

## To Israel, India is more than just a backpacker's paradise

Mini Kapoor

Posted online: Tuesday, October 23, 2007 at 0000 hrs IST

JERUSALEM, OCTOBER 22

In Israel, were you for some reason not able to know the age of people you meet, this should do the trick. Ask about visiting India, and Israelis neatly divide into two categories: those who will say their son or daughter visited (and are thereby headed for middle age) and those who say they themselves are back from an extended visit (and are, therefore, in university or the early years of their working lives).

More than 40,000 Israeli 20-somethings head out to India each year after their mandatory attachment to the Israeli Defence Forces, two years for women, three for men. An equal number take off for Latin America.

For this gap year of sorts — the visits are typically five-six months long — the road passes through Goa, Manali, Pushkar. Mention of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai landmarks usually draws a shrug of unfamiliarity.

Those cities get Israelis who clock in their visits in terms of days, not months: the business travellers. Trade with India is rapidly increasing: last year it was \$2.7 billion. (This does not include the defence sector. That area of cooperation is ruled by confidentiality and figures are not forthcoming.) This year non-defence trade is expected to be \$3 billion.

Israeli investment has diversified from IT, pharma and telecom to real estate and infrastructure. But diamonds account for a major chunk of bilateral trade, with roughly 40 families from Gujarat dominating.

It would seem that these worlds come into contact only on flights in and out of Israel. On the connecting flight from Amman to Tel Aviv, an overheard conversation was revealing. "How do you do it, this travel without a city-wise itinerary," asked the bespectacled Indian executive.

"How do you all find each other? How do you manage to get visas for business work to other West Asian countries?" asked the backpacker.

Foreign ministry officials are alert to the problems that come with the two categories. They say they are aware of the kinds of local resentment building around 'Little Israels', where youngsters congregate on their India circuit. In the past year an orientation programme has been formulated for those planning extended stays in India. Also a "peace backpackers" programme is putting young Israelis in touch with NGOs in India.

For the frequent business traveller, say officials, the paper stamp visa is still given as an increasingly rare exception. The "Israeli stamp stigma" refers to the problems of obtaining a visa to many regimes in the region on a passport that carries record of entry to Israel.

Once Israel was more accommodating of requests that visas and immigration/emigration be stamped on pieces of paper. Now, say officials here in Jerusalem, requests had better be well rationalised — by and large, reasons of work imperatives carry weight, not plans for casual travel.

For the backpacker, other support services are becoming available. Insurance cover for backpackers that includes evacuation in case of emergency is being offered. In fact, one of Israel's leading novelists, A B Yehoshua, wrote a bestselling novel 10 years ago about just such an emergency. Translated into English as Open Heart, the novel tracks a couple's transformative trip to India to bring their ailing daughter back.

The Israeli business traveller too is signing up for orientation courses. The India-Israel Chamber of Commerce acquaints Israelis with mannerisms and differential nuances in nomenclature (MOUs, for instance) they could encounter in India.

Harel Cohen, CEO of FTK Technologies, points to the business acumen needed to solve other differences. His company is ready to launch Lekhika 2007, a software application that works around the difficulty of using standard keyboards for speakers of most Indian languages. He says the application, to be made available in association with the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing in India, germinated in conversations with professors at IIT, Madras.

Yet another aspect of India to be found in Israel reflects the changing demography of the work force in this country. It is estimated that 6,000 Indian nationals have work permits for employment as caregivers to children and the elderly, a service often financed by the state.

Their numbers pale against the vast influx of caregivers from the Philippines and Sri Lanka. By way of contrast, there are 100,000 agricultural labourers from Thailand. There is normally a limit of five years for such stay in Israel.

These growing numbers point to two things: the expanding need for workers due to rapid economic growth and also the decreasing employment of people from the Palestinian territories because of the separation or security barrier.

Curiously, this week the right-of-centre Jerusalem Post used the example of the Northeast's Bnei Menashe tribe to criticise a rigorous change in procedure for giving entry visas to groups for mass conversions. (There are currently 70,000 Israeli citizens of Indian origin, most of them Bene Israelis or Cochin Jews, but the Jewish status of the Bnei Menashe is still contested.)

But the most striking touch of India in Israel? The spontaneity with which men and women of a certain age break into the melodious strains of 'Ichak Dana'. The Hindi movie song, they say, has been on the prescribed repertoire of world music for students.