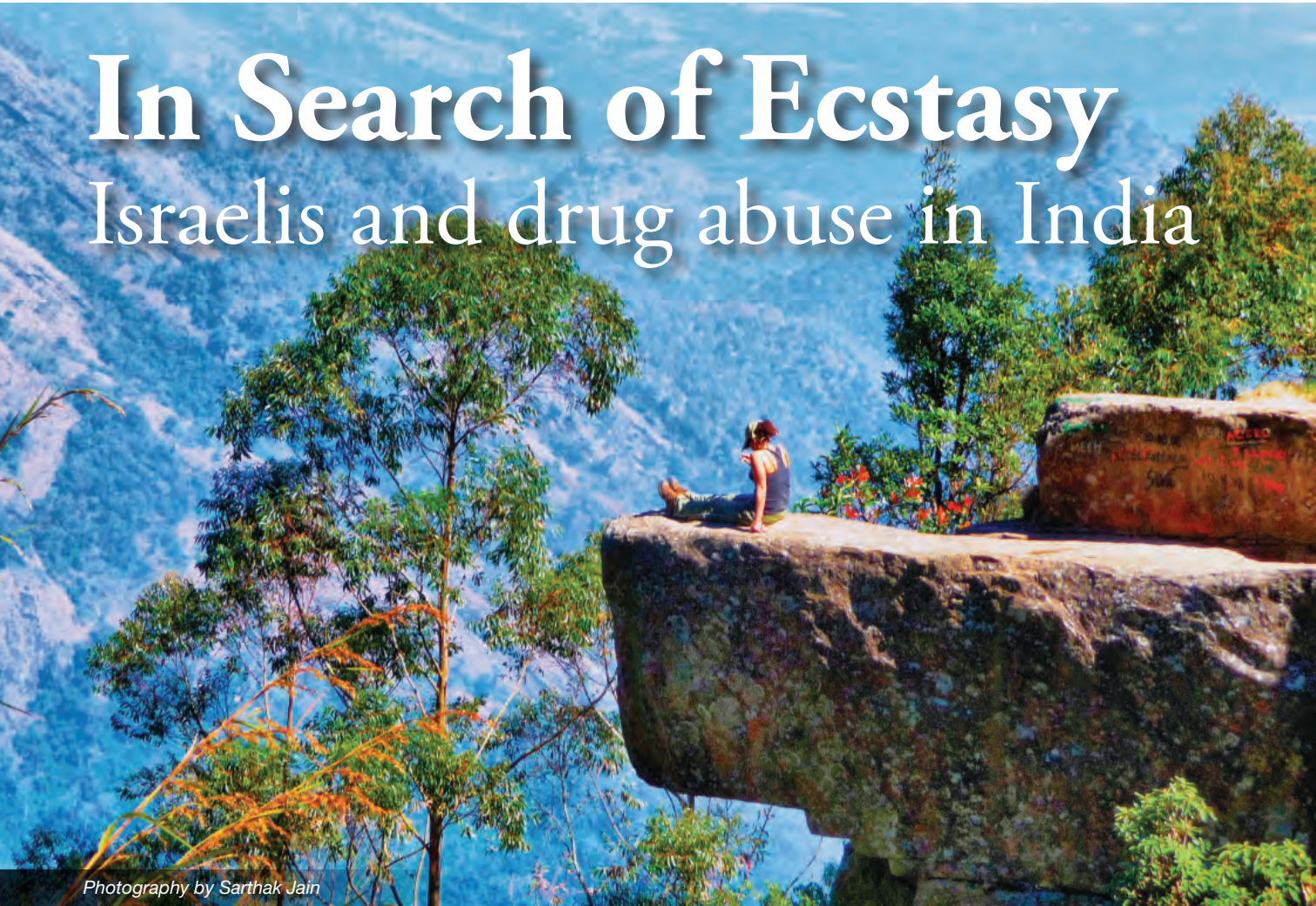


# In Search of Ecstasy

## Israelis and drug abuse in India



Photography by Sarthak Jain

Suspended on the edge of a 1,000 foot cliff, with the vibrant glow of the dawning sun, two Israeli backpackers light up a joint of marijuana and soak in the serenity of another Indian morning mentally aloft in a dazed high. They are just two of the thousands of Israelis that flock to Kodaikanal, a mountainous sanctuary in Tamil Nadu known as the Queen of the Hills, to get a taste of India and the ‘high’ life. Unfortunately for many of the Israelis, their adventures become more about the drugs and less about the vast cultural experience available to them in India.

“A significant majority of the Israelis that visit Kodaikanal are using drugs, and those who are using will often use 3 or 4 times a day,” says Dr. Charles, a local psychologist associated with the Asian Jewish Education Foundation International (AJEFI), an organization working to combat the substance abuse amongst Israelis.

Every region of India boasts its own variety of drugs for tourists to experience: Goa with its hard drugs like ecstasy and cocaine, Manali with its Malana Cream Hashish, and Kodaikanal promoting hallucinogenic mushrooms and other famed assortments of marijuana. “For

Israeli backpackers – most of whom have recently completed their three year mandatory service in the Israeli Army – this medley of drugs is highly enticing,” says Dr. Saraswati, another psychologist working with AJEFI.

In India drugs are cheap, highly accessible, and the Indian Government rarely prosecutes drug use amongst the tourist crowd to avoid diplomatic tension. This spells TROUBLE for the Israelis touring through India’s unregulated drug culture. “PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) is not an unknown condition among Israeli backpackers. They suffer from the traumas of violence and military



discipline just like any other man or woman in the services. Drugs provide an easy escape from stress and anxiety, but it is not a healthy one,” explains Saraswati.

Around one third of Israel’s young adult population use their wages collected from military service to travel internationally. For many, these adventures abroad provide a rite of passage from the military life into adulthood. “After my service I felt burdened by stress,” says one Israeli backpacker who has now settled in India, “I just need to get out of the country for a while. Living in Israel is not as easy as everyone thinks.”

India provides attractive incentives for the Israeli backpacker: cheap living, easy traveling, interesting cultural sites, and established Israeli communities. But perhaps above all “drugs are practically free in comparison to the rates of western societies,” Charles elucidates.

This enticing tourist paradise with what the Indian Times refers to as “an uninterrupted treat of drugs, rock ‘n roll and nirvana” has put a significant mark on the towns and villages where large concentrations of Israelis have settled during their travels in India. From November until Passover, Israelis

flood cities like Manali and Kodaikanal by the thousands. As a result, entire communities have been re-arranged to attract Israeli business.

“Three hundred rupees a night per room is my average rate for Israelis,” says Samuel of the Vadakanal village in Kodaikanal. “If I put 3 Israelis in one room (3 floor mats for sleeping, Indian toilet, and water from Mercury infected wells), that’s 900 Rupees a day. I have 4 rooms which earns me a total of around 3 Lacks (300,000 Rupees) a month.”

Compared to local hotel rates, these fees are quite outrageous. Even some

of the most luxurious hotels will only charge 1,200 Rupees per night, which includes all amenities. But the Israeli travelers stick to the grooves of a specific path that other Israelis blazed before them. “The Israelis come to Vadakanal because they hear about it from other Israelis while they are traveling in India,” describes one of the members of the Kodaikanal Chabad House working to enrich the lives of the Israelis traveling through Kodaikanal. “They will meet in Goa or Dharmasala, sharing their stories with one another and highlighting the best places to visit.”

Such isolated interest in specific areas has caused local markets to skyrocket, especially in the drug industries that thrive off of the Israeli tourists. “Hashish, magic mushrooms,” murmurs one drug dealer wandering from shoulder to shoulder of Israelis scattered through the central streets of Kodaikanal. An interested buyer follows him into a secluded corner of town where a dealer withdraws a variety of drugs from which the Israeli nonchalantly makes his purchase.

This economically dependent tourist industry has significantly transformed the local politics and community. Drug dealers bribe government officials to sell their products without restriction, forest services provide land for growing marijuana, and locals who were once farmers become drug dealers because of the attractive incentives and easy money.

From the perspective of organizations like AJEFL, this lifestyle has cultivated a vicious cycle that is causing decay within both the local and Israeli communities; Israelis want drugs, locals want money, and government officials want power. Together they feed off of one another, making drugs more readily available and corrupt government officials wealthier.

“These young veterans are searching for emotional and psychological support,” describes Dr. Murali, professor of sociology and an advocate of AJEFL. “A support system has been established. Unfortunately it is built upon a lifestyle that is neither sustainable nor healthy.”

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Loose restrictions have caused the Israeli backpacker culture in India to revolve around the youth ideals of drugs, sexy, and relaxation. Only a few organizations are scattered throughout India that support the growing number of Israeli travelers, most of which are religiously affiliated to the Chabad Lubavich community. “You cannot expect a youth population that has just finished military service to know what is going to benefit them in the long term. They come to India to find relief and if there are no substantial options available, they will make their own,” explains Murali.

In truth, the Israeli backpacker community in India has been socially neglected. Many have pushed aside the reality that a large percentage of these young adults are not merely traveling for the sake of traveling but rather to find some balance in their lives. Some of the travelers have even seen death and violence, which undoubtedly affects their quality of life, and by traveling to India they are trying to relieve these heavy burdens that weigh down their thoughts and emotions. But self-healing is most often an ineffective way to treat

psychological complexes, especially when people end up in an environment that is surrounded with drugs.

“The most common drugs used amongst the Israelis are classified as stimulants, depressants, and hallucinogens,” says Dr. Charles. “The stimulants are used because they can relieve states of depression. Depressants are popular because they nullify painful emotions and stresses. Hallucinogens are attractive because they give a sense of elevated awareness, the substance based ‘nirvana’ which people find experientially interesting.”

Addressing this issue of drug use and social neglect is no small task. Although AJEFL, and organizations like it, are providing alternative environments with free lodging, cultural events, and drug rehabilitation facilities, their resources can hardly encompass the growing number of Israelis whose population can expand to over 3,000 people in a small village like Vadaikanal during the tourist months.

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Because of the substantial number of Israelis involved, reformation requires the support of large administrative organizations like the Israeli Government and other communities who support the Israeli population. Drug use in India is not simply an isolated incident but an encompassing situation that involves a commanding portion of the Israeli youth population.



Actions must be taken which address two important issues: first, steps must be taken to manage the psychological distresses that affect many of the post-service youth who have resorted to drugs as a means to 'erase' negative feelings and memories. Second, intuitive programs must be designed that encourage Israelis to explore, on a more holistic level, the diverse aspects of Indian culture that will be sustainable both for the Israeli and the Indian community.

"By working with Israeli backpackers, we are addressing the youth of Israel, the future of this historically and religiously monumental nation-state," says Dr. Saravanan, Associate Director of The Israel-India Association who

is also a professor of Judaic Studies. "They will determine the outcome of the Zionist movement and the continuation of a significant point in Judaic history in which Judaism exists both as a Diaspora and nationhood. Their success is the success of a dream and vision for a permanent Jewish homeland."

Culturally receptive mentoring would provide a more vibrant preservation of the ethnic traditions within the regions in which large populations of Israelis are settled; the Israelis would benefit by receiving a taste of ancient India while the Indian culture is encouraged to promote its cultural dynamism. But at its current pace, such a bright future does not seem to be the moving trend. ✧

### About the author

Dr. Adam Cohen is president of Asian Jewish Education Foundation International, an organization with the central focus of Jewish Education and the Support of Israelis in India. Programs offered cover a diverse range of goals including developing Judaic Studies, providing free accommodations to Jews and Israelis, offering drug rehabilitation for Israeli backpackers, and organizing community service projects that bridge sustainable relationships between Judaism and India. The AJEFI staff includes university level professors, clinical psychologists, and members of the local Jewish Community. More information can be found at [www.ajefi](http://www.ajefi).