

Feature



Photo credit: Mohita Bhatnagar

All Joking Aside

The serious side of India's Seinfeld

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.

AJL: Wow, your accent? Do you think that this is part of what people in the US find to be funny? Does that insult you in any way?

SK: Sometimes I do think the accent is a barrier, but I have found smart audiences who appreciate what I say and not how I say it. Sometimes I will say simple things like, "If you are wondering when will I start speaking normally....I am!" Then the show just moves along.

AJL: *Mahatma Moses Comedy Tour* - how did it come about?

SK: When I started doing standup in USA I did not know the nuts and bolts of the business. After doing standup for a few years and seeing myself stuck in a rut unable to break into the mainstream I had two choices - quit OR stand up for myself. I decided to launch the *Mahatma Moses Comedy Tour* on my own.

AJL: You appeared in the recent *Panel Discussion on Asians* in Standup. Many interesting ideas surfaced. One participant said she refuses to make her ethnicity part of the shtick- your response?

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 of 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



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them on a platter. It's like this, I like to eat what my wife cooks for me but it tastes so much better if we cook together. I like to tickle the brain not the bum, and even if it doesn't bring me a lot of popularity, it does bring me a lot of satisfaction!

AJL: What is the reaction of the Indian (Bene Israel) community to your routine?

SK: Fantabulouastic!! 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: Yes! I have been seriously contemplating moving back to India for 2 reasons - One, standup is just establishing itself and I can see it exploding in India. Two, and more

importantly, my jokes are driven by common sense issues, which India has in abundance and I want to trigger a few minds to think in the right direction. The boundaries in America and other Western countries are already pushed far. I want to push those boundaries in India. My wife thinks if I move back to India I will certainly get into trouble with the powerful (or what I like to call power-hungry) folks in society. Lenny Bruce & George Carlin went to jail for the art and she thinks I will too.

AJL: So Indian Seinfeld? If you could have chosen your own reference what would you have picked?

SK: When I told Indian folks that I do standup they'd mention "Oh...like Seinfeld", and it seemed like that was the only comedian that Indians knew... through TV, because most had never seen any standup live. And somewhere along the way, a few of my comedian friends used to say that I could be like the Seinfeld of India...perhaps due to my Jewish background, perhaps my early day persona. But I have been highly influenced by George Carlin. I would rather be the Indian Carlin, although less cynical. My other favorite is Eddie Izzard from UK. Besides those two popular names there are a lot of local San Francisco comics that I really like.

AJL: Your Jewish background? Your Jewish education?

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. 🌟