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 more American Jews — by throwing a Hannukkah party.

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

Every immigrant community in the city of immigrants must reconcile competing desires to remain unique and assimilate. But while Russian, Bulgarian 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 Ronniel 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, we were 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 Bulgarian 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 Hannukah party's significance is that it reinforces 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 Alexandria. They were trading with India," said Moshe Sassen, a friend of Daniel's who, like Daniel, made his way to Queens from Bombay. "There was a typhoon, and one ship went down in the sea, one was swept to Cochín and one landed on the coast of Malabar."

The legends end with the birth of two communities: a larger one in and around Bombay, known as Bnei Israel, and a smaller one in the city of Cochín.

Shipwreck, or no shipwreck, the Bnei Israel and Cochín 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 Baghdadi Jews. The combined Jewish population of India numbered about 37,000 at its peak.

Today, the Jewish population in India has slumped to about 5,000. Many Bnei Israel and Cochín Jews have immigrated to Israel, and the Baghdadi Jews have relocated to British Commonwealth countries.

And then there is the community of mostly Bnei Israel Jews in the United States, which is concentrated in the New York area and numbers about 300. "My husband and myself are second cousins. My son and his wife were second cousins," said Moshe Daniel, who is married to Reem. "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 Chaplai'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 1963, Israel's chief rabbi questioned their "purity" as Jews and demanded that they be converted under Ashkenazi 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 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 reentered the temple, they found only one vat of pure oil. They lit the menorah, and the oil was last only for 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 ideas. 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.

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 during 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.
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 its Consulate General on December 11. The guests at the first Hanukkah at New India House included the Consul General of Israel in New York, Ayal Shavit; Consul for Political Affairs, Pravin Kumar; Deputy Consul General of India, Dr. Ajay Goundar; and NYC Councilmember Helen Sears.

"Hanukkah, from the Hebrew word 'dedication' or 'consecration', marks the rededication 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 Hanukkiah 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 Hanukkiah in the form of a brass six-pointed star, the traditional Hanukkiah from India, was lit.

Eight people lit the candles to the accompaniment of the prayers recited by Daniel, David Ganshur, 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.

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

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 practices 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 Pune, 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 ran silent funds which 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 Cochinus, the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel. The Cochin Jews settled in Cochin around 1560 and in around 1565 the Baghdadis and Bene Israel 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 Israel, who predominately Jewish presence in India," Daniel said.

Some say that the Bene Israel came from the ancient kingdom of Israel after the Assyrian King defied 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 feasible is that they descended from the Jews who lived in 175 B.C.E. from the Syrian-Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes, who was deposed at Nisanos near the port of Chel in 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 Israel have such names ending with 'a' identifying the villages where they resided," he said.

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

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Councillor Shavit said that the Indian Jewish community in Jackson Heights and said that the first Hanukkah will be celebrated in their district with the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA.

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

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

This was followed by Bharatnatyam performances by Vanibha Chadhuri and Israeli dances by the Parparrin Dance Ensemble. The event ended with a Seder 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-Israeli fashion, as was the practice in Mumbai.

Images

Vanibha Chadhuri, right and her student Radha Devi, left performing Bharatnatyam. (Photo: Courtesy IJC)

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

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Indian classical dance was performed during the celebrations

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.

The event ended with an Indian Kosher dinner.

Source: Voice of Asia
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