between shows and a day job in the tech world, AJL caught up with comedian Samson Koletkar for an interview and a few laughs. Koletkar, a Bene Israel, was born and raised in Mumbai, though he now calls San Francisco home. AJL definitely considers him one of the best Bene Israel, standup comedians currently living in the San Francisco area.

He is the producer of Comedy Off Broadway Oakland and also launched the Mahatma Moses Comedy Tour. Did you hear the one about an Indian, a Jew and an Indian Jew who walk onto stage? He promises that some of this interview will make its way into his act.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Is there anything too serious to joke about?

Samson Koletkar (SK): Nope. Although...timing is everything, not just in a joke, but also of a joke.

AJL: So, what does your Jewish mother think about her son as a comedian? Wasn’t she hoping for a doctor or lawyer?

SK: My mother is not the stereotypical Jewish mother as perceived by the west. She did want me to be educated and well-off, which I am in my software field. She also likes the comedian in me, because she likes to see me on stage making people laugh. At the end of it all, I think she is assured enough to know that I won’t make horribly bad career decisions.

SK: What every comic chooses to talk about is entirely up to them. It’s all about what matters to you. I talk a lot about my Indian and my Jewish background, because that is my past, and I am secure enough to laugh at its absurdities. It also matters where you are in your career. When you are starting out you are trying to establish your identity, people don’t know you and you need to let them know who you are before you can tell them what you think about them. So it necessitates some background stuff in your routine. Once you have established yourself you don’t need to reiterate who you are, people know it, now they want to know what you think, feel, like, dislike!

AJL: How do you think you are perceived in the US as an Indian? What stereotypes have you encountered as an Asian comedian?

SK: Easterners are generally seen as introverts. I can see why that perception may have developed in the west.

AJL: You touched on the tendency of some American comics to rely on vulgarity in their routines, how do you stay original and true to yourself in a competitive industry?

SK: In my early days I used to talk about things that I had heard other comedians/people talk about i.e. “regurgitating stereotypes”. But over time I started to find my own voice, I started talking about things that bother me, things I see wrong in the world. Every time I write a joke I ask myself - Is this funny to me? Has this been done before? Is it true? I also had to cultivate the habit of curbing the urge to use profanity.

I work with a lot of comedians and see a lot jokes and subconsciously am aware of what works and what I can reinstate to make people laugh, but I choose to differ and I like to make people think a little. I want my audience to put some effort into getting my jokes. I don’t like to serve it to
AJL: What is the reaction of the Indian (Bene Israel) community to your routine?

SK: Fantabulous! I performed at the Jewish Community Center in Mumbai in Oct 2009 and it was one of my best shows ever.

AJL: Mumbai Jewish Community Center aside, who are you finding you most appeal to?

SK: People that are thinkers, folks that prefer caffeine over alcohol. I have always gotten a lot of love from the immigrant population...be it Asians, Middle Easterners, Europeans, or South Americans. I also remember my first gig in Utah, where I did so well on the 8pm show that I was given extra time on the 10pm show. Somehow I haven’t figured out Virginians, although just to the east in Washington DC I thrived.

AJL: What has the American Jewish community’s reaction been to you? Are you at home there?

SK: The few Jewish gigs that I have done so far have been great. I am not the stereotypical Jewish comedian so my stories are totally different than most Jewish comics. Right now, a lot of Jewish folks are in the Mahatma Moses Comedy Tour audiences. I would love to do some shows exclusively for the American Jewish communities.

AJL: Could you go back home again?

SK: I was raised very Jewish. I attended the only Jewish school in Mumbai, learned Hebrew as third language in school, was trained by the Chazzan and could conduct every Jewish prayer. Later, as I became less and less religious, I was still involved actively in the Jewish community through the Jewish Youth Group for 5 years. I was even president of the group for 2 years. During my tenure we organized social/cultural/educational/sporting events, organized festival celebrations for the community, started a monthly newsletter, provided a minyan for burials, conducted Shabbat services at the old age home and more. I was also sponsored to attend a community leadership program in Israel, and I started one of my own for the youth after I came back to Mumbai.

AJL: In your routine, you talk about having to validate your Judaism to other Jews in the face of comments like: Are you really a Jew? Were you born a Jew? Joking aside, does this bother you?

SK: Initially I thought it was all fun and jokes, because we (Indian Jews) are such a small community, no one knows about us; even most Indians themselves didn’t know that there were Jews living in India. But as I started talking more and more about it with people here I noticed that not all questions were out of astonishment and curiosity, some were out of disbelief, and some out of sheer disdain. One day I saw this video about an Indian Jewish kid wanting to emigrate to Israel. She visited an Indian Jewish official who told her that because she (or her mother, I don’t remember exactly) had converted to Judaism in India, Israel does not recognize it. The girl seemed so perplexed and helpless. That really bothered me.

AJL: Future career plans? Still software tech by day & comic by night?

SK: I hope to switch to comedy full time, but until that happens software ain’t too bad by the day. Right now I have Comedy Off Broadway Oakland, a show I produce and host Thursdays/Fridays/Saturdays. The Mahatma Moses Comedy Tour, which I headline, has picked up well. We have done 10 shows so far with 6 more lined up for 2010. Besides these I am getting some exciting gigs across USA, am working on an hour-long-one-man-show, and I plan to do another round of shows in India around April 2011.