

Remnants of a Secluded Culture: History of Jews Diaspora in Kerala

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the project entitled **Remnants of a Secluded Culture: History of Jews Diaspora in Kerala** is a bonafide record of the project work done by **Aiswaryamol M, M. A History Semester IV (2018-2020)** Pavanatma College, Murickassery, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the **Degree of Master of Arts in History** from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the project entitled **Remnants of a Secluded Culture: History of Jews Diaspora in Kerala** is a bonafide record of the project work done by **Aiswaryamol M, M. A History Semester IV (2018-2020)** Pavanatma College, Murickassery, under my supervision and guidance and that it has not been previously submitted for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Title or other Recognition.

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DECLARATION

I, **Aiswaryamol M**, do here by declare that the project entitled **Remnants of a Secluded Culture: History of Jews Diaspora in Kerala** is a bonafide record of the project work done by me under the supervision of Mr. Jijo Jayaraj, Assistant Professor on Contract, Department of History, Pavanatma College, Murickassery, Idukki and that it has not been submitted earlier to any other university/ institution for the award of any Degree or Diploma.

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AISWARYAMOL M

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Introduction

The Jews or Jewish people are an ethno religious group and they believed in an ethnic religion Judaism. The Jews who arrived in India must first have set their foot in Kerala. The three main Jewish communities in India were the Bene Israel Jews, the Cochin Jews and the Baghdadi Jews, other group include the Telugu Jews and Bnei Menashe. Jewish connection with Kerala was started in the tenth Century B C. The Jews are an ethnic group who settled first in Muziris, the earliest seaport in Kerala which was known as 'Little Jerusalem'. There has been close contact between the Jews and Kerala since the early days. The relationship began with the arrival of Solomon's merchant ships in Kerala in 970 BC, for the purpose of trade. . In the 6th century BC the Jews came to Kodungaloor in order to escape from the Babylonian captivity of Nebuchadnezzar. They came to Kerala in about 68 A D at Muziris or Kodungaloor and extended to Quilon, Madayi, Pantalayani Kollam, Chowghat, Chenamangalam, Paalayur, Mala, Pullut etc. There are no traces of Jewish colonies in these places today except that there is a 'Jew's Hill' at Chowghat and a 'Jew's Tank' at Madayi. They build Synagogues and laid the foundations of strong community life.

The Jewish settlers like the Christians who preceded them, achieved a large measure of economic prosperity and secured several valuable privileges from the native rulers. The famous Jewish Copper Plate grant of Emperor Bhaskara Ravivarman dated 1000 AD records of royal gift to the Jewish chief, Joseph Rabban of several rights and privileges in perpetuity. The Jews continued to enjoy a high standing in society till the arrival of the Portuguese who persecuted them and compelled them to leave Cranganore for Cochin in 1565. The white Jews synagogue, mattancherry was built in or about 1567 in the wake of this migration. For

centuries thereafter the Jews formed an important commercial community in central Kerala. Under the Dutch and the British they enjoyed full freedom to carry on their commercial and religious activities. The birth of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948 thrilled the Jews of Kerala and the bulk of them have since migrated to Israel.

The Jewish community in Kerala is divided into three groups the white, the black and the brown. There are eight synagogues in Kerala in the recorded history, even though most of them are not operating any more. One of these belonged to white Jews of Cochin, while the other seven belonged to the Malabari (black or brown) Jews. Each of these is unique in its construction and architecture nevertheless, they retain very similar aesthetics, blending in both the Jewish and Keralite traditions rarified over centuries. The Jews of Kerala made substantial contributions to the socio-economic life of the land. They have assimilated the customs and manners of the people among whom they lived and unlike the Muslims, and to some extent the Christians, they have accepted the local language as a medium of their prayers and devotional songs. The synagogues are the outstanding monuments of the Jewish heritage in Kerala.

The present situation of the Jews in Kerala is getting worse. They had built many mansions and buildings in Jew Town, many of which have now been converted to heritage hotels and offices. After the birth of the nation of Israel in 1948, the number of Jews in Kochi dwindled so much that, often the weekly prayer service at the synagogue cannot be conducted due to an inadequate number of male members. The Jewish community of Cochin faces a diminishing population, neglected synagogues and cemeteries and internal conflict that date back centuries. Most of them have migrated to the land of Israel leaving behind literally a handful of old and sickly souls. Even those who are left behind will soon be

gathered into the bosom of Abraham. With that, this thin, long, bright strand in the multi-coloured fabric of Kerala's population would become just a faint mark. Before this happens, it is necessary to collect as much information as possible about their history, customs and manners.

Area of study

The area of study of this research is, Ernakulam district of Kerala in India situated in central part of the state. Spanning an area of about 2,407 km², Ernakulam district is home to over 12% of Kerala's population. The study of Jewish synagogues in Kerala are scattered on Ernakulam district. The study is mainly centered in the synagogues like Mattancherry, Paravur and Chendamangalam.

Objectives

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to an understanding of the Jewish community in Kerala with special reference to the cultural and social contributions of the Cochin Jews.

- To study the historical background of emergence of Judaism in Kerala.
- To study the spread of Jewish settlements in Kerala.
- To analyze the traditions and way of life of Jewish people in Kerala.
- To evaluate the reasons for dwindling of Jews in Kerala.
- To identify the cultural remarks of Jews in Kerala.
- To analyze features of Jewish synagogues in Ernakulam district.

Hypothesis

The Jews had a culture and heritage of their own. Gradually the number of Jews residing in Kerala is being decreased. The cultures followed by them were also being vanished along with the Jewish community. Their cultural contributions also include the architectural style of them. Through this study the researcher attempts to bring out the architectural specialities of Jewish synagogues in Ernakulam district.

Review of Literature

The present study uses various kinds of primary and secondary sources for completion of the work.

The Jewish copper plate was one of the primary sources used for this research. The Jewish Copper plate was issued by Kulashekhara king Bhaskara Ravivarman in the thirty-eighth year (AD 1000) of his rule at his capital Mahodayapuram. It describes the rights and benefits accorded to Jewish leader Joseph Rabban.

‘The Jews of Kerala’ by P. M Jussay. In this work Prof. Jussay made an attempt to reconstruct the history of Kerala Jews based on his study of folk songs prevalent among the Cochin Jews before their migration Israel.

‘The Last Jews of Kerala: The Two Thousand Year History of India’s forgotten Jewish Community’ by Edna Fernandes. It is a repetitious history of vanishing community it also deals with rise and fall of black Jews and white Jews over centuries.

‘History of Kerala’ written by G. Krishnan Nadar. This book provides information about the social change brought by the Jews in Kerala.

‘Who Are the Jews of India’ written by Nathan Kats. This work provides information about the three distinct Indian Jewish communities; like the Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel and the Baghdadis.

‘Syrian Manuel Samagra Kerala Charithram’ by T.O Aleyas in this book the author explains, the Jews, their social life, synagogues, Jewish wedding rituals etc.,

‘The Cochin State Manual’ by H. Sarkar this book describes about the monuments in Kerala and also helps to trace the Jewish history in Cochin.

‘St.Thomas Christians and Namboothiris, Jews and Sangam Literature; A Historical Appraisal’ written by Bosco Puthur. This book includes the response towards P. M. Jussay’s work ‘The Jews of Kerala’.

‘The Jews of India’ edited by Orpa Slapak provides the story of three Jewish communities. It also provides information like Jewish songs, education, political and economic conditions, their early history and their immigration to Israel.

‘A Hand Book of Kerala’ edited by T. Madhava Menon. This book explains the Jewish history of Kerala: its origin, early settlements, Jewish Copper Plate etc.

‘Cultural Heritage of Kerala’ written by A. Sreedhara Menon. This book deals with the Jews, Judaism, synagogues and religious toleration of Kerala.

Research Questions

- When the Judaism came to Kerala, how long it was acceptable to other religions that existed at that time?

- Is the Jewish community having any religious similarity with other religions in Kerala?
- Unlike other religions, what are the cultural contributions made by the Jews in Kerala?
- Why did the Jewish community in Kerala became diminishing?
- What are the characteristics of Jewish architecture in Kerala?
- What are the changes takes place in Ernakulam district due to the transformation of Jewish synagogues into museums?

Methodology

The some materials which describe the extent to which Jews had spread in Kerala can be divided into two main types-the Primary Sources and the Secondary Sources include Government Gazetteer, Census data, Archeological sources etc, archeological sources which include inscriptions. The Secondary sources are also used for this research, it includes literary sources, journals, newspaper reports, web sources etc., oral sources are also used which collected through direct interviews.

Chapterization

The proposed study is divided into three chapters excluding introduction and conclusion.

The first chapter of the study entitled as ‘The History of emergence of Jewish community in Kerala’ which narrates an overview of Jewish community and the historical background of their arrival to Kerala. It also includes the spread of Jewish settlements in Kerala.

The second chapter entitled as ‘The socio-religious life of Jews in Kerala’, it describes the traditions and way of life of Jewish people, and the caste divisions among them.

The last chapter entitled as ‘The Remnants of the Jewish settlements in Kerala’ in this chapter the dissertation deals with, the Jewish synagogues in Kerala, the architectural characteristics of Jewish synagogues in Ernakulam district.

Limitations

The Major Limitations of the study, The collection of scattered sources from various destinations within a short period of time was the main limitation of the study. Data restricted to what already exist. The researcher overcomes this difficulty by using data collected secondary sources and also using oral sources.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF JEWISH COMMUNITY IN KERALA

The Jews in Kerala

Kerala, being one of the enlightened states of India, is well known for its religious harmony, cultural diversity and religious plurality. Hailed as God's own country, by many, It deserves this tribute because of many features geographical sociological and historical. Even though the term Kerala is often used from the olden days, the political unity was visualized only in 1956. Kerala State was formed in 1956 from portions of the former Travancore-Cochin State and the former Malabar district of Madras State. It has a long coastline in the west and mountains called Ghats, on the east forming clear natural boundaries. The geographical and historical peculiarities have enabled it to enjoy a measure of isolation to develop its own way of the life and culture unaffected by major upheavals in the other parts of the country. Its unique geographical position and peculiar physical features have invested Kerala with a distinct individuality.

Religion has played a pivotal role in the formation of Kerala society. Religious toleration has always been the corner-stone of Kerala culture. It is curious to note that ancient Kerala became the meeting ground of almost all the important religions of the world.¹ Besides the indigenous religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, foreign religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism found the soil of Kerala fertile and favorable for their progress and development

¹ A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, D. C Books, Kottayam, 2007, p. 83

Kerala society is composed of diverse cultures and peoples, languages and religions. To examine the nature of diversity of the religious faiths in our country we must look at the historical antecedents of various religious groups found in our society.

Diversity of religious faiths has existed over a very long period of time as Kerala has been a country of not only very ancient history but also a place where communities from outside continually kept on coming and settling down. Together with diverse cultural groups in various religions in Kerala pursuing their faiths, these immigrant communities also brought their own religious faiths, customs and cultures. This resulted in bringing together people following different religions and gradually laid the basis of religious pluralism in Kerala. Religious pluralism means diversity among people based on their varied kinds of religious beliefs. Pluralism of religion has thus two connotations:

- 1) It refers to the fact that India has been a land of not one but many religions since ancient times and
- ii) That each religion contains, besides its primary features which define its essence many cultural, social and ritualistic elements which cut across boundaries of different religious faiths. These cultural and social similarities are a product of interaction and accommodation established over a long period of time by regional, linguistic, ritual and social proximity of various religious groups. Religious pluralism in Kerala is, thus not only a fact but it also permeates through beliefs, values and social character of individual religions in India.

Religious pluralism is thus, keynote of Kerala culture and religious tolerance is the very foundation of Kerala secularism. Religious secularism is based on the belief that all religions are equally good and that they all lead to the same goal of realization of God. The

people of ancient Kerala observed several primitive religious practices like *animism*² and *totemism*.³ These aboriginals, who lived in the pre historic past, had no permanent, established or unified religious creeds, rituals or social traditions. They were mostly ancestor worshippers and propitiated many local deities.

Buddhism Jainism and Judaism entered Kerala in the centuries prior to the Christian era. Christianity and Islam may have reached during the formative years of the religions itself. “Judaism” the religion of the Jews has a long history. There are five distinct groups of Jews in India-the European, the Baghdadi or Iraqi, the Manipuri, the Marathi and the Malayalee. The European Jews came mostly from Germany and Austria, escaping from the Nazis. They are found in the big cities. The Baghdadi came in the wake of the British conquest of India and are also found in the big cities, especially Calcutta the Manipuri Jews have far eastern features and claim to be descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel who wandered into China and came to Manipur and Mizoram via Burma. The Marathi Jews who call themselves Bene Israel or the children of Israel are the largest Jewish community in India. They are clustered in the Konkan area of Maharashtra State. Their ancestors are said to have come “from a far off country in the north about 1600 years ago”.⁴ The Malayalee Jews, considered the most ancient Jewish community in India, could be found until recently living in small groups in the erstwhile Cochin State. Most of the Marathis and the Malayalis have immigrated to the modern State of Israel, leaving behind just a few souls.

The Origins

² Animism, some forms of ancestor Worship and nature worship

³ Totemism, is a belief about the relationship between people and nature

⁴ P.M Jussay, *The Jews of Kerala*, Calicut University, Calicut, 2005, p. 18

It is difficult to determine the ancestry of the Kerala Jews, as there are no reliable records in this regard. It is believed that the earliest Jews to have come to Kerala were the sailors in the ships of King Solomon (10th Century BC), which according to the Bible, used to bring home from afar "once in three Years, silver, elephants' tooth, peacocks and apes. The words used in the Hebrew Bible peacocks are *tukim* and, for apes, *Kapim*, which are Hebrewised Tamil words. It is argued that Solomon's ships used to call at Muziris, the port city of Cranganore, which in ancient times was a part of Tamilakam, known as Damarika to Ptolemy. The Periplus, Pliny and the Tamil works of the Sangam Period indicate sustained maritime relations between Red Sea Coast and Muziris, the "first emporium in India". These contacts became more frequent after the discovery of the Hippalus Wind in the second century BC. Traders from Europe and West Asia came to Kerala for its spices, especially pepper. Rawlinson (1916) mentions that the Romans had a colony at Cranganore to protect their trade interests. Hence, it is highly probable that the earliest Jews to come to Kerala were the sailors in the ships of Solomon. They, during their seasonal sojourn on this spicy coast, must have taken local beauties to wife and the offspring of this romantic interlude became the nucleus of the Jewish community of Malabar. To this were added and into it were absorbed large numbers of refugees who managed to reach this coast escaping from the atrocities of the Assyrians Kings 17:5ft) in the 8th century BC, the bondage of the Babylonians in the 6th century BC and the destructive ravages of the conquering Romans in the first century AD.⁵ Later it is said that two large waves of refugees came from Majorca in Spain, one in 340 AD and the other in 499 AD.

Early Settlements

⁵ Segal J. B, *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, London, 1993, p. 17

The earliest groups operated from the harbour towns like Kozhikode, Kodungallur and Kollam. No record about their settlement at Kozhikode is available now. It is evident from the Tarisappalli Copper Plates that they had at Kollam a guild of Anjuvannam. According to tradition among the Jews their early settlements were at Palur, Pulloot, Maliankara and Madai. Palur or Palayur, as it is known today, is a few kilometers to the north of Kodungallur near Trikkanamathilakam (Mathilakam of today). It was an important trade centre "resounding with the loud wranglings of deceitful merchants" (kokasandesam, verse 48), The Zamorin annexed it and made it the headquarters of his southern command. He befriended the Arabs or the Moors who were the rivals of the Jews in trade. This unfriendly presence very near to their settlement forced them to abandon it and move away to safer grounds. This is what their ancient Malayalam songs indicate. Place names like Jootha Kunnu (Jews' Hill), Jootha Theru (Jews' street) that still persist indicate that once it was an important Jewish centre. Pulloot is to the north of Kodungalloor. Once it was a ferry point known as Kavu kadavu or temple Ferry. Hence the Jews of this settlement came to be known as Kadavumbagam (or "ferry-side") Jews. Maliankara is on the southern bank of the Periyar near its estuary. It appears to have been an important Jewish settlement, as St. Thomas is said to have landed there in 52 AD." It is also believed that in the 4th century, a fairly large number of Judeo-Christians (Jews converted to Christianity), under the leadership of K'nai Thomman or Thomas of Cana from Syria, disembarked and settled down at this place.

Another place where Jews were resided is Maravel (Marahi), and later called Madai.⁶ It is described as "very ancient and well off and in it live Moors and Gentiles and Jews; these Jews are of the language of the country: it is very long that they have dwelt in this place".

⁶ P. M Jussay, op.cit., p. 20

Today the place is called Methala. In its heyday, it was known as Shingly, especially among the Westerners. Shingly is the foreignised version of Changala Azhi, the original name of the estuary at Kodungalloor. A part of the name survives as the place is called "Azhi" today. It was the hub of the activities of the Anjuvannam, the Jewish Merchants' Guild.

The Jewish Copper Plates

The most important and the earliest documents extant relating to the history of the Jews of Kerala are the Copper Plates preserved in the synagogue at Mattancherry, Cochin. It is a Royal Deed of Bhaskara Ravi Varma Kulashekhara Perumal, installing Joseph Rabban, the Jewish merchant, as the overlord of Anjuvannam with all the seventy two princely privileges and prerogatives of aristocracy, to be enjoyed by him and his male and female issues and sons-in-law by marriage in hereditary succession. By this Grant, Anjuvannam was elevated into an autonomous corporation and the Jewish village of Shingly into a principality.⁷

Jewish merchants known as Radanites began traveling by sea and land between the Mediterranean and China in the ninth century, stopping at ports along the Malabar coast. Commercial documents from the Cairo Genizah give glimpses of Jewish trade with India in the centuries that followed. Before the Portuguese conquest in the sixteenth century, there were Jewish communities in a number of coastal towns, as well as in Cranganore. The oldest

⁷ T. Madhava Menon, *A Hand Book of Kerala*, International School of Dravidian Linguistics, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p. 205

Jewish tombstone In Kerala, dated 1269, is found in Chendamangalam, where the Jews lived under the protection of a local chieftain called the Paliat Achan.⁸

By the beginning of the 12th Century, the Kulashekhara Empire disintegrated and petty kings rose to power. Calicut came under the Zamorin: Cranganore and Quilon, eventually under the Rajah of Cochin and the King of Venad respectively. The main body of traders in Calicut was the Moors or Arabs, in Cranganore the Jews and in Quilon the Christians.⁹

The rivalry between the Moors and the Jews, egged on by the Zamorin, developed into hostility. In order to wrest the control of Cranganore from Cochin, the Zamorin had to subdue the Jews who were loyal to the Rajah. He aided and abetted the Arabs to harass and attack the Jewish settlements.

The Emergence of Cochin

In 1341, a cataclysmic flood in the Periyar silted up the estuary at Cranganore and created a new harbour down south at Vypeen. As it was smaller than the one at Cranganore, it was called "KochuAzhi" (small estuary) which eventually became Kochi. It was fast developing into a major trade centre and the enterprising Jews of Shingly dispatched a large contingent to protect their trade interests. The Rajah welcomed them and helped them to settle down near his own palace. Soon a new bazaar developed which, being smaller than the one at Cranganore came to be known as "Kochangadi" (small bazaar), and this name is

⁸ Orpa Slapak, *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1995, p. 28

⁹ T. Madhava Menon, *Op. cit.*, p. 206

retained even today. Before long, a synagogue was built, and named "Kochangadi Synagogue". It fell into disrepair and was closed down in 1789.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese had reached Kerala, wanted to establish their monopoly in the pepper trade. This led to a bitter fight between them and the Arabs. The Jews were not only their rivals in trade but also their inventor enemies and so the Jews could do nothing except bear all the indignities the Portuguese were heaping upon them.¹⁰ They were held in very low esteem. Before long, information was received that the Arabs had obtained artillery from the Turks to fight against the Portuguese. "They (Arabs) had become so powerful that the Gentiles did not dare dispute with them".

If the news was disturbing to the Portuguese, it was really alarming to the Jews because Cranganore, "having no walls around it", the Arabs could bombard their settlements from the sea and destroy them. In this hour of crisis, Daniel Reubeni, "Prince" of Anjuvannam, sent his brother David to Europe to negotiate with the Pope and the king of Portugal for an offensive and defensive alliance against the Arabs and the Zamorin. Although the king promised military aid, Shingly was destroyed by the Arabs before aid could be received. The events that led to the destruction of Shingles are described by Shaik Zainuddin.

A quarrel had broken out between the Jews and the Muslims of Cranganore, possibly over the suspected adulteration of a supply of pepper, which led to the death of a Muslim. In retaliation, the Muslims gathered in strength and with the approval of the Zamorin, attacked the Jewish Settlements, killed many of the inhabitants, burnt down their houses and synagogues. Many Jews fled in fear and escaped Cochin and Ernakulam. This happened in

¹⁰ Bosco Puthur, *St. Thomas Christians and Namboothiris Jews and Sangam Literature; A Historical Appraisal*, L.R.C Publications, Kochi, 2003, p. 132

1524. Despite s terrible tragedy, some Jews still tried to cling on desperately to their ancient settlements until 1566 when another attack was mounted, this time by the Portuguese. With that the story of the Jews at Cranganore came to an end.

Although the loss of Cranganore is attributed to the Moorish and Portuguese attacks on their settlements, according to tradition, dissensions and divisions in the community also contributed to it. At first it seems to have been economic disparity that caused the dissensions between the rich and the poor. Later, based on birth the community was divided into Meyuhasim (Jews of pure lineage) and Meshuhhararim (those of mixed origin a large assortment of slaves and children of the concubines of the former). Some meshuhhararim, who had become rich, "intimate with royalty and princes, being the basis of negotiations with traders, demanded marital union with the daughters and granddaughters of their former masters."¹¹ This was contemptuously rejected. "On account, they have contentions and quarrels without end".¹² At that time, there arose a dispute between two descendants of Joseph Rabban regarding succession. This split the Meyuhasim into two groups and each sought the help of the Zamorin to put down the other. Exploiting this opportunity, the Meshuhhararim advised him to pretend to help one against the other and cheat them both. The Zamorin attacked the settlement on a Sabbath midnight, destroyed the habitations of both Meyuhasim and Meshuhhararim, massacred many of them and drove out the rest. The K'nanya Christians also were not spared. It was a terrible night and left such an indelible scar on their memories that in after years, Jews coming to Cranganore on business would not stay there overnight, but would hasten home before the sunset. But, because of their

¹¹ Segal, Op. cit., pp. 24-25

¹² Ibid., p. 30

attachment their ancient settlements, they used to return to take away handfuls of earth from the hallowed spot where once the synagogue had stood, to deposit it with earth from Jerusalem in the coffins of their dead relatives as a token of their being buried in that holy city: Thus was formed, they claim, the present "JoothaKulam" (Jews' pond) in modern Methala.¹³ But this version is surely exaggerated as the pond is much too big to have been so formed. It was obviously used for the ritual bath.

There is another example of this attachment. Those who took asylum in Cochin and Ernakulam built two synagogues each at either place. Of these, one each is named Kadavumbhagam, and the other Thekkumbhagam. At Cranganore, these names had geographical justification, but by no stretch of imagination can such justification be found either at Cochin or at Ernakulam.

The Judeo-Christians who had come to Cranganore under the leadership of K'nai Thomman, had settled down on the southern side of that town. There was an earlier settlement of Christians on the northern side. The latter were known as "Vadakkumbhagam" ('northists') to distinguish them from the K'nai group, known as "Thekkumbhagam" ('southists'). Like the Jews, the K'nai Christians too used to take a handful of earth as a keepsake from their ancient settlement. From this act arose their present day practice of taking a pinch of ash from the hearth of the ancestral home of the new bride and depositing it in a knot at one end of her dress when she bids farewell and goes with her husband to live in the house of their own. On account of this, they are called derisively by the Vadakkumbhagam Christians as "Chaaram kettikal (Knot-makers of ash).

¹³ T. Madhava Menon, *Op. cit.*, p. 207

The Jewish refugees from Cranganore were welcomed by the Rajah of Cochin and were allowed to settle down build synagogues in various places within his kingdom also appointed a Mudaliar, a chief, from amongst them their spokesman, investing him with special privileges and prerogatives and with jurisdiction in all internal matters, without, however, any political power. At this time, a new of enterprising Jews from Spain arrived and built yet another synagogue at Cochin. The members of this congregation were mostly recent immigrants from Europe or West and hence the place was dubbed Paradesi or Foreigners' Synagogue by the Kalahari or indigenous Jews.¹⁴ Thus, the earlier division of the community was given yet another dimension on the basis of the land of their origin or adoption which is synonymous with the "White" and "Black". This division among the Jews is peculiar to India. In fact, it became a cancer in the body of the community.

At the beginning of the 18th century, there were 12 synagogues in Kerala, 4 in Cochin (Kochangadi, Thekkumblagam, Paradesi and Kadavumbhagam), 2 in Ernakulam (Thekkumbhagam and Kavumbhagam), one each at Parur, Palur, Chendamangalam, and Thuruthur. The Kochangadi synagogue was demolished because it was old and crumbling. The Thekkumbhagam synagogue at Cochin was demolished and the ground sold when the entire congregation left for Israel. The Kadavumbhagam synagogue was also sold off; the buyer used it as a warehouse to store prawn, considered unclean and forbidden for the Jews and cursed. So it was sold again, and is now a warehouse for coir products. The synagogue at Mala was handed over by the congregation when it left for Israel to the local Panchayat, and is now used as an Assembly hall. The one at Chendamangalam is dilapidated and may collapse at any moment. The beautiful interior decorations of both the synagogues at

¹⁴ Ibid.

Ernakulam were ripped off, and are closed for service because there are not enough adults to form a minyan or minimum prayer group as required by the codes. The Paradesi synagogue conducts regular Services, and the one at Parur, occasionally.¹⁵

The darkest period in the history of the Jews of Kerala was under Portuguese supremacy. Under them, the Jews were subjected to contemptuous treatment, to oppression and restrictions of all kinds in addition to arbitrary taxes levied upon them. However, during the Dutch rule, they experienced not only complete cultural autonomy and religious freedom, but also an economic prosperity unparalleled in their long history. One of the significant events of this period was the visit of a commission of four sent by the Jewish community of Amsterdam to enquire into and report about the state of community in Cochin. Mosses Pereyra de Paiva, a member of the commission, published his Report *Noticias Dos Judios de Chochin* in 1687. This reliable and rare work is one of the most important documents for the understanding of the history of the Jewish community in Cochin.

During this period, there emerged from this small community a galaxy of remarkable leaders, of pioneers of trade and commerce, of agents, negotiators and interpreters and real merchant princes like the Rahabis, the Rotenburs, the Abrahams, the Cohens, the Halleguas and the Sarguns. But towards the end of the 18th Century, the fortunes of the Jews of Cochin declined. By the time the British strode in imperialistically, they had become a community of almost no consequence. They offered no resistance whatever when privileges conferred on them by the Rajahs and confirmed by the Dutch were withdrawn.

¹⁵ Bosco Puthur, *Op. cit.*, p. 135

With this, the old animosities lying dormant bounced back with redoubled force and the community degenerated into a conglomeration of infighting congregations of logger heads and hardened hearts. These infights between the 50 called Mayuhasim and the Meshuhararim were enacted notably in the Paradesi and the Parur congregations. In former, AB Salem staged a Gandhian model Satyagraha against the discrimination practiced against the Merarim. The younger elements of the Mayuhasim joined him discriminations practised in the House of the Lord were removed. At Parur, similar groups were locked in so bitter a fight that it was taken to the court much against the spirit of Judaism.

This situation continued till the middle of the 20th century when, with the establishment of the modern state of Israel, the clarion call of Zion rang loud and clears throughout length and breadth of the Diaspora (the great dispersal of us following the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD). In batches big and small, Jews from every land including Kerala left for the New Promised Land, leaving behind few sad souls too old and weak to launch forth with verve and vigour into the uncharted seas of the future. These few 30 left behind are coming together forgetting at least apparently their old animosities. But here and also in Israel, a discerning eye can detect among them an undercurrent of age old prejudices and passions still lingering.

But every Keralite, Jew or gentile, nay, every Indian, can feel proud that the small group of Jews from Kerala in Israel has contributed most generously their share of blood and sweat, toil and tears, for promoting its progress and defending its frontier.

The Jews of Kerala made substantial contribution to the socio-economic life of the land. They maintained caste and colour prejudices among themselves, and such distinctions

were further encouraged by the caste system that prevailed in Kerala. But socially, they could create awareness among the low caste Hindus, since they could appear fully dressed, covering the upper part of their bodies, and wearing the same ornaments as the high caste Hindu women. Their contribution to the economic prosperity of the land by opening international markets for the products of Kerala is praiseworthy.¹⁶ Ship-building industry was developed by them and their possession of a large number of ships and boats helped the native rulers in naval warfare to defend the country from the enemies. The Jews played an important part in the war of liberation started by Chera rulers against Chola imperialism. The White Jews' synagogues• Mattancherry and Cranganore are artistic and architectural monuments which have added to the cultural glory of the country.¹⁷

The survey of the religious scene in Kerala makes it abundantly clear that the atmosphere that prevailed in the land was one of tolerance and amity. In spite of the existence of diverse sects within Hindu religion itself and the prevalence of several other non-Hindu faiths in the land, there was absolutely no religious rancour of any kind in the outlook of the people of Kerala even in the early days. The Vaishnavites and Saivites behaved towards one another as brothers and the Hindus as a whole treated the followers of other religions like Jainism, Buddhism, and Christianity etc. in a spirit of extreme friendliness. Notwithstanding the predominant position occupied by the Hindu religion in the life of the people, the other religions which existed side by side with it were in no way looked upon as inferior in any respect. The religious institutions of the Buddhists, the Jains, the Christians, the Jews and the Muslims were all called Pallies. There was no religious

¹⁶ A. Sreedhara Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, S. Viswanathan, 1996, p. 22

¹⁷ G. Krishnan Nadar, *History of Kerala*, Learners Book House, Place nil, Year nil, p. 90

cleavage. Communal amity reigned supreme. The Hindu, the Jain, the Buddhist, the Christian, the Jew and the Muslim lived as good neighbours. The author of the Sanskrit poem Mooshakavamsa (11th century A.O.) says that just as the proverb goes that in the asramas of those great kings who attained the siddhis beasts naturally inimical to each other lived harmony, so in the region of Kerala ruled by the Mooshaka kings religions with dreadfully opposed doctrines flourished side by side. We find concrete results of this religious harmony and synthesis in other spheres as well, eg. Customs and manners, social institutions, etc festivals, language, literature, architecture, art, music, painting etc.

CHAPTER II

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS LIFE OF JEWS IN KERALA

Jew Street

Jewish life in Cochin today is not vastly different from that which prevailed two hundred and fifty years ago. The Jews still live in the one long narrow street which was laid out for them in 1568.¹ At the lower end is the *Kadavumbhagam*² synagogue of the black Jews, named after an earlier structure in Cranganore. The houses of the black Jews extend up the street for perhaps five hundred yards. Most of them have an open veranda in front, in which the head of the family sells his fowls, eggs, and produce. In back of the shop are the living quarters which must be entered through the veranda, for the houses are jammed one against the other. Sandwiched between Jewish homes are houses belonging to Moslem merchants and Hindu artisans, for poverty and the extinction of family lines have necessitated the sale of some Jewish houses to outsiders.³

The lower section of Jews' Street is a busy thoroughfare. It is crowded with trade and choked with the sacred cows of the Hindus. When the Jewish school lets out, children come pouring forth, chasing each other, pausing in the middle of the road to examine some strange new sight, or ambling along with arms over their fellow's shoulders. In facial contour, skin pigmentation, speech, action, and dress, these children of the black Jews are indistinguishable

¹ David G. Mandelbaum 'The Jewish Way of Life in Cochin', *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol.1, No.4, p. 440, <https://www.jstor.org/Accessed> on 15.06.2020

² *Kadavumbhagam*, riverside

³ K.V Ravisankar, *Kerala Tourism Hand Book*, Tourism India, 2004, p. 45

from the pupils of other religions who also attend the school. But they are unmistakably identified as Jews by the gay skullcap atop the head of each boy and by the amulets both boys and girls wear. The Moslem and Hindu children also wear such devices, but theirs are inscribed in Malayalam or Arabic, while the neck pendants which ward off the evil eye from the Jewish children is marked with "*El Shadai*"⁴ in Hebrew characters.⁵

Toward the middle of the street are the houses of the intermediate caste, m'shuhararim. Many of them have moved to other cities and there are but few families left. They look and live like their coreligionists, the black Jews.

The upper section of the street is the quarter of the white Jews, and here the houses are larger, better built and without the open verandah shop. They are mostly two-storied structures, rising from the edge of the road. Their whitewashed walls, tiled eaves, wooden shutters and doorways overhung with slat curtains suggest the Dutch and Portuguese influence at the time they were built.⁶ Some of the houses have two wings which extend back from the sheer block of the street facade, with a court-yard between the wings. The rooms are large and the ceiling high, the furniture sparse, as best suits a tropical dwelling. The back rooms of the ground floor are often occupied by servants who are many and cheap by Western standards. Their wage averages perhaps a dollar a month with bed, board, and new clothes on the Jewish holidays.⁷

⁴ *El Shadai*- is often translated as my lord or lord. Shadai is god of Heaven

⁵ David G. Mandelbaum, op.cit., p. 440

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ David Abram, *The Rough Guide to South India*, London: Rough Guides, 2003, pp. 368-369

The upper part of the street is not as busy nor as crowded as the lower, for there are no shops at this end and while the lower street leads on to other parts of the town, the white Jews section terminates in a dead end. There is no mistaking a white Jew for a native, although some of them approach the pigmentation norm of the ordinary *Malayali*.⁸ But they are generally much lighter in color and have a different dress. The men usually wear the European style to business and to the synagogue, although the elders wear in the synagogue the long varicolored tunic, the gay vest and the loose white trousers of the Baghdadi fashion. This dress is worn also by all the black Jews when in the synagogue on festival days. Within Jew town, the men and boys of the white Jews dress in pajamas, exactly like those retailed in Western countries for sleeping garments, and admirably suited to the hot climate. The women of the three castes ordinarily wear short, loose blouses of simple cut and gay color, and ankle length skirts, created simply by wrapping a length of cloth around the body and tucking in the upper corner at the waist.

The *Thekkumbhagam*⁹ synagogue of the black Jews is within the white Jews' section, but it is not far from the middle of the street's length. Built in 1489, it is the oldest synagogue now in use; of the 1344 *Angadi*¹⁰ edifice only ruins remain, for it was destroyed (according to tradition) in 1789 by the Moslem emperor Tipu *Sultan*.¹¹

⁸ *Malayali*-refers to the people from the mountains who lived beyond the Western Ghats

⁹ *Thekkumbhagam*-Southern region

¹⁰ *Angadi*- A Shop

¹¹ *Sultan*-A Muslim Sovereign



Figure 2.1: Jew Street in Kochi

Standing at the head of the long line of Jewish houses is the *Paradesi*¹² synagogue of the white Jews, whose clock tower dominates the life that is lived in the street. The synagogue enters into every social activity and molds the personal being of every individual. It is the scene of most communal gatherings and the setting for all joyous occasions. Much of the surplus wealth of the congregation is lavished on the gold and silver of the *sefer Torah*

¹² *Paradesi*- Person from a foreign land

ornaments and the silk and satin of the synagogue draperies. The synagogue funds support the indigent and the revenue from its lands provide decent burial for the old or help send the young through college. Within the synagogue, families jockey for personal prestige; status is attained or lost in terms of synagogue prerogatives. To the synagogue the old men come to lounge, the children to play. It harbors the abject penitence of the Day of Atonement and the riotous exuberance of the Day of Rejoicing of the Law. Though it is officially the province of the male, women too, live in it and through it, keenly participate and vicariously direct its affairs. The community is knit together around the synagogue and closely integrated by it.

Caste Division among the Jews of Kerala

The Jews of India comprise three distinct groups-Cochin Jews of Kerala, Bene Israel of Maharashtra, and Baghdadi Jews who were mainly settled in Calcutta and Bombay. They lived in India in complete harmony and safety.¹³

The Jews of India comprise three distinct groups-Cochin Jews of Kerala, Bene Israel of Maharashtra, and Baghdadi Jews who were mainly settled in Calcutta and Bombay. The total strength of Indian Jews in 1948 was nearly 25,000-about 22,000 Bene Israel, 2,500 Cochin Jews and around 1,000 Baghdadi Jews. The Indian Jews started migrating to Israel since 1948 with the formation of the State of Israel. At present, Indian Jewry comprises of around 60,000 Jews in Israel.

It is interesting to note that the Indian Jews were one of the few Jewish communities which never faced persecution and anti-Semitism in India, The Jews of cochin were an

¹³ Bosco Puthur, *St.Thomas Christians and Namboothiris Jews and Sangam Literature; A Historical Appraisal*, L.R.C, kochi, 2003, p. 126

indigenous community of Kerala which settled in and around Cochin. From the middle of the fourth century, there is evidence of Jewish presence in the Malabar Coast (i.e. Kerala). The first group of Cochin Jews left for Israel in December 1949 under the leadership of Kadavil Meyer from Chendamangalam village. By the mid-1960s most of the Cochin Jews had immigrated to Israel except for a few well to do families. The Jews of Cochin along with other Jewish communities of India immigrated to the so-called promised land of 'milk and honey' with great hopes and dreams.

There are really three classes amongst the present Jews of Malabar namely, (1) the white Jews, (2) the brown Jews and (3) the black Jews. The earliest exponent of this threefold division, which no doubt is scientific, was the Rev: T. white house in the evening hours. But European writers generally speak only of two classes, the “white” and the “black” Jews.¹⁴ The “White” (Paradesi) Jews were the descendants of European and other Jews, who had arrived on the Malabar Coast from the 16th century on. Two of the prominent Paradesi families were the Koders, who originated in Iraq and became great traders from Cochin, and the Halleguas, who trace their origin from Spain and who reached Aleppo, Syria, after the Inquisition in 1492. Many Paradesi families settled in Mattancherry, Cochin. The “Black” (Malabar) Jews lived in seven congregations, including Ernakulam, Mala, Parur, Chendamangalam and Cochin. Social and religious interaction between the White and wealthier Paradesi and the darker-skinned and poorer Malabari Jews was restricted and there was not a single case of intermarriage between them.¹⁵

¹⁴ K. P Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2013, p. 523

¹⁵ Orpa Slapak, *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1995, p. 28

In addition, both communities held manumitted slaves known in Hebrew as Meshuchrarim (freed people) who were distinct from the Jews with impeccable descent (known in Hebrew as Meyuhasim (privileged)). The Meshuchrarim have been mistakenly identified as a separate caste and called “Brown Jews” by some researchers, but in practice, while White Jews were distinguishable from Black Jews on the basis of colour, the dark-skinned Meshuchrarim were not “Brown”. Until the middle of the 20th century, in an imitation of caste-like practices, the Meshuchrarim were not allowed to dine or intermarry with their masters. In the Paradesi synagogue they were prohibited from being called up to the Torah or participating equally in a minyan (quorum). This caste like situation changed in the middle of the 20th century, in large manner due to the activism of Abraham Barak (henceforth A. B.) Salem.

A. B. Salem (1882–1967) was the first *Meshuchrarim*¹⁶ to receive a university degree in law. He became actively involved in politics and served on the Cochin Legislative Assembly.²¹ He used certain Gandhi-like Satyagraha non-violent tactics to improve the status of the Meshuchrarim in his own synagogue. Only in the 1940s was he allowed to read the Torah in the synagogue (which, as I have mentioned, was previously prohibited), and in the late 1940s Meshuchrarim were finally allowed to be buried in the Paradesi cemetery, but in a separate section.

Until the 21st century the history of Cochin Jews was, with few exceptions, monolithic, referring exclusively to Paradesi “White” Jewish history. In parallel, the spatialization of Cochin Jewish research was confined to Mattancherry, Cochin, where the

¹⁶ *Meshuchrarim*- former slaves, some of mixed African European descent. They were not allowed to marry White Jews.

Paradesi synagogue was located. In 2004, Galia Hacco, a Malabar Jew recently known as a “Black” Jew, wrote about the ritual cycle of Cochin Jewish holidays from “a Malabari perspective”.¹⁷ Since then, scholars and the general public have become aware of “other” Jewish spaces in the annals of Cochin Jewish history, and specifically Malabar Jewish landscapes. The restoration of the Chendamangalam synagogue in February 2006 and its opening as a Jewish tourist site²⁶ has triggered interest in other settlements where Malabar Jews resided and enacted their lives. As noted in a Jerusalem Post article on July 12, 2009, Parur (or Paravur), the site of another Malabar Jewish congregation, will now be included in the study of Cochin Jewish topography, as plans to conserve the synagogue and a Jewish house are progressing. Future research still has to explore more ancient Jewish settlement in Kerala, Cranganore, and other sites. The archaeological dig in Pattanam at Parur is shedding new light on the ancient history of trade in Kerala, and specifically on the role of the Jews there. It is hoped that the Muziris Heritage Project will unearth proof of the Jewish presence in other Jewish landscapes on the Malabar Coast from early times.

The synagogue complex is not only the matrix of the communal life, not only a templet for the development of the personal life; it is the way of life for the Jews of Cochin. This is true for the black Jews no less than for the white. If anything, their lives are even more synagogue-centered. While the white Jews have begun to relinquish a few of the old customs, spend less time in the study of the Law and more in the intricacies of English composition, the black congregations adhere to all the old practices. Thus, the white Jews have recently given up ceremonial scourging on the day before *Yom Kippur*,¹⁸ but among the

¹⁷ K. P Padmanabha Menon, Op. cit., p. 523-527

¹⁸ *Yom Kippur*- day of atonement

black community this rite is still faithfully performed. The old men of the black Jews too are more learned in the *Talmud*¹⁹ than the white Jews. The black Jews have long been employed as synagogue officiants, shohetim and hazanim, by the Jewish congregations in the north of India. Apart from the few instances in which the white Jews have given over old customs, the liturgy and religious observances of the three Cochin castes are precisely alike. The formal code which governs conduct is embodied in the Scriptures and the various commentaries.



Figure 1.2: Jews in Kochi

¹⁹ *Talmud*- The collection of ancient Jewish laws and traditions for religious and social matters

The life journey of a Jew anywhere in the world is marked by certain specific milestones, and they were rigorously followed by the Jews of Kerala as well -birth, circumcision, entry into adolescence, wedding and death. The *synagogue*²⁰ she belonged to, the *Torah*²¹, the *rabbi*²² and the congregation have an important role in this rite of passage in a devout Jew's life. Though both *paradesi* and *Malabari* followed the same customs and strictly adhered to the scriptures, their synagogues and congregations were separate. The three groups of Jews rarely intermingled in any intense manner.

Jewish Food, Diet, and Utensils

The Jewish diet is also strictly based on the scriptures written in Hebrew, the language of the Jews. There are no restrictions placed on the consumption of vegetarian food. Meat is also allowed, provided it is kosher (or “fit to be consumed” as per the Jewish scriptures). However, meat and dairy are served together and a gap of three hours has to be mandatorily maintained between the consumption of the two. Even the vessels in which they are stored are cleaned separately. The coconut therefore plays a very important role in Kerala Jews' kosher cooking where coconut milk is used as a substitute for milk.

A word that is always heard in association with Jewish food is kosher. It means “all right” or “fit,” and there are strict and elaborate laws about the kind of food that is prohibited, restrictions regarding even those items that are permitted, rules that decide how meat should be prepared, and instructions about the utensils to be used in the kitchen. The essence of

²⁰ *Synagogue*- The Jewish place of worship

²¹ *Torah*- The holy book of the Jews

²² *Rabbi*- Jewish priest

these intricate set of regulations contained in the scripture is that the food should be clean, and the meat extracted with minimum infliction of pain to animals. The service of a shohet, a man trained in slaughtering animals in the most delicate manner, are sought by pious Jewish households as much to abide by scriptural codes of dietary conduct as to cause least harm to nature. This is followed to such an extent that the Jews ensure the detergents used for cleaning their vessels do not contain animal fat.

Judaism imposes no restrictions on a vegetarian diet. It is with regard to the consumption of fish, bird and animal meat has to be fresh. Further, only those animals that have cloven hooves and chew the cud are worthy of being eaten. If anyone of these conditions is not met, the animal cannot be slaughtered for its meat. The camel and the hare may chew the cud but since they do not have cloven hooves, they are unacceptable. The pig has cloven hooves but does not chew the cud. Therefore, it is avoided. With regard to fish too, two characteristics have to be looked for. It should have fins and scales. Following these criteria, the pious Jew forgoes aquatic creatures like the shellfish or the eel. Among birds, chicken, duck, goose, pigeon and turkey may be killed for their meat. Birds of prey are completely banned because they are presumed to be unclean. Swarming insects like locusts and grasshoppers, and swarming animals on the ground from the mouse to the crocodile are taboo.

Jewish custom

Like the Jews in Israel, the U.S, Canada, Latin America, Africa, Australia, and other part of Asia, the Jews of Kerala, in their halcyon days, initiated and participated in all the important religious festivals and observances, customizing them when the need arose and

adopting some of the customs from other religious too, all within the framework laid out by their scriptures.²³ The beautiful amalgamation of cultures has often led to the evolution of certain customs among that are unique to the Jews of Kerala, distinguishing them from their counter parts in the rest of the world. For instance, the rabbi of a Jewish congregation is generally considered as its spiritual leader. But in the absence of rabbis among Cochin Jews, this position is occupied by the elder male members of the community. Also, women belonging to the orthodox Jewish communities are prohibited from singing in the public, especially when men are present. However, the women of the Cochin Jew diaspora have a long-standing tradition of singing devotional folk songs, hymns and prayers, often composed in the dialect of Judeo-Malayalam. Women were also educated in Hebrew, recited Hebrew prayers along with men and read the torch.

In a custom similar to that practised by the Hindus, Cochin Jews always remove their footwear before entering synagogues. They are also known to wear brightly coloured cloths for festive occasions and celebrate Hanukkah in a way similar to Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights.

At the same time, the Kerala society also respected the customs of the Jewish community since the times they settled in the state. A prime example of this is when as early as in 1550 the king of Cochin refused to launch an attack on enemy forces on a Saturday because his Jewish warriors were observing Sabbath (the day of rest for Jews observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening). Even for university examinations that were scheduled on Sabbath day, Jewish students were allowed to wait till Saturday sun down to take their

²³ Ibid., p. 528

examination. Of the White Jews, Sir Charles Lawson observes: “Their complexion is not exactly European, but it is the pale olive freshness most nearly allied to it, and the delicate carnation of the tips of the fingers proves that no native blood flows in their veins. Their features are fine, if not (especially with the elders) noble; they have broad and high forehead, Roman nose, thick lips, generally, though concealed by a most luxuriant, jet-black, curly beard.”²⁴

The women, when young, have mostly a Spanish style of face, though, in a few cases, the pale-coloured hair and light brown or blue eyes would induce one to expect a more northern parentage. They are rather short and, from their mode of costume and inelegance of gait, are not remarkable for any other charms than that of a face which, for contour and expression, may be called truly beautiful. But, whilst the Jew seems to improve in appearance as years creep on, the Jewess ‘fades as the leaf fades’ and, at 30 years of age, is plainness itself. The children look almost leprously white, so habituated does the eye become in India to dark skins”. Speaking of the Black Jews, he says: “Some of them have a *Hebrew*²⁵ cast of countenance; but by far the greater number is indistinguishable from the natives around. The White Jews wear a long tunic of rich colour, a waist coat with the bright silver or gold buttons, which are fastened in by a fine silver or gold chain attached to the topmost hole, and full white trousers. Ordinarily, they go about with a skull cap, but put on a turban when they go to the synagogue.

On occasions of festivals, the dresses are very handsome; robes of silk, velvet or satin, of a scarlet, blue, green or amber tint, with costly shawls wrapped round the head and

²⁴ Ibid., p. 529

²⁵ *Hebrew*- The ancient language of the Jewish people

waist, and lavish display of gold chains and buttons made of English sovereigns. The ordinary dress of the Jewesses is by no means so graceful as that of the men. Usually they are very plainly dressed, but for grand occasions they have magnificent costumes which are but seldom used, composed of cloth of gold and silver. After the first few years of their marriage, they discard all rich attire and take to scanty skirts and jackets they have copied from the native around them. The cloth is fastened round the waist by a gold or silver belt, from whence hangs a bunch of gold or silver keys. When dressed for festivals they wear a square head-dress, with a veil which falls over their shoulders as low as the waist. Of ornaments they wear plenty, especially rich gold chains curiously fashioned together with gold coins of various sorts strung together and worn round the neck. Married women, after the birth of their second child, generally leave off their jewels and dress plainly.²⁶ Of late, the young Jewess has taken a fancy for the Bagdad dress, which consists of a scanty skirt of rich cloth, satin, figured barege or muslin, made in one piece, from the neck to the ankles, gathered in behind, fastened up in front and open from the throat, nearly as far down as the waist, showing a white handkerchief or stomacher. After marriage, they always cover their heads, either with a handkerchief or, on grand occasions, with a little gold coloured cap with long golden tassel.

The Black Jews dress more or less like the native Mahomedans. Many of them put on shirts and have skull caps like Jonaka Mappilas. They generally use coloured cloths, both men and women. The Jews generally shave their heads or crop the hair leaving locks at the sides brought down in front of the ears, which distinguish them from the other sections of the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 530

population. They invariably use wooden sandals. Their liturgical language is Hebrew, while, at home, they speak Malayalam, the language of the country.

The White Jews celebrate their marriages on Sun days, but the Black Jews still retain the ancient custom of celebrating them on Tuesday after sunset. They have adopted the Hindu custom of tying a tali round the neck of the bride this is done by some near female relative of the bride groom, generally his sister, amidst the joyful Shouts (Kurava) of women. Divorce is not affected through a civil tribunal; marriages being dissolved by return in the amount mentioned in the Ketubah or the marriage document. Though polygamy is not prohibited, monogamy is the rule.

The Cochin Jews observe the Sabbath strictly. The great feasts of the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles are celebrated with the most exact attention to ritual. The feast of Trumpets is also observed. So also, the Day of Atonement and the anniversary of the Destruction of Jerusalem.

Jewish festivals

Jewish festivals and celebrations are focused around the import events in the history of the Jews. Most of the Jewish holidays are the pilgrim festivals. A few of the important Jewish festivals are Rosh Hashanah (New Year), YomKippur (Day of Atonement), sukkot (day of thanks giving), Hanukah (festival of lights), Purim (festival of merry making), Pessach (festival of freedom) and Shavout (festival of weeks).

Among this one of the most important festival is Hanukkah. Hanukkah is the Jewish Festival of Lights and it remembers the rededication of the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Hanukkah is the Jewish word for dedication. Hanukkah last for eight days and

starts on the 25th of Kislev, the month in the Jewish calendar that occurs at about the same time as December. There are many theories pertaining to the migration of Jews to the Cochin city of Kerala. As per one such belief, the people of the Jewish community migrated to this port city in the first century after the second temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in the 72 AD. The Jewish community gradually settled in and around Mattancherry and Kochi. There still a decent Jewish population in Cochin, which religiously observe their various Jewish festivals and customs till date. Another important festival of the Jews, celebrated with gusto in Kochi, Hanukkah or the Festival of Light. The eight-day long festival is being organized by the Koder House Fort Kochi in association with the Jewish community. The holiday of Hanukkah is related to the revolution of Jews that took place 2000years ago against their Greek oppressors under the leadership of Mattathias the Hasmonean and also to unite against the suppression of Judaism. At the rededication of the temple after the revolt, there was sanctified oil to burn in the temple menorah only for one day: it burned for eight days until new oil was sanctified. The holiday was declared to celebrate this miracle and the permanence of the Jewish tradition.

The songs of Everayi and other Cochin Jewish songs

Cochin Jewish Malayalam folk songs, containing special turns of phrase in Judeo-Malayalam, traditionally sung by Jewish women in Kerala, are currently being revived. These Malayalam Jewish folk songs cover biblical, wedding, historical, and other themes. In the "Song of Everayi,"²⁷ the narrator cells of one Ephraim the *Mudaliar*,²⁸ accompanied by a

²⁷ P. M Jussay, *The Jews of Kerala*, Calicut University, Calicut, 2005, p. 77

²⁸ *Mudaliar*- Means a supervisor or an official

Rabbi Abraham the Dutch who began his sojourn to Cochin in Jerusalem, stopping in Egypt and Yemen and ending up in Paloor Bay in Kerala with a carpenter who constructed the synagogue.²⁹

In observant Jewish societies, men are not permitted to hear women sing. This ban is called *koi isha* and applies only to singing outside of synagogue prayers. (Because, it is believed that in the synagogue, the women's voices will be not being heard separately from that of the entire group of male and female worshippers.).³⁰ There have been, of course, several interpretations of this prohibition, from various rabbis. In modern-day Israel, with its Westernized population and mixed-sex youth groups and a lively cultural and music milieu, such prohibitions are no more an issue.

However, among the Kerala Jews, considered very orthodox, there was a clear deviation from this practice. Mixed singing was a matter of everyday life, with the distinction that women sang only religious songs (Hebrew *Piyyutim*) in the synagogue - while sitting in a different section.

Outside, in their homes and various life cycle functions likes weddings, childbirth, circumcisions and festivals, the Cochini women had a wonderful repertoire of songs- ranging from Biblical tales to singing praises of their ancestor-prince Joseph Rabban and the Cochin Maharaja.³¹ Women's lives in medieval Kerala revolved around the rituals in the synagogue

²⁹ Raphael Patel, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p. 256

³⁰ Ibid., p. 257

³¹ P. M Jussay, Op. cit., p. 78

and festivities in the community and the songs reflected the social life of the times.³² Some songs, with many unique Tamil words are believed to be very old, because Malayalam came into popular usage only by the 15th century. Almost all the songs are original, written and set to tune by Cochin Jews. Songs in praise of Joseph Rabban, the merchant who was given princely privileges by Cheraman Perumal Bhaskara Ravi Varman in 1000 A.D., talk of palanquins and old traditions, testifying to their antiquity.³³

Birth and Rituals

The birth of a baby in a Jewish family is attended with great rejoicing and prayerfulness. Blessings are sought for the mother and the baby at the synagogue and an apt Hebrew name, as well as a civic name, is selected. If it is a baby boy, he is given a name after the Brit Milah, or the ceremony of circumcision is conducted on the eighth day of his birth. This is never postponed even when the eighth day is a Jewish day of rest (Sabbath) or the Jewish Day of Atonement (YomKippur).

Traditionally, the baby is taken to the Jewish place of worship, the synagogue, for circumcision where two chairs are placed in front of the Mohel, a pious man trained in the holy art of circumcision. The baby's godmother (usually his grandmother or an aunt) brings him into the sanctuary, and the godfather (usually the grandfather or an uncle) holds him during the rite while remaining seated in one of the chairs. The second chair is kept empty. It

³² A. I Simon, *The Songs of the Jews of Cochin and Their Historical Significance*, University of Florida Libraries, 1947, pp. 8-10

³³ P. M Jussay, Op. cit., p. 81

is reserved for Prophet Elijah who, the Jews believe, maintains their contact with the almighty.

If the baby is a firstborn son born to a Jewish mother through natural means, a ceremony called the *Pidyon Haben*³⁴ is conducted on the thirtieth day of his birth. Here, the father of the child takes him to a *Kohen*³⁵ and “redeems” him from the obligation to become a priest by making a payment of five silver *Shekels*³⁶ in the presence of a Minyan (a group of ten Jewish men whose presence is mandatory for performing prayers and certain rituals).

As there were no Kohens in their community in Kerala, most of the Malabari Jews, either did not observe this rite or waited for years until a kohen came here from another country. Such was the deep divide between the two Jewish communities of Kerala.

Nercha of Jews

Nercha is an offering to God. People belong to all religious groups in the Muziris region of Kerala considered, Nercha as an important religious activity, so do the Jews lived in that geographic region. Jews used to offer Nercha to God and sing special songs like 'Everai' during Nercha time. Nercha was offered on Nehmiya Motha's Remembrance Day also. Nehmiya Motha was a Jewish mystic and poet and he came to Kochi, Kerala from Yemen. Motha died in 1916 and his grave is considered to be a centre of religious activities.

³⁴ *Pidyon Haben*- The redemption of the first-born son

³⁵ *Kohen*- a descendant of the hereditary family of priests

³⁶ *Shekels*- Coins of ancient Israel

Jewish Wedding



Figure 2.2: A Kerala Jewish Wedding

The wedding usually takes place after a betrothal and is sealed as a legal contract and a divine act. As per the most ancient custom, in times when it was customary for the man to provide a home for his bride, the wedding ceremony took place under a canopy (that symbolized the home) called Huppah. Gradually, it gave way to the tall it, the prayer shawl of the Jews, draped over the heads of the couple. Still later, the hood of the groom's headgear was extended to cover his bride's head too. The modern version of it is the white veil worn by the bride. The couple also signs a *Ketubah*,³⁷ or marriage contract which is read out loud to the congregation. Some of the handwritten Ketubbahs belonging to the cochin Jews, that

³⁷ *Ketubah*- is a Jewish marriage contract

are more than a hundred years old, are still preserved and on display at the Israeli museum, Jerusalem.³⁸

In Kerala, old photographs of Jewish wedding ceremonies show young brides wearing *pudava*³⁹ and embroidered white blouse or the native costume of sari with a veil covering their heads. In others, the wedding ceremony is seen conducted under a tasselled cloth canopy. The *pudava* cloth may later be used to drape a coffin and eventually sown into a *parokhet*⁴⁰. the grooms wore loose white trousers and knee length white shirt along with embroidered *sattriyah*⁴¹ or *kappa*⁴² and skull cap. Some wore western suits instead. The Jewish custom of the groom adorning his brides little finger with a ring made out of the silver coins gifted by the groom's father was retained (which would not be removed even upon her demise), and a local custom of the groom ties a *thali*⁴³ adopted.⁴⁴

The latest wedding to take place in the state was in two thousand eight after a gap of nearly two decades. The ceremony was conducted in the Thekkumbhagam synagogue, mattancherry.

³⁸ T. O Aleyas, *Syrian Manuel Samagra Kerala Charithram*, Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, Kottayam, 2015, p. 85

³⁹ *Pudava*, Ornate embroidered wrap skirt

⁴⁰ *parokhet*- curtain hanging in the holy ark where the holy book of the Jews , the Torah, is placed

⁴¹ *Sattriyah*- A coloured vest with removable metal buttons

⁴² *Kappa*- A buttonless long coat with a stiff collar made of solid coloured silk or fine cotton

⁴³ *Thali*, a tiny gold pendant worn as a symbol of a women's married status

⁴⁴ P. M Jussay, Op. cit., p. 97

Death and Mourning

In death too, the religious customs are meticulously followed. The dead are cleaned, dressed in white, laid in the coffin, taken to the graveyard in a procession, eulogized by friends in the congregation, and finally lowered into the grave. The coffins of the Jews of Kerala are generally buried along with a handful of soil from the Promised Land, Israel. The details of the departed are engraved on their tombstones in Hebrew, the language of Jews, and English. Seven days of mourning called shivah are observed, and after 30 days, the bereaved family is expected to resume normal life. There after memories of the dead are ritualistically recalled and observed on the anniversary called yahrzeit.

After the migration of Jews to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s many of the Jewish cemeteries in Kerala are presently in a state of disrepair. Archeological department of Kerala is looking at conservation plans for the Jewish cemetery in market road as part of a drive to preserve the rich Jewish heritage of the state.

Historical Monuments of Jews

The architectural scene of Kerala was influenced by many socio-cultural groups and religious thoughts from foreign lands. The sea board had promoted trade contacts with maritime nations Such as Israel, Rome, Arabia, and china even prior to the dawn of the Christian era. The trade contact would have paved the way of establishing settlements near the old port towns and gradually spreading in the interior. During the time of second cera kingdom, the old port city of Makotai (Kodungallur) had different parts occupied by these groups. For example, the cultural contact of Jews with kerala predates the time of Solomon and by fifteenth century there were Jewish settlements in Kodungallur, Kochi and other

coastal towns. The most important Jewish settlement is seen at Kochi near the mattancherry palace.⁴⁵ The architecture of the Cochin Paradesi Synagogue is marvelous. It is a beautiful monument having a ground floor that is used for religious studies, ritual practices and community purposes. In the gate house, there are rooms on the upper floor for Torah study, a room for elders and Judges of the community and archives for preserving historical documents. According to Shalva Wiel, the Synagogue architecture manifests the social structure and hierarchical social order of the Cochin Jewish community and its special relationship to the surrounding society. The old Synagogue is typical of the Cochin Jewish style, rectangular with a narrow staircase to the right of the entrance leading to an upper gallery where the women once sat in purdah behind lattice work screens. At the front of the central hall there is an ark, a wooden box or cupboard which houses the seven copies of the sacred Torah scrolls, hidden from view behind a silk hanging. Each of the ancient scrolls contains a cylindrical wooden carpet covered with sheets of beaten silver. On the top of each carpet is a solid gold crown studded with Rubies, Sapphires and Emeralds, one of them donated by the Maharaja⁴⁶ of Cochin in 1805. Narrow wooden benches are arranged in a horse shoe shape around the edge of the Synagogue, flanking the ark on three sides.⁴⁷

After Indian Independence in 1947 and the establishment of Israel as a nation, most Cochin Jews immigrated from Kerala to Israel. Most of the white Jews preferred to migrate to Australia and other common wealth communities. The Jews in Kerala had their DNA

⁴⁵ P. J Cherian, *Essays on the Cultural formation of Kerala*, Kerala state Gazetteers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, p. 283

⁴⁶ *Maharaja*, A Hindu prince ranking above a raja

⁴⁷ C Achuthamenon, *The Cochin State Manual*, State Editor, Gazetteers Department, Trivandrum, 1911, p. 50

analyzed and the natives of Israel preferred to go to their original home land. Thus, the Jews played a great role in the history of Kerala by opening international markets for the products of Kerala and creating a sense of awareness among the low castes to attain their rights and privileges and their upliftment in the society ⁴⁸

Decline of Kerala Jewish Population

For many centuries, the Jews of Kerala thrived in their adoptive land. Some scholars are reluctant to attribute this phenomenon to the prevailing atmosphere of religious tolerance in Kerala. Such a romantic notion has gained great popularity among the modern natives and tourists alike, especially when they see a synagogue situated in close proximity to a church, a mosque and a temple in a small village in the district of Ernakulam. The immigrant Jews, historians argue, were too few in number to pose a real threat to the native communities in the past. Left to fend for themselves, the refugees took up various professions, and became merchants, traders, artisans and every money-lender.

But over time, Jewish community became divided based on ethnicity and skin colour into *paradesi* “white” Jews of “pure “European or middle-eastern blood who claimed racial superiority, Malabari “black” Jews born of union between the European Jews and the natives, and the *Meshuchrarim*, a term often used derogatorily to refer to the slaves who were brought from Europe, as well as converts and their descendants who were considered as inferior. Though their religious customs were very similar, *paradesi* and Malabari Jews built different synagogues, refused to intermingle (let alone intermarry), and fought over a range of issues from ancestry to religious superiority some scholars opine that this racial polarization and

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 52

apartheid was a contributing factor to the dwindling population of Jewish community in Kerala.⁴⁹

During the times of their highest prosperity, the Jews of Kerala numbered in their thousands and worshipped at eight synagogues. Seven of them, located at Paravur, chennamangalam, mattancherry, market road and Jew Street in Ernakulam, and mala in Thrissur, were used by the “black” Malabari Jews, and the paradesi synagogue in mattancherry was patronized by the “white” paradesi Jews. At the present, the total number of Jews being 50 or much less, only one synagogue (the paradesi synagogue) is in active use by the worshippers.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ <https://www.keralatourism.org/judaism/Accessed> on 10.06.2020

⁵⁰ Ibid

CHAPTER IV

THE REMNANTS OF JEWISH SETTLEMENTS IN KERALA

The most important Jewish heritage structures in Kerala are the residences, cemeteries and synagogues.

Jewish Residences

Today, most of the early Jewish homes sold to non-Jews are substantially modified or refurbished. However, there are a few features that still make them identifiable. Sometimes you can trace Jewish symbols like *Menorah*¹ and *Magen David*² on the walls, windows and roof tops. For example, a few residences in Mattancherry still maintain the Star of David despite being converted into shops or warehouses. The best way to locate the home of a residing Jew is to look for the Mezuzah on the door post. Nailed to the doorpost of a Jewish home, Mezuzah is a small container made of wood, plastic or metal having a piece of parchment with the most important words from the Jewish Holy Book, Torah. It is customary among religious Jews to touch the mezuzah on entering or leaving the home. A few homes in the Synagogue Lane of Mattancherry with mezuzah are the residences of the remaining 9 Paradesi Jews. The Jew streets in Kerala are, Jew Street Mattancherry (Jewish residences with Mezuzah and Magen David) Jew Street, Ernakulam (today all shops in non-Jewish hands), Jew Street, Paravur (Twin Pillars), Jew Street, Mala (Gate House and Breezeway of

¹ *Menorah*- candlestick

² *Magen David*- Star of David

synagogue turned into shops), Jew Street, Chendamangalam (used to be a Jewish Market or Judakambolam), Jew Street, Calicut (identified in July 2011 as Jootha (Jew) Bazar)³

Cemeteries

Resting place of ancestors means a lot to the Jewish community. Sometimes they even carried tombstones from their old settlements while migrating to a newer place. The oldest Jewish tomb in India (dated 1269 AD) preserved in front of Chendamangalam synagogue is one such transferred from Kodungallur. Unlike Christian tombs in Kerala with Malayalam and English engravings, the Jewish graves have mostly Hebrew inscriptions. The Jewish year can be converted into modern Gregorian date if one can read the Hebrew letters. 'Reading Hebrew Tombstones' is an interesting site to read the Jewish tombs.⁴ The Jewish cemeteries in Kerala are; Paradesi Jewish Cemetery, Mattancherry, Malabari Jewish Cemetery, Mattancherry, Old Jewish Cemetery, Ernakulam, New Jewish Cemetery, Ernakulam, Paravur Jewish Cemetery, Mala Jewish Cemetery, Chendamangalam Jewish Cemetery⁵

Synagogues of Kerala

In Kerala there a mixture of Vernacular and colonial construction and design influences were blended with both broadly Jewish and specifically Kerala Jewish liturgical requirements to create a distinctive way of building and organizing synagogues. For this reason, the synagogues of Kerala, although not resolved in a way that made them distinctly

³ <http://jewishmonumentskerala.blogspot.com>. Accessed on 11-07-2020

⁴ Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India*, University of South Carolina Press, p. 83

⁵ Ibid.

and wholly "Jewish visually from the exterior, are unique in their architecture. In their interiors, the robot and hekhalot as quintessential Jewish elements may reveal that they synagogues, yet otherwise the space cannot be described as emphatically "Jewish." Rather, it is the compilation of multiple design and planning variables,⁶ make the Kerala synagogues milestone Jewish houses of prayer. The compilation of multiple design and planning variables, make the Kerala synagogues milestone Jewish houses of prayer. They represent a chapter of Judaic history when Jews freely built synagogues of their own volition by incorporating elements from a variety contemporary and historic local and outside influence fused with their particular religious and cultural needs.⁷The Jews of Kerala built places of worship, or synagogues, in the areas where they settled. Synagogues were traditionally designed as small structures. The interiors of all the synagogues were designed in such a way that as the worshippers looked towards the Ark and prayed, they faced Jerusalem. Therefore, all synagogues in Kerala were oriented towards the north-west.⁸

The architectural style of Kerala synagogues differs from those in the west. These synagogues are strongly influenced from earlier Hindu religious buildings on its design and construction. They are characterized by high slope roofs, thick laterite-stoned walls, large windows and doors, balcony and wood-carved ceilings.

Some of the architectural components of kerala synagogues;

⁶ Jay Arthur Waronker, *The Synagogues of Kerala: Their architecture, History, Context, and Meaning*, M.A Thesis, Cornell University, 2010, p. 49

⁷ Ibid., p. 50

⁸ A. Sreedhara Menon, *Keralasamskaram*, D.C Books, Kottayam, 2007, p. 69

Gatehouse: The rectangular gatehouse with a compound wall surrounding the synagogue is predominantly a Kerala feature. It functioned as a transition space where meetings were held, and houses the staircase leading to the women's seating area in the gallery of the synagogue.

Breezeway: A covered breezeway connects the gatehouse to the gallery of the sanctuary, which was the path used by women to gain access to their seating area. The passageway is often adorned with Kerala-style wooden struts.

Azara: Azara is an anteroom inside the sanctuary which serves as a buffer space.

Sanctuary: It is the space where all religious rituals are performed. The sanctuary in Kerala synagogues is usually a double-height rectangular hall. Only men were allowed to occupy the ground floor of the sanctuary.⁹

A Tebah/Bimah: Located at the centre of the sanctuary, adorned with brass balustrades, facing the ark Tebah is usually an elevated wooden platform or pulpit from which Torah, the holy book of Jews is read. Men sit on benches placed on either side of the bimah.¹⁰

A Heichal (Ark): Represents the altar, is a chest or cupboard in the synagogue where the Torah scrolls are kept. It is usually carved intricately and painted/gilded with teak wood. Unlike in the European Synagogues, where the ark is placed on the eastern wall, the synagogues in Kerala have the arks on the western wall facing Jerusalem.

⁹ www.sahapedia.org/cochinjewsandsevensynagogues. Accessed on 11-07-2020

¹⁰ Ibid.

A Balcony/Second Tebah: It is unique to the synagogues of Kerala. The balcony has two portions one for men and the other for ladies. The women's section had its own Bimah in the front which was separated by a grille and this was generally used only on special occasions like Sabbath (the Day of Rest for Jews observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening) or holidays. Wooden benches for the devotees to sit on were placed around the Bimah on the ground floor and also lined up against the walls. The floors were generally covered with carpets. Women's seating area is placed directly above the azara.

A Staircase: Leads to the balcony and is generally spiral in shape and made of wood. At times there are two staircases, one for men from the main hall inside the synagogue and the other for the ladies from a staircase room outside the synagogue;

A Jewish School: Is actually a classroom for Jewish children usually located behind the women's section on the first floor.

While each of these sacred buildings was built in Kerala in tune with the local style of architecture that made it merge with the local landscape, the interior proclaimed its distinctive otherness. For instance, the intricately carved flower motifs in high relief on the wooden ceilings (Poo Machchu) of these buildings were very much an indigenous component. But they cleverly accommodated an important symbol in Judaism, the Star of David, too. The Star of David is known by other names – Magen David (Hebrew for “The Shield of David”) and the Star of Redemption – each of which means “God”. This six-pointed star made up of two interwoven equilateral triangles contains deep symbolism.

Therefore, it is sacrosanct reminder to the worshippers in a synagogue of their connection with the Creator.¹¹

Kerala is today home to seven synagogue buildings, four of which are located in the city of Kochi. Of the four, two can be found at its Mattancherry district in Jew Town on Synagogue Lane: the Paradesi Synagogue, which was the only Jewish house of prayer built by the White, or Paradesi Jewish community and the sole synagogue in Kerala that remains fully intact and still operational, and the nearby Kadavumbagam Synagogue, which survives in part as a building although it has not been a house of prayer since 1955 when its congregation made up of Malabari Jews immigrated en masse to Israel. Two other synagogues in Kochi built by the Malabari Jews, also closed due to the diminished Jewish community since the mid1950s, are located on the mainland of Ernakulam: the Tekkumbagam and Kadavumbagam Synagogues.¹²

Kerala's three other former synagogues, all built by the Malabari Jews, can be found to the north of Kochi in the town of Parur (Paravoor) and the nearby village of Chendamangalam, which are both in Ernakulam district, and at farther a field in Mala in Kerala Thrissur district.

Chendamangalam Synagogue

The Chendamangalam Synagogue (Chennamangalam Synagogue) is a Jewish place of worship located in the Ernakulam district of Kerala near the banks of the river Periyar. It was built and patronized by Malabari Jews (also called "Black" Jews), or Jews born of a

¹¹ <http://jewishmonumentskerala.blogspot.com>. Accessed on 12-07-2020

¹² Ibid.

union between the European Jews and the natives. The exact time of the construction of this synagogue is shrouded in mystery. Some claim it was put up in 1166 CE. The oldest surviving tombstone in the graveyard beside it, dated 1269, records in Hebrew that it is the final resting place of “Sarah, Daughter of Israel”. The synagogue is believed to have been rebuilt in 1614. Today, however, it is popular and attracts visitors as the “Kerala Jews Lifestyle Museum” and is supported jointly by the State Department of Archaeology and the Muziris Heritage Project.¹³

The uniqueness of the Chendamangalam Synagogue lies more in its location than itself. It is situated in close proximity to a temple, a church and a mosque within a few hundred meters of each other. It is said that every eight or nine years, the festivals of all four places of worship coincide, creating a spontaneous, totally unorchestrated, but harmonious mix of sounds from the temple conch, the church bell, the muezzin’s call and the shofar [Jewish horn]

The synagogue at Chennamangalam reflects traditional Kerala architecture and has utilized western construction technology. Some of the visual attractions of this synagogue are undoubtedly the majestic altar, which stands out for its intricate artwork. The synagogue has a high roof, which at first sight would itself convince one about the difficulties that the craftsmen might have encountered while fixing it. The ceiling of the roof has a brightly coloured chequered pattern, with huge wooden beams giving additional support to the roof. A wooden balcony with beautifully carved balusters and railings is another attraction of this synagogue. There is another balcony, meant exclusively for women. A marvellous craftsmanship in wood, a spiral wooden staircase leads to this

¹³ Jay Arthur Waronker, *Op. cit.*, p. 142

balcony.

Chennamangalam is also an example of religious tolerance and harmonious co-existence, which can be felt by the presence of temple, mosque and church located close to the synagogue.

Paradesi Synagogue, Mattancherry

The Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry is a Jewish place of worship located in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. It is believed to have been built in 1568 by Spanish-speaking Jews on the land granted by the king of Cochin near his residence and a Hindu temple.¹⁴ As it was constructed by “foreigners” it gained the name Paradesi, the Malayalam word for foreign. It was badly damaged sometime in 1663 during the battle with the Portuguese but was restored within a few years after the Dutch emerged victoriously.¹⁵

The structure stands as a white-walled rectangular building with a tile roof and wrought-iron gates decorated with the Star of David. A Dutch-style clock tower with four clocks, featuring four different numeral styles—Hebrew, Roman, Malayalam, and Arabic—was added by the Dutch East India Company’s principal merchant in India, Ezekiel Rahabi, in the mid-18th century.

The synagogue houses gold- and silver-decorated Torah scrolls, an intricately carved teak ark, a rug that was a gift of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I, paintings portraying Jewish history, and Belgian crystal chandeliers and decorative lamps in silver, brass, and glass. A unique feature is the hand-painted tiles paving the floor, which were brought

¹⁴ Nathan Kats, *Who Are the Jews of India*, University of California Press, London, 2000, p. 40

¹⁵ Ibid.

from China. The synagogue's most-cherished possessions are the 1,600-year-old copper plates on which are inscribed the community's charter of independence and the privileges granted to the Jewish community by the raja of Cochin.¹⁶

In earlier times, only the Paradesi ("White") Jews, or Jews of European origin, were allowed to be permanent members of the congregation. The Malabari ("Black") Jews, or mixed-race Jews born to Europeans and the natives, were allowed the right to pray at the synagogue. But they were not considered as full members. The Meshuchrarim, or freed former slaves and their descendants, were not allowed inside and had to sit on the steps outside. They had no communal rights either. Perceiving this injustice, Abraham Barak Salem, an Indian nationalist and member of the Meshuchrarim Cochin Jew community successfully fought against this discriminatory practice in the 1900s. His non-violent means of agitation inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's methods like hunger strike and prayer boycott earned him the moniker 'the Jewish Gandhi'.¹⁷

Paravur Synagogue

The Paravur Synagogue is a Jewish place of worship located in Ernakulam district of Kerala. It was patronized by Malabari Jews (also called "Black" Jews), or Jews born of union between the European Jews and the natives. The faithful believe that this synagogue was built in 1616 on the same site as and over the ruins of an earlier one established in 1164. As per the engraving on a stone slab placed outside the synagogue, it was the fourth mudaliyar

¹⁶ www.sahapedia.org/cochinjewsandsevensynagogues. Accessed on 12-07-2020

¹⁷ Ibid.

(community leader of the Jews of Kerala), David Yaacov Castiel, who took the initiative to rebuild it.¹⁸

Of all the synagogues in Kerala, it has the longest and largest structure. This synagogue is the result of a beautiful amalgamation of Jewish and Kerala architectural designs. While the general layout with the prayer hall, with its the Holy Ark (a niche that houses the holy book of the Jews, the Torah) and the wooden rosettes decorating the ceiling, is that of a typical synagogue, features like the outer *Padippura*¹⁹, the lamps in the prayer room and the special seating arrangement for female devotees are all indicative of the influence of the adopted land of the Jews. Interestingly, it also carries a few Portuguese elements.

The Paravur Synagogue was bombarded during the time of the Portuguese invasion – in 1635 – and later rebuilt by a wealthy family. It was damaged yet again by the invading armies of Tipu Sultan (the ruler of erstwhile Mysore) in the late 1700s during the Second Anglo Mysore wars. But it was renovated only much later.

With the migration of Jewish community of Kerala en masse to the nation of Israel, their Promised Land, by the 1950s and 1960s it became increasingly difficult for the last remaining members of the congregation to conduct religious services and maintain the Paravur Synagogue. The original Bimah (an elevated platform or pulpit for the reading of the Torah) and the Holy Ark were dismantled and taken to Israel in the 1990s and the ownership of the synagogue was transferred to the Government of Kerala in 2009. As part of the Muziris Heritage Project jointly organized and conducted by the Departments of Tourism and

¹⁸ Jay Arthur Waronker, Op. cit., p. 104

¹⁹ *Padippura*- Gate way to the main building

Archaeology of Kerala, the building underwent substantial renovation between 2010 and 2013. Currently, the Paravur Synagogue is known as the “Kerala Jews History Museum”.

Mala Synagogue, Thrissur

The Mala Synagogue is a Jewish place of worship located in Thrissur district of Kerala which was patronized by Malabari (or “Black”) Jews born of union between the European Jews and the natives. It is believed to have been constructed in 1400 CE and renovated in 1792, after it sustained serious damage during Tipu Sultan’s attack in the 1780s. The inscriptions on the frieze in the synagogue’s gallery engraved in Hebrew and Malayalam put the year as AD 1909 when a major refurbishment occurred. The Jewish populace of Mala, as in the case of a majority of the Cochin Jewish community, left for Israel in 1955.²⁰ Subsequently fell into disuse. Originally the synagogue had a gatehouse and breezeway connecting the sanctuary, which was demolished recently after being cut off from the building by land encroachments and constructions.²¹

Thekkumbhagam Synagogue Mattancherry

The Thekkumbhagam Synagogue in Mattancherry was a Jewish place of worship located in Ernakulam district of Kerala. It was patronized by Malabari Jews (or “Black” Jews, born of union between the European Jews and the natives). After the congregation worshipping at this synagogue left for Israel, it was demolished and a house was constructed in its place. However, some of its relics were recovered which are presently housed at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, University of California in Berkeley

²⁰ Yulia Egorova, *Jews and India: History, Image, Perceptions*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p.106

²¹ Ibid., p. 107

Kadavumbhagam Synagogue, Mattancherry

The *Kadavumbhagam*²² Synagogue in Mattancherry is a Jewish place of worship located in Ernakulam district of Kerala. It was built sometime around 1549. A couple of centuries later, it fell into neglect and became a warehouse. Today only a shell of a once glorious structure remains. Much of the intricate woodwork on the ceiling carrying motifs typical to Kerala's style of architecture and interiors carved in teak wood including beams, lintels, doors, doorposts, steps and the second Bimah (an elevated platform or pulpit for the reading of the Torah, the holy book of the Jews) attached to the women's section along with its screen were dismantled and taken to Israel in 1991. The Holy Ark (a niche at an end of the prayer hall where the holy book of the Jews, the Torah, is kept behind curtains) had already been shipped to Israel a few decades earlier where it was installed in an orthodox German synagogue in Moshav Nehalim. Today the interiors of the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue are placed on display in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Kadavumbhagam Synagogue, Ernakulam

The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue is a Jewish place of worship located in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. Kadavumbhagam translates as 'the side on the landing place (for boats). According to some, the foundation stone was laid in the 13th century in Cranganore (present-day Kodungallur), said to be the place of the first Jewish settlement, and relocated to its present site in early 18th century. The architectural beauty of its front façade with its glass lamps, two-storey high ceiling decorated with wooden carvings of lotuses, and red and gold Holy Ark (a niche at an end of the prayer hall where the holy book of the Jews

²² *Kadavumbhagam*- River side

called Torah is kept behind curtains) was noteworthy in its heydays. But with diminishing numbers of devotees, the synagogue fell into disuse and was eventually closed down for prayers in 1972.

It stood witness to cruel vandalism: some of its lamps and brass pillars were stolen, even the Bimah was not spared. The Torah used in this synagogue was shifted to Israel. However, the building was renovated in 2018. Currently, it is under the care of Mr. Elias Josephai, better known in the neighbourhood as Babu.

Thekkumbhagam Synagogue, Ernakulam

The Thekkumbhagam Synagogue, built by Malabari Jews in 1950, is a Jewish place of worship located in Ernakulam district of Kerala. Nearly three-and-a-half centuries later, the structure weakened and started deteriorating. As a result, it was demolished in the 1930s and reconstructed later.²³

The current structure was constructed between mid to late 1930s, and it followed the architectural style prevalent in Kerala at that time, making it notably different from the other synagogues which were constructed a few centuries ago. Its beauty lies primarily in the stained-glass windows. Currently, it is under the care of Mr. Elias Josephai, better known in the neighbourhood as Babu.

²³ Jay Arthur Waronker, *Op. cit.*, p. 227

Lost Synagogues in Kerala

According to traditions, in 70 AD the Jew established their settlements at Cranganore, Palur, Pullut, Madai, Tir-Tur and Saudi.²⁴ The first three are in south and last one in North. In time, due to persecution first by the Moors in the twelfth century, the natural disaster in fourteenth (1341 AD) century later in the sixteenth century persecution by Moors and then Portuguese, and of many various reasons the Jews living in these early settlements shifted to more secure places and established the settlements. In the process, the earliest synagogues were abandoned and lost, and the next generation of buildings was built. None of these synagogues survives, yet through narratives and the Jewish folksongs sung by the women in Malayalam, some things are known about them.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., p. 98

²⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The Jews were the miniscule and ancient community. They arrived in Kerala as traders around ten centuries ago and have made rich contributions to our culture. The Jew street and seven synagogues all hold testimony to the Jewish influence in Kerala history. The Jews of Kerala made substantial contribution to the socio-economic life of the land. They maintained caste and colour prejudices among themselves, and such distinctions were further encouraged by the caste system that prevailed in Kerala. But socially, they could create awareness among the low caste Hindus, since they could appear fully dressed, covering the upper part of their bodies, and wearing the same ornaments as the high caste Hindu women. Their contribution to the economic prosperity of the land by opening international markets for the products of Kerala is praiseworthy. Ship building industry was developed is one another advantage. The White Jews synagogues at Mattancherry and Cranganore are artistic and architectural monuments which have added to the cultural glory of the country. With the community migrating to Israel, their promised land, the heritage lies in tatters. Dwindling population and neglected synagogues reflect the predicament they face.

It has always been important in this work documenting and writing about synagogue architecture that include not only the grand in scale, richly decorated, or spatially complex examples, but also the more modest and less architecturally distinctive ones. The synagogues of Kerala, far from grand in scale or incorporating the most lavish of building materials, may also not be the most understated structures, yet they are prime examples of this more understated logic. They are structures within the canon of architectural history that beautifully express the influences of a variety of local and foreign, religious and secular construction traditions on the ancient Jewish building typology. They are all clear examples

of how the vernacular traditions of a place, ones created out of climatic and cultural factors and concerns, influenced the development of a formula for several rounds of synagogue design and construction.

The Kerala Jews were never a homogeneous community who spoke with a single voice. They originated from various parts of the world at different times. Definite subgroups were established, and they normally lived separate lives including when it came time to pray. Some of the Kerala Jews were wealthy and pursued professional occupations, while others were less affluent and were involved in working class trades. Communities of Jews existed in the city, small towns, or villages. Regardless of these differences, they communally established a tradition of building synagogues in a certain way. While their details and arrangements vary from place to place, the overall pattern of a compound with distinct exterior, partially enclosed, and fully interior spaces linked in a processional path emerged. The incorporation of an azara, gallery/balcony level, separate seating from men and women, the unique second tebah with women's seating area behind accessed by its own stair, and the shape and expression of the heckal and ground-floor tebah filtered from one synagogue to the next. The fact that, at some point early on, a prototype for a synagogue was created in Kerala and subsequently adhered to is significant.

In a time when the study of less than monumental or high architecture is gaining both respectability and an audience, the survey and documentation of the synagogues of Kerala is a timely undertaking. It seeks to examine how a tiny minority living in a small outpost of the Diaspora for centuries if not millennia managed to maintain their own identity living among majority neighbors despite centuries of political and social change. The results of how the Jews of Kerala chose to express themselves architecturally in their synagogues are interesting

and even surprising. While monumental buildings and those designed by leading architects will always receive top billing among many historians and much of the public at large, the study of more ordinary, vernacular buildings, especially in relationship to their cultural and natural context, is an area of architectural history and theory which does have appeal to a curious audience and should therefore not be overlooked. The study and documentation of the synagogues built in Kerala is timely. Beginning in the mid-1950s with the mass immigration of the community to Israel, the majority of the buildings were left behind and, over time, they mostly ceased to operate as houses of prayer. Decommissioned, some were converted to other private and public functions. Even with those synagogues they did manage to remain active, the small and aging remaining community did not have the means to always properly maintain them. As a consequence, especially in light of Kerala's particularly wet and hot humid, they suffered. In very recent years, however, as a result of renewed interest by the former Kerala Jewish community now living in Israel, other sympathetic foreign Jews, historic preservationists and architects, anthropologists and historians, and particularly leading forces of the government of Kerala who have come to recognize the cultural value of these buildings as part of the State's centuries-old history, the Kerala 263 synagogues are entering a bright new phase. Most of them are now being preserved and better maintained, and many are even being carefully restored by professionals. Many old synagogues are completely lost and their historic sites are not yet clearly identified or geo-located. Today the Paradesi synagogue is the only active synagogue in Kerala in which prayers are conducted by the Jewish community.

After the changing role and functions of synagogues as they have been remodelled into museums in Cochin, the architectures have to be re-examined in the context of memory

and explore how new places have developed to allow a counter-memory to challenge the dominant narrative of museum in general. The historical authenticity of the revival/restoration is a goal pursued in the synagogues converted into Jewish museums, in which the historical design is the most impressive element of the exhibition. The Jewish culture is that the totality of wisdom, practices, folkways and so forth- the content of all our texts, songs, poems, artwork, stories and axioms- that constitutes what we choose to remember and record or write of Jewish experience. Jews left cochin and the synagogues remained a nostalgic yearning for Jewish folkways that once sustained us as a people apart.

GLOSSARY

Angadi	- A Shop
Animism	- some forms of ancestor Worship and nature worship
El Shadai	- is often translated as my lord or lord. Shadai is god of Heaven
Hebrew	- The ancient language of the Jewish people
Kadavumbhagom	- River side
Kappa	- A buttonless long coat with a stiff collar made of solid coloured silk or fine cotton
Ketubah	- is a Jewish marriage contract
Kohen	- a descendant of the hereditary family of priests
Magen David	- Star of David
Maharaja	- A Hindu prince ranking above a raja
Malayali	- refers to the people from the mountains who lived beyond the Western Ghats
Menorah	- candlestick
Meshuchrarim	- former slaves, some of mixed African European descent. They were not allowed to marry White Jews.
Mudaliar	- Means a supervisor or an official
Padippura	- Gate way to the main building
Paradesi	- Person from a foreign land
Parokhet	- curtain hanging in the Holy Ark where the holy book of the Jews, the Torah is placed
Pidyon Haben	- The redemption of the first-born son
Pudava	-Ornate embroidered wrap skirt

Rabbi	- Jewish priest
Sattriyah	- A coloured vest with removable metal buttons
Shekels	- Coins of ancient Israel
Sultan	- A Muslim Sovereign
Synagogue	- The Jewish place of worship
Talmud	- The collection of ancient Jewish laws and traditions for religious and social matters
Thali	- a tiny gold pendant worn as a symbol of a women's married status
Thekkumbhagam	- southern border town of Paravur municipality
Torah	- The holy book of the Jews
Totemism	- is a belief about the relationship between people and nature
Yom Kippur	- Day of Atonement

Appendix-I



Figure 1: The tombstone of 'Namiah Mubah' at Mattancherry, Photographs taken by Rajalakshmi T.S on 10-01-2020

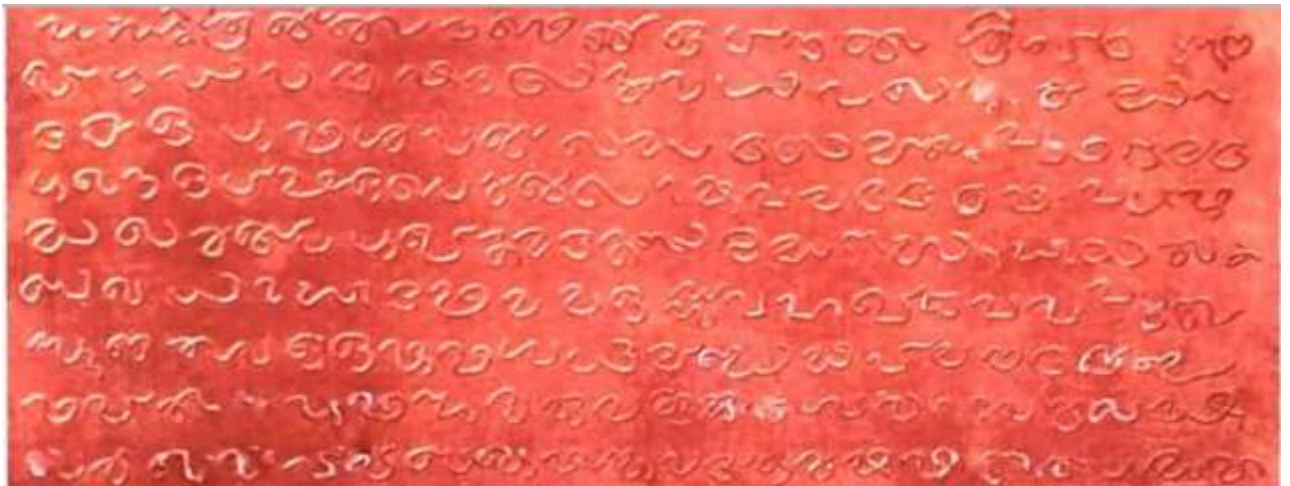


Figure 2: Jewish Copper Plate- BazalelEliahu, My Motherland My Fatherland, Family Magazine, 2003, p.55



Figure 3: Bazalel Eliahu, My Motherland My Fatherland, Family Magazine, 2003, p.53



Figure 4: A tombstone, Bazalel Eliahu, My Motherland My Fatherland, Family Magazine, 2003, p.48



Figure 5: The paradesi Synagogue, Bazalel Eliahu, My Motherland My Fatherland, Family Magazine, 2003, p.46



Figure 6: Jewish Pond in Madayipara, known as Juda Kulam, jewsofmalabar.blogspot.com
Accessed on 12-07-2020



Figure 7 Clock Tower Fort Kochi, <https://www.google.com> accessed on 12-07-2020

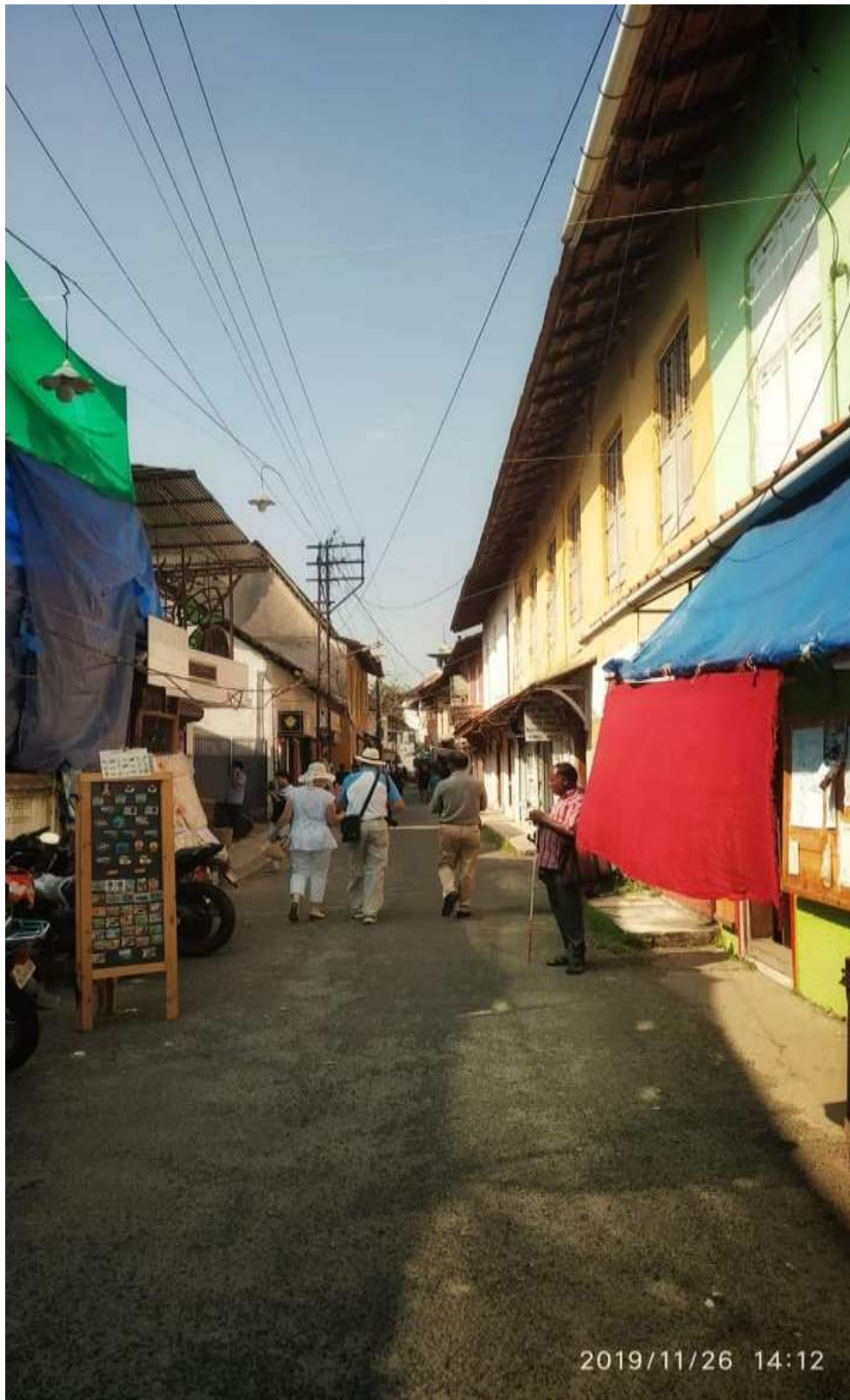


Figure 8: Jew Street, photographs taken by Rajalakshmi T.S on 26-11-2019



Figure 9: Chendamangalam Synagogue <https://www.google.com> Accessed on 12-07-2020



Figure 10: Antique shops, Jew Street, <https://www.google.com> Accessed on 12-07-2020

Appendix- II

Maps

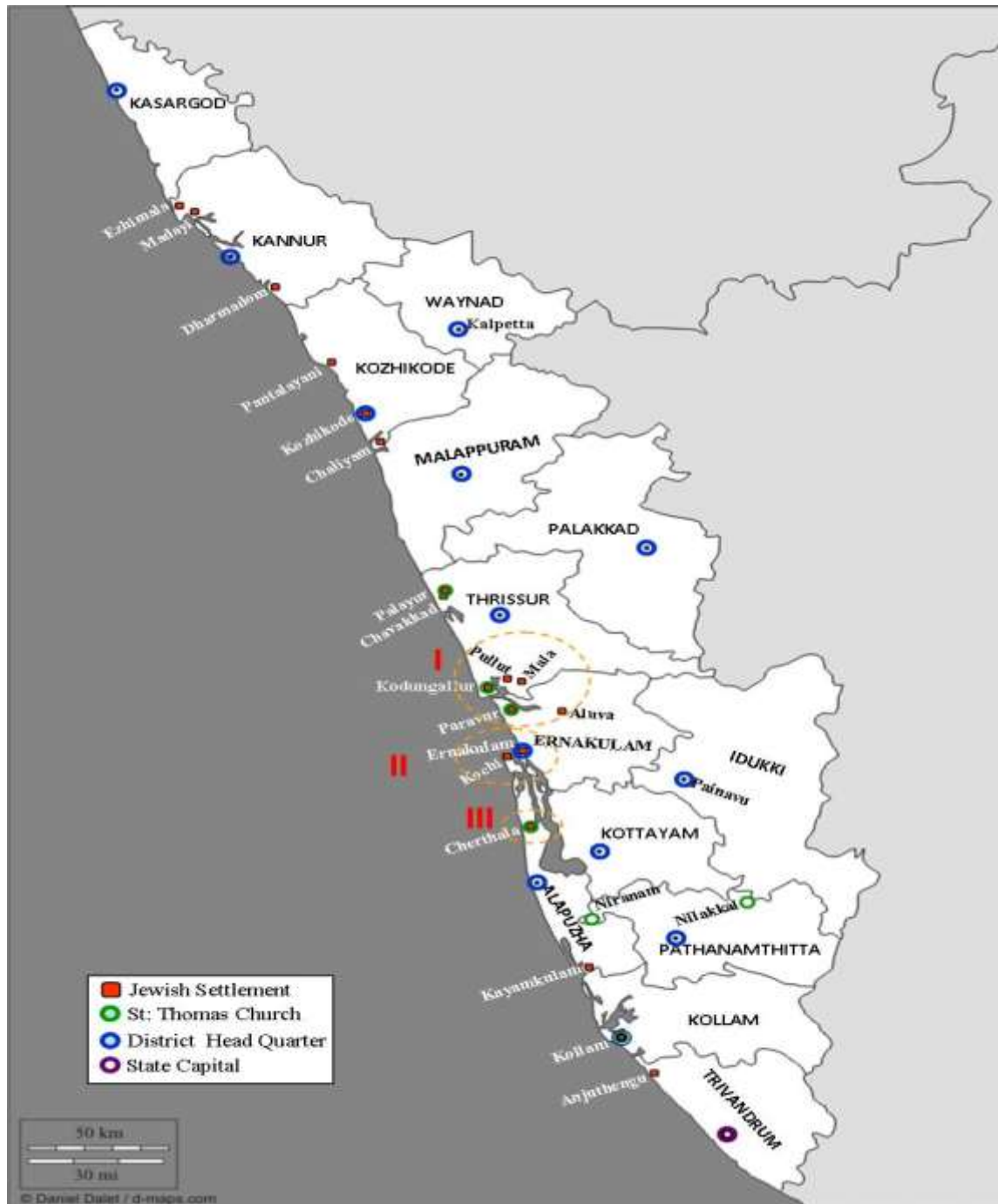


Figure 1: Jewish settlements in Kerala <https://www.google.com>

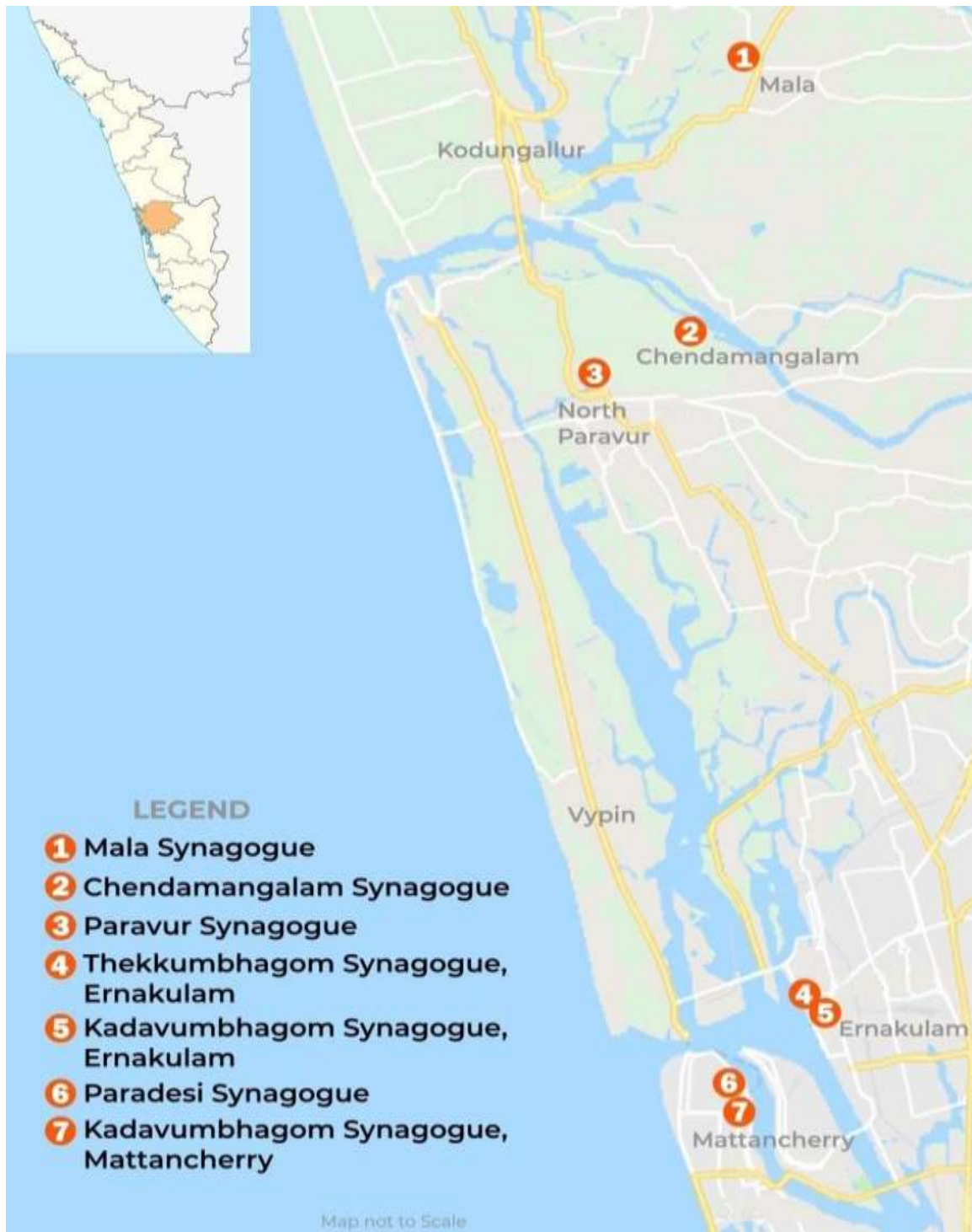


Figure 2: Jewish Synagogues in Kerala <https://www.google.com>

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