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Finding things in common Indian-American Leaders Seminar latest effort to tie Jews, Indians

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Special to the WJW

Together, Indians from Southeast Asia and Jews make up one-fifth of the world's population. That's the running joke oft told when discussing the increasingly warm bonds both political and personal between Indian Americans and Jews.

It was heard again last Thursday at Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen's District residence during the fourth annual Chanukah party sponsored by the Embassy of India for more than 200 invited guests, including members of the Indian American community and Jewish Americans, who have a stake in the growing relationship with Indians.

Among those attending were representatives from such prominent Jewish organizations as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith International and American University Hillel, which next month is coordinating a first: a Jewish student trip to India.

Another recent trip, the Indian-American Leaders Seminar, sponsored by the AJCommittee's Project Interchange with funding from the Feldman Family Foundation of San Francisco, brought a dozen Indian American leaders from around the United States on a whirlwind visit to Israel.

There, participants, including five from the D.C. area, representing the Sikh community, the Indian-American Council of the Democratic National Committee and this nation's largest Indian organization, the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, met with representatives of the Israeli government, journalists, academics and community and religious leaders of all backgrounds.

Project Interchange, founded in 1982, has to date brought more than 4,000 American and 300 Europeans leaders from all walks of life and all ethnic and religious origins to Israel.

"Our goal is to present a balanced introduction to Israel through sightseeing as well as meeting with a cross section of Israeli society, Jews as well as Arabs and Palestinians," explained Laurie Wexler, Project Interchange's executive director. "We have a very comprehensive and intensive week on the ground to inform them and offer them a broader perspective and understanding so when they come back to their

home communities they are able to speak [about Israel] from a better understanding."

"The Indian American community is one of the most economically successful ethnic communities in the country," noted AJCommittee Washington area director David Bernstein, who has observed many contacts in the business world between Indian Americans and Jews.

"We're looking to connect the domestic American Jewish community and the Indian American community with the emerging partnership between Israel and India," Bernstein added, "to make the Indian American community stakeholders in that partnership."

For Jews, tiny in number, it's clear that cementing bonds between Israelis and Indian Americans is politically beneficial, but what's in it for Indian Americans, who make up the majority of that one-fifth number?

Mandakini Sud, a participant in the recent weeklong seminar in Israel, explained: "We have a lot to learn from the Jewish community."

Sud, a District resident born in Punjab, observed the political and organizational strength of the American Jewish community and sees ways to similarly leverage her own community's political power.

Vic Chauhan of Herndon agreed. One of the co-founders of the U.S.-India Political Action Committee, Chauhan noted that both Indian Americans and Jewish Americans are minority groups in the United States that should work together.

"We have a lot of similar ties here, and AJCcommittee and USINPAC have gotten close on projects on Capitol Hill – Indian Americans and Jews are also education minded, also family and culturally oriented, that's why we've gotten along together. We have to work together on common issues."

Chauhan, a director at BearingPoint with expertise in information technology, was most impressed at the meeting with the president of Ben Gurion University in the Negev. "The work they're doing there is visionary in high-tech, biotech and research in the desert," Chauhan observed.

He also became involved in setting up a program to bring students from the Indian Jewish community in Israel on educational trips to India and the United States in coming years. He sees it as one more way to foster the trilateral relationship between India, Israel and the United States.

Ultimately, Chauhan and Sud note that more than just politics and fund raising are at stake with these two communities. "There's a lot of history between Indians and Jews because India was the one country where Jews weren't persecuted," Sud noted. "When Israel looks eastward, India is the first democracy they find and, given that 60,000 Jews a year go to India for tourism, we have a lot of Israeli students."

Sud discovered much in common among the Jewish and Indian cultures. "We found that basically our cultures are very, very similar. I had gone to Israel hoping to learn about a foreign culture. I came back having reinforced some of the same values that my culture has taught me over and over again," she said, adding, "Our cultures are so similar in terms of the good and the bad that it's easier for us to get to know and assimilate with the Jewish population."

The bond between Indians and Jews that matters most is, for Sud, one forged person to person. "Governments come and governments go and agendas change at the drop of a hat or after elections," she said, "but what is important is that the stronger voices that remain are built on understanding and mutual respect. That works longer term than governments."