jews now live in Israel, and probes the relationship between location, space and class mobility.

The following several chapters provide the heart of the ethnography. Singh presents the engrossing narratives of the earliest immigrants who came from India to Israel by planeloads almost immediately following the end of British rule in India in 1947 and the formation of the Israeli state in 1948. Their stories document the early years of the Israeli nation, when there was barely any infrastructure, and tell of surviving the cultural and economic challenges of resettlement often in remote development towns and moshavim. All the Indian Jews while in India had identified their religious practices as "Jewish," and this "Jewishness" was their common reason for migrating to Israel, combined with varying economic and personal aims.

The immigration stories reveal how social class played a key role in the immigrant experience, as those with more education, knowledge of English, and professional or technological skills were much more likely to secure professional jobs in Israel and become situated in the higher ranks of society, whereas many more men and women from India were given lower-level white-collar jobs and manual work in agriculture and construction. For such families, life in Israel in the early days was extremely tough, and the spiral of being underprivileged has been very difficult to break. Many Indian immigrants also faced painful discrimination in Israel, due to their "dark" skin color and widespread perceptions about their country of origin as "backward." Because the Indian Jewish community had in general not faced discrimination over centuries of living in India, Singh observes that for them "to encounter prejudice in Israel, where they came expecting total affirmation for their Jewish-ness, was heartbreaking." (116–17) In these ways the book offers a compelling window into problems of social stratification along lines of class, ethnicity and race in Israel.
The book moves on to focus on home and family life, examining how Indian Israelis negotiate competing Jewish, Israeli and Indian values surrounding issues such as gender, housework, religion, life cycle rituals, teen autonomy and responsibility towards elderly parents. In addition, Singh devotes a chapter to exploring matters of national identity, such as the impact of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel in 1992, how to understand the overwhelming enthusiasm of Indian Jews to support the Indian Embassy, and how Indian Israelis place themselves within Israeli nationalist narratives of Jewish persecution, which they have never personally experienced.

_Being Indian, Being Israeli_ is situated very effectively, as Maina Singh characterizes, “at the cusp of history and ethnography.” (34) It offers an innovative examination of how individuals articulate a sense of belonging and fashion hybridized identities as Jewish, Israeli and Indian and, argues for the significance of the Indian Jewish community within Israeli discourses on ethnicity, religion, race and national identity. Even wealthier in data than in theory, the work’s clear and engrossing writing style and rich, original data will make it an enlightening and enjoyable read for those interested in transnational identities, Israel and the Indian diaspora.