



THE HISTORY OF JEWS IN KERALA

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Abstract

The history of the Jewish people is one of the extreme persecution and resilience with which they maintained their culture and identity. This paper provides the background of the Jewish people right from their origin, and their life in Kerala till the contemporary situation with the geopolitical scenario of their promised land – Israel. 4000-year-old history, Canaan, Egypt, Babylon, and then the Roman destruction of Jerusalem their Second Temple in 70 AD and diaspora lead them to the shores of Malabar. Invited or uninvited the Jewish refugees where our guests as the Upanishad suggests '*Atidhi Devo Bhava*'. Unlike the rest of the diaspora, the Malabar Jews were free to observe and practice their religion and free to engage in the pursuit of livelihood. India is the only country in the world, the Jews lived in the friendly neighbourhood of Hindus, Christians and Muslims for 2000 years where they never experienced any horror of antisemitism. The Biblical prophecy coupled with Zionist Philosophy of fleeing from one country to another, the Jews will never have peace unless they have their own country prompted them to immigrate to their father land when it became an independent nation in 1948. So, the Kerala Jews who were orthodox and religious with their ardent desire to participate in the rebuilding of their nation migrated to Israel. In a matter of few years majority of the Jews reached Israel. The Jewish history continues in Kerala with the last 22 people who could not leave for Israel due to their own reason.

Keywords: Acculturation, Jewish People, Kerala Jews

Introduction

The history of the Jewish people is one of the extreme persecution and resilience with which they maintained their culture and identity. This paper provides the background of the Jewish people right from the origin till the contemporary situation with the geopolitical scenario of their Promised Land – Israel. Jewish history began about 4000 years ago with Patriarch Abraham. The Jews are an ethno-religious group and a nation originating from the Israelites and Hebrews of the historical Israel and Judea. Their faith is monotheism and religion called Judaism; people who live with the Holy Scriptures are of suggestive that Judaism is a conversation between God and man.

Babylon, a very wealthy, modern state of the time was built on many city states, prominent among them were Kush, Susa and Ur. Patriarch Abraham's father Terah decides to immigrate to Canaan (Genesis 11:31) and on their eastward journey crosses river Euphrates. "By the act of crossing the river Euphrates Terah and his family group become the first people in the Bible identified as '*Ivrim*' of which the English version is 'Hebrews', the people who crossed over", "The people from the other side of the river" (1).

On the way Terah dies and Abraham had his first encounter with God. Abraham buys land and settled down in Canaan. His grandson Jacob becomes the progenitor of the 12 tribes of Israel. A great famine swept across Canaan and the Hebrews immigrated to Egypt and lived there for 400 years till Moses led them out of slavery. We read in the Bible the Jews wandering in the wilderness for 40 years living in tents and eating 'Manna' falling from the Heaven, receipt of Torah by Moses on the Sinai Mount, going back to Canaan under the leadership of Joshua and settled down there.

A 1000 years passes David becomes the king of the Jews after the death of the first anointed king Saul. David's son Solomon builds the First Temple in Jerusalem. Palestine (Canaan) was the consolidation of two states north, the kingdom of Israel and south the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem Temple as common for worship. Northern kingdom was attacked by the Assyrian king Sargon II and took the entire population into captivity. These people came to be known as the "Lost 10 Tribes of Israel". And now it was the turn of Judea to be defeated. In the year 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king attacked Judea killed the king and his sons, the city was looted Jerusalem Temple was destroyed and the population was deported to Babylonia.

Jewish Diaspora began when they were captured by the Assyrians and continued on much larger scale with the Babylonian captivity. Persian king Cyrus defeated Babylon and allowed the Jews to return and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. We read in the history that in 70 A.D., the Roman General Titus Vespasian destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple. With the fall of Jerusalem Judaism was in peril. Judaism would have died without the continuous transmissions of knowledge to future generations. Someone needs to start a Yeshiva for the Jewish learning to keep the knowledge alive. An enterprising Rabbi by name Yohanan-Ben-Zakai got the permission from the Roman General to start a Yeshiva (Academy) for the future of the Jewish learning in Yevneh, north of Jerusalem.

From the early days the Jews realized that education is the tool for their survival. Learning gave value to their lives. We read that Maccabean queen Alexandra gave the decree for compulsory education for both boys and girls at least up to primary level. (2) There was not even a single illiterate person in Judea, universal education, a 100 odd years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The golden age of Jewish culture in Spain was during the time of Muslim rulers. Large and wealthy Jewish communities were established. Ummayid Caliphs treated the Jews with extraordinary favour and tolerance. There were substantial and well to do Jewish communities with their own Yeshivas (3)

Due to their education and knowledge the Jews held influential positions. This success of a small community led to discrimination in the society. In Europe anti Semitism became prevalent throughout the Middle Ages and the Jews were subjected to ghetto life, suffering, persecution, genocide but came out successfully to make their own intellectual mark in the modern times. Medieval Jewish history ended in England in 1300 in France in 1400 in Spain in 1500, with the successive expulsions of Jews from these countries. Modern Jewish history began with the re admittance of the Jews to the west in the 17th Century (4).

Zionism – the desire to return to the Motherland to rebuild the nation kept kindling in the heart of every Jew in Diaspora. The young Jews all over Eastern Europe felt an urgent need of action left for Palestine to settle in the land to work on the soil and create agriculture settlements. The billionaire bankers in Europe like the Rothchilds, Hirceshs and others supported the movement by purchasing vast stretches of land to resettle the Jews. Theodore Herzl who started the Zionist movement 1897 motivated the rich Jews all over the World that by fleeing from one country to another the Jews will not have peace until they have their own country.

In an unseen way the forces that set in motion by Herzl slowly began to be felt. The presence of Jews as an international political entity was sensed by the British who sought the aid of World Jewry in their war efforts; on November 2nd 1917 England issued the Balfour Declaration announcing that it looked with favour upon the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine (5).

In the 1930's the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi terror made an increasing number of Jews in Europe to leave for Palestine which was their only hope. The Second World War broke out and Hitler occupied most of Europe. There was substantial number of Jewish population in Poland. The Nazis implemented the 'Final Solution'. This was an extensive organized genocide on an unprecedented scale in modern history aimed at the annihilation of the Jewish people known as Holocaust. 6 million Jews were exterminated in concentration camps and gas chambers in Poland.

Large scale immigration of Jews to Palestine was resisted by the Arabs. The British Government found that the British mandate unworkable. Once the British Government renounced their mandate, Harry S. Truman, the president of United States pushed for the creation of a Jewish State. On 29th November 1947 thanks to Truman's vigorous backing the partition plan, there would be Jewish and Arab states was endorsed by the U.N. General Assembly 33 Votes to 13 with 10 abstentions (6). On May 14th 1948, David Ben Gurion proclaimed the establishment of a Jewish state – Eretz Israel - The State of Israel.

The Jews in Kerala

The history of the Jews is incredibly fascinating and interesting. 4000 years of history - they lived in all continents and civilizations. The Jew's relationship with India goes back to the Biblical times when the merchant ships of King Solomon (960 to 922 BC) arrived for trade with Malabar. The history of the Jews of Cochin continues with the last remaining 22 members of the community. This is an attempt to present a brief history of Kerala Jews. Kodungallur is a coastal town 35 km north of Cochin. It was a natural harbor in ancient times. Its ancient name in Malayalam was Muzirikode and the foreigners, the Greeks and Romans called it Muziris.

M.D. Japheth writes "It is believed by many that in that far of age when trade between India and other countries was an important factor, waves of Jewish settlers manning the fleets of king Solomon arrived on the coast of Malabar. That part of the country having been rich with produce of the land that could constitute profitable merchandise. It is quite possible that the ancestors of Cochin Jews were brought to this country by the impetus of Trade (7). Professor Chaim Rabin of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem too have the same view. "Solomon's expedition was in the 10th Century BCE. After that kingdom of Judea came to be an active participant in the trade with India. Trade with India carried out in the following way; Ships came from India to the south end of Arabia, because you can come across with the monsoon. On the other hand it was very hard to sail up to the Red Sea, because of the adverse wind and also because of the pirates. Goods were brought over land by camel caravans from South Arabia. One of the points where they touched civilization was Judea. The Judean Kingdom was one of the mediators in the trade that came from India (8).

The exact year of the arrival of the first Hebrew traders and their numbers are not known. Basnage suggests 973 BCE as the probable year but the scriptural portions indicates an earlier date since ivory, rhesus monkeys, peacocks, sandal wood and precious stones mentioned in the Bible had to come from Kerala. It is presumed that a small Jewish business community flourished in Solomonian era. Basnage suggests that the king of Jews had an astrologer from Kodungallur named Asan in his royal court (9).

Ancient writers like Periplus (10) and Pliny (11) have recorded that there was a sustained maritime relation between the Red Sea coast and Muziris (Kodungallur), "the first emporium of India". Tamil works of Sangam period describe the westerners who were frequently visiting the port city.(12) These contacts became more frequent with the discovery of 'Hippalus' wind in the second century B.C. that made the sea route from Red Sea to Kerala much safer, shorter and easier (13).

The westerners were attracted to the shores because of spices especially pepper. We read agitating the white foam of Periyar River, the beautifully built ships of the Yavanas (Greeks) came with gold and returned with pepper and Muziris resounded with noise (14). Pliny has described the lavish expenditure of the Romans on this and other similar luxuries (15). It is said that there was a temple of Augustus at the port city with colony of Romans to protect their trade interests (16).

As we have seen the earliest Jews to set foot on the soil of Kerala were perhaps the sailors who came in the ships of King Solomon. P.M. Jussay in his book "The Jews of Kerala" observes that it is possible that during their seasonal sojourn on this spicy coast the rulers of the land known for their generous hospitality might have provided them with the necessary bed and board including slave girls to keep them company. The off spring of this romantic interlude might have become the nucleus of the Jewish community in Kerala. This was being continually enlarged by the refugees who managed to reach the coast fleeing from the atrocities of the Assyrians, the bondage of the Babylonians (17) and the destructive savages of the conquering Romans (18). Thus, at the beginning of the Christian Era, there flourished along the coast of Kerala quite a few thriving Jewish Communities.

In 1718 C.E. Adrian Moens the Dutch Governor of Cochin wrote “According to the general tradition of Malabar Jews, about 1000 people arrived in these regions a few years after the destruction of the second temple at Jerusalem. Thus, if this account is accepted, it might have happened 70 years after the birth of Jesus Christ when Jerusalem suffered greatly at the hands of Titus Vespasian, or in the year 136, when the said town was completely demolished by order by the Emperor Aelius Hadrian, after a rising of the Jews against the Roman Government, and a new town called Aelia Capitolina was built on the same site, within two hours distance of which town they were forbidden on pain of death to approach” (19).

The subjugation of Judea was completed in 136 C.E. with the suppression of the revolt led by Simon bar Kochba. During the turbulent period thousands of Jewish exiles sought refuge in Kodungallur. An old paper preserved in the Secretariat records of Kerala reads as follows. “After the destruction of the second Temple in the 3828th year of creation 3186th years of tribulation, 68th year of Christian era, about 10,000 Jews and Jewesses came to Malabar and settled themselves at Cranganore, Palloor, Mahadam and Palloothoo three-fourth (of the Jewish) population remained at Cranganore, then called Mahodrapatna and subsequently Chingley (Shingly) under the Government of Cherumpoomal (Emperor of Cheraman Perumal) (20).

“Atithi Devo Bhava”

The dynamics of host-guest relationship which embodies the Indian Philosophy of revering the guests with the same respect as god is explained in the Taithiriya Upanishad. The Jews were driven out from their country by the Romans after destroying Jerusalem and the second temple in 70 A.D. These refugees with the sense of dread, disorientation confusion and anxiety; arrived the shores of Malabar. Invited or uninvited the hospitality and affection shown to them by providing food and shelter makes India unique among nations of diaspora. The Jews were free to observe and practice their religion and engage in the pursuit of their livelihood.

Anjuvannam

K.K. Menon, the Malayali author of “History of Kerala” writes that in the second century C.E. sailors of a Roman Merchant ship that plied regularly between Mayos Hermes on the Red Sea and the Malabar coast found a Jewish colony in kodungallur. Very often the sailors brought with them gold and silver and purchased pepper and spices from the local merchants. Recently a hoard of Roman gold was unearthed in Valluvalli, near North Parur, about 20 km from kodungallur. These Roman ships, it is believed brought more Jews to Kodungallur.

“But the most important of the early settlement was one at Cherigandaram that later became Shingly and then Methala the name of which it is known today. Shingly may be the foreignized version of “Chengala Azhi”. The original name of the estuary is Cranganore (Kodungallur). A part of the original name is still retained, as the place is known as (Azhi). It was the hub of activities of Anjuvannam or the Jewish Merchant guild.”

One of the remarkable episodes in the long history of Kerala was the formation of an autonomous Jewish principality in Kodungallur called Anjuvannam. Two ancient – copper plates inscribed with the epoch-making proclamation issued by king Bhaskara Ravi Varma known as Juthasasanam to the merchant prince Joseph Rabban. As all ancient India documents, the ordinance of Parkaran Iravivarmar lacks a title and the date of promulgation. The facsimile of the copper plates was brought out in 1968 to commemorate the quarter century of the Cochin Synagogue; a printed card appended to it gives the following information. “The copper plates form the Magna Carta of the Jews of Cochin. No two scholars agree as to their dates and other transactions. Some scholars maintain the 11th century as the correct date, but the traditional date according to the Cochin Jews is 379”. They have an authorized version of transaction. But Dr. M.G.S. Narayanan of the Calicut University considers the “Authorized Version” is imperfect.

The researcher had two opportunities to share the dais with Dr. M.G.S. in seminars on the Jews of Kerala. During one such seminar in Maharajas College, Ernakulam, he told the researcher that he was surprised to find the custodians of the copper plate in Mattancherry (Cochin) were still keeping the old erroneous transaction with speculative early dates. Dr. M.G.S Narayanan made a fresh English translation which is reproduced below. “Hail prosperity! This is the gift that His Majesty, King of Kings Sri Bhaskara Ravivarman who is to wield sceptre for several thousand years, was pleased to make during the thirty sixth year after the second year of his reign on the day when he was pleased to reside at Muyirikode we have granted to Joseph

Rabban, the Anjuvannam, tolls by the boat and other vehicles, Anjuvannam dues, the right to employ day lamp decorative cloth, palanquin, umbrella, kettledrum, trumpets, gateway arch, arched roof, weapons and the rest of the seventy two privileges. We have remitted customs dues and weighing fee.

More over according to this copper plate grant he shall be exempted from payments due to the king from the settlers in the town, but he shall enjoy what they enjoy. To Joseph Rabban proprietor of the Anjuvannam his male and female issues, nephews and sons-in-law Anjuvannam shall belong by hereditary succession as long as the sun and moon endure - Prosperity. This is attested by Govardhana Marthandan, Governor of Venadu. This is attested by Kota Chirikandan, Governor of Vempallinadu. This is attested by Manavepala Manaviyan, Governor of Eralnadu. This is attested by Rayiran Chathan, the Governor of Valluvanadu. This is attested by Kota Ravi, Governor of Nedumpurayurnadu. This is attested by Murkan Chathan, Commander of Eastern forces. This writing is to executed by Vanralachery Kandan Kunrappolan, the officer who takes down oral messages (21). Although there had been differences of opinion among the scholars regarding the date of the grant for quite some time Professor Elankulam Kunjan Pillai examined these and other inscriptions of the period and suggested that Bhaskara Ravivarma ascended the throne in 962 CE. According to the hypothesis the 38th year of the reign of Bhaskara Ravivarma in which Juthasasanam was issued in 1000 C.E. Proof E.K. Pillai refers to the monarch as Bhaskara Ravi Varma senior or Bhaskara Ravi Varma I.

It was a period when the Chera-Chola conflict was developing in the South. The Cholas has invaded Ayvel country, a tributary state of the Chera Empire – captured its king and relatives and carried away his treasures. The Chera army moved down to the south and the two armies met in battle at Vizhinjam a few miles south of Quilon. The Chera army was routed and victorious Cholas were moving to the Chera capital Muziris. At this moment of crisis, Bhaskara Ravi Varma, the Chera King convened a war council at which all the Governors of Potentates of the land including Joseph Rabban, the merchant prince, were present. He in a rare gesture of patriotism must have placed at the disposal of the sovereign of his ships, together with men and materials for the prosecution of war of resistance. In return for this timely help, the king raised the status of Arjuvannam by making it an autonomous corporation and installed Joseph Rabban as its head with all the seventy two princely privileges enjoyed by the titular lords (22). It was perhaps on this occasion that the title “Chirianandan” was also conferred on him (23). The symbol of ethical and moral philosophy of protecting the host and his country is Anjuvannam the Jewish guild of Muziris’ elevation to an autonomous Jewish principality and installation of the leader Joseph Rabban as its titular head with all princely privileges by the Chera king. The installation of Joseph Rabban as the over-lord of Arjuvannam and the conferment of princely privileges on him led many westerners to consider him as to Jewish King of (Shingly). Thus the 14th century Rabbi Nizim of Barcelona wrote

I travelled from Spain

I had heard of the city of Shingly

I longed to see an Israeli King

Him I saw with my own eyes (24)

Anjuvannam was 27 square miles in area. The tradition which has come down from ancient times is that more than 20,000 Jews lived in the kingdom. The most important shrines of it were the Kadavumbhagam (riverside) Synagogue and the Thekkum bhagam (south side) Synagogue. Anjuvannam flourished more than a millennium and the descendant of Joseph Rabban held the scepter up to the 72nd generation. During this golden era Anjuvannam Jewry was reinforced by large number of Jewish immigrants from Spain and Portugal. Persecution of Jews was erupted in Persia and large number of Jews from there and also from Mesopotamia Jews took refuge in Kodungallur.

In 1341 the last king of the Rabban dynasty died. Moshe-de-Paiva the traveler from Amsterdam recorded that the quarrel between two sisters brought hatred between two brothers Azar – Aron of the Rabban siblings caused the fall of Anjuvannam kingdom. Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut was too eager to expand his territory interfered in the affairs of Anjuvannam with an eye on the spice trade monopolized by the Jews. Zamorin supported the Moorish (Arabs) traders who were eagerly waiting for an opportunity to crush the Jewish monopoly. With the support of Zamorin the Moorish marauders descended upon the hapless Jews of Anjuvannam on a Sabbath night in 1524. The Jewish houses, shops, Synagogues and their ancient records and religious valuables kept in the Synagogues were consumed by fire. Most of the survivors took to flight. Joseph

Azar swam across the lake with his wife on his back. The fall of Anjuvannam had an agonizing impact on the Jews of sub continent Shellin Samuel remarks is the destruction of Kodungallur is often compared to the destruction of Jerusalem in miniature (25) and the dispersement of the Jews from the Holy land. The Portuguese occupied Kodungallur in 1565. The Jewish philosophy of hope, faith and optimism enabled them to overcome the odds they faced throughout their history. When the Portuguese and Arabs with the help of Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut drove them from Muziris they made settlement in the territories of the Raja of Cochi and prospered.

Later Settlements Outside Kodungallur

The Jewish community in Kodungallur does not seem to have been a fully integrated unit. It was rather a conglomeration of heterogeneous elements drawn from different sources and brought together at different periods. According new evidence available, the earliest Jews to arrive at Shingly were two tribes of Judah and Benjamin before the destruction of the first temple (800 BC). There was a second wave in AD 70 after the destruction of the second temple (26). Later some came from the Middle East as merchants and later still more came as refugees from the Iberian Peninsula. So, when the exodus from Kodungallur started after 1341 they broke up into different groups easily and wandered away to settle down in different places within the territory of the Raja of Cochin. Thus, when Moses Pereyra de Paiva visited Cochin in 1685, there were eleven congregations in the State, each with its own Synagogue (27).

Advocate Premdoss Swamidoss Yehudi in his book “The Shingly Hebrews” narrates the origin of the Cochin State as “during the period from 80 AD to 1102 AD Cochin and the adjacent territories were controlled by the Chera of Kulasekhara kings. The kingdom consisted of numerous territories held together by the king: Chera is derived from a Malayalam word meaning union or cohesion. As time passed the authority of the Chera king weakened and the last Perumal was forced to partition his realm. Thus, the native State of Cochin was formed around 1102 A.D. The rulers of Cochin were known as Perumpadappu Swarupam and according to tradition the nephew of Cheraman Permal was installed as the first maharaja of Cochin, Perumpadappu Mooppil. The maharaja of Cochin ruled his kingdom from Mahodayapuram in Kodungallur, but intermitted war threats from the neighboring Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut necessitated a change and eventually the capital was shifted to Cochin proper about 1341.

The Jews of Cochin were divided into two groups the white Jews (Pardesi or foreigner) and the Malabaris. The Pardesis came to Kerala coast in the 15th century from Spain and Portugal during the inquisition. The Malabarees were the earliest settlers in India came during the time of King Solomon as the sailors in his merchant ships and during the time of the destruction of second temple in 70 A.D. The pardesi Jews were rich merchants and leading exporters of pepper, timber, amber, rice and cotton. The cordial relationship between the Jews and Maharaja of Cochin are documented by the Dutch traveler Van Lincheston who visited Cochin in 1589 (28). He described the Jews as being the king of Cochins nearest counselors. The Raja has allotted a site closer to his own palace for the Jews. Van Llincheston added that in 1550 the Raja of Cochin refused to fight a battle on Saturday because his Jewish soldiers would not fight that day and they were his best soldiers. Some of the Malabari Jews were ship builders and helped the local Rajas in maritime trade (29).

In contrast to the western educated urbanized pardesi Jews, the Malabari Jews due to their economic backwardness lacked the opportunity to educate their children. The majority of the Malabari Jews were, chiefly engaged as fishermen, book binders, peddlers, petty traders and unskilled laborers. The Pardesi Jews never enjoyed any kind of cultural or social relationship with the Malabari Jews and considered them inferior. According to various surveys the Cochin Jews have never numbered more than 2500 even before their immigration to Israel. By 1959 their number has fallen to 370 largely due to their immigration to Israel. Currently the total number of Cochin Jews in Kerala is not more than 25 (30)

The Dutch traveler Moshe de Paiva stated in 1685 at Cochin the Malabari Jewish quarter was in the main street at the other end of the pardesi Synagogue and they were comprised about 120 families and three Synagogues Kochangadi, Kadavumbhagam and Thekkum bhagam. At Parur there are 100 families living in extreme distress and one Synagogue where two scrolls from ancient community of Shingly were kept. The other congregations were smaller, Mala about 60 families and one Synagogue, Muttam 35 families one Synagogue and Chennamangalam 50 well to do families and one Synagogue (31).

Malabari Jews were concentrated in five places Cochin, Ernakulam, Mala, Chennamangalam and Paravur. Except one family “Mattath”, who had settled in Paravur when the congregation in Muttom (Cherthala in Alappay district) was abandoned were educated and employed. The rest of the people were very poor. They were among the first to immigrate to Israel after Israel became an independent Jewish Nation in 1948 May 14. Within a year the Jewish agency officers visited Kerala and exhorted the people to migrate to Israel to rebuild their promised land.

A Zionist activist of Paravur Kadavil Mayer was a clerk in the Travancore Government. He also served in the British army during the Second World War. He came into contact with many service men from whom he understood that any Jew who served in any of the World war can enter Israel without any special permit. The Law of Return promulgated by the Israeli Government in 1950 also allows any Jew to settle in Israel (32).

The group consisting of 17 families around 100 people under the leadership of Kadavil Mayer left for Israel in 1949 December and reached Israel in January 1950 after a stay of one month in Bombay. “The highest migration to Israel was between 1952 and 1958 wherein some 1800 Jews migrated to Israel. The Mala congregation was the first one to go en masse donating their Synagogue to Mala Panchayath. The “youth aliyah” was the main organization which handled the immigration of youth and children. By the end of 1960’s most of the Cochin Jews had immigrated except a few well to do families. Leaving the native land for good was very painful for the Jews of Paravur, the researcher’s native place in Ernakulam district, Kerala. When the friends and neighbors who gathered to bid them farewell, a lot of hugging and tears in the porch of the Synagogue. The immigrants were garlanded; the last few words to the neighbors took place there. A very inspiring song written by a Jew from Ernakulam was on the lips of every Jew. They sang it loud partly to cover up the pain they are going through to leave their friends and relatives. The meaning of the song in Malayalam is almost as follows:

“Let us get ready to go to Israel. Leaving our dear land that nurtured us so long is painful. But we must leave. Once we are born, we all must die. Let us die and get buried in Israel.”

They continue to sing this song till they reach Aluva Railway Station. A large number of friends and relatives are gathered at the Railway Station to bid them farewell. Aluva to Bombay and from there to Israel. The sojourners who have become a part of the society are back to their “Promised Land” leaving a faint pain in the heart of those who loved them.

Acculturation Without Assimilation

Rabbi Hillel, the first century religious leader and sage said that Torah (613 Laws including 10 commandments) can be encapsulated into a single commandment “(WHAT IS HATEFUL OR HURTFUL TO YOU DO NOT DO TO ANOTHER)”. This philosophy of the Jews do not differ from the Hindu philosophy. Living among the friendly neighbourhood people for 2000 years it is natural they borrowed many symbols each other. “Halacha” the Jewish law, is the systemization of ethical, social and ritual norms that have defined Jewish practice since the establishment of the Rabbinic academy in Yavneh following the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. Minhag is the way halacha is observed according to local customs and minhayim vary from place to place. Halacha is incomplete without minhag (33).

Like all truly ancient religions Judaism is extremely complex, comprising diverse threads over centuries and millennia. Unique among the World’s religions is Judaism’s diasporization. Jews have lived among all peoples of the World wherever destiny took them. It is natural that living among the Hindus of Kerala, the Jewish traditions which is so multidimensional might have borrowed from the host culture. Susan Bayly observed in her book “Saints Goddesses and King” (Page 252 Oxford University press) that what is important to bear in mind that Kerala Jew’s adaptation of high caste Hindu’s ritual behaviors and symbols into their observances was a very serious matter for it served to integrate them in to the society in which they lived, not assimilated.

CTE Rheunis a missionary of German origin who is a member of English Church Missionary Society was sent to preach in South India observed that idolatry exempted many Hindu religious practices resembled those of Jews (34).

Sometimes it was mentioned that especially the Brahmins had some Jewish features and some even argued that the Brahmins are the Lost Tribes of Israel. Similar observations are made by Tudor Pertiff in his paper in the journal of Indo – Judaic studies. Pertiff has observed that the myth of the Lost Tribes developed as a useful channel for understanding unknown people and races. When finding parallels between Hindu and Jewish customs it is often argued that they borrowed symbols each other immensely through their almost 2000 years of close relationship (35).

Kerala Jews who have adopted many Hindu practices have yet scrupulously ensured that their religious patterns not violate Jewish legal or ethical principles. In so doing they have done what Jews everywhere have done. They have maintained a distinct identity while adapting creatively into their culture milieu. The Cochin Jews adaptation to their Indian environment is evidenced in their ritual use of Hebrew paralleling Hindu use of Sanskrit, their dietary restrictions and their removal of footwear in the Synagogue. Some of their practices such as endogamy, the use of sacred language, adherence to dietary codes and concern for family purity, entailing avoidance of menstruating woman – represent points at which Jewish and Hindu values coverage (36).

Similar to the Hindus the Jews also attach significance in ritual bath before important occasions. For this purpose, on the opposite side of the Synagogue little away on the left side Paravur Jews had a pond known as the Jewish Pond or “Judakkulam” in Malayalam. Both Jews and Hindus attach importance to the Holy Rivers, River Ganges and River Jordan for Jews. Both observe fasting as a form of penance.

Before the burial, the body is washed thoroughly with light warm water by the Jews. The elder son or the close relative carries a pot of water around the body three times and pot is broken by someone to spill the water. As among the Hindus it is the eldest son who put the first mud in the pit. The Jews and Hindus are having lunar calendars and the month is calculated from new moon. Both religions celebrate the festivals of triumphs of good over evil, Durga pooja and Purim.

In the researcher’s native town North Paravur the houses built by Brahmins and Jews are similar. The Synagogue is in the middle of the Jews Street and the Sri Krishna temple is just in front of the Brahmin Street and both are line houses without any gap in between. Similarities can be seen in their economic dependency on their respective places of worship. The researcher was a witness on many a time the poor Jews of Paravur collect money from the Synagogue for the Sabbath and other festivals from the corpus fund.

Thali

Nearly 2000 years of residence among the friendly hospitable affectionate neighborhood people the Kerala Jews had adapted many customs into their lives, prominent among them is Tali ceremony. Tali is purely a South Indian custom. A golden ornament with a pendent called “mangalasutra” tied to the bride’s neck by the groom, which is the most important ceremony in the Hindu wedding. While among most Indian castes Tali is given by the husband, but among the Kerala Jews, the grooms sister presents the tali to the bride, which according to Walestain, reflects Nayar matrilineal heritage (37). The significance of tali ceremony has not been fully explored in the literature on Jewish wedding of Kerala. It symbolizes deep underlying belief about woman, man and marriage and its presence in Jewish marriage customs underscores their acculturation in to South Indian culture.

Tamil traditions classifies women into six categories; virgin, unmarried mother, married woman, barren woman, woman who dies during childbirth or pregnancy, and widow -of these married women or sumangali is the most powerful; unlike the other groups; she is fully benevolent. The ideal woman in South India, observed Reynolds, sumangali, “she who is auspicious”. This auspiciousness is predicated upon two factors, possession of a husband and children (38).

“Evil eye” is a harmful, negative energy that is created when one look at something with any ill feeling. The Jews believed it from the Biblical times. (Samuel 18:9 Proverb 28: 22) The Kerala Jews adopted into their marriage observations, what the Hindus do to ward off the evil eye, “Uzichal” – circling the betal leaf and coin on the head of the groom / bride by their respective sister or mother three times and throw it away. Uzichal is purely a South Indian symbol borrowed by the Jews to ward off the evil eye. In modern times there are symbols – different types of blue eyes in metal big or small or a cluster of small eyes hanging from a big eye are available

in shops all over Israel. During his first visit to Israel in 1997 the researcher's friend gifted him one which the researcher displays in a prominent place of his home.

Another symbol of the Hindus adopted by the Jews is "Ululation" (Kurava or Kuzhava in Tamil). Before the groom and bride enter the Synagogue all the ladies gather and welcome them with a loud chorus of ululation to express their happiness. The "Cochinis" (immigrants to Israel from Kerala) took the Onam festival and ululation with them to Israel. They celebrate Onam usually the day following Saturdays which is a holiday for them. Researcher's second visit to Israel in 2009 was on the Onam day. He took Ona Pudava (The traditional dress the Kerala ladies wear for the Onam) and Kerala delicacies for Onam feast. There was the usual Pookkalam (flower arrangements, lighting of the traditional Kerala lamp with a loud ululation (Kurava) by all the ladies. That Onam celebration we had a guest from the Indian Embassy, the Cultural Attaché. The Cochin Jews along with their counterparts from Bombay (Beni Israelis) participate in the Indian Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations in the Indian embassy campus in Tel Aviv. The saying goes around among the Cochin Jews is that no one can take away the India from a Cochini.

Each and every Hindu temple has its own deity and usually celebrates annual festival. During the Kannan Kulangara Sri Krishna temple of Paravur the deity's image is displayed on caparisoned elephant with the priest holding it and carried through a public area. These are the elements characteristic of Hindu festivals; display and procession are also characteristic of Jewish festival of Simha Torah (Receipt of Torah by Prophet Moses on Mount Sinai). Like a Hindu deity the Torah scrolls are removed from their holy abode paralleling the Hindu sanctum sanctorum carried around the Synagogue by the members of the community in turn and displayed in the courtyard. The above two aspects taking out and display are so unique and which serve as the means by which Hindu symbols and rituals adapted by the Jews.

"The ingenuity of these adaptations are instances of the Jewish genius for cultural adaptation. How to participate in the gentile world while maintaining fidelity to Jewish observances has been the challenge faced by Jews in all corners of Diaspora. In Kerala, a culture not merely tolerant of religious diversity, but affectionately supportive of it, Jews have adapted to Hinduism while adhering to normative Judaism's standards. Theirs has been a well-balanced, ritually established identity. Traditional Jewish metaphors and symbols have been judiciously merged with borrowings from Hindu practice in order to connect Jews with one of India's poles of power and thereby to integrate the Jews into Kerala's predominantly Hindu social order" (39).

We can observe similarities in the coming-of-age rituals for boys among Jews and Brahmins. Upanayanam is the sacred thread ceremony for boys in Hindu community to confirm they are of an age to take on religious responsibilities parallel to this is Bar Mitzva, the Jewish coming of age ritual for boys. The initiative ceremony of a Jewish boy who has reached the age of 13 is regarded as ready to observe religious duties and eligible to take part in public worship.

Offering food to the hungry is the humanitarian aspect both the Jews and Namboothiris (Kerala Brahmins) adapted from ancient times. A member of Namboothiri family comes out every night and asks if anybody who don't have food for the night come and partake our food. Similarly on Passover (Pessah festival) night the Jews invite the hungry to partake their food. "This is the poor bread which our ancients ate in the land of Egypt. All hungry come and eat and make Passover" (40).

When finding parallels between Jewish and Hindu customs it is often argued that they borrowed symbol each other immensely through their almost 2000 years of close relationship.

Why did they leave Kerala?

It is always to be remembered that India, especially Kerala is perhaps in the whole world where the Jews have never been subjected to persecution and torture, but on the other hand where they treated with respected, given higher state honours and full freedom to observe their religion and engage in trade or business activities to make their living. Then why did they leave India?

The biblical prophecy coupled with Zionist philosophy that no Jew can find peace by fleeing from one country to another unless they have their own country. The short prayer during the final day of the festival of Passover, Pesach "*Le Shana Habba B'rusalayim*" (meaning next year in Jerusalem) reflective of their ardent desire to go back to participate in the rebuilding of their father land. The Malabar Jews were petty traders, hawkers, book binders unskilled workers except one or two educated families who were employed in Government service or private companies. Better financial prospects and better living conditions was the attraction for many. The mass emigration to Israel was between 1950 to 1960. A few youngsters left for Israel in the last decade because there were no marriageable partners.

The last Jews of Malabar

The ancestry of the Malabar Jews can be traced back to 2000 years. They are the sons of the soil. They never faced any persecutions or discriminations. The Jews are close to Hindus, Christians and Muslims in Kerala. Here they live in peace. Almost all of the Malabari Jews has immigrated to Israel leaving a handful of 20 people. This remaining historical ancient community faces the risk of fading into oblivion in a few decades. Before it happens it is important to record their inner voice for posterity. The emigration of the Jews to the ancestral land Israel has created a big vacuum in their lives. They do not have the required quorum of minimum 10 adult Jews (minyan) to pray in the Synagogue. This absence of religious and social meetings has affected them as an ethnic group.

Before the immigration there were Hebrew classes were conducted in the Synagogues. The seniors know to read their prayer books in Hebrew. Some of the young people were taught by their parents. A few of them do not know their ethnic language. From time to time the Jewish religious departments in Bombay appoint Rabbis. But the young people do not take interest or they do not have time to learn from Rabbis. The basic human instinct of having a family made all the Jewish youngsters to marry either Hindu or Christian. They observe the festivals and holidays of their spouses also. Knowing these young people from their childhood intimately the writer avoided the unpleasant delicate and embarrassing direct or indirect enquiry of how do they bring up their children as Hindus or Christians or Jews.

In a short time the Jewish community will disappear from Kerala. Every member is aware that they are on the threshold of extinction. They are realized what their destiny would be. What is it for a poor people whose end is near! They laugh but weep inside. Life goes on for the last few people who leads a bleak life expecting nothing much. They know with the last Jew gone in a few decades they will be leaving just a faint mark on the multi colored fabric of Kerala population. The researcher, 75 years old know every one of the Jews intimately well. He lived with them as one among them since childhood. The poignant portrayal of these remarkable ancient people is an ultimately tragic story.

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