

India Educator Background

Passport to Peoplehood

Jews are a multicultural people who live around the world.

Big Ideas

1. India has one of the oldest Jewish diaspora communities. India has been a warm and hospitable place for Jews throughout time.
2. Indian Jews are not a singular community but a variety of communities that have developed over time.
3. India was on the Silk Road and was known as a source for spices.

Evidence, both in the Bible and in India itself, shows a connection between the ancient Israelites and India dating possibly as far back as the year 1,000 B.C.E. The details of these first connections are lost to history but we can be sure that when we discuss the Jews of India we are looking at one of the world's oldest communities. There are mentions of Indian Jews in the Talmud and in midrashic literature and Jews have lived peacefully in India thousands of years.

India was part of the the Silk Road, which were networks of trade routes which connected the East and West. From the 2nd century BCE to the 18th century, the Silk Road helped to generate commerce between different kingdoms, spreading ideas, culture, inventions, and unique products across much of the world. India was famous for its spices, fabrics, and ivory. It went along the northern borders of China, India, and Persia and ended up in Eastern Europe near today's Turkey and the Mediterranean Sea. It was incredibly dangerous to travel along the Silk Road because of the desert, mountains, winds, snakes, and bandits. Jewish merchants were active along the Silk Route linking the Far East with the Mediterranean twenty-two hundred years ago. Hebrew names appearing on pottery fragments attest to the presence of Jews living along the Silk Road.

When we speak of the Jews of India we are speaking of multiple historic communities. Each community has its own origin story, unique customs and characteristics. Through most of history, the groups were distinct from one another. Our focus will be on the three largest groups: the Bene Israel, the Cochini Jews and the Baghdadi Jews.

The Bene Israel

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The Bene Israel are the oldest and largest group of Indian Jews. From ancient biblical and rabbinic sources, including the midrash and Talmud, we know that Jews traded with India—precious metals, spices, and other natural resources. The story is told about a group who set out from Israel and made their way to the coast of India. One night, the boat in which they were travelling was shipwrecked on some rocks. Seven men and seven women held onto the same rocks that had brought about their peril. Throughout the night they prayed to Elijah the prophet to save them. Miraculously, they survived the night. In the morning, the locals came to their rescue. They brought the stranded strangers into their village, fed them, and offered them shelter. These ancient Jews were welcomed in India and made it their home. The place where they settled was the Konkan coast, on the western shore of the modern state of Maharashtra. Over time, communities of Jews could be found throughout the region.

The timing of their arrival in India is a matter of discussion. Some trace their roots back to the time of King Solomon. Others say they were refugees from ancient Israel after the defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Others say it was the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem in 586 BCE, while still others say that those first refugees were fleeing Antiochus Epiphanes the Syrian-Greek in 175 BCE. No matter the version, the timeline begins in ancient times.

These early origins explain some of the unique religious observances of this community. In the earliest times the Bene Israel community came to be known as Shanwar Telis or Saturday Oilmen because they were known for their work as pressers of oil as well as their tradition, different than others in their community, of refraining from pressing or selling oil on Shabbat. Because the community was founded before rabbinic Judaism—before the Maccabees and the celebration of Hanukkah and before the Book of Esther and Purim—these holidays were not celebrated. On Yom Kippur, which is also known in the community as the Festival of the Closing of the Doors, it is their practice to arrive for prayers before the sun rises and stay all day.

The community has a strong and unique connection to Elijah the prophet, who they call Eliyahoo Hannabi, and there are special prayers in his praise. Some say it is because the original Bene Israel prayed to Eliyahoo Hannabi after their ship was wrecked. Or it may be because he visited India in his chariot, ascending to heaven from a village called Khandallah on the Konkan coast. To this day Jews and others go on a pilgrimage to the spot where it is said indentations in a rock were made by Eliyahoo's horses.

The isolation of the Bene Israel from the rest of global Jewry ended when a Jewish trader and diplomat from Cochin named David Ezekiel Rahabi II (1694-1771) encountered the Bene Israel

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during his travels. Though their customs were different from his own, he recognized them as fellow Jews and reintroduced them to Hebrew and to the observances of Hanukkah and Purim.

With time the Bene Israel moved from rural towns to cities, especially Mumbai, where there were better economic opportunities and other Jews. In the 1830s it is estimated that there were 6,000 Bene Israel in India, a number that grew to approximately 10,000 by 1900 and 20,000 by 1948. After the founding of the modern State of Israel, many Bene Israel emigrated to Israel; today, less than 5,000 remain in India. When the Bene Israel first arrived in Israel, they were not accepted as fully Jewish by the government or the rabbinate, who control matters of personal and religious status. Beginning in 1962, the Bene Israel staged protests demanding full acceptance of their Jewish status. In part due to these protests, the rabbinate recognized the Bene Israel as Jewish in 1964.

The Cochin Jews

The smallest group of Jews found in India are the Cochin Jews. This ancient Jewish community settled on the Malabar coast in southwest India and just north of the city of Cochin in Kerala.

The details of their origins are obscured by time. It is thought that the Cochin Jews came in small groups over time, rather than all at once, which may account for the variety of origin stories.

As with the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews are said to have first arrived in King Solomon's time, during the Babylonian exile, or after the destruction of the Second Temple. Alternately, they may have migrated from Majorca or Yemen, arriving in India as late as the 4th century CE in Cranganore, a trade hub north of Cochin.

In the 1500s, following attacks by foreigners, first Moors and, later, Christian Portuguese, this community migrated to the safety of the city of Cochin. There, they lived in ongoing peace with their Hindu, Muslim and later Christian neighbors. After the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, some Sephardi Jews found refuge in Cochin and expanded trade networks with other Sephardi Jews who had dispersed throughout the world.

The Cochin Jews followed several unique Jewish traditions. They have a strong culture of religious singing in Malayalam, the vernacular language of Kerala, as well as in Hebrew. While both men and women sang, women often took the lead, not only in all women's gatherings like celebrations for brides, but in mixed settings including life cycle and communal celebrations. Through the generations, these songs were recorded by women in writing, proof of strong

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support for women's education and literacy in Kerala. Cochin wedding ceremonies are similar to Jewish weddings around the world, but it is common for the groom to hold the kiddush cup and make many of the blessings and for a young boy to read the ketubah. An example of a Cochin synagogue can be found today inside the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

This small Jewish community never numbered more than approximately 2,500. After the founding of the modern State of Israel, many made their way to Israel and settled in agricultural moshavim. Today only a handful of elderly Cochin Jews still live in India.

Baghdadi Jews

The Baghdadi Jews only arrived in India in the late 18th century. As their name implies, some of them came from Baghdad, but, in truth, this name came to represent Middle Eastern Jews who emigrated from Syria, Persia (now Iran), Afghanistan, and Yemen as well as Iraq. They originally came to Surat as traders; as trade moved to Calcutta and Bombay (today Mumbai), the community moved with it.

Building on the network of Sephardi Jews throughout Asia and the Middle East, the Baghdadi Jews of India grew into a wealthy community. They were strongly connected with the British ruling class, while maintaining a unique Sephardi identity particularly with regards to prayer and ritual. The Sassoons were most prominent of the trading families, building an economic empire that dealt in everything from opium (until it was outlawed) to fabric. Known for their philanthropy in the Jewish community and beyond, the Sassoons built schools, bridges, synagogues, and wharves and supported many charitable causes. Members of the family reached the greatest heights of British society and were even knighted.

After World War Two, soon after which India gained independence, many of the Baghdadi Jews of India chose to emigrate. Unlike Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, although some did go to Israel, most headed to a variety of other countries, primarily England, as well as United States, Australia and Canada. During their heyday, it is estimated that there were between 6,000-10,000 Baghdadi Jews in India.

Bnei Menashe

The Bnei Menashe live in the northeastern Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram, which border Burma and Bangladesh. According to oral tradition, the tribe traveled through Persia, Afghanistan, Tibet, China and on to India, where it eventually settled in northeastern India. In the late 20th century, Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail named them the Bnei Menashe, based on their account of descent from the lost tribe of Menasseh, one of the [Ten Lost Tribes](#) exiled from the

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Land of Israel more than 2,700 years ago by the Assyrian empire. After making contact with Israelis, they began to study normative Judaism and established several synagogues. So far, some 3,000 Bnei Menashe have made aliyah to Israel, Some 7,000 Bnei Menashe remain in India. They were required to formally convert to be accepted as Jews, because their history was not documented.

Indian Jews Today

The historic distinctions among the Jewish communities in India have faded with time and mass migration. The majority of the between 6,000-10,000 Jews that live in India today are of Bene Israel origin. In some ways these Jews are culturally similar, to Indians of other religions. They are similar to other Indians in the way they dress, eat, and look. However, they have also maintained many of their own customs, like henna ceremonies before marriage. As well, Indian Jews continue to offer special prayers to Eliyahu Hannabi, such as [the Malida](#), and make pilgrimages to see the hoofprints of his horses.

On November 26, 2008, 10 members of an extremist terrorist group from Pakistan perpetrated a series of six terrorist attacks on Mumbai. Among the targets was the Chabad house in Mumbai. Six hostages, including the rabbi and his wife, were among those killed. The attack was truly shocking to the Jewish community, which had never experienced any previous violence from their fellow Indians.

The historic [Keneseth Eliyahu Synagogue in Mumbai](#), built by the Sassoon family in 1884 for the Baghdadi Jewish community, has recently been restored, and is a showcase for the entire Jewish community. This grand blue sanctuary is recognized by UNESCO for its historic and architectural value.

In Israel

Today, the largest community of Indian Jews resides in Israel, primarily in the south of the country in Dimona and Be'er Sheva. Having gained recognition from the rabbinate in 1964, most recently Indian Israelis lobbied to have the unique Malida ceremony, used for many auspicious occasions, included in Israel's national school curriculum in connection to the celebration of Tu B'shvat. This achievement marks a milestone in the recognition of the value of the unique heritage and customs of Indian Jews.

In the rest of the world

PTThere are pockets of Indian Jews live throughout the world today., with small concentrations in England and the United States. Historically, Indian Jews did not train their own rabbis,

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instead relying on leaders and rabbis from other places; today several Indian Jews in the United States have become rabbis. Nonetheless, there is no Indian Jewish congregation. Additionally, there are individual Indians who are now part of Jewish families or have converted to Judaism creating a new chapter in the understanding of Indian Jews.