

**Preserving the Legacy of Indian Jewish Communities**

**The “LILA” Project with the University of Haifa**

Drawing from the rich tapestry of history and culture embodied by the Indian Jewish communities, the University of Haifa's "LILA" project stands as a beacon of scholarly and cultural enlightenment. LILA is a Sanskrit term signifying the "Divine Play." The name's allusion to ‘Divine Play’ offers insight into the extraordinary endurance of Jewish identity within communities that have remained isolated from major Jewish centers for over two millennia. Among these, the Indian Jewish communities — Bene Israel, Cochini, Baghdadi, and Bene Menashe — stand out as a distinctive element of the global Jewish diaspora. Thriving amid India's vibrant diversity, these groups represent a facet of Jewish life that, despite its rich legacy, remains relatively unknown in the broader world.

This lack of widespread recognition, coupled with a scarcity of academic research and educational resources, forms the impetus behind "LILA": an ambitious initiative dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich heritage of Indian Jews. Established in early 2022 through the initiative and generosity of Rafi and Nurit Bhonker, "LILA" seeks to illuminate this neglected chapter of Jewish history through rigorous academic research, educational outreach, and global engagement.

To date, "LILA" has achieved remarkable milestones, including the funding of doctoral research by candidates of Indian origin, the development of specialized educational content by Dr. Noga Cochavi, and the successful hosting of the inaugural academic conference on Indian Jewish communities in June 2023. These efforts have not only enriched the academic landscape but have also fostered a deeper appreciation for the unique contributions of Indian Jews to Israeli society and the Jewish world at large.

The journey of discovery and enlightenment is far from complete. The next phase of "LILA" aims to expand its horizons further by additional doctoral students, enriching educational content, and hosting annual academic and educational conferences.

We are currently seeking support for the following initiatives:

1. **Fellowships for PhD students.** The "LILA" project seeks funding for doctoral students, starting with Leora Pezarkar, a new immigrant and Bene Israel community member. Leora, who helped organize LILA's 2023 conference, will research the Bene Israel community's evolving identity and culture, particularly post-1950s migration to Israel. This study aims to explore the communities over 2000-year history, its unique cultural practices influenced by local Indian contexts, and the balance between assimilation into Israeli society and preservation of distinct identity. The project also encourages further research through awards for outstanding papers on Indian Jewish communities.
2. **Expanding the educational activities on the Indian Jewish communities** - The "LILA" project plans to enhance its educational impact by enriching the already developed Unit of Study with more comprehensive content. To extend its reach beyond Israel, there is an initiative to translate this Unit of Study into English, facilitating its deployment internationally. Leveraging existing platforms that currently host the content, the project aims to broaden its deployment through dedicated programs, promoting its use among organizations across various countries.
3. **Promoting academic and educational initiatives on Indian Jewish communities** - The "LILA" project plans to host an annual academic conference open to the public, aiming to spotlight the latest research and developments the on Jewish communities. Concurrently, educational conferences will be organized specifically to equip teachers with the tools and knowledge necessary to integrate the rich history and culture of Indian Jewish communities into their curricula. To foster a deeper engagement and scholarly interest among students, the project will also initiate a program to encourage the publication of papers exploring various aspects of Indian Jewish life. This initiative will offer incentives, including prizes, for the most insightful and original contributions.

These initiatives are crucial for continuing to shed light on the Indian Jewish communities, fostering academic interest, and promoting educational engagement both within Israel and internationally.

**Request for Support**

We invite you to join us in this noble endeavor by supporting the "LILA" project at the University of Haifa. By supporting the "LILA" project, you become a partner in illuminating a vibrant yet under-recognized chapter of Jewish history. Your contribution will ensure the continuation of groundbreaking research, the creation of rich educational materials, and the fostering of global awareness for the remarkable legacy of Indian Jewry. Together, we can write a new chapter in the history of Indian Jews, ensuring that their stories are known, celebrated, and passed down through the ages.

**For Further Information or the Arrange a Meeting**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sapir HershkovitzIsraeli Friends of the University of Haifa0526309994shershkoviz@univ.haifa.ac.il | Rafi Bhonker054-5433109rafi.bhonker@gmail.com |