

THE COCHIN JEWS OF INDIA: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL STUDY

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Introduction

There have been Jews settled in India from Ancient time. Yet the exact date of their arrival in India and their origin are full of historical uncertainties. There are three major Jewish communities in India, the Cochin Jews of Kerala, the Bene Israel of Maharashtra and the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta.¹ At their peak they comprised a total population of approximately 30,000 individuals. Today there are approximately 5,300 Jews left in India, the majority having migrated to Israel and the remaining few to Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America.

The Indian Jews are unusual in that they are among the few Jewish communities in the world that have not experienced anti-Semitism in their host country. The many centuries of settlement in India, under the influence of the caste systems and the simultaneous attempts at preserving their Judaic faith have resulted in these Jewish communities forming and articulating a dual identity, namely, one that is both Indian and Jewish. This has had major consequences on their integration in both India and Israel.² Among the Jewish communities in India, the Cochin Jews of Kerala are the most famous. It is the socio-history of this community that is the focus of this paper.

Kerala, situated on the West Coast of India between the Arabian Sea on the West and the Western Ghats on the East, provides us with an interesting study of multiethnic communities living together in peaceful co-existence. Located in the tropical zone, Kerala is covered with dense forests which have provided it with some of its main exports—cardamom, cinnamon, teak, ivory and pepper.

In India, where myths and legends abound, Kerala owes its creation in the mythological literature to Parasurama, the Hindu warrior God³ Having avenged his father's murder, Parasurama decided to do penance in a land which would be free of his past wars and consequent bloodshed. Summoning the Sea Lord, Parasurama demanded some land, threatening to dry up the oceans if his demand was not met. When asked by the Sea Lord to specify the amount of land he wanted, Parasurama replied by hurling his mighting magical Parasu (axe) which fell upon the sea where the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal converge. The water is said to have receded up to the point where the axe had been thrown, thus creating the Land of Kerala (Varghese, 1970:10).

Like most states in India, Kerala's political boundaries have changed through the ages. In ancient times, Kerala was not a single political unit. It comprised three distinct political entities—Malabar, Cochin and Travancore.⁴ Etymologically, the word "Kerala" has several interpretations. Sanskrit and Tamil scholars associate it with *ul kera* (meaning coconut which is found in abundance in Kerala) and *malanad* (land of hills) respectively. However, some historians are of the view that Kerala is a variation of the term *Cheral* and has derived from the famous Chera dynasty. The fact that Kerala acquired fame and importance during the Chera period lends plausibility to this theory (Tatpuram, 1968:125) It is in this small yet important area that there developed a historically and culturally rich Jewish community. The Jewish community was divided into three groups, black, white and brown Jews with each group

maintaining its own boundaries.⁵ The contribution of this community, especially that of the White Jews, in the economic and political sphere of Kerala in pre-independent India was significant.

The history of the Kerala Jews can be divided into five distinct phases. The first phase began with their settlement on the coast of Kerala and extended up to the coming of the Portuguese. The next three phases may be divided into the Portuguese period, the Dutch period and the British period. The Portuguese domination extended from 1497 to 1663. This period was followed by Dutch supremacy and ended with the coming of the British in 1795. The last of these phases began with the formation of Independent India in 1947 and the creation of Israel in 1948, and can be traced to the present day. This last phase has been characterized by emigration of majority of the Indian Jewish population to Israel.

In the absence of any well documented data on early Jewish settlement, a chronological reconstruction of Kerala Jewish history becomes a difficult task. The early phase of Jewish history in India is filled with ambiguities. Several viewpoints have been put forward by various scholars. According to Moses De Paiva,⁶ the Cochin Jews arrived from Majorca to Cochin in 370 A.D. where their forefathers had been taken captives by Titus Vespasian. In 499 A.D. another batch of Jews followed. Jost holds the view that the Jews arrived in Cochin from Persia in the 5th century to escape persecution by King Kobad (Koder, 1965). Rabbi Rabinovitz is of the view that the first clear evidence of the Jews dates back to Mahammedan rule and the activities of the Radanites.

The Cochinites themselves prefer to trace their arrival to the destruction of the Second Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D. S.S. Koder, an eminent Cochin Jew has remarked that the strong resemblance between the Cochinites and the Yemenites and the similarity in the traditions followed by both suggest that the Cochin Jews may have migrated from Yemen. The use of Aramaic among the earlier generations of Cochin Jews tends to lend credence to this view. However unsubstantial evidence makes it impossible to reach any definite conclusion. What is evident is that the Cochin Jews arrived in an area which was familiar to them through trade and were able to keep in touch with developments that took place among world Jewry. This was made possible since trading posts were already operating as early as 1000 B.C. for the export of ivory, teak and spices.⁷

The Copper Plates

The earliest evidence pertaining to the Jews in Kerala is in the form of two copper plates bestowed to Isuppu Irappa or Joseph Rabban by the Hindu ruler of Malabar, Bhaskara Ravi Varma whose title was Cheraman Perumal.⁸ These copper plates are inscribed in the Vattalettu script.⁹ Though one is compelled to depend upon the history of the Jews after the presentation of these copper plates, there is still a great deal of confusion that the researcher is confronted with. To begin, there are no dates inscribed on the copper plates. This has led to a great deal of controversy among historians and anthropologists as to the exact date of the presentation of these plates. However, most agree that the grant was made sometime between the 4th and the 10th century A.D.¹⁰

Since the copper plates were bestowed as a mark of appreciation for the involvement of the Jews in the pepper trade, it can be deduced that the Jews had acquired a certain prosperity and influence in the commercial world (Walestein, 1982). Thus the dates on the copper plates would not have indicated the exact date of their arrival and settlement. The same confusion extends to

the ruler who bestowed the gift and the receivers of the copper plates. The Black or "Malabar" Jews insist that the copper plates were gifted to Joseph Rabban, a black Jew, by Bhaskara Ravi Varma and were subsequently stolen by the white Jews and lodged in the Pardesi Synagogue (the Synagogue of the white Jews). As stated earlier, lack of any concrete evidence makes it difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion as to their origin. However, what is interesting to note is that no mention was made of the existence of these copper plates prior to the arrival of the Dutch in 1663 (Fischel, 1862: 230-248). Moreover, there is no adequate proof to show the existence of white Jews before the sixteenth century (Roland, 1980: 76).

These copper plates were considered invaluable since they conferred to Joseph Rabban and his descendants the hereditary ownership of the principality of Anjuvanam near Cranganore with the material right to levy taxes and also exempt them from certain duties payable to the Royal palace by other town inhabitants. This indirectly implies that these Jews were given a privileged status vis-a-vis the other town inhabitants. Recent historians have put forward a rather interesting theory about the copper plates. According to Narayana, Anjuvanam was a guild rather than a town or trade center (Timberg, 1986:29). This theory that Anjuvanam was a guild seems to be more probable since it is unlikely that a Maharaja would give away such a strategically important area to the Jews or any other community. It would be vital for the Maharaja to keep it under his authority. If it was a gift, then this "27 square mile territory was perhaps the only sovereign Jewish principality in almost 2000 years of diaspora" (Musleah, 1975: 358-359). What historians hypothesize is that, the Maharaja of Cochin, fearing an imminent threat of war, felt it imperative to secure the support and loyalty of the Jews for his army. In order to achieve this he conferred the grant (which were primarily aristocratic privileges) to the Jews and in return the latter were loyal to his highness. This view is substantiated by the fact that the signatories on the copper plates were five members who formed the Maharaja's War Council. The following is a translation of the copper plates.¹¹

Hail and prosperity! The following gift was graciously made by him who had assumed the title of King of Kings, His Majesty the King Sri Parkaran Iravi Vanmar, whose ancestors have been wielding the sceptre for many hundred thousands of years, in the thirty-six year after the second year, on the day on which he dwelt in Muyiricote, was pleased to make the following gifts. We have granted to Joseph Rabban the village of Anjuvanam together with seventy-two propriety rights, tolls on boats and carts, the revenue and the title of Anjuvanam, the lamp of the day, a cloth spread to walk on, a palanquin, a parasole, a vaduga drum, a trumpet, a gateway, garlands, decorations with festoons, and so forth. We have granted him the land tax and weight tax, moreover we have sanctioned with these Copper Plates that he need not pay the dues which the inhabitants of other cities pay the Royal Palace, and that he may enjoy the benefit which they enjoy to Joseph Rabban, Prince of the Anjuvanam and his descendants, sons and daughters in natural succession, so long as the world and moon exist. Anjuvanam shall be his hereditary possession, Hail (Signature manual) With the knowledge of:-

Govarthan Marthandan Chief of Venadu
Kodai Chirikandan Chief of Venapalinadu
Manaveapala Manavin Chief of Eralnadu
Irairan Chathan Chief of Vallunadu
Kodai Iravi Chief of Nedumpurayurnadu
Moorkan Chathan Sub Commander of the Forces
Vandalacheri Kandan The Prime Minister

Written by Kelappan

Whatever the controversies that revolve around the copper plates, there is no doubt that these plates are considered invaluable by the Cochins, especially the "white" Jews who see them as proof of their privileged position in Kerala society in the ancient and traditional period.

In order to describe Jewish socio-history in India, it is imperative to understand the influence of caste upon Jewish society. Traditional Indian society was divided into four main hierarchically ordered groups or *Varnas* which were ordered in part by the principle of "pure" and "impure". These four *varnas* are: the *Brahmins* (the priestly class who form the top of the hierarchy), followed by the *Kshatriyas* (warrior class), *Vaishyas* (traders and other professional categories) with the *Sudras* (menial workers) forming the bottom of the varna hierarchy. However, what is important to note is that this four hold hierarchy forms the broad framework. For functional purposes in day-to-day activities, Hindu society is subdivided into numerous castes, *jatis*, based on hereditary occupational specialization (among other factors). It is these *jatis* that form the unit of analysis of Hindu society since the individual's day to day behavior is focused within the parameters of the *jati* (Srinivas, 1969)

Like other parts of India, the caste system has played a dominant role in the social formation of Kerala. However, as E.M.S. Namboodiripad has remarked, the four caste system was not observed in its traditional style in Kerala. Though the Brahmins had become a part of Kerala's Hindu society, the other three *varnas* had no clear cut demarcations between them. There were no representatives of the trading varna in Kerala. Thus when the non-Hindu communities came as traders and not as armed invaders, it was easier to accept them into the traditional varna structure. The other two religious minorities, the Christians and the Muslims, also absorbed the "un-Christian" and "un-Islamic" elements in their socio-cultural life (Namboodiripad, 1984: 20). This created a feeling of brotherhood between Hindus and non-Hindus. It was this very factor that made it easier for the traditional Kerala society, which was so rigid in its observance of the ideology of "pure" and "impure", to incorporate the Jews into their society. This caste structure in Indian society left its impact upon Jewish society too.

Contrary to the Judaic principle of an egalitarian religion, there arose within the Jewish community in Kerala a threefold division of 1) Black Jews 2) White Jews and 3) Brown Jews. This division into three color categories was not based merely on physical criteria alone, but also had social values as underlying principles.

The Malabar or Black Jews

The black Jews or the Malabar Jews were the oldest and largest of the three "color caste" groups among the Kerala Jews. They settled in Cranganore, an entreport for trade between the East and the West, situated at the mouth of the Periyar River. It is most likely that these Jewish immigrants married into the local population as a means of establishing some roots in the new land where they were settling. The idea that the majority of the Jewish immigrants intermarried with the local population (who were primarily dark complexioned) seems to be implied in Benjamin of Tudela's travelogue. In his travelogue, Benjamin Tudela writes about the existence of "several thousand Israelites....the inhabitants are all black and Jews also." These Jews were engaged in petty trade, comprising of trading mainly in dairy products. Some of them were small scale cultivators. Despite the fact that they were engaged in petty trade, this Jewish community enjoyed considerable importance until their shift to Cochin around the sixteenth century due to persecution at the hands of the Portuguese. Later they spread out into Ernakulam, Mala, Chendamangalam and parur and build Synagogues in these areas.

The Pardesi or White Jews

The white Jews or the *Pardesi* Jews (meaning foreigners), as they were popularly known, came to Cochin from the Middle East and Europe. While the specific date of their arrival in India is unknown, they were later migrants than the black Jews. However, unlike the latter, the former were comparatively small in number and kept their separate identity (Patai, 1980). Many of the white Jews were in the trading occupation and hence the trade routes to India were not unfamiliar to them. The white Jews had the advantage over their black counterparts in that they were fluent in the European and Levantine languages and were skilled in diplomatic and commercial relations. These skills enabled them to act as intermediaries between the Maharajas and the Dutch and to establish themselves as an important social, economic and political group in Kerala society. The patronage extended to the white Jews by the local *Maharajas* made it possible for this section of the Kerala Jews to remain aloof and distance themselves from the other two sections. In addition, the invasion of India by foreign "white powers" (Portuguese, Dutch and the British) resulted in the notion of "white supremacy" gaining importance. The white Jews thus had the added advantage of indirectly imbibing this notion of "white supremacy" to establish their own supremacy vis-a-vis the other Jewish groups. It is believed that their most prosperous period was during Dutch rule. Besides their enhanced position by virtue of being "white", they adopted upper caste customs which were obviously advantageous to them and at the same time were able to retain their separate identity as Jews.

While the white Jews gained ascendancy in Kerala society due to their patronage under the local Rajas and the Dutch in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, what is intriguing is whether these white Jews came with their wealth to Kerala or acquired it immediately upon their arrival. It is likely that these traders came with some wealth which initially helped them establish their position on the Malabar coast. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the white Jews enjoyed a privileged status as a group and like the Namboodiris and the Nayers (upper castes) were unable to adjust themselves to their decline in economic and political position in the latter part of the British rule and the post independence period (Robin, 1976).¹² A natural concomitant of British policy was the decline of the prevailing caste structure. The worst affected were the upper castes.

The growth of the middle or professional class which was a natural offshoot of British rule resulted in the decline of the existing power structure based on caste. After their relative loss of property, the white Jews, like their counterparts among the native population, continued to live the high lifestyle of the earlier period. However some white Jews remained prosperous largely due to their business enterprises. Among the foremost were the Halleguas and later this position was taken over by the Koders, who established a chain of stores dealing in general goods. With the creation of Israel and when migration to Israel took place among the Jews, many of the white Jews initially stayed back in India. Having been used to a privileged position throughout most of their stay in India, these Jews preferred to remain in the place that had been home to them.

The Manumitted or Brown Jews

The third group were the brown or manumitted Jews who in 1937 numbered around thirty. They were the offerings of slaves or of unions between Jews and native women. Among these were some who had converted to Judaism. They were also called "*Meschunarim*" which is the corrupted form of the Hebrew term "*M'schurarim*" which meant liberated ones (i.e. they were the slaves who had been liberated from their bondage to their owner). This third group had the

lowest status in the threefold division. They were not permitted inside the Synagogue and had to satisfy themselves by standing at the entrance of the *Pardesi* Synagogue. These Jews were, however, very enterprising. In 1848, they build a separate prayer hall for themselves and conducted services as an independent congregation. Under the leadership of Abraham Barak Salem,¹³ they managed to gain several concessions for themselves.

While all these three groups had in common their Jewish identity, there was minimal interaction between them. The white Jews wanted to maintain their superior position and as such dissassociated from the rest of the Jews. Interestingly, there has been no mention of the white Jews prior to the report of Moses Da Paiva.¹⁴ Hence boundary maintenance based on color probably developed sometime during the fifteenth century as a combined product of the adoption of caste principles and the notion of white supremacy. There was no social intercourse between the three groups. The black Jews were provided with separate seating arrangements when they were invited by the white Jews. Intermarriage was prohibited between members of the three groups. Attempts were made by the white Jews to prevent the Manumitted Jews from wearing the *talit* (shawl) and they were also prevented from attending services within the synagogue.¹⁵ Though relegated to an inferior position in the social hierarchy vis-a-vis the white Jews, the Manumitted Jews often rose in revolt against the former.

After the establishment of British rule, some of the black Jews and many of the Manumitted Jews migrated to Bombay and Calcutta in an attempt to improve their socio-economic status. They were often employed as domestic help in the house of Baghdadi Jews. Throughout British rule, there was a continuous struggle among the Malabar Jews and the Manumitted Jews to gain equal status with the white Jews. On the other hand the white Jews refused to make any concessions and held out until the departure of the British, when the notion of white superiority began eroding and their dwindling population (due to migration of the younger generation) over a period of time compelled them to involve the other Jewish caste groups with their activities. Despite attempts at upward mobility through non-traditional means, the black Jews were unable to break through the caste-like structure and remained at the lower echelons of traditional Kerala society. The black Jews were the first to migrate and take advantage of the opportunities offered to them in the new State of Israel and have done relatively well for themselves economically as compared to their situation in India.

One of the major advantages that the white Jews had over the black Jews during their stay in India was the royal patronage of the Cochin Ruler and their better economic position. Hence despite being non-Hindus, the white Jews were able to obtain all the advantages and privileges conferred on the upper castes and to establish domination over the other Jewish groups. They thus had the ideal situation of the privileged status of upper castes while retaining their Jewish identity. The white Jews whom I interviewed in Kerala were of the opinion that this social structure was different from the traditional Indian caste system. What they do acknowledge is that Jewish society in Kerala was divided into three groups based on color. These Jews believe that they were never looked upon as a caste group, but rather as a religious category within which they had the privileged status attributed to upper castes. According to some, this may have made it easier for other castes to accept them into Kerala society. Yet, within the community, we see that there was a caste-like structure based not only on color but on social attitudes. This can be substantiated by the fact that if ranking were by color criteria alone, then the brown Jews should have had a higher status than the black Jews, but this was not so because the former had the stigma of being the progeny of converted slaves and children of mixed origin. Despite these differences, these three groups retained the common appellation of "Jews" and based on this criteria observed boundary maintenance vis-a-vis the majority population. They retained the

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appellation of Jews due to their strict observance of religious beliefs and customs which governed their social life to a large extent. Thus sabbath, high holidays, kosher, circumcison, etc. were strictly observed. Nevertheless, they adopted several customs and traditions that were outside their religion. Like other minorities, the Jews too imbibed many Indian social customs. Among these were the tying of the *tali* (a pendant on a gold chain) around the bride's neck, the lightin of the *nada valaku* (lamp) and the use of the *lungi* (the local dress) for casual wear. Having discussed the indirect influence of the caste system on Jewish society in Kerala, we can now resume our tracing of the historical development of Jewish socio-history in Kerala.

The Move to Cochin

The pre-eminent position held by Cranganore as a trade center declined considerably by 1341 because of silting caused by heavy floods in the Periyar river. This silting inhibited the berthing of larger vessels in the harbor. Around the same time, further South, there occurred a series of ecological events which caused structural changes in and around Cochin. These changes resulted in the formation of an excellent all weather harbor in Cochin. Since the Jews were primarily traders, they were quick to perceive the potential of Cochin as the new trade center. The more enterprising amongst them soon settled in this area. Dissensions among the descendants of the Rabban family led to many more shifting to Cochin in 1344.¹⁶ The predominance of the Jews in the pepper and timber trades and the desire of the Moors backed by the Zamorin of Calicut to break this monopoly resulted in severe persecution of the Jews. The Jews fled to Cochin in large numbers and sought refuge there.¹⁷ The Maharaja of Cochin provided them with land adjacent to his palace grounds where the three Jewish caste groups lived in a single street. At the upper end of the street, which came to be later known as Synagogue lane, resided the white Jews or Pardesi Jews. In the middle were the black Jews or *Malabar* Jews and at the lower end were the brown or Manumitted Jews. The area where the Jews were concentrated came to be known as "Jew Town" in Mattencheri.

The Portuguese: 1497-1663

The first attempts of the Portuguese to establish themselves on the West Coast were met with extreme hostility by the local population and the Portuguese were compelled to retreat to the Island of Anjedive. With the help of Gasper de Gama who was married to an Indian Jewess, the Portuguese succeeded in making a headway into Cranganore. One of the main factors responsible for Portuguese success in establishing themselves in Kerala was their ability to exploit the prevailing internal conflict between the Zamorin of Calicut and the Cochin Maharaja. The Zamorin was one of the welathiest persons in India. With the help of the Arabs, who had vested interests in the spice trade, the Zamorin succeeded in crushing all attempts of the Portuguese to establish themselves in Calicut. However, the ruler of Cochin, an arch enemy of the Zamorin, gave permission to the Portuguese to establish trade links in 1499. This proved fatal for the Cochin Maharaja whose territory came more or less under Portuguese domination for the next one hundred and sixty years. Meanwhile, the Zamorin, in an attempt to curb the rising power of the *Kunjali Marakars* (hereditary admirals of Calicut), entered into an alliance with the Portuguese. Thus started the phase of foreign domination in Kerala and the dwindling of the powers of the local kings.

With the advent of the Portuguese a more volatile situation was created. Trade was no longer the only crucial issue. The fanatical Portuguese were as concerned with the issue of

conversion to Christianity as they were with trade. The Portuguese, who looked with suspicion at the Jews, launched a policy of persecution and compelled the latter to flee. The situation may be summed up in the words written by Alphonso Albuquerque in his enquiry to His Majesty in Lisbon in 1513—"May I extinguish them one by one just as I come across them?" (Reissner, 1949). This started the only phase of Jewish persecution in Indian history. The Jews of India compare their flight from Cranganore as analogous to their departure after the destruction of the Second Temple. These Jews claim that most of their original documents pertaining to the early history were lost during this period.

By 1565, almost the entire Jewish community of Cranganore had left for Cochin, where they were given asylum by the Maharaja. The Jews provided one of the best fighting forces for the Maharaja. According to oral history, the Maharaja was so dependent on this force that in 1550, he postponed assisting in a war because it was a Saturday—the day of Sabbath for the Jews. This fondness for the Cochin Jews earned him the title of "King of the Jews" from the Portuguese. In 1568, the Pardesi Synagogue was built adjacent to the Maharaja's palace by Sammuel Castiel, David Beliliah, Ephraim Sala and Joseph Levi. In 1662, the Portuguese resorted to plunder and arson once again and wrecked the Pardesi Synagogue. The Cochin Maharaja was unable to intervene on behalf of the Jews because of his politically weak position. The Malabar Jews fled en masse to Ernakulam and built a Synagogue there.

The Pardesi Synagogue was rebuilt in 1664. The Synagogue was tiled with blue patterned tiles imported from China. A clock tower was added in 1761 by Ezekiel Rahabi with dials in Hebrew, Malayalam, and Roman numerals. Later additions included a gold case for keeping the Torah Scrolls presented by the British Resident, Colonel MaCaulay in 1808. There is also a Shofar which is two hundred years old and brought from Amsterdam. However some of the present Jews are sceptical of its origin as the Shofars used in Amsterdam are supposed to be much shorter. The original Shofar brought with the Jews when they came into Kerala is supposed to have been destroyed in the course of conflicts between the two groups. The constant patronage of the Pardesi Synagogue by the Maharajas and important Jews resulted in this Synagogue acquiring considerable fame. Even today, this Synagogue remains an important tourist attraction to tourists from within India and abroad.

The Dutch 1664-1794

If the Portuguese were the persecutors then the Dutch were the redeemers of the Cochin Jews. When the Dutch made inroads into Kerala, the Jews immediately joined hands with them in an attempt to overthrow the Portuguese. However the Dutch were forced to retreat due to heavy losses incurred during the struggle. With the help of the Jews, the Dutch managed to escape and return later with larger forces. In the first week of January, 1663, the Portuguese were finally forced to leave Kerala. However, they retained their colony in Goa until 1948 when they were defeated by the Indians. The advent of the Dutch from 1663 marked a period of peace and prosperity for the Cochin Jewish community. The Dutch brought with them "religious freedom and civil tolerance" (Slater, 1975: 491). Since the Dutch had commercial and not colonial interests in India, they were able to establish harmonious relations with the Jews. (18) Trade flourished during this period. Since the Dutch were primarily interested in securing for themselves a monopoly over the pepper trade, it was imperative for them to establish diplomatic ties with the local chieftains and principalities. The constant necessity to sign and renew treaties compelled them to seek the support of the white Jews, who were well versed in trade and trade relations. Thus the white Jews acted as intermediaries between the Dutch and the local rulers.

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Their fluency in the European and Levantine languages and in the local dialect helped them to acquire key positions as interpreters and advisors, both for the Dutch and the local rulers.

The general situation received a greater filip when the Maharaja appointed a *Mudalier* (status of a chief) for the Cochin Jews. The first *Mudalier* was presented with an official staff mounted with gold on which was engraved the motto of the Dutch East India Company. The heirs of the *Mudalier* had the hereditary leadership. This position was later taken up by the Castiel family and still later by the Hallegua family. "The *Mudalier* exercised criminal law and jurisdiction over the white Jews and sat in judgement in the Synagogue" (Alyar, 1902:130). This began an interest in Amsterdam about the Cochin Jews. Moses de Paiva was sent with a delegation to study and report on the lives of the Cochin Jews. The delegation included Isaac Irfus, Isaac Moscat and Abraham Part. Moses de Paiva's book entitled "Noticias dos Judeos de Cochin" published in Amsterdam is the first comprehensive study of the Cochin Jews. His report on the Jews created a great deal of interest in Europe on this hitherto unknown community. More Hebrew books were introduced into Cochin.

The most prominent Cochin Jew during this period was a white Jew named Ezekiel Rahabi (1694-1771). He was a Jew of Syrian origin and was the son of the famous David Rahabi, who is said to have discovered the existence of the Bene Israel. It is said that David Rahabi's father was a rich and prosperous Jew who had impressed Moses de Paiva and his delegation. In 1726, the Dutch made Ezekiel Rahabi "Principal Merchant" of the Dutch East India Company. He held this position until 1771. He was the chief negotiator between the local rulers, the Dutch and the chieftains of the three main principalities of Malabar, Cochin and Travencore. He dealt in all kinds of items ranging from spice to timber. His ships were used by the British, Portuguese, Dutch and the local Rajas. He gave financial assistance to the local rulers as well as the foreigners. Among the Cochin Jews, Ezekiel Rahabi undoubtedly played the most important role in the socio-economic and political affairs of Kerala. He often intervened in religious matters on behalf of the Christians, Hindus and Muslims.

In general, the Dutch period witnessed peace and prosperity for the Jews. For the white Jews, it was a period when they enjoyed economic and political power. They had the combined privileges conferred by the Maharaja of Cochin and the Dutch. During this period Jews owned and chartered ships. O.K. Nambiar is of the view that Portuguese persecution of Jews had depleted their numbers to such a large extent that it was virtually impossible for them to regain the old glory that they enjoyed in Cranganore. This is obviously incorrect since the white Jews were few in number from the very beginning and they enjoyed political power and prosperity throughout the Dutch period. The section of Jews who were affected were the *Malabar* Jews who ceased to enjoy most benefits after their arrival to Cochin. This was due to the fact that the special patronage extended by the Maharaja of Cochin were confined to the *Pardesi* Jews only. As stated earlier this patronage from the royal palace helped the *Pardesi* Jews in establishing and maintaining a high status vis-a-vis the other two Jewish groups of Cochin. It has often been remarked by individuals that the white Jews called themselves *Pardesi* in order to acquire a higher social standing for themselves. However, this view seems to be incorrect, since the establishment of a Jew colony in Cochin preceded the Portuguese and Dutch rule. It is more likely that the white Jews were called *Pardesi* by the Black Jews since the former were a later batch of Jews and were fair complexioned.

The British Period: 1795-1947

The success of the British in the Battle of Plassey,¹⁹ was a turning point in Indian history. It witnessed the beginning of British power of the Indian Empire. Due to the desire of the East

India Company to gain a monopoly over trade and production, all intermediaries were eliminated from the commercial scene. The worst affected by this were the Jews who until then had held the undisputed position of intermediaries, especially between the local Maharajas and the foreign traders. This decline in position was a cruel blow to the Jewish merchants and started a period of their slow decline in political and economic power. The local Maharajas, who until then were always powerful enough to come to the rescue of the Jews, were unable to intervene on their behalf as they themselves were under threat of political subjugation. With the adoption of the policy of Annexation by Lord Dalhousie,²⁰ trade became of secondary interest and was left in the hands of private individuals. Once the British had embarked upon their expansionist policies, Cochin had little importance. There was a shift in political and economic activity from Cochin to Madras and Calcutta. This shift also necessitated the development of these three cities into major urban centers. With the development of railways and better communication systems, Cochin lost its dominant position. Thus Cochin became a backwater, neglected and "de-industrialized."

An important development during the British period was the establishment of the printing press which printed Hebrew literature. Prior to the coming of the British, Hebrew literature was imported from Amsterdam. The introduction of the printing press in India initiated interest in the opening of their printing presses. Jacob David Cohen, a Cochin Jew, set up a Malayalam and Hebrew printing press in Cochin. He also produced a treatise containing the "Shingli" version of the Minha service of Simchat Torah. Another Cochin Jew, set up a press in Calcutta and later a press was started in Bombay by Rabbi Yehuda Ashkenazi, also a Cochin Jew. While these presses made Hebrew literature easily accessible for the first time, they were not very successful and soon the policy of importing books from Amsterdam was reverted to.

The spread of modern education introduced by the British after 1813 was not utilized by some sections of the Jewish community, particularly the white Jews. Like the upper castes in traditional Kerala society, the Jews of Cochin refused to take advantage of western education. With the development of an English-educated middle-class who went into professional services, the Jews due to their lack of higher education tended to be supported by the income derived from their estates, relatively diminished activities or by working in Jewish owned companies. A letter from Lord Curzon, in 1900 amply illustrates the necessity felt by the white Jewish community to improve their educational endeavors.²¹ However, by the 1930's there was no doubt that the Jews had fallen behind not only commercially but also in the field of education. One of the problems that the Jews encountered was the non-recognition of Jewish holidays. A community that was traditionally more orthodox than other religious communities was seen by some members of the larger community as a serious deterrent to a "backward community who have been gradually attracted towards modern education."²² Being a microscopic minority, they began to feel insecure about the prospects for the members of the community and encouraged the younger generations to migrate to Israel.

From ancient times, in Cochin State, all Jewish festivals were recognized by the Maharajas as well as the British government as gazetted holidays. However, after India's independence this policy was discarded and the Jews were forced to take casual leave on their holy days. This was particularly disappointing to them, since most of the holidays observed in India had a religious base (e.g. *Bakrid* and *Ramzan* for Muslims; Easter and Christmas for Christians; Diwali, Holi for Hindus, etc.) The Jews sent several memoranda for a change in this policy.²³

Though the economic prosperity of the Jews had declined considerably during the British rule, there were still some very wealthy white Jews among them. In a letter by Naphatali Eliahu

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Rahabi to Dr. Theodere Herzl, mention is made of the enormous wealth that could be obtained from the Jews of India towards promoting the Zionist movement. In this letter, N.E. Roby has forwarded the addresses of three white Cochin Jews²⁴ from whom Dr. Herzl could obtain money for promoting Zionist activity. The letter also indicates the involvement of the Cochin in the Zionist movement. It was the Zionist movement and the interest it generated among the three sections of the Cochin Jews which was partially responsible for bringing a certain degree of unity among them. Within each section, their respective synagogues played an important role in bringing together all the members of the community. In the absence of a Rabbi, the elders of the community who were well versed in the Torah and the Talmud accepted the leadership of the community and acted as the religious and political spokesman for their community.

India's independence in 1947 and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 were of particular importance to the Cochin Jewish community. The creation of Israel meant the opportunity to go to the "promised land". To the religious dimension was added some economic expectations among the Malabar and Manumitted sections. Even among the white Jews there were some whose religious motivation was combined with a desire for better economic prospects. Having spent most of their lives in the lower echelons of Kerala's traditional social order, the Malabar and the Manumitted Jews looked toward an egalitarian society where all Jews would be given equal opportunities. To attribute religion alone for the mass exodus to Israel among these two sections would be a mistake. This total emphasis of religion as the sole criteria for migration has been put forth by Dr. Fischel when he wrote—

No greater proof of their deep love of Zion can be offered than the very fact of their immigration to Israel, motivated not by intolerance or discrimination on behalf of the authorities, not by external political or social considerations, but by their abiding attachment to the land of their forebearers.²⁵

The complete closure of the Mala Synagogue due to immigration is of great relevance here as it mentions the economic situation of these Jews. In 1914, a letter addressed to Lady and Mr. Sassoon by the Jewish Synagogue at Mala reveals the synagogue to be "...the resort and consolation of a score of poor Jewish families..."²⁶

In spite of the fact that it was only the Pardesi Jews who played an important role in the economy and in international relations, the Jews as a community were perceived as important enough to be allowed to elect their own representatives to the Cochin Legislative Council (created in 1925). Even after the abolition of this Council, Jews continued to be nominated for other seats until 1948 (Roland, 1980: 76).

The cordial relations that existed between the local rulers and the Jews of Cochin is exemplified by the reply of the Maharaja of Cochin to the Cochin Jews on the occasion of the celebration held for the creation of the State of Israel in 1948—

It is very gratifying for me to learn that your co-religionists are now celebrating their national freedom in Palestine, the original home of your forefathers and I heartily congratulate you on this very happy occasion.²⁷

For the Cochin Jews, their centuries of domicile in India had been a peaceful one. They had faced no anti-Semitism at the hands of the Indian rulers or the local non-Jewish population. However, the creation of Israel had a major impact on the Cochins and from 1950 onwards, India witnessed their emigration to Israel. Today there are just a few Cochin Jews left in India. Though attempts are made by these members to retain their Jewish way of life, the notion of an active Cochini community has become a part of the past.

Notes

- 1 For further details on these three communities, see Margaret Abraham, unpublished dissertation, 1990; See also, Isenberg, Shirley Berry, 1988.
- 2 See Margaret Abraham 1991a, 1991b.
- 3 Parasurama was the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver.
- 4 Kerala as it exists on the map today was established in 1956.
- 5 The distinctions between these groups will be discussed in detail further on in this paper.
- 6 Moses De Paiva was a member of the Dutch Mission which was sent to Kerala to enquire and report on the Cochin Jews. His report was entitled "Noticias dos Judeos de Cochim", published in 1687. For an English translation see, *400 Anniversary Souvenir of the Cochin Synagogue, 1968: 32-50*.
- 7 See Margaret Abraham, 1990, unpublished dissertation, chapter 5 on the Bene Israel. I have put forward Shelim Samuel's view on the origin of Bene Israel. Though the theory put forward by him is quite probable, it is surprising that, unlike their Cochin counterparts who were able to establish trading links immediately, the Bene Israel who were also familiar with the trading routes should have settled down to a rural and isolated existence.
- 8 Interestingly, the grant was also made to the Christians and is presently kept in the Christian Seminary at Kottayam.
- 9 It is believed that today there is no one who can precisely decipher this old Tamil script which has changed considerably over the years.
- 10 The Dutch Governor Moens gives the date of the grant as 426 A.D., Bishop Middleton as 508 A.D., Lawson as 750 A.D. and the Cochin Jews as 379 A.D.
- 11 Source: The Cochin Synagogue in 1568-Mattanchery, Cochin, Kerala.
- 12 The author has given us reasons for the decline of Namboodiri and Nayar dominance during the nineteenth century in Kerala. He has analyzed the reasons behind the decline and the effects of it on these two caste groups.
- 13 Abraham Barak was from the community of manumitted Jews. He was a lawyer by profession and an active Indian Congress worker. He was on the Executive Board of Indian States Peoples Congress for the establishment of democracy in the autocratic princely state of Travencore under the Dewanship of Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer. He was also a delegate to the famous Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress. For

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further details see the diaries of Abraham Barak Salem kept in the Library at the University of California at Berkeley.

- 14 See Moses De Paiva-footnote 6
- 15 The windows of the synagogue were left open during services and the Manumitted Jews stood at these windows in order to partake in the prayers.
- 16 According to the oral tradition, there was a fight between the two brothers of the Rabban family's descendants. The fight was supposed to have been so severe that one of the brothers to escape from danger had to swim through the backwaters into Cochin carrying his wife on his back!
- 17 The term "Cochin" for the Kerala Jews was due to their move to Cochin and their having settled there.
- 18 The persecution of the Jews in Spain and Portugal in the mid fifteenth century, resulted in their seeking refuge in Amsterdam. The Dutch, though initially intolerant towards the Jews, gradually changed their attitude and after 1600, Amsterdam became a refuge for Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews.
- 19 The Battle of Plassey was fought between the British East India Company and Siraj-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Bengal in 1757.
- 20 This Policy of Annexation was adopted in 1853 ostensibly to help the local rulers in administering their territories more successfully. But the real motive behind the policy was to colonize the whole of India in a slow but successful manner.
- 21 See M. Abraham unpublished dissertation for the text of the letter from Lord Curzon to the "Congregation of White Jews".
- 22 Letter from Abraham Barak Salem, Advocate, Cochin—To the Director of Public Instruction, Travencore-Cochin State, Trivandrum, 1952.
- 23 Memorandum on the needs of the Jews in Travencore-Cochin State, signed by S.S. Koder, A.B. Salem, and E. Elias, 11/4/54 at Mattanchery, Cochin.
- 24 Issac Elias Hallegua, Esq., Samuel S. Koder, Esq., Jacob Hay E. Cohen, Esq.
- 25 Reprint from Herzl Year Book, Herzl Press, New York, 1961-1962, vol 4:322
- 26 See, Appendix of Margaret Abraham, 1990 unpublished dissertation for letter to Lady and Mr. Sassoon, London, from the Jewish Synagogue at Mala, June 17, 1914.
- 27 See, India and Israel, Bombay, Year book, 1951.

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