

The people connection

Young Israelis visit India in huge numbers each year, forging a stronger acquaintance



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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is accompanied on his visit to India by a large delegation drawn from the defence, cyber, and agricultural sectors; he intends to boost trade, investment, and tourism between the two nations. This year, Israel's Ministry of Tourism will spend \$5-6 million in India in a bid to boost tourism to Israel. The goal is to have one lakh tourists visiting Israel in 2018.

Once distant

When I was growing up in Kolkata in the 1950s and '60s, India had virtually no relations with Israel. I remember a singular exception: an Israeli school friend of my brother's who was sent to study at La Martiniere. His father was posted in Nepal on deputation to the Air Force. Yusef would tell us colourful stories of life in Israel. There were a few other Israeli visitors who held dual passports (Israel allows this) who were able to come to India. Several people from the Israeli foreign service visited India to help make arrange-

ments for those Jews who wished to make *aliyah* - the right of any Jew to "ascend" to Israel. As the Marathi Jews were always the largest in number among India's Jewish communities, they made the largest *aliyah*.

Most Israelis knew little about India until about the mid-1990s. Some of the European pioneers of Israel were familiar with Tagore's writings, and a street in Tel Aviv is named after him. Many Israelis knew of Mahatma Gandhi. Few know about the 800-year-old Indian hospice that was set up at the site where the Sufi saint, Baba Farid, is said to have prayed and meditated when he visited Jerusalem in the 13th century. It serves as a guesthouse for pilgrims of all faiths who come to Jerusalem to pray at Al-Aqsa mosque.

India recognised the state of Israel in 1950, and in 1953 permitted it to open a consulate in Mumbai. Despite there being no formal relations, Israel provided India with crucial intelligence information during several wars. Full diplomatic relations were established between India and Israel until 1992 when India opened its embassy in Tel Aviv.

Though there are many Indian Jews living in Israel - over 80,000 - they have remained a relatively quiet and somewhat "invisible"



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community. In Israel, Indian Jews are largely subsumed into the larger "Mizrahi" community of non-white Jews from North Africa and West Asia. Few in Israel know about the Jews of India, their varied histories, and the marked cultural and ethnic distinctions between them. This is largely due to where in Israel the Indian Jews settled, which, for economic and political reasons, was primarily in peripheral towns. When Jews from India first arrived in the 1940s and '50s, the darker-skinned Bene Israel and Cochin Jews faced discrimination from the predominantly powerful European (Ashkenazi) Jews.

The Jews from Cochin settled mostly in "moshavs", or community farms, in southern Israel. There, they became very successful at flower growing and export. The Bene Israel Jews from the Konkan were in a range of middle-class, modestly-paying professions. They settled in smaller towns such as Ashdod, Ramla, and Lod. In the 1960s, the Bene Israelis fought and won a major case to be fully accepted as Jews.

Far fewer in numbers were the Baghdadi Jewish arrivals from Mumbai, Pune, and Kolkata. They became part of the much larger Iraqi Jewish community or integrated with other English-speaking immigrants to Israel. In the last few years, about 2000 Bnei Menashe Jews from Manipur and Mizoram have made *aliyah* as well; many of them have been placed in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The Indian Jews in Israel have always held strong ties to India. They celebrate Indian Independence Day and Republic Day, and many of them, especially the Bene Israelis, listen to Indian music and watch Indian films, hold Indian cultural events for community members, and open Indian stores which stock the groceries and spices. They have formed their own associations, issue their own

community publications, and keep their Indian Jewish traditions alive. However, very few Israelis in the past came to know about India from the Indian Jews who lived there.

'A human bridge'

Indian Jews were feted during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel last year. This visit commemorated 25 years of diplomatic ties between the two nations. Mr. Netanyahu called the Indian diaspora "a human bridge" between the two nations. I would argue that it is young Israelis who have flocked to India over the last 25 years, and who have come to know India first-hand, who have played a more significant role in familiarising Israelis with India.

More than 40,000 Israelis visit India each year. For a country with a population of 6.5 million, that is a considerable number. India is now almost an obligatory visit for Israelis after finishing their compulsory army service. They live in the smaller towns and villages of India for as long as their money can last them, and revel in the freedom India offers them after their rigorous term of service.

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