



Clockwise from above: The entrance to Magen David Synagogue on Canning Street, Kolkata, is hidden behind shops and vendors. Seek help from locals to visit it: It is honourable for Jews to partake in efforts to keep the Ner Tamid lamp burning and they contribute funds toward it generously; Lavish interiors of the Beth El Synagogue, Kolkata, are largely empty due to the dwindling number of Jews in the city.
Facing page: Built in 1884, the Knesseth Eliyahu Synagogue in Mumbai's Fort area is visited by a large number of foreign tourists apart from local Jews.



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Say shalom to synagogues

TEXT SONALI SHAH

The Star of David is your best bet to recognise the few synagogues spread across India. A visit to one of them will leave you wanting to know more about these fascinating houses of Jewish worship.

A shipful of merchants from Europe arrived on the western coast of India in the early 11th century, and that's how our story begins. Jewish by faith, they built sacred spaces for their worship. To outsiders, it is simply the "temple that Jews go to", but to the Jewish community in India, the handful of synagogues spread across the country are precious reminders of their faith. You may have visited a church, a mosque or a gurdwara even if you do not belong to the faith, but very few non-Jews have been inside a synagogue.



synagogues, apart from being places of worship, are excellent places of study, too, for Jews as they double up as Yeshivas. Yeshivas are rabbinic schools and lessons in Hebrew are given to those who wish to learn the language, hence enabling them to understand their prayers and ancient scriptures better. The synagogues also stock Jewish literature and books on Judaism for those keen to gain deeper knowledge of the religion. Others, such as the Shaar Hashomayim or the Gate of Heaven Synagogue in Thane (established in 1879) have Youth Clubs and Jewish Welfare Associations.



The synagogue forms an important part of Jews' lives. For it is inside these buildings that all important occasions take place – weddings, burial prayers, etc.

WESTWARD TRAIL

All synagogues in India face West, towards Jerusalem, Israel. For a couple of them, as with the Tiphereth Israel Synagogue that do not face West due to structural issues, the congregation looks toward Jerusalem while praying. Even though the synagogues are built centuries ago, chiefly in stone, a large part of the interior has been redone in the recent past. Now, marble is part of the renovated walls and false ceilings chip in for the beautification process. Men and women's seating areas are separated by a fence, and the altar forms the epicentre of all activities.

Siona Benjamin, a Jewish Indian contemporary artist based in America is back in India on a Fulbright Fellowship to research Indian-Jewish narratives. "From an artist's point of view," she says, "I find the synagogues here extremely beautiful, especially because they have a distinct Indian feel to it, which I don't find anywhere else in the world."

Clockwise from below: Visit Nahoum's Ceremonies, New Market, to request a guided tour of the synagogues as Mr Nahoum is a trustee of Kolkata's Jewish institutions; Stained glass windows is one of the common features of synagogues across India, though basic architecture varies greatly; The Koch synagogue has been standing proud since 1568.

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