

Growing Up Jewish in India

The photographs that appear in this article are part of a larger series taken by photographer Richard Lord. In recent articles examining the contemporary Bene Israel community in India, words such as diminishing, fading and vanishing are often evoked. Perhaps the photos in this part of the collection suggest something different. These photos capture the faces of the future for the Bene Israel. They carry 2000 years of history in a country virtually void of anti-Semitism. Their stories can't be summarized by a single word or label. It is still up to them to write their narratives.

I am an Indian Jew

It is a startling reaction that I often face whenever I meet someone outside India who is confused or even doubtful of the existence of Indian Jewry. "There are Jews in India?" they ask. For many people, we're a hard fact to digest simply because we do not look different from other Indians and seem outwardly to be completely assimilated. Although we have adopted the culture of our nation, our religious beliefs as Jews have remained unaffected.

The Jews of India have a long history here which many people don't know. We are made up of different communities: the largest one is the Bene Israel from Maharashtra (which I'm a part of). For over 2,000 years our community has lived in harmony with the local Indian population, especially since Hindus (the majority religious population in India) are a tolerant bunch. Their polytheistic beliefs have ensured that they warmly accept that our God is different.

In that spirit, as a Jew in India I've never felt an identity crisis. I can be Indian and Jewish at the same time. In school and college the fact that I've had friends from different religious backgrounds, together with our diverse faiths, has never been a matter of apprehension. I feel free and safe to practice my



religion. It is a well known fact that Jews have faced very little or almost no anti-Semitism in India.

And though they say there is strength in numbers, it's important to note that we are just a few thousand Jews in a population of over a billion people. The Bene Israel community, for instance, is mostly spread over the large city of Mumbai whose population alone is around 13 million. And although that makes getting

together quite hard, our Jewish Community Center helps facilitate our sense of community.

Located in the center of the Mumbai --and accessible from all parts of the city -- the JCC is where I attended camp and Gan Katan (a Jewish Sunday school) as a child. It is also where I now actively participate in the youth group called the Jewish Youth Pioneers (JYP). Being associated with the JCC and JYP is a big part of my Jewish identity.

India is a magnificent country, and has much to offer to its people, including its Jewish citizens. I have the best of both worlds. As an Indian and a Jew, I know I am right at home here!

Meirah Bhastekar, 20 years old, is a resident of Mumbai and an active Jewish community member. ✡



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CoverStory A Photo Essay



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For more information about JDC's programs in India, contact Antony Korenstein at AntonyK@jdc.org.il.