

Indian Jews Look To Invite Attention on Hanukkah

By Marissa Brostoff

Next week, at New York's Indian consulate, a group of Indian Jews will attempt to bridge the gap between their culture and that of most American Jews — by throwing a Hanukkah party.

The decision may seem obvious, but Hanukkah is actually a relatively new addition to the Indian Jewish tradition, which developed separately from those of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. Although lore claims that Jews have lived in India since the time of Antiochus, the villain of the Hanukkah story, Indian Jews started celebrating the holiday only about 200 years ago.

Every immigrant community in this city of immigrants must negotiate competing desires to remain unique and to assimilate. But while Russian, Bukharian and Middle Eastern Jewish communities are substantial enough to be visible within the larger Jewish landscape, New York's tiny Indian Jewish community has gone largely unnoticed.

"People have been here 30, 40 years, but the community is virtually unknown," said Romiel Daniel, president of an organization called the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA. "The Russians got tremendous

support [from the American Jewish establishment]; as far as our community was concerned, no."

Since 1995, the Indian Jewish Congregation has been renting out the Village Temple in Manhattan's Greenwich Village on major holidays. The congregation's High Holy Day services, which are free and open to the public, have drawn people from outside the community, including Ethiopian, Russian and Bukharian Jews.

"We want to be part of the larger community," Daniel said. "We don't want to assimilate, we want to integrate."

Part of the upcoming Hanukkah party's significance is that it reaffirms the growing partnership between India and Israel, both of whose New York consuls general will be in attendance. Today, India is the second-largest importer of Israeli goods.

That situation is not far off from the one that brought Jews to India in the first place, according to one version of the story.

"Three ships left from Palestine. They were trading with India," said Moses Samson, a friend of Daniel's who, like Daniel, made his way to Queens from Bombay. "There was a typhoon, and one ship went



INDIAN JEWISH CONGREGATION OF USA

From Bombay to Jerusalem: The consuls general of India and Israel were scheduled to attend a Hanukkah party being thrown by the tristate area's small Indian Jewish community.

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Community

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down in the sea, one was swept to Cochin and one landed on the coast of Maharashtra" near Bombay.

The legend ends with the birth of two communities: a larger one in and around Bombay, known as Bene Israel, and a smaller one in the city of Cochin.

Shipwreck or no shipwreck, the Bene Israel and Cochin communities date back more than 2,000 years. Much later, in the 19th century, a wave of Jewish traders and refugees from the Middle East settled in eastern India. This group became known as the Baghdadis. The combined Jewish population of India numbered about 37,000 at its peak.

Today, the Jewish population that remains in India has shrunk to about 5,000. Many Bene Israel and Cochin Jews have immigrated to Israel, and the Baghdadis have relocated to British Commonwealth countries.

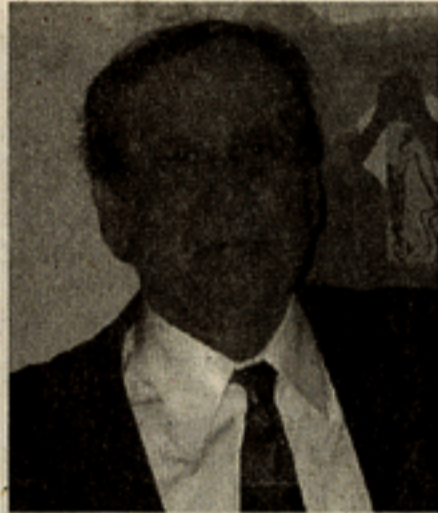
And then there is the community of mostly Bene Israel Jews in the United States, which is concentrated in the New York area and numbers about 350. "My husband and myself are second cousins. My son and his wife also were second cousins," said Noreen Daniel, who is married to Romiel. "Our community is small."

The Daniels left Bombay in the early 1990s and spent three years in Madagascar and Mauritius before settling in New York. Their living room contains a mix of Indian and Jewish decorations — a clock set to Bombay time, a replica of Chagall's stained-glass windows and an Indian menorah with holders for small cups of oil instead of candles.

Indian Jewish émigrés, who left the old country primarily for economic reasons, were not greeted warmly, either in Israel or in the United States, Daniel said. In 1962, Israel's chief rabbi questioned their "purity" as Jews and demanded that they be converted under Ashkenazic supervision. (Legend has it that he failed after David Ben-Gurion himself intervened.)

In the United States, they seem to have simply slipped beneath the radar.

"Part of the reason we wanted to [hold the Hanukkah party] in the consulate is that we wanted to increase awareness... of the fact that there are Jewish populations of different ethnicities who are here in this country," Daniel said.



INDIAN JEWISH CONGREGATION OF USA

Daniel: The head of America's Indian Jews is looking to raise his community's profile.

The evening may be an opportunity for integration, but Daniel promised that the Hanukkah rituals — reciting Psalm 30, an unusual benediction for the holiday, in a unique kind of chant, and eating fried Indian snacks — will "make you feel like you're back home in Bombay."

"If we changed the services, we'd get killed," he said with a laugh.

Indian Jews celebrate Hanukkah at consulate

MONIKA JOSHI

Romiel Daniel takes pride in the fact that although the Jewish community has faced repression in many parts of the world, it never faced violence or discrimination in India.

Daniel is president of the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA, an organization of Jews from India. A predominantly Hindu country of more than a billion people, India has about 138 million Muslims, 24 million Christians and less than 5,000 Jews.

In a first, the IJC celebrated Hanukkah at the Consulate General of India in New York City December 11. It was the last day of Hanukkah – the festival of lights that commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the Syrian-Greek ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

It is believed that when the Jews re-entered the temple, they found only one vat of pure oil. They lit the menorah, and the oil that was to last for only one day burned for eight days. That's why the Hanukkah candle, called the menorah, has eight candles, and a central candle called shamash that is used to light the others. In the Indian tradition, a separate candle is used to light the others. This accompanies the chanting of Psalm 30 from the Bible.

The story of Hanukkah is relevant today, Daniel said, since it also means peace overcoming terror, and life and growth overcoming destruction. Antiochus did not want to destroy the temple, but to defile it and destroy Jewish ideals. In other words, he did not want to capture the body, but the soul.

The soul of Hanukkah lies in meditation and joy, and its warmth and light is shared not only with one's family but the entire world. "That's why we put the menorah in the window for everyone to see," Daniel said.

Indian Jews comprise at least three groups – the Cochin Jews who settled on the Malabar coast in southern India centuries ago; the Baghdadis, who migrated from Iraq and Syria and settled in Mumbai, Kolkata and Pune, and the Bene Israel, who dominate the Jewish presence in India. Oral tradition has it that they are descended from the Jews who fled from Antiochus and were shipwrecked on the Konkan coast in present-day Maharashtra, and seven men and seven women survived.



Hanukkah celebrations at the Indian consulate in New York



A dance presented on the occasion



New York City Council member Helen Sears, Deputy Consul General Dr A M Gondane, Romiel Daniel, President, Indian Jewish Congregation of USA

New York City Council member Helen Sears, who was present, had not heard of India's history of tolerance for the Jewish community. At the city council, she said, they often find themselves talking about discrimination and that it is not too soon to educate children about respecting their differences. If we don't respect the differences, then "that is destroying the very fiber of human society," she said.

Sears represents District 25 in Queens, which comprises the very diverse neighborhood of Jackson Heights. In the 1970s, a handful of Indian merchants started to settle on 74th Street that has now come to be known as Little India. "It was something

very new," Sears said. The food they brought along and that everyone has come to love was very different, their outfits were very different, and the jewelry the women wore was different. Business was bad then, Sears said, adding that there were empty stores and apartments. But the merchants did not move away. "Today, it is one of the most thriving communities in the city of New York."

Members of the Rego Park Jewish Congregation, of which Daniel is president, were scattered among the 150 or participants in the Hanukkah celebration. Among them were women in silk saris and white kippahs (a round head covering worn dur-

ing prayer).

Before presenting the vote of thanks, Sam Daniel, a prominent member in the community, spoke about his experience working as a security guard at the home of the Indian ambassador when he came to the United States. It was 1955, and Daniel's job was to make sure the residence was secure, man the door during special events, and mark the daily newspaper for India-related news for the ambassador, G L Mehta.

He recalled the reception hosted for Jawaharlal Nehru, then India's prime minister, that Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, the President and vice president respectively, attended. Pandit Nehru forgot his glasses at Blair House, the President's guest house in Washington, DC, where he was staying. They were delivered within minutes through a courier on a motorcycle, Daniel said. He also remembered taking the scarf Mamie Eisenhower was wearing and hanging it so she could be comfortable.

After the event Daniel found he had made a splash. Within a few days, he started receiving letters from friends and family in India. "They saw me in the news," he said.

Hanukkah

Indian Jews celebrate Hanukkah at New India House

By Bhargavi Kulkarni

The Indian Jewish Congregation (IJC) of USA celebrated Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights at India's Consulate General on December 11. The guests at the first Hanukkah at New India House included the Consul General of Israel in New York, Asaf Shariv; Consul for Political Affairs, Pravin Kumar; Deputy Consul General of India, Dr. Ajay Gondane, and NYC Councilmember Helen Sears. "Hanukkah, from the Hebrew word 'dedication' or 'consecration', marks the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the forces of Antiochus IV, the Greek king who ruled during the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire from 175 BC until his death, and commemorates the miracle of the container of oil," Romiel Daniel, President of the Indian Jewish Congregation told *Desi Talk*. "It is the festival of miracles and lights and celebrates the spiritual upliftment of the people."

It is observed for eight nights, starting on the 25th day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar and occurs from late November to late December on the Gregorian calendar.

"The festival is observed by the kindling of the lights of a special candelabrum, the Hanukkiya or the Hanukkah Menorah, one on each night of the holiday, progressing to eight on the final night," Daniel said. An extra light called a shamash, Hebrew for 'guard' or 'servant', is also lit each night, and is given a distinct location, usually higher or lower than the others.

The evening began with the candle lighting ceremony where a Hanukkiya in the form of a brass six-pointed star, the traditional Hanukkiya from India, was lit.

Eight people lit the candles to the accompaniment of the prayers recited by Daniel, David Galsurkar, Lesley Jacob and members of the Indian Jewish Congregation.

Daniel explained the significance of Hanukkah and how it is celebrated in the traditional Indian Jewish way.

Gondane spoke of the parallels between the festival of Diwali and Hanukkah.



Romiel Daniel, President, Indian Jewish Congregation (IJC) of USA, left, with members of IJC, David Galsurkar, center and Lesley Jacob, right reciting prayers. (Photo: Courtesy, IJC)

"Hanukkah, from the Hebrew word 'dedication' or 'consecration', marks the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the forces of Antiochus IV, the Greek king who ruled during the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire from 175 BC until his death, and commemorates the miracle of the container of oil," Romiel Daniel, President of the Indian Jewish Congregation told *Desi Talk*.

Councilmember Sears spoke of the Indian Community in Jackson Heights and said that next year Hanukkah will be celebrated in her district with the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA.

Consul General Shariv referred to the warm relations between India and Israel saying that India's trade with Israel has grown exponentially in different fields.

Sam Daniel, a senior member of IJC gave the vote of thanks.

This was followed by Bharatnatyam performances by Vaishali Chaudhri and Israeli dances by the Parparim Dance Ensemble.

The event ended with a Kosher Indian dinner.

Talking about the history of the IJC, Daniel said that since 1995, the Indian Jewish community in the tri-state area has been having its own religious services performed in traditional Jewish-Indian fashion, as was the practice in Mumbai.

According to him, the initial purpose of establishing the IJC was purely religious. "We wanted to make sure that the Indian Jews settled in the United States continue their religious practice and services the way we did back home - the Indian Jewish way."

Then in 2005, the IJC took upon itself the task of providing help and support to the Beth El Synagogue in Panvel, near Mumbai.

"This synagogue, which was built in 1849, suffered heavy losses during the monsoons in Mumbai in 2005," Daniel explained.

With the help of the members of the IJC, the Indian Jewish community in the USA, other institutions and individuals two Sifrei Torah were sent to the synagogue.

Daniel also gave a brief history of the Jews of India.

The Jews of India consist of three distinct groups, the Cochin Jews or Cochins; the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel.

"The Cochins settled in Cranganore and in and around Malabar; the Baghdadis are Jews from West Asia, mainly from Baghdad, who came in the 19th century as traders and refugees and settled in Mumbai, Kolkata and Pune and the Bene Israelis, who predominate the Jewish presence in India," Daniel said.

Some say that the Bene Israelis came from the ancient kingdom of Israel after the Assyrian King defeated them in 722 B.C.E. Some believe that when the kingdom of Judah was destroyed and Jerusalem taken by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., some of the Jews reached the West Coast of India.

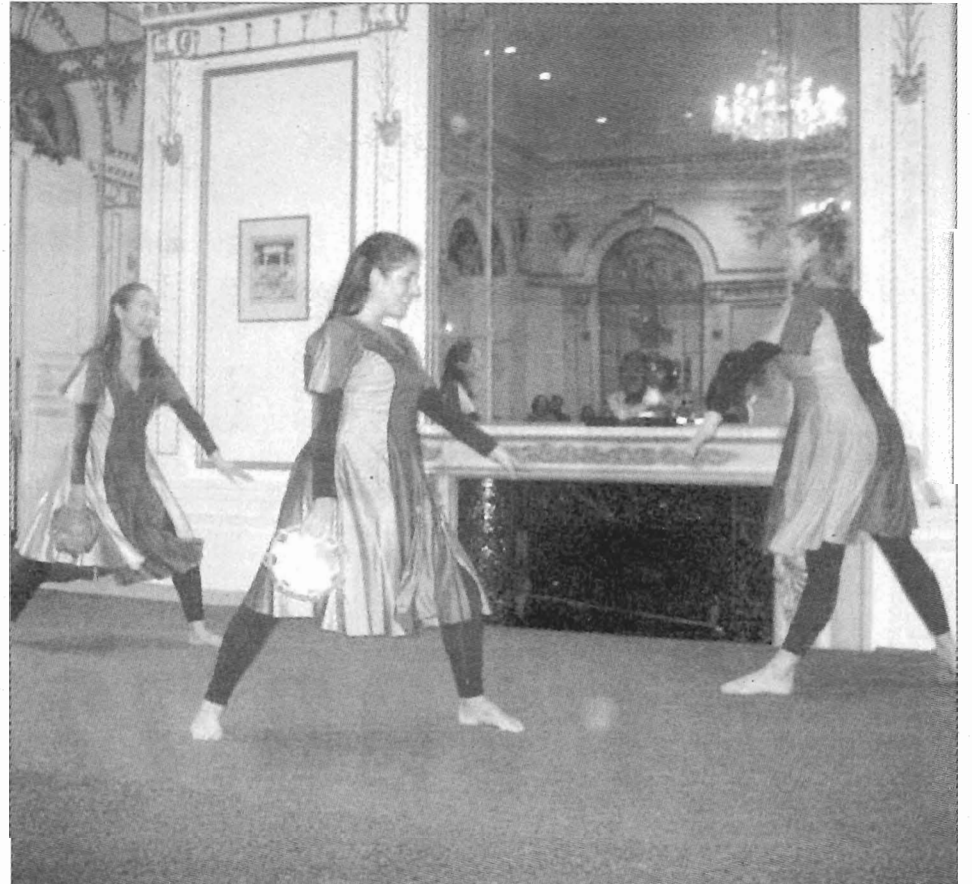
Oral tradition and probably the most favored is that descended from the Jews who fled in 175 B.C.E. from the Syrian-Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes, were shipwrecked at Navgaon near the port of Chaul on the Konkan Coast, 30 miles south of Mumbai. Seven men and seven women survived and from there the Bene Israel spread to many of the surrounding villages in the Konkan.

"Most of the Bene Israelis have last names ending with 'kar' identifying the villages where they resided," he said.

Images



Vaishali Chaudhuri, right and her student Radha Devidasi, left performing Bharatnatyam. (Photo: Courtesy, IJC)



Members of the Parparim Dance Ensemble, performing a traditional Israeli folk dance. (Photo: Courtesy, IJC)

Indian Jewish Congregation of USA celebrates Hanukkah

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

New York

CONSULATE General of India in New York celebrated Hanukkah along with the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA at the New India House recently.

Pravin Kumar, consul for political affairs, gave the welcome speech at the event, while Romiel Daniel, president of the Indian Jewish Congregation, explained the significance of Hanukkah and how it is celebrated in the traditional Indian Jewish way. He also gave a brief history of the Jews of India.

Deputy Consul General of India Dr Ajay Gondane talked about the parallels between the festival of Diwali and Hanukkah.

During the candle lighting ceremony at the event glasses containing the candles were lit using a Hanukkiya in the form of a brass six-pointed star, the



People at the festival venue

traditional Hanukkiya from India. Eight different people lit the candles to the accompaniment of prayers recited by Romiel Daniel, David Galsurkar, Lesley Jacob and members of the Indian Jewish Congregation.

The Consul General of Israel in New York, Asaf Shariv, spoke about the warm relations between India and Israel. There was also an exhibition of Indian dances performed by Vaishali Chaudhri and Israeli dances by the Parparim group, directed by Ruth Goodman. The event ended with an Indian Kosher dinner.

Hanukkah celebrated by the Consulate General of India, New York

Indian Jewish Congregation of USA joins the celebrations held on December 11th 2007 at the New India House in New York.

NEW YORK, NY - Pravin Kumar, Consul for political affairs welcomed the guests at the New India House on Dec. 11 to the Hanukkah celebrations that were being jointly held by the Consulate General of India, New York and the Indian Jewish Congregation of the USA.

Romiel Daniel, President of the Indian Jewish Congregation explained the significance of Hanukkah and gave a brief history of the Jews of India.

The Deputy Consul General of India, Dr. Ajay Gondane spoke of the parallels between the festival of Diwali and Hanukkah.

Helen Sears, Councilwoman for the 25th District spoke in glowing terms of the Indian Community in Jackson Heights and stated that next year Hanukkah will be celebrated in her district with the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA.

The candle lighting ceremony followed was a fascinating experience where glasses containing the candles were lit using a Hanukkiya in the form of a brass six pointed star, the traditional Hanukkiya from India. Eight different personalities lit the candles to the



Indian classical dance was performed during the celebrations

accompaniment of the prayers recited by Romiel Daniel, David Galsurkar, Lesley Jacob and members of the Indian Jewish Congregation.

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Sam Daniel, a senior member of the Indian Jewish Congregation gave the vote of thanks.

This was followed by some very exhilarating Indian dances performed by Vaishali Chaudhri and then exciting Israeli dances by the Parparim group directed by Ruth Goodman.

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PHOTOGRAPHS: PARESH GANDHI

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