

# IMPACT OF JEWISH CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE ON KERALA SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

Judaism, Christianity and Islam arrived India much before they reached the west. The famous Jewish Copper Plate Grant of Emperor Bhaskara Ravi Varman dated 1000 AD and the Jews continued to enjoy a high standing in society. For centuries after the Jews formed an important commercial community in central Kerala. Jews believe in a single deity. Their religious observances conform in every way to the Jewish norms established by the 'halacha' and they kept contact with mainstream Judaism through many generations. The Cochin Jews have never suffered from anti-semitism on the part of their Hindu neighbours. The Jews lived on the Malabar Coast were centered on the Synagogue, which corporately owned estates in each settlement. The various stages of the life cycle are also marked with ceremonies. The Jewish diaspora is vanishing from Kerala society. An important contribution of Jews was in the field of literature as large number of folk songs. The architecture of the Cochin Pardeshi Synagogue is marvelous, used for religious studies, ritual practices and community purposes.

## INTRODUCTION

Jews have formed part of community in Kerala from very early days. According to the tradition, they came to the Kerala Coast in 68 AD in order to escape from religious persecution at home. They settled at Cranganore, Palayar, Mala and Pullut. Most importantly religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam trace their arrival in India to the Malabar region of Southern India which is currently the modern state of Kerala. Since ancient times, Kerala has been the centre of the Indian spice trade where Greek, Romans, Jews, Arabs and Chinese came for grabbing their part of share. To be precise, the first Jewish, Christian and Islamic settlements of India were established in a place called Cranganore (Kodungallur) in Kerala.

Among the three major Jewish communities in India, the 'Kerala Jews' popularly known as 'Cochin Jews' are the most ancient (2500 year ago). It is said that, out of the 148 nations where Jews were never persecuted by the natives. Gradually, Jews of Kerala became organized into three distinct groups, but the different communities interacted very less among themselves. First one is 'Meyuhassim' (privileged) or Malabari Jews; the largest and the most ancient group considered to have arrived in India as merchants during the period of King Solomon. Second one is 'Pardesi' (Foreigner) Jews, the second largest and recent group who migrated from Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Spain and Germany. Third one is 'Meshuhararim' the smallest group believed to be the slaves held by both Malabari and Pardesi Communities who were converted to Judaism and later or released from their status as slaves. Based on the skin colour, the Meyuhassim are called 'Black Jews', Meshuhararim — the 'Brown Jews' and the pardesi — the 'White Jews'.

As Jews were religious minority in Kerala, they may not have got adequate attention compared to others and this may resulted the disappearance of their settlements. Racial polarization and Apartheid may have contributed to the dwindling population of Jewish Community in Kerala.

## THE LIFESTYLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Indian Jews are a religious minority of India, but, unlike many parts of the world, have historically lived in India without any instances of anti-Semitism from the local majority populace. The better-established ancient communities have assimilated many local traditions through cultural diffusion. It is estimated that India's Jewish population peaked at around 20,000 in the mid-1940s, and began to rapidly decline due to their emigration to Israel after its creation in 1948. There are reminders of Jewish localities in Kerala still left such as synagogues and other artifacts.

The Jews of Kerala made substantial contributions to the socio-economic life of the land. They are one of the oldest communities in Kerala. Till the 15th century the Jews enjoyed a high status in society and established trading monopoly without any challenge. They were very influential in the society. They are called 'Cochin

Jews' because they lived in the city of Cochin in South India. The Dutch period was the golden era for Cochin Jews. They provided services for the Cochin rulers and the Dutch East India Company. They dominated export trade and LK Rahabbi was a trader at Mattancherry. He had close links with other local community and European countries. A Jewish observer Rabbi David D Beth Aillel reported that during the time of the Dutch, the white Jews of Cochin were great and wealthy merchants, that they have since sunk weak and is even in a miserable state, living chiefly by the sale of trinkets and furniture purchased in more fortunate days.<sup>2</sup> The British period was also favourable for the Cochin Jews. During 1835 an English school was started to teach English and Hebrew for Jews. A Hebrew Malayalam press was established in 1877. The oldest documentary evidence of a Jewish community in Kerala dates from 1000 CE, when a Jewish leader named Joseph Rabban received a set of engraved copper plates from the Hindu ruler of Cranganore. These plates, which are still preserved in the Cochin Pardesi synagogue, list economic and ceremonial privileges including exemption from paying taxes, the right to collect tolls, and the honor of using particular lamps, umbrellas, drums, and trumpets associated with high ritual status. It is clear that by this time the Jews were firmly established in the area.

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.

In 1568 the Jewish newcomers, who were subsequently called Pardesis built a synagogue of their own next to the Maharaja's palace in Cochin. They adopted the Malayalam language and identified enthusiastically with Kerala customs and traditions, but at some point they stopped marrying the Jews who had been there many centuries before them. Although Cochin Jewish internal social relationships were undoubtedly influenced by the caste

1 Shalva Weil, *Bene Israel Rites and Routines*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2009, pp. 26-3

2 John Roland, *Jews in British India*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1998, p. 121.

system and Hindu social values, it should be emphasized that the Cochin Jews were not themselves divided into separate castes, and that all of them shared in a common culture.

There is ample evidence of social contacts among all the Jewish communities of Kerala—including business relationships, invitations to each other's lifecycle rituals, men studying Jewish texts together, women lending jewelry and exchanging songs, and the sharing of ordinary and ritual meals. As with Jews elsewhere, friendships between members of different communities were most common among people of the same class, education, and occupational standing. Under British rule, some Jews in Kerala held positions as clerks, teachers, and lawyers in the expanding colonial bureaucracy, others continued as small merchants, dealing especially in fish and poultry. Economic difficulties led a number of Cochin Jews to move to Bombay and less frequently Calcutta. They nevertheless retained their Kerala identity, even while living elsewhere in India. Most of them married only Cochin Jews and when they moved to Israel they tended to settle among their relatives from Kerala. The 400th anniversary of the building of their synagogue in 1968 celebrated with a week-long series of cultural events. The festivities included performances of Kerala music, scholarly seminars, and a visit from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

## DRESS AND CUSTOMS

The white Jews wear a long tunic of rich colour, a waist coat with 12 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 the 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 waist, and a lavish display of gold chains and buttons made of English sovereigns. The ordinary dress of 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 natives 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, specially 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. 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 head, 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 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 Sundays, 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 (small bit of gold beaten flat) 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 effected through a civil tribunal, marriages being dissolved by returning the amount mentioned in the Kettuba 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.<sup>3</sup>

## KINSHIP

Strict caste endogamy was observed by Cochin Jews, only marrying other Jews. However, there was no intermarriage between 'White' and 'Black' Jews. Even within the 'White' Jewish subgroup, the "White" meyhassim, who claimed direct descent from ancient Israel, did not accept their meshuharim, or manumitted slaves, as marriage partners. Similarly, the 'Black' meyhassim did not marry their freed slaves or proselytes. Today in Israel, more than one in every two Cochin marriages is contracted between Cochin Jews and other Israeli Jews.

Cochin Jews in general tend to encourage cross-cousin marriage. Kinship terminology reflects local Malayalam terminology. Each person's name was made up of the first initial of the chamullah, the first initial of the father's name and the individual's first name.

## MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Marriage is the most important Cochin social occasion and is celebrated in India for a complete week. Cochin Jews build a manara or aperion, for the wedding, usually at the groom's house. After a ritual bath the bride receives a tali, an Indian pendant, in imitation of local Nayar practice. The groom enters the synagogue on a white carpet- a custom apparently observed by Malabari but not Pardesi Jews- and sits near the podium until the bride's procession arrives. The groom himself- not a rabbi, as in other Jewish communities announces his betrothal and marriage to his bride. The Halakha, the religious law, does not permit a Jew to marry a non-Jew or a converted to Judaism. In the absence of a Rabbi, the wedding ceremony will conduct by the groom himself under the supervision of elders, a system prevalent in Ancient Judea.

The basic domestic unit is the patrilineal joint family. Inheritance is patrilineal in accordance with Jewish law and local custom. The family name is passed on through the

<sup>3</sup> K.P. Padmanabha Menon, History of Kerala, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2001, pp.529-531.



father. <sup>1</sup>The young couple sets up a new household and in Israel attempts to socialize their children to become Israelis who are proud of their Cochin heritage.

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Jews believe in a single deity. Their religious observances conform in every way to the Jewish norms established by the 'halacha' (Jewish legal code), and they kept contact with mainstream Judaism through many generations. While they were fully integrated into Kerala society, they were influenced by Hindu and Christian practices and beliefs, for example, the emphasis on purity of descent, the wedding customs and canopy, and the asceticism associated with Passover preparations. The Cochin Jews have never suffered from anti-Semitism on the part of their Hindu neighbours. Cochin Jews never had any rabbis, but several men served as 'shochetim'-ritual slaughterers and 'hazanim'-cantors both for their own communities and for another community of Indian Jews, the Bene Israel in Bombay.

## LAND TENURE

Families owned their own land and built houses on it. The synagogues also owned large tracts of land, which were share-cropped.

## CASTE DIVISIONS

Divided Jews into the White and the Black on the basis of the colour of their skin, Pardesi and Malabari on the basis of the nationality of their origin or adoption and Meyuhassim and Meshuhararim on the basis of their birth. These divisions were maintained with such rigidity that it prevented intermarriages and even free association on social and religious

4 occasions.

The disputes between the black and the White Jews have been known from early times. Mr. Moens, Dutch Governor of Cochin in 1773, observes that "previous to the coming of the Portuguese, there had been a considerable commotion among the Jews at Cranganore, in consequence of the Black Jews revolting from the White" <sup>2</sup>

## SUBSISTENCE AND COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

Each synagogue in the city has not only a cemetery close by but a market as well, signifying the importance they gave to trading as well as their beliefs. <sup>3</sup> The Jews were the intermediaries in the exchange of metal products between Kerala and other foreign lands from medieval period, and they settled in Cranganore at first. <sup>4</sup> The Cochin Jews mainly engaged in petty trading in the towns in which they lived on the Malabar Coast. They often traded food goods such as eggs and vinegar although they rarely grew their own produce. In general, the Pardesi Jews had higher standard of living and numbered among their ranks several merchants, including international spice merchants, and professionals like lawyers, engineers, teachers, and physicians. The Jewish men usually had small shops that carried various goods. These Shops were situated on the verandas of their houses. The women engaged in domestic pursuits. In the younger generations, both men and women work to contribute to the family income and work in many different professions.

## FOOD HABITS

Most Jews follow strict dietary laws which include complete exclusion of pork, shellfish and fish without scales and separation of dishes used for meat and milk. They use a lot of coconut milk in their cooking. Their recipes include Makhalla, Marak, Murug( chicken soup) Hameen (chicken cooked with barley or rice, carrots etc. on

<sup>1</sup> J.B Segal, White and Black Jews at Cochin: The Story of a Controversy, The Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1983, p.228.

<sup>2</sup> K.P. Padmanabha Menon, History of Kerala, p.53 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bonny Thomas, A Walk With a Writer on the Trail of Jewish History, Times of India February 16, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> MR. Raghava Varier, MadhyakalaKeralam Swaroopaneethiyute Charithrapatangal, Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, Kottayam, 2016, p. 118.

a low fire all through the night). Mahasha (stuffed onion, tomatoes or cabbage leaves), Babas (pastry filled with mashed dates) and Baklava (a sweet made of dates and other dry fruits).

## SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANISATION

The Black Jews claim that they were the original recipients of the copper plates, proving their high status in the South Indian context. However, the copper plates are kept in the Pardesi Synagogue. After the White Jews built the Pardesi synagogue in 1568, no Black Jews were qualified to pray there. The Black Jews had several synagogues that no White Jew would enter.

One White Jew who rose to prominence under the Dutch, who had taken over in 1668, was Ezekiel Rahabi (1694-1771). For forty-eight years he acted as the principal merchant for the Dutch in Cochin. He had contacts all over the East as well as in Europe, and he signed numerous memoranda in Hebrew.

The Jews lived on the Malabar Coast were centered on the synagogue, which corporately owned estates in each settlement. The congregation was known as the Yogam and administered communal affairs collectively. The yogam acted as a social control device that determined the fate of its members. In extreme cases, where social taboos were ignored, the congregation could excommunicate a member.

## ARTS

The Jewish community of Kerala have a large number of folk songs that the women in particular sing regularly. Some are sung at weddings, some are lullabies, and some specifically recall the return to the songs being in Malayalam, their contents and importance could not have been understood by foreigners. A few of them published in a small pamphlet as far back as 1948. In 1984, the Cochin Jews in Israel staged a huge pageant, relating in song and dance the story of their emigration from India and their integration into Israeli society.

## CEREMONIES

Both the 'White' and the 'Black' Jews perform their ceremonies separately in their own synagogues and homes. However, the ceremonies are similar and distinctly Cochini according to the Shingli (Cranganore) custom. Daily prayers were chanted according to the Shingli custom, a unique version of the standard Jewish prayers. Cochin Jews have incorporated many unique customs into some of the universal Jewish holidays. For example, the festival of the Rejoicing of the Law, which celebrates the conclusion and new beginning of the annual cycle of Torah reading, is celebrated with special liturgy and a majestic procession with the Torah scrolls.

The various stages of the life cycle are also marked with ceremonies. The circumcision ceremony takes place on the eighth day after the birth of a baby boy. The father carries his son to the main synagogue, where he is circumcised and named after one of his grandfather. When a baby girl is about six months old, she is named after one of her grandmother during a Sabbath or festival service.

At the age of eight or nine, Cochin boys read the weekly section from the Prophets and at the age of thirteen a boy attains religious majority.

## FESTIVALS

Jewish population in Kerala, which religiously observe their various Jewish festivals and customs till date.

### 1 i. Passover Festival

Passover festival of the Jews is celebrated during March or April. Though sometimes referred to as the spring festival also, the Passover is originally associated with the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The feast of unleavened bread is one commemorating the birth of Israel as a nation and deliverance of the Jews from the Egyptian slavery.

### 1 ii. Pentecost

Pentecost is celebrated on the 50th day of the Passover. It is said to be an Old Testament festival, associated with agriculture and seeks to welcome the inception of the spring season. Later, during the early New Testament period, Pentecost started getting celebrated, in honor of God's creation of His people.

### 1 iii. Feast of Tabernacles

This festival is celebrated during September or October. It happens to be one of the oldest festivals of the Jews and is celebrated in Cochin City with lots of gaiety. It is known as the Feast of Ingathering in the Bible. In Hebrew, it is called the Sukkoth. During this feast, Jews set temporary booths covered with palm leaves and decorated with citrus and other fruits.

### 1 iv. Jewish New Year

It is celebrated during September or October. New Year is not a time of revelry for a Jew; rather it is a pious season for self-assessment and judgment in the life of the Jew. Day of Atonement is the second day following the Jewish new-year and it is the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. Not a morsel of food or a drop of water will pass the lips of the observant Jews from sunset of the previous day till after the nightfall of the next day. The Jews will be in the synagogue of devoting themselves to fervent prayers.

### 1 v. Hanukkah

It is celebrated during November or December. Another important and popular festival of the Jews, celebrated with gusto in Kochi, is the Hanukkah or the Festival of Light. It is already associated in pre-Christian times with the victory of Judah the Maccabee over the Syrian general Lysias in 164 BCE and over the attempted Hellenisation of the Jewish homeland. The rededication of the Temple was celebrated for eight days and marked with music, praise, fire and palm branches in a manner reminiscent both of Jewish and nonJewish feasts. In the first century, Josephus refers to it as the festival of lights, and contemporary rabbinic sources refer to the kindling of lights, the recitation of hallel, and the prohibition of mourning.<sup>8</sup>

Among the Jewish festivals, the Sabbath (Saturday) occupies the pride of place. The Sabbath gives the labourer every week a day of rest and leisure.

## DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

The Cochin Jews belief in an afterlife has been influenced both by Jewish and Hindu beliefs. Many of their death and bereavement customs are also connected to Hinduism as well as Middle Eastern Sephardic traditions. The family surrounds the deathbed to witness the departure of life and then the oldest son closes the eyes of the deceased. The dead body, although impure, is respected, and burial in a special Cochin Jewish cemetery takes place within half a day.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

The Jewish diaspora is vanishing from Kerala society. But we cannot ignore their contributions to the state's culture and development. When the Jews arrived here, Kochi was a marshy land and they developed it as a trade centre. They brought large scale business here. The city flourished by their efforts too, and this fact should be recognized. The Ernakulam Market was under the control of the Jewish community till 1935<sup>9</sup> and they handed over the rights to the Kochi Municipality in 1935.<sup>23</sup> All throughout their existence in Cochin, the social conditions of the Jews have been, to a great extent, governed by their own religion, rituals, dietary and marriage laws. They were so keen in preserving these traits and cherished in their minds the Zion-centered hopes as told by their religious texts. The first Zionist Organization was set up in Cochin in 1923. Jews have almost always been great subjects of history. The Jewish museums explain how, when and why. The

<sup>8</sup>

Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (ed.), A Dictionary of Jewish - Christian Relations, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2005, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup>

Manoj Viswanathan, A Waning Heritage : The Jewish Influence in Kerala, The New Indian Express, February 14, 2018.

government should protect Jewish monuments as heritage structures. The Jewish community have contributed to several spheres of society.



## MALAYALAM FOLKSONGS

An important contribution of Jews was in the field of literature as large number of folk songs. Meanwhile the Jews were leaving India for Israel in batches big and small carrying away with them whatever manuscript copies they had. In their new environments these songs are seldom sung, because they belong essentially to India: anywhere else they will appear out of place. Moreover, the few elderly women who remembered the songs and their tunes, were thinning out fast. Thus urgent and desperate steps had to be taken to salvage the songs from the dustbin of oblivion. This has now been accomplished to a large extent. Fifteen handwritten books of songs have been collected from the houses of Kerala Jews in Cochin and in Israel. Altogether about 300 songs have now been collected and these have been classified into five categories, Historical, Bridal, Invocational, Biblical and Miscellaneous.

Most of the Songs are original compositions of the Cochin Jews. They seem to have been composed by various persons and at different times. It has not been possible to determine the persons who composed them or the year of composition. The language used is Malayalam with a generous admixture of Hebrew and Tamil words and quaint expressions current only among the Cochin Jews. The presence of a large number of Tamil words and expressions in the songs indicate that perhaps some of them might have been written during the sixteenth century or earlier when Malayalam had not been weaned away from the influence of Tamil. As they were not copied down and preserved, but transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation, some of the earlier composition must have been forgotten and lost. The song are sung by women folk especially during wedding festivities, circumcision and religious festivals.

### i. Historical Songs

Twenty five songs of those collected so far, can be considered historical in theme. They describe some of the main events in the long history of the Jews of Kerala like passage from Palestine first to Cranganore and then to Cochin.

Some of the songs sing the glory of Joseph Rabban, the Jewish merchant of Cranganore who was honoured by Bhaskara Ravi Varma, the Ceraman Perumal, in the year 1000 A.D by conferring on him princely privileges. The Royal Deed of conferment of the titles and privileges engraved on copper plates is preserved in the synagogue of the White Jews at Cochin. The installation ceremony and the royal procession that followed are also described In songs.

A song describes a dispute that arose between two sections of people over the right of collecting taxes from the market sector in Cranganore. The dispute was, however, settled amicably with the intervention of Ceraman Perumal. It is possible that this dispute was between the Jews and Christians as the right of collecting taxes had been granted both to the Jewish leader Joseph Rabban and his successors as well as to Thomas of Cana and his descendants. If on the other hand the dispute was between two factions of Jews, each headed by a descendant of Joseph Rabban, both claimants to his titles, then it can be considered as the genesis of the division of the community into the Black and the White.

Another song is a prayer for the Cochin Royal Family. It is an adaptation of a Hebrew prayer and seems to have been composed on the occasion of the installation of Prince Vira Kerala Varma as the Rajah of Cochin on March 6, 1663. This Prince's claim to the throne of

Cochin had been supported by the Dutch and the Jews of Cochin under the leadership of David Rabhabi, against the claims of Prince Goda Varma. Not only Vira Kerala Varma but the other Rajahs of Cochin, before and after were also very favourably disposed towards the Jews. Thus the love and loyalty of the Jews to the Royal House of Cochin was so strong and sincere that they had no hesitation in adapting their Hebrew prayer for their own kings in Palastine and making it a prayer for the gentile ruler of their land of adoption.

Another seems to be the description of a naval engagement in which the Princes of Cochin.

Rama Varma and Goda Varma, the Zamorin of Calicut and his admiral Maraikar, and Ezekiel Rahabi, the leader of Cochin Jews were involved. Perhaps, this was one of the many naval engagements that took place, off the coast of Cochin during the Dutch Portuguese struggle for supremacy in Kerala. The Zamorin and Ezekiel Rahabi supported the Dutch while Prince Goda Varma and his friends were on the side of the Portuguese.

The historical songs also detail about the various synagogues in Kerala. Here again we find the evidence of the generous attitude of the rulers towards the Jews. They not only donated the land and building materials for the construction of the synagogues, but also supplied free oil for the Sabbath lamp.

#### ii. Bridal Songs

These are sung by women folk during the wedding festivities. A fairly complete picture of their wedding customs can be drawn from these songs as there is a song for every stage of the long wedding ceremony. This picture is indeed interesting because in it one finds both the Semetic and Hindu customs intertwined and integrated.

#### iii. Invocational Songs

Although some of the hymns and prayers are translations from Hebrew, the majority are original compositions. Even in these prayers one can detect the Hindu influence, like God being described as the creator of Fourteen Worlds.

#### iv. Biblical Songs

These songs narrate the stories from the Bible, but it is done by giving local colour to the characters and events.

<sup>5</sup>

The Malayalam Jewish folksongs of the Cochin Jews are part of the cultural and religious development of Kerala and the affirmation of its language and identity. Placed in the context of the surrounding fervor or bhakti in which Kerala and India in its entirety was plunged, for reasons which were partly political and ideological, but also under the influence of an artistic and literary explosion specific to the history of Indian art, these songs constitute an interesting field of research within the framework of Indian and JudeoIndian studies. The Jews are known to have developed Judeo Malayalam, a dialect of Malayalam language.

### HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF THE JEWS

The architecture of the Cochin Paradeshi 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 the 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 Maharaja 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. The Jewish museums represents their customs, life styles etc.

### HEBREW CULTURE IN THE HINDU WORLD

By studying the texts of the songs, their language, their content and the times when they were performed, similar elements of both the Hebrew and Hindu cultures can be found. The climate of total religious freedom and independence made the Cochin community the oldest and most productive center of Hebrew culture in India.

They are tolerant to other religious and lived with Christians, Hindus and Muslims as brothers. The Jewish Copper Plate inscription issued to Joseph Ramban was a monument of religious toleration to Jews by the king Bhaskara Ravi Varma.

<sup>5</sup> P.M Jussay, The Jews Of Kerala, pp. 107-114.



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 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.

## CONCLUSION

Jews have made substantial contribution in the field of trade and commerce. A colony of Jews has been settled there for many centuries. They have been comparatively isolated from the main body of Jewry and have long been influenced by the customs of surrounding Hindu cultures.

The Jewish communities who came here in different periods settled in and around Kodungallur were involved in trade. Forward trading and money lending business originated with them. The Banking also began with them. Synagogues are Jewish places of worship. They received special rights and privileges from the kings to build these Synagogues. Innumerable aspects of Kerala culture were absorbed by them. Repeated attacks by Portuguese, Dutch and Mysore inflicted damages on the Synagogues. When Israel came into being, many Jews returned in groups. The Synagogues were left unattended, and worship there stopped. Their left out synagogues and cemeteries are the physical landmarks that still stand in testimony to the vibrant and glorious heritage of Jews who claim at least 2000 years of strong and continuous bond with India. The big question is about the accessibility and identification of these monuments. Some of the cemeteries are so overgrown with weeds and turned into garbage dumping yards that even the locals have no clue about their existence. In Cochin, the Pardesi Synagogue is still active as a place of worship, but the Jewish community is very small. The building also attracts visitors as a historic tourist site. While the Pardesi Synagogue remains popular as a tourist attraction, the Kadavumbhagom Synagogue in Mattancherry has almost faded from memory. A portion of the synagogue, which earlier stood right at the coastline, was removed to construct the road in front of it. The building came down by heavy showers on September 10, 2019. The structure's front portion collapsed in rain. A portion of the synagogue was pulled down overnight by some unknown persons in 2015. Heritage conservationists had long been demanding that authorities take measures for the upkeep of the structure. Private individuals had been used the building as a storage space for the past many years after the Jewish residents sold it while they left for Israel. The building is now under the mercy of the Archaeological Department for the restoration process. The amount sanctioned by the Government for the restoration is kept pending due to some other legalities.

Some residents hope tourism will provide an incentive to preserve the landmarks of Kochi's Jewish community, like the Pardesi Synagogue and the Kadavumbhagom Synagogue in the aquarium store - even if some Jews can't make it to the synagogue. The Jewish history is indeed a proud memory, but their culture did not end when the Jews left Kerala. The history and culture of Kerala Jews is an important and enduring part of Kerala's cultural heritage.

It feels so woeful to see Jewish monuments go carelessly abandoned. Activities like 'Saving Jewish Monuments of Mala, Kerala' under Prof. C. Karmachandran is appreciable. The Jewish monuments should be preserved at all cost. The land mafia should not be allowed to seize the land. The Government of Kerala should take actions to demolish the illegal structures that have come up at the Jewish cemeteries. It is a matter of pride for all of us to preserve what is left behind them.

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