



Wandering Jews No More? Indian Jews In U.S. Struggle For Unity, Acceptance

By: Ita Yankovich Wednesday, February 13, 2008

India, a predominantly Hindu country of more than a billion people, is home to approximately 5,000 Jews. While the country historically has been friendly to Jews, the lure of Israel, coupled with economic factors, has prompted many Jews to emigrate.

There are currently 14 functioning synagogues and two Jewish schools in India, but Jewish leaders there and abroad wonder how long the community will remain intact since Indian Jews -- outside of Israel's 70,000-strong community -- tend to typify the stereotypical wandering Jew.

There are roughly 350 Indian Jews in the United States. We'll return to them shortly, but first, some information about Indian Jews as found on the website www.jewsfromindia.org:

Indian Jews generally fall into three groups, with each maintaining separate identities and little admixture.

The Cochin Jews: These Jews settled in Cranganore and around Malabar. In the 15th Century C.E., they took shelter in Cochin further south after being attacked by the Moors and later by the Portuguese. They never numbered more than 2,500. Today there are no more than 17 mainly elderly Jews in Cochin.

The Baghdadis: This sect consists of Jews from West Asia, mainly from Baghdad and Syria. They arrived in the 19th century as traders and refugees, settling in Bombay, Calcutta and Pune. The Baghdadis spoke Arabic or Persian, and English. Once numbering about 5,000, today there are less than 200 -- most having emigrated to England, Australia and Canada.

The Bene Israel: This is the dominant Jewish presence in India. The scholarly dispute surrounding their origins centers around whether they came from the ancient kingdom of Israel after being defeated by the Assyrian king in 722 B.C.E., or when the kingdom of Judah was destroyed and Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. In the latter scenario, some Jews reached the West Coast of India.

But oral tradition and the seemingly favored view is that the Bene Israel descended from the Jews who fled in 175 B.C.E. from the Syrian/Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. It is believed they were shipwrecked at Navgaon near the port of Cheul on the Konkan Coast, 30 miles south of Bombay. The seven male and seven female survivors then spread out to many of the surrounding villages in the Konkan. Most of them have surnames ending with "kar," identifying the villages where they resided.

Long after the Israeli rabbinate's 1964 declaration that the Bene Israel are "full Jews in every respect," DNA testing in 2002 confirmed the Bene Israel's claim that they share the same heredity as *kohanim*.

David Rahabi of Cochin is credited with reviving Judaism among the Bene Israel. Fully convinced that the Bene Israel were Jews, he re-taught them Hebrew and specific aspects of the Jewish religion.

With Bombay becoming an important port of British India, the Bene Israel were encouraged to move to Bombay where greater opportunities for employment existed. Many of its members worked in government service, and a considerable number of others distinguished themselves as officers in the Indian army. In the 1950's and 60's, when the majority of Indian Jews left for Israel, a few important members of the Bene Israel remained in India.

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Cantor Romiel Daniel is president of the Indian Jewish Congregation (IJC) of USA, the only organization in the U.S. that helps unite and assist Indian Jews. He is also president of the Rego Park Jewish Center in Queens, and a full-fledged Yeshiva University-trained cantor.



Romiel and Noreen Daniel

Why did you start the IJC?

I wanted to bring the Indian Jewish community together. When I left India and went to Madagascar we weren't allowed to worship openly, so I held services secretly in my home. But when I came to the United States 14 years ago and saw that there was nothing in place for us to celebrate our culture, rituals and traditions, we started having High Holy Day services and celebrating other Jewish holidays. [This practice] continues today.

Why is it so important to have an Indian *shul*?

Our unique liturgy is unlike the Sephardic or Ashkenazic style. In India we prayed from Livorno *sefarim*, and had a special melody and trope to our *davening*. We also incorporate different prayers. For example, on Chanukah we recite psalm 30 [David's song for the inauguration of the Temple] after lighting the menorah.

Have Indian Jews in the U.S. encountered discrimination from other Jews?

No. In fact I'm president of a *shul* that's 99.9 percent Ashkenazi with a population of mostly Polish, German and Hungarian Jews. The acceptance here has been more than what we all dreamed for. We want to integrate within mainstream Judaism, not assimilate.

Have you ever been mistaken for a convert?

Occasionally people will ask how I'm Jewish, or if I converted. These are normal and expected questions. Most people inquire based on ignorance, not from skepticism of our heritage.

What message do you want to convey to mainstream Jewry?

American Jews need to know that there are communities where people have been practicing traditional Judaism for over 2,000 years. They need to learn about other cultures, incorporate them into mainstream Judaism, and get to know their rituals.

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Lael Daniel is the son of Romiel Daniel. In addition to assisting his father in the running of daily events, he is also on the IJC's board of trustees and is its public relations manager. Lael aims to gain recognition for the IJC by organizing lectures, among other projects. He and his wife, Regina, will be staging an Indian Jewish wedding at the JCC in Manhattan on February 17.



Lael Daniel at Simchat Torah celebration

What is the IJC's goal?

We would like to unite Indian Jews around the world and be a symbol for Indian Jewry. We help Indian Jews get scholarships, access to healthcare and eldercare, and ensure that our traditions remain alive and vibrant for the next generation. We need to have a permanent place of our own for religious services. At present we rent out the Village Temple on 12th Street in Manhattan, but it was felt that the community should meet at least twice a month in a central place (preferably in Manhattan) for lectures on Torah, and for teaching the cultures and traditions of Indian Jews for the benefit of second- and third-generation Indian Jews.

What are some of the challenges currently facing Indian Jews?

I wouldn't call them challenges, but rather opportunities. In India, we have no challenges; it is a very accepting country. We have *shuls* in major Muslim areas and one of the first mayors of Bombay was an Indian Jew.

In Israel, we are getting much more recognition due to a population increase. There are also plans to name four streets in Beersheba after Indian Jews. In the U.S., we still need to work at getting the mainstream Jewish community to be better informed about our community.

Do you mix Indian culture with Judaic practice?

No, we are practicing Jews like any other community. Like our fellow Jews, we follow the *halachot* of *kashrut*, Shabbat and holidays. Most of us are Orthodox in practice.

Are there any distinct Indian customs in your community?

We do have an Eliyahoo Hannabi [editor's note: this is the preferred spelling and pronunciation of Eliyahu *HaNavi* among Indian Jews] ceremony to thank God after overcoming an illness, having a baby, or even for buying a new house or car. On *Tu B'Shevat* in India, the tradition was for every Bene Israel household to perform this ceremony. For those wishing to have this ceremony in a communal setting, a special trip was made to Khandala – near Alibag – in the Konkan district. There the ceremony would be performed at the rock where the track marks of Eliyahu's chariot can supposedly be seen. This was the time when he ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire.

We make *malida*, a parched rice grain offering, one of the 11 Temple practices. This is offered, along with five or seven fruits, to all Eliyahoo Hannabi ceremony participants, after saying special prayers for God's protection – with Eliyahoo as His messenger.

In our wedding celebrations we have a special song called "*Nava Mikol*," sung by the bridegroom in praise of his soon-to-be-wife as she walks down the aisle.

We also have a custom called *Hathboshee*, where we greet each other by extending our arms close to our bodies and kissing them.

Where do Indian Jews in the U.S. currently reside?

Many live in Rego Park or in other Queens areas. Still others reside in other parts of New York, as well as in New Jersey, Connecticut, California and Boston. Overseas, there are communities in Australia, England and, as mentioned, Israel. I would like to add that Indian Jews are staunch religious Zionists who moved to Israel out of a sense of duty to work and develop the land.

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Noreen Daniel was raised in India by educated parents who instilled that value in her. She is chairperson of Women in Judaism, and runs a series of lectures that empowers women while extensively teaching them about Judaism.

Do Indian Jewish women dress in the traditional Indian garb, and do they adhere to the rules of *tzniut* (modesty)?

Today in America we mostly dress in modern contemporary clothing, but we do wear a sari at celebrations and in synagogue. The sari is a fabric of five meters length, so it basically covers everything. Unlike regular saris, we do not walk around with our bellies exposed or in low-cut tops. The sari is draped over a blouse and petticoat. This is the proper method of wearing this traditional Indian garb.

Do Indian women wear *sheitels*?

Not on a regular basis. But to be respectful, we do cover our hair every time we say a prayer or hear prayers when we're in *shul* or when we are at a *simcha*. Even unmarried girls practice this ritual.

Do your dating and courtship customs differ from those of other Jews?

We still have arranged marriages and we frequently marry our second and third cousins to keep it in the family. By marrying inside our families, we already know everything about the boy and girl in question. It is interesting to note that the caste system helped keep our community intact and away from intermarriage. If someone married a Hindu or Muslim, they and their family were outcasts. We don't care if an Indian marries outside the Indian community, so long as the person they are marrying is Jewish.



Indian Jewish wedding

Is divorce or the plight of *agunot* prevalent in your community?

When we marry, we marry for life, so we don't really have an *agunah* situation. If a married couple is experiencing difficulty, they will appear before the committee of elders at the synagogue to discuss their problems. They might separate for a while with each side living in their parents' house, but eventually they will reconcile. Indian women understand that it will be very hard to remarry inside this community after a divorce.

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Aylon Samson wasborn in India and raised in Israel. Aylon has been living in the U.S. for the past 17 years.

What is your relationship to the Indian Jewish community?

Most of my experience with Indian Jewry was in Israel, having grown up in Lod – site of Israel's first Bene Israel synagogue. I launched our Bene Israel website in May of 2006. I also worked on our community's newsletter and helped with various events.

What might surprise our readers about Indian Jews?

The first surprise would be that there are Indian Jews. Readers will be surprised to learn about the aforementioned flourishing of our community in Israel.

How has the community changed since you arrived in the U.S.?

The community has gotten closer and more united.



Indian Chanukia

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Shmuel Divekar works as a school social worker helping special and handicapped children at P.S. 129 in Manhattan. He grew up as one of 11 children in India before moving to the U.S. in 1955. As senior trustee of the IJC, his duties include helping plan annual events and celebrations, along with raising funds for the shul and overall cause.

How is the IJC funded?

We work on a very tight budget. Basically we charge an entrance fee for our events, and money left over is used to run programs. Funding is always a challenge.

What areas in the Indian Jewish community need improvement?

We are a displaced community with no real place to *daven*, hold meetings and conduct *Shabbos* services. We don't have an arrangement for burial. Many students approach us for scholarship requests that we can't deliver.

What's life like for Jews in India today?

The community has become more progressive and crowded. There was a lack of religious education, but it is picking up – thanks to organizations like American ORT and the American Joint Distribution Committee.

With the cow being holy in India, is *shechita* and kosher meat hard to find?

Not if you know where to look, so *shechita* is generally not a problem for us. Most Indian Jews are vegetarians. Others eat chicken (which is expensive), goat or lamb – but very little beef out of respect for the Hindu culture.

The swastika is both an anti-Semitic and popular Hindu symbol. How do Jews react to this?

We understand that the left-handed swastika in India isn't a symbol of hatred against Jews but rather part of Indian Hindu culture, and the country is very sensitive to our feelings. The swastika in India is a sign of good luck. It indicates two opposing forces of evolution and dissolution.

In contrast, the right-handed Nazi swastika was misused – to inflame rather than instruct.