



The Jews of India

For 2,000 years, India has been home to a small but prominent Jewish community. So what makes India one of the safest places for Jews in the world?

Michaela Stone Cross

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Because of their light skin and willingness to go on the stage, Jewish Bollywood stars such as Nadira (Florence Ezekiel) — pictured on right — ruled the silent era. (Jio Mami Mumbai Film Festival/Shalom Bollywood)

Rahel Musleah was 6 years old when she immigrated with her parents to the U.S. It was Philadelphia, 1964, and, like most Indian immigrants, she experienced the usual culture shock: bad food, uninformed locals, a less-familiar tongue

animal tongue.

“If we wanted to find things that were used from India, like cilantro, like dhaniya, we’d have to hunt high-and-low,” recalled Musleah. “There was one Indian store in Philadelphia and we’d have to go especially to that shop to get our dhaniya saag.”

But Musleah wasn’t just different than most Americans — she was different than most Indians, too. She wasn’t Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, but Jewish, and ostensibly white.

“I just knew that I was Indian and Jewish,” said Musleah. “I didn’t know about my Baghdadi ancestry.”



A Jewish family at home in Aizawl, the capital of northeastern Indian state Mizoram. (Ellen Goldberg)

Few people know that India has long been home to a small but prominent indigenous Jewish community, part of which dates back to over 2,000 years. At its peak, the population was around 22,000; it has dwindled to under 14,000, making it the smallest religious minority in India. Musleah is a member of one of the more recent influxes, the Baghdadi Jews who arrived from the Middle East around the beginning of the 19th century, one of the world's roughly 100,000 Indian Jews. Around 85,000 Indian Jews now live in Israel, 12,000 in the country, and a few thousand are scattered throughout the world.

“How can you be Jewish and be from India?” said Musleah, repeating the question she received over and over again. “They used to call ‘Yiddish’ ‘Jewish,’ so they’d say, ‘How can you be Jewish but not speak Jewish?’ Even today, with so much emphasis on diversity and global Judaism, people are still surprised that there are Jews in India.”

“The Jews really flourished in India like nowhere else in the world,” said Isaac Kehimkar, a member of the Marathi-speaking Jewish community, the Bene Israel. “India is the only place where they were never persecuted or looked down upon.”



Queenie Koder Hallegua holds her ketubah, a Jewish marriage contract. (Ellen Goldberg)

India — according to many of its Jewish citizens — is one of the safest countries for Jews in human history. Since the first Cochin Jews reached the banks of Kerala around 2,000 years ago, India is one of the few countries to have

repeatedly welcomed waves of Jewish refugees. From those fleeing Roman persecution in the first century to the **estimated 5,000** refugees fleeing the Holocaust, India has long given refuge to arguably the world's most persecuted ethnoreligious minority. Until the **Citizenship Amendment Act** passed in 2019, which excluded Muslim refugees from fast-tracking their citizenship, India has long been a refuge for religious minorities fleeing persecution.

"They love India, they're very patriotic," said Nathan Katz, a professor of Indo-Judaic studies at Florida International University who has lived among the Cochin Jews. "They know India has been the kindest nation in the world to Jews."

There are four main strains of Indian Judaism: the Cochin Jews of Kerala, who came to India 2,000 years ago and were patronized and protected by the maharajas. Because they maintained ties with the global Jewish diaspora, they knew Hebrew as well as Malayalam, and were able to marry within their community and keep up with contemporary Jewish practices. The Bene Israel, in contrast, was a small community that originated from a shipwreck of seven Jewish couples off the Konkan coast 2,000 years ago. They intermarried with the local community and adopted local practices, and for hundreds of years were out of touch with Jewish learning. The Baghdadi Jews, meanwhile, immigrated in the late 18th century. They were wealthy families fleeing persecution in Syria and Iraq, and hardly intermarried.





The Tiphareth Israel Synagogue in Mumbai. (Ellen Goldberg)

Except for the **Goa Inquisition**, conducted by Portuguese-occupied Goa to advance Catholicism, and the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which targeted a Chabad house and killed six Jews, India has been remarkably safe for the community. Relations between Jews and Muslims have been particularly strong: synagogues in Mumbai and Kolkata tend to exist in Muslim neighborhoods, with Muslim caretakers, since the majority of Jews have left for Israel and abroad.

“Never from the Hindus,” said Kehimkar, when asked if he experienced anti-Semitism growing up. “Sometimes the Christian boys would say, you know, ‘you killed our god’ — I blame the priests for that. But Muslims never had this kind of anti-Semitic feeling. Not in India, never.”

“In Hindi, the word for Jewish is ‘yodar,’” said Osher Shanti Rozan, a Tamil-speaking Jewish woman whose Israeli parents raised her in Tamil Nadu. “When I say ‘yodar’ the reaction is usually very positive.”

Though only a tiny fraction of India’s population, Indian Jewish communities have contributed beyond their numbers for thousands of years. The Sassoon family of Bombay is particularly famous: they were wealthy philanthropists who built synagogues, schools, and even funded the Gateway of India, leaving a lasting imprint on the city. Early Bollywood had many Jewish actors and particularly actresses. The Sassoon Docks in Mumbai still bear their name.

“Indian women were too modest to act in the cinema,” said Musleah. “So Baghdadi Jewish women were the first stars of Bollywood. Sulochana [born Ruby Myers] was my second cousin once removed — she starred in about 70 movies.”

Because of their light skin and willingness to go on the stage, Jewish Bollywood stars like Pramila (Esther Abraham) and Nadira (Florence Ezekiel) ruled the

silent era. Pramila was also the first Miss India in 1947.

India is both multicultural and non-assimilationist, absorbing cultures without dissolving them. For this reason, perhaps, India has been able to preserve minority religions that have disappeared elsewhere, such as the Zoroastrian Parsis.

“Indian society...tolerates wide diversity but does not permit people born into one group to cross over into another, or even to associate with the others beyond the public square,” wrote academic Daniel J. Elazar. “The Jewish community could fit into India as another caste and even developed its own subcastes.”



Indian women clean wheat to be used for Pesach matza. (Ellen Goldberg)

The Jewish communities entered India within a hierarchical pecking order, one based on religious purity, money, education, skin color, and global access.

“The Baghdadi Jews were merchants, spoke English, and in general, are more fair-skinned than the other Indian Jewish communities, so they always identified more with the British,” said Musleah. “They even petitioned to be officially classified as Europeans, but their request was rejected.”

“The [Cochin] Jews were a minority, but I will say a privileged minority,” said Katz. “They contributed to the society but also benefited greatly from the society.”

“The British, of course, were at the top, and then there were the Anglo-Indians, what they called ‘Eurasian people,’” said Katz. “Right after them are the Parsis, the Jews, the Armenian [Christians], all these micro-ethnic communities that were mercantile communities, and had a tremendous amount to do with the development and prosperity of India’s main cities.”

The Cochin Jews, through waves of various Sephardic groups, are diverse-looking, ranging from dark-skinned to blue-eyed and blonde, while the Baghdadi Jews looked typically light-skinned and Middle Eastern. The Bene Israel look Marathi and speak a dialect of the language spoken by Marathi Muslims in the countryside.

“The Baghdadi Jews don’t actually mingle with the Bene Israel — they kept their distance. Possibly they found that we are more Maharashtrian than Jews,” said Kehimkar. “We have a lot of customs we have adopted from local traditions.”



Jacob Dandekar, a chazan, in Alibag, a coastal town south of Mumbai. (Ellen Goldberg)

Indian Jews, especially the non-Caucasian Bene Israel and Bene Menashe of the northeast, have tested what it means to be a member of the Jewish community. Unlike the Cochin Jews, who maintained rigorous ties to the Sephardic community, both groups joined the local Indian community and knew little Hebrew. Both groups faced resistance in Israel, where their Jewishness was questioned. The Bene Israel were initially unable to marry

under Israeli law since the country does not have civil marriage and rabbis were disputing their Jewish credentials.

“They held a civil disobedience demonstration a la Gandhi, in the parliament building in Israel,” said Katz. “Israel, especially in 1960, was really trying to put a good image to the so-called ‘third world.’ A Jew is a Jew — they don’t know the intricacies, nor should they. So brown Jews being rejected as Jews is horrible for Israel.”

The Bene Israel, as well as the tribal Bene Menashe, won their legislative battles and were accepted by the Israeli government and head rabbi. Now all but 12,000 — 5,000 Bene Israel and 7,000 Bene Menashe — have moved to Israel.

“There’s a good, thriving community there,” said Kehimkar. “They speak Marathi there, actually. They’ve even started a Marathi magazine called *Mai Boli*, which means, ‘mother tongue.’”

Since Indian independence in 1947 and the founding of Israel in 1948, there’s been a steady stream of Jewish emigrants leaving India. Jews left not because of persecution, but because of democratization, socialist legislation, economic opportunities, and Zionist fervor.

“It was a leveling of society,” said Katz. “That’s what democratization is. So the Jews lost their position of privilege. Nobody’s against them, nobody dislikes them — it’s just the changing times from a kingdom to a democracy.”



Jeremy Lalflanmawia at the gate of his home business in Aizawl. He does not work on the Sabbath, Judaism's day of rest. (Ellen Goldberg)

Indian Jews, as a privileged minority under the British and the Maharajas of Kerala, feared that democratization and socialism would threaten their status.

“There was a lot of upheaval at the time,” said Musleah. “Nobody really knew what was going to happen with the new economic policies and things like that. So half the [Baghdadi] community left for Israel, then also for Britain, Australia, and Canada.”

The major neighborhoods of Indian Jews, both Kerala and in West Bengal, became areas of communist governments, whose land redistribution and

nationalization programs threatened the business interests of wealthier Jews.

The Jews of Cochin relied on money from large tracts of coconut fields, which were divided amongst poor farmers during the onslaught of socialist legislation. Poorer Jews, meanwhile, left for the greater economic opportunities a passport to a developed country afforded.

“There was the emotional reason to go to Israel and to help Israel, but there was also the economic reason,” said Kehimkar, who has many family members who immigrated. “My uncle wasn’t doing well [financially]. My elder brother too.”

Of the remaining Indian Jews, there are only a handful of Baghdadi Jews in Kolkata and Mumbai, 26 Cochin Jews, 5,000 of the Bene Israel. The largest group remains the Bnei Menashe tribals of India’s northeast, who number around 7,000. There are now also many Jewish expats, with around 70,000 Israelis alone living in India, many of whom have raised families. Rozan, whose Israeli parents raised her in Tamil Nadu, even learned to speak Tamil from the local village kids. There are around 60,000 Israeli Jews permanently settled in India — for decades the country has been a popular hotspot for young Israelis coming out of the army.

“There were days I used to wish I had dark skin,” said Rozan. “I used to dress very traditionally, always braid my hair and wear a pottu, like a bindi and chudidhar and really try to fit in. I think I realized though that, however much you try, you’ll never fully belong.”





A Jewish woman in Aizawl. (Ellen Goldberg)

As of today, Rozan feels neither Indian nor Israeli: “I feel like I am a mix.”

Katz and Musleah both **conduct tours** of historic Jewish India. Kehimkar, a lepidopterist (specialist in butterflies and moths) who lives in Navi Mumbai, gave his children the option to immigrate to Israel.

“They have these special tools, which are designed to attract young people,” said Kehimkar, describing his sons’ experience during Birthright, a **free** trip young Jews between age 18 and 32 often take to Israel. “They take them to all the best places, they have a lot of army girls surrounding the boys, you know. My son said ‘I like one girl, I fell in love with her. But I want to go back to India.’”

He explained his family that has settled in Israel now misses India. “Yes, Israel is there,” he said. “But it’s okay. I’m Indian more than anything else.”

Michaela Stone Cross is a freelance writer from Philadelphia. She currently lives in Mumbai, where she spends most of her time trying to explain why she’s there. She’s written for several publications, including VICE.

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