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Indian cricketers strike silver at Jewish Olympics, little Moshe first to get a feel

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ANCHOR

Nariman House survivor Moshe's grandparents can't forget India, followed team progress keenly

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TRAVELLERS at Mumbai's international airport early Monday morning were surprised to see a group of young men in smart suits walk out, lugging heavy cricket kits, wearing shiny silver medals around their necks.

The flight from Tel Aviv had just landed, bringing home the team that finished second at Israel's Macabiah Games, the Jewish Olympics which, after a modest beginning in 1932, is now the world's third biggest sporting event, attracting 9,000 ath-



Moshe with the silver medal the Indian team (right) won



letes from 60 countries.

While it's unusual that a cricketing high has gone largely unnoticed

in India — the final was played on Thursday — the achievement

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Indian cricketers win silver at Jewish Olympics in Israel

means a lot for the country's roughly 10,000-strong Jewish community. An Indian contingent has been participating at the Maccabiah — held, like the Olympics, every four years — since 1957. Cricket was included way back in 1989, but this is the first time that an Indian team has made it to the podium.

The first-timers in the squad were as excited about their history-making effort on the field as they were about finding their roots, having kosher food and learning new Hebrew words.

But for the 73-year-old head of the delegation, Samuel Marshall, the Mumbai-based NRI businessman and a Maccabiah regular since 1957, the excitement was overshadowed by a very emotional moment.

Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and his wife Rivka, who were killed in the terror attack on Nariman House in November last year, were Marshall's close friends in Mumbai, and he was deeply attached to their son Moshe, who survived the massacre and was later moved to Tel Aviv.

"I happen to be last man who spoke to Rabbi Gabi before he died. I have babysat Moshe several times. After winning the silver medal, I visited Moshe and his nanny Sandra at his grand-

parents' house. When I put the medal around his neck, he gave me a beautiful smile. He didn't want to return the medal," said Marshall, adding that it was at that moment that he realised that this wasn't just a cricketing triumph but something much more precious.

Marshall spoke about how Moshe's grandparents had keenly followed the performance of the Indian squad that included 15 cricketers and two table tennis players. "Besides, there were many Jewish people of Indian origin now settled in Israel who turned up in big numbers to support the cricket team," he said.

The deputy head of the delegation, Ezra Moses, met many of these expatriates and also athletes from other countries inquisitive about the Jewish community in India. "Invariably during these interactions, the topic would shift to the Mumbai terror attacks. We got noticed after the silver medal, we were the talk of the Games village," he said.

But the journey to the podium wasn't quite smooth.

It started long before the games, with Marshall and Moses sending circulars to synagogues around the country to spot sporting talent. After trials, the team gathered in Mumbai, but with the monsoon in full

swing, net sessions were almost impossible. That's when the wicket-keeper of the team, Noah Ashtamkar of Mumbai's Shinrai Toyota, came up with a solution.

"We had our net sessions indoors at his car showroom in the section where repairs take place," said Moses, who is the secretary and trustee of Gate of Heaven synagogue in Thane.

Funds to finance the trip were a problem, but Los Angeles philanthropist Steve Soboroff extended a helping hand that included a cheque of \$75,000.

While most of the boys in the team were from Thane, it was a Rajkot cricketer who was declared Player of the Tournament. Bensiyon Songarvkar, who has represented Saurashtra in the Ranji Trophy, finished with an average of 57 in five games.

The standard of cricket was quite high, Songarvkar said. "South Africa had a Test player in Adam Bacher and the teams from Australia, England and Israel were also good."

For Songarvkar, this was a huge achievement. "In Rajkot, and there are just four Jewish families. Gujarat once had many Jewish families, but many have migrated to Israel. I felt we were destined to fly the Indian tricolour on this trip," he said.