

Jews: an Historical Exploration through the shores of Kerala History

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Kerala, also known as Gods own Country, is a state in the South West region of India. The state was formed on November 1956 by combining various Malayalam speaking regions. From the early days Kerala is famous for trade, particularly for spices which attracted traders from different parts of the world. As per Sumerian records Kerala is referred as the 'Garden of spices' or 'The spice garden of India'. The state has attracted Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Arabs, Greeks and Romans. Merchants from West Asia and Southern Europe established coastal ports and settlements in Kerala.

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'. They came to Kerala during the period of King Solomon. It is believed that King Solomon had visited Kerala for trade purposes. From the very early days the country Kerala was known to the ancient Jews. In the 6th century BC the Jews came to Kodungaloor in order to escape from the Babylonian captivity of Nebuchednezzar. In 580 B C the Babylonian Empire conquered Yehudah (Judah), the Southern region of ancient Israel. After 50 years later, the Persian Empire (ancient Iran) conquered the Babylonian Empire and allowed the Jews to return home to the land of Israel. But most of the Jews remained in Babylonia, some remained in today's Iraq and Iran, and some migrated to neighboring lands of Central and East Asia including India, China, Afghanistan, Egypt, Yemen etc.

When St. Thomas came to Kerala in 52 AD, there were a large number of Jews in Kerala. St. Thomas and his disciples tried to proselytize the Jews to Christianity. They came to Kerala in about 68 A D at Muziris or Kodungaloor and extended to Quilon, Madayi, Pantalayani Kollam, Chowghat, Chenamangalam, Madai, Paalayur, Mala, Pullut etc. The Jews lived a strong community life and they were protected by the native rulers. The Kulashkara Kings granted several privileges to the Jews. They were granted the famous Jewish copper Plate grant in 1000 AD by the Chera Emperor, Bhaskara Ravi Varman. The Jewish hill known as Joodakunnu and the Jewish tank Joodakulam at Madai depict close relation between the Jews and the Keralities.

I. Culture, Customs and Beliefs of Jews

The Jews are a special group that settled in their own town known as Jews town. They have their own specific cultural traits, religious worship, customs and ceremonies. They keep themselves apart from other people by holding their own linguistic, racial or cultural characteristics. They are known to have developed Judeo Malayalam, a dialect of Malayalam language. The Malayalee Jews can be divided into two categories, the white Jews or the Paradesi Jews and the Black Jews or the Malabari Jews. They believed that Palestine was their true home and believed in Judaism. They worshipped in one God Yahwah and their sacred text is the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Torah. The Bible of the Jews is called the Old Testament. They believed that the God revealed to Moses the laws that would guide human beings in all aspects of their personal and social life which were written in the Torah. But 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. The Chola king Raja Raja Chola defeated Bhaskara Ravi in the battle of Kanthalur and Vizhinjam. It was at that time that Bhaskara Ravi Varma granted certain privileges to Jewish merchants to get their support. Joseph Ramban gave all help to the king against the Cholas and they received a prominent place in the kingdom. The Jews were wealthy merchants who involved in trade of pepper, spices, ivory etc. Venetian traveler Marco Polo who visited Kerala in the 13th century described that the Jews established colonies in places like Cranganore, Parur, Palayur etc.

The place of worship of the Jews is called the Synagogue. It is a large hall in which there is a central raised platform, the Bimah or the Taybah from which the priest conducts services for marriage, daily prayers, Sabbath prayer, festival prayers etc. The Jews followed several rituals and prayers for every occasion. The White and Black Jews of Cochin have almost the same social and religious customs. They hold the same doctrines, use the same rituals, observe the same feasts and fasts and follow the same religious practices.

The wedding celebrations of the Jews lasted for many days. They spend huge money, time and energy for these rituals and ceremonies. The celebrations start with the 'betrothal,' also known as suit cutting. The suit

cutting day is fixed and a tailor is invited to the house of the bride. The measurement of the dress is taken in the presence of the bridegroom's mother, relatives and friends. Sweets were distributed among the friends and relatives. The Jewish marriage always takes place in a Synagogue. Weddings days are on Sundays and Tuesdays. The celebration would last for one week. On Friday night, before the wedding there will be a dinner at the bridegroom's house. The bride will not attend this gathering but the whole congregation will be invited in this occasion. Two close relatives are selected and they will accompany the bride and bridegroom at all times during the wedding. A lunch is arranged on Saturday before the wedding day. On the wedding day few women will accompany the couple with claps and marriage songs. They have their own marriage folk songs for these occasions. The rings are exchanged and blessings are showered upon the couple. Several customs of the Jews are similar to those of Hindus and Muslims.

A large majority of the Jews in India bury their dead. The body is washed and dressed in white garments. The hands are folded over each other with a spring of myrtle leaf. A bag of Jerusalem mud is put under the head and the mud is also placed on the closed eyelids. The Khaddish is recited by a male descendant at the funerals. In recent times several Jews have asked to be cremated.

The Jewish festivals are celebrated according to the Jewish calendar which is a lunar calendar. Hasanath and Yom Kippur are the holidays of the Cochin Jewish communities. The holidays start with the morning service in the Synagogue. The liturgical theme of these Jewish holiday is Gods attribute of kingship. During these holidays they display their holy book Torah and conduct royal processions.

Another festival, the Purim celebrations took place in the Hebrew month in Jewish calendar. Purim means the feast of lots. It is a celebration in remembrance of the deliverance of the Jews from the evil plotting of Human by Esther who became queen of kings Xerxes of Persia. There is a fast conducted by the Jewish people before the Purim day.

The Pessach and Shavout are the most significant festivals in the history of Jewish community. Passah celebration which lasted for eight days was another festival. They use Hebrew language in the rituals during these days. The main highlight of these celebrations is the reading of the story of Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt. Shavout is celebrated in the commemoration of the day, when Mosses received the Torah from God at Mount Sinai.

The most mournful day in the Jewish calendar is the ninth day of the Hebrew month. (Trisha is A V in Hebrew). During these day numerous had fallen on them tragedies and destructions. This includes the destruction of the holy Jerusalem temple first in 586 B C and again in 70 C E. For the Cochin Jews this day is the destruction of Cranganore by the Muslim king of North Malabar in the 14th century and by the Portuguese troops in the 16th century. The Malabari Jews were destroyed by the Portuguese attack in the 16th century.

II. Jewish Synagogue in Cochin

In 1524 the Muslims led by the ruler of Calicut attacked the wealthy Jews of Cranganore for the primacy in the pepper trade. The Jews moved to the kingdom of Cochin seeking the protection of Hindu royal family and the Raja of Cochin gave asylum to them. From the time the Jews arrived in Kerala, they built several synagogues in various parts of the state. Most of their synagogues have been sold and adapted for other uses. The Paradesi Synagogue in Cochin which was built in 1568 was gifted by the Maharaja of Cochin Raja Rama Varma near his palace is the important Synagogue which has survived in Kerala. Now it has become a great center of attraction because of the beauty of its interior and Chinese tiles. It was built with the help of the Spanish, the Dutch and the Europeans and shares a common wall with the famous Mattancherry palace temple. The Synagogues at Chennamangalam and Parur was reconstructed recently. The Cochin Jews consisted of three sects of people. They are white Jews, black Jews and Meshuchrarim. White Jews were the high professional and merchants and they were treated as the full members of the Jewish Synagogue. Black Jews comprising traders and craftsman were allowed to pray and were not given full membership. Meshuchrarim* were a group of freed slaves and had no communal rights and no Synagogue of their own.

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 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).

Historical Monuments of 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.

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

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

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