

Israel

Basic Facts

Population of the country:	6.3 million (as of October 2000)
Approximate number of the Indian community:	
(a) Persons of Indian Origin:	45,000
(b) Indian Citizens (NRIs):	300
(c) Stateless persons, if any:	Figures not available, but we have not come across any such cases

Profile

According to available data, between 25,000 and 30,000 Indian Jews have migrated to Israel starting from the late 40s, with the major waves going there in the 50s and 60s. The migrants from India belong essentially to three groups: the Bene-Israel of Maharashtra (20,000 plus); the Cochin Jews (3,500); and the so called Baghdadi Jews. Of these, the first two groups had lived in India for thousands of years and were thoroughly Indian in their language (Marathi and Malayalam, respectively), food habits and other cultural traits. The Baghdadis had a shorter sojourn in India starting from the 19th century onwards; they retained many elements of Iraqi Jewish culture but technically many of them could also claim Indian origin in terms of the definition in Article 5 of the Citizenship Act. In the last few years a fourth group has emerged – the Bnei Menashe of Mizoram who were accepted as a ‘lost tribe’ of Israel. A small number have settled in Israel. The available information about this group is scanty.

- 9.2. The Jews have never faced discrimination in India. Some of them went to Israel because of their religious affiliation and hopes for a better economic life. Initially, they found a country established by Ashkenazi (European) Jews. It was run by the latter on their terms, and many of the migrants from India had a difficult time adjusting and assimilating. Lacking adequate economic and social support systems, the Israelis from India had to struggle in the small “development towns” and agricultural settlements to establish themselves in Israel. The community today has a good

reputation for being law abiding and modest. They belong, by and large, to the middle class. A large proportion of the Bene-Israel lives in small towns and works as employees in firms and government agencies. A few have become business executives, while some own small businesses. Many of the Cochins took to agriculture (in contrast to their professions while in India) and have succeeded. One migrant from Cochin ranks amongst the largest exporters of roses from Israel.

- 9.3. Since the younger generation born in Israel are mainly conversant with Hebrew (all immigrants have to study the language) and are being absorbed in the Israeli Jewish melting pot, the community is losing the “Indianness” which the first generation had taken with it. Knowledge of Marathi and Malayalam, for example, is diminishing among the Jews born and raised in Israel. There is, however, considerable interest among them in maintaining cultural links with India. Israelis of Indian origin have participated in gatherings of Marathi speakers from all over the world, and a session of the World Marathi Conference was held in Israel some years ago. The most evident cultural link today, however, comes through the pop culture, particularly Hindi films and the dance forms associated with the film world. This is popular with many young people in the Indian Jewish communities, irrespective of whether or not they understand the language fully.
- 9.4. As they are of modest means with little political “activism,” Israelis of Indian origin have had limited economic involvement with India, or any political status in the country of their adoption. There are a number of “Indian Jewish” and “Bene-Israel” associations in small towns, along with a loosely structured umbrella organisation, the Central Council for Indian Jews in Israel. But the community does not have a high degree of political mobilization at the national level and consequently little bargaining power in the intensively competitive Israeli political system. There is only one person of Indian origin in the Knesset –Eli Ben Menachem – a Labour (One Israel) MK who was born in Mumbai in a Baghdadi family. A few PIOs have been successful in local politics, in town councils in cities like Lod and Ramle where there are concentrations of PIOs. A Cochini is presently the Council President of a small town (Yesod Hamala) in northern Israel. In recent years, a group of young Indian Jews started a movement (Hodaya) to mobilize the community for political action. They had marginal impact in the 1999 elections, but are seeking to continue their organisational activity.
- 9.5. The basic problem of the Israelis of Indian origin is socio-economic advancement. Given the fact that the Israeli economy has developed very rapidly in the last two decades, the community does have reasonable prospects for development, particularly if it emphasizes higher education more than in the past. The Indians in Israel are broadly classed as “Sephardic” Jews and have a few Rabbis among them. In religious terms, they are quite well integrated among the “Sephardim” of Israel.

Non Resident Indians

- 9.6. The small community of Indian citizens in Israel is mostly of Gujaratis engaged in the diamond business. There are about 20 families (most of whom can trace their origin to Palanpur) and some of their employees are resident in Israel with employment permits. They play an important part in the diamond trade, which constitutes about half of overall Indo-Israeli trade. The Gujarati community is socially active and, by and large, well respected in Israel. It has set up an informal association called the Gujarati Indian Association that celebrates major cultural festivals.
- 9.7. There is also a small and fluctuating population of students and scholars, numbering about 50 to 60 and a few Indian workers engaged in construction, the hospitality industry and domestic work. Their numbers are hard to verify but they have been estimated to be a few hundred only.

Cultural and Other Associations:

- 9.8. The following associations have been formed by the PIOs in Israel:
- (i) The Indo-Israel Cultural Association: This association organizes a variety of cultural events in Israel including lectures on India and artistic performances.
 - (ii) The Central Organisation of Indian Jews is the main association of Jews of Indian origin in Israel. It conducts meetings of all Indian Jews once in a year and organizes cultural events, especially popular Hindi and Marathi song and dance programmes. The Central Organisation of Indian Jews also publishes a quarterly journal.
 - (iii) The Centre of Jewish Heritage is broadly the main organisation of the Cochin Jews in Israel. It administers the Museum on Jewish Heritage in India. This is located at Moshav Nevatim in Israel.
 - (iv) The Gujarati Indian Association has been referred to in para 9.6 above.

Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora

- 9.9. The older generation of the Israeli community of Indian origin has notions about India that are based on nostalgia for the past. Members of the second generation have high expectations from India, derived from what it has heard from the older generation. They expect things in India to conform to standards in Europe and Israel, and get a culture shock when they visit India and find that this is not so.

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