**Jews of Cochin**

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### A background to Jewish migration

The Jews of Cochin have possibly lived on the Malabar coast of Southwest India for about 2 000 years. The Malabar coast today belongs to the modern state of Kerala – a fertile, green land of coconut groves, rice paddies, rivers and lagoons. It is bounded on the east by the Western Ghats, a mountain range, and by the Arabian Sea on the west.

Kerala was long known as the land of spices. Merchant ships came down from across the Indian Ocean and would leave laden with precious cargos of pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, and ginger.

Trade across the Indian Ocean went with the seasonal monsoon winds. Ships could travel downwind in either direction at predictable times from April to October. This meant that foreign traders would find themselves in India for six months at a time, sometimes more, when rough weather conditions delayed their return. Many of them eventually came to own estates, marrying into local families and settling down in the country.

### Mercantile connections

We can find textual references to Indo-Judaic mercantile relationships going as far back as the 10th century BCE. Cargos carried on the ships of King Solomon (960–922 BCE) are believed to be of Indian origin. The biblical Book of Kings speaks of cargoes of *kofim* (apes, *kapi* in Sanskrit), *tukim* (peacocks, *takai* in Tamil), and *algum* or *almug* (sandalwood) (Weil 2003).

Excavations in the ruins of Ur in Babylon (over 5 000 years ago) revealed large beams of teak, believed to be of Indian, and according to some, Malabar origin (Panikkar 1960).

Roman trade with Kerala is mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, and in the writings of Pliny and Ptolemy around the 1st century CE (Narayanan 1996).

The Cairo Genizah documents mention trade between India and Arabic-speaking Jews (Weil 2003). Ibn Kordadbeh wrote about Jewish merchants called Radanites who traded between France and China via India during the 9th century CE.

The Malabar coast, and the port of Muziris in particular, was a key node in Indian Ocean trade. If traders had to go all the way to Malacca or Canton, they couldn’t always make the journey in a single monsoon, so they would stop over for a few months at Malabar ports (Vijayalekshmy 1997).
Arrival of the Jews

The three main Jewish communities in India were the Bene Israel Jews who settled along the Konkan coast, the Cochin Jews who lived in pockets around Kerala, and the Baghdadi Jews who came around the 17th century CE to Calcutta. Other groups include the Telugu Jews in Andhra Pradesh and the Bnei Menashe in Manipur.

Historians haven’t come to a clear consensus on exactly when the first Jews settled in India. Estimates of the arrival of the Bene Israel Jews (believed to have been shipwrecked just north of the Malabar coast) are widely divergent — ranging from around 175 BCE according to Kehimkar (1937), to the 8th century BCE according to Shellim Samuel (1963), to between the 5th and 6th centuries CE as per BJ Israel (see Weil 2003).

When St Thomas arrived in Kerala around 50 CE, it is claimed that Jews were already living in Malabar. According to popular Christian tradition, St Thomas arrived on the Malabar coast and was invited to the wedding of the daughter of the king of Cranganore. There, St Thomas sang a Hebrew bridal song which none of the company could understand, except for a Jewish flute girl. After the wedding, St Thomas retired to the Jewish quarter in Cranganore, and took up residence there (Jussay 1986).

Another theory says that the original Malabar Jews fled to India following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and were welcomed in Muziris, the most prominent port at the time (Katz 2000). Further migrations took place when Sephardic Jews were displaced during the Inquisition in Portugal and Spain.

These theories paint a picture of a gradual migration that took place in waves over the centuries, with the Malabar coast, and Kodungalloor (Cranganore) in particular, gaining a reputation as a warm and hospitable place for Jews.

The earliest surviving documented evidence of Jewish settlements in Kerala is found in the copperplate inscriptions addressed to Joseph Rabban, presumably the leader of the Jewish group.1 Various historians have dated this to different periods from 345 BCE to the 10th century CE, the latter being the most recent dating (see Katz 2000: 33; Spector 1972).2

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2 Nathan Katz (2000: 33) discusses the dating of the plates: ‘As recently as 1925, the traditions of the Jews of Parur dated the plates to the Jewish year 4830, or 1069 C.E., a date much closer to contemporary scholarly assessment.’ The opening lines of the copperplates include the date ‘the thirty sixth year opposite to the second year’ of the reign of king Sri Parkaran Iravivanmar, or Bhaskara Raviyarman. MGS Narayanan, who translated the plates, dates this to 1000 CE (Narayanan 1972).

It is possible that in 1972 Spector was unaware of Narayanan’s translation of the plates, which was published the same year. She writes: ‘Although it is generally believed that the copper plates are dated 379 A. D. they have been attributed by different historians to the 4th, 5th, 6th, 8th or even the 11th century.’ She gives no references to any historians but in the footnotes writes: ‘After superficial examination, Dr Raghavan suggested the 7th century.’ It’s not clear in the article who Dr Raghavan is or which publication is being cited, if any.
Shingly

Cranganore was the main port city on the Kerala coast. It had numerous quarters, each known by different names, which were sometimes taken to be the name of the city itself. *Muriacod or Muziris* indicated the name of the quarter where the palace of the Cera ruler was located; *Tiruvanchikulam* indicated the temple quarter; *Shingli* was the Jewish quarter.³ Between the 10th and 15th centuries, Shingly was a Jewish prince-state.

The 17th-century poet Rabbi Nissim writes:⁴

>`I travelled from Spain<br>I had heard of the City of Shingly<br>I longed to see an Israel King<br>Him, I saw with my own eyes`

Shingly became a haven for Jews. Their attachment to this place was so strong that there existed a Jewish custom at one point (worldwide, according to some) of putting a handful of Shingly sand into any coffin, together with a handful of earth from the Holy Land (Varghese 2008).

Around 1341, the harbour silted up in what was known as the Great Flood (Panikkar 1960) and most of the people there migrated to other cities. The final Jewish exodus from Shingly happened during the Portuguese occupation in the early 16th century (Katz 2000). Some of the Shingly exiles moved inland, perhaps joining other existing Jewish communities, while others went south to Cochin, where the Maharaja welcomed them, granting them land to build synagogues in Cochin and Ernakulam.

While some accounts say that they were driven out of Shingly, economic factors and natural disasters seem to have played a role as well. The traumatic nature of their exit is clear from the tradition that no Jew may stay in Cranganore beyond sunset (Varghese 2008).

**Shingly tunes**

There were eight synagogues around Kerala – one each in Parur, Chendamangalam, Mala, two in Ernakulam and three in Cochin. All eight congregations followed a similar Hebrew liturgy – a blend of Sephardi, Yemenite and Baghdadi elements along with ancient prayers and melodies that originated in Kerala itself. There also existed a parallel prayer book – a *minhag Shingli* (Shingly rite), which contained the Cochinis’ own liturgical compositions. This musical heritage of over 200 songs, composed between the 1st and 17th centuries, was dearly treasured as an integral part of their identity, a sort of collective memory.

Each of the synagogues had its own tunes and there were tunes for each of the High Holy Days as well. We can see the influence of Malayali customs in tradition of the Cochin Jews (Weil 2003). On Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, they would touch their elders’ feet and kiss their fingertips. Touching of feet of one’s elders is a widely practised Indian custom. During the week of *Pesach*, the Passover, the Jews would not eat anything outside their home, stressing pure, unbroken ingredients. This has been linked to the Brahminical concepts of purity and caste.

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³ According to PT Nair, the name Shingly comes from a corruption of Tiruvanchikulam, and was located where the current town of Kotapuram stands today (see Jussay 1986).

⁴ Rabbi Nissim’s identity is disputed. Gamliel (2010: 14) says he was a 17th-century Turkish poet named Nissim ben Sanji, whereas Katz (2000: 32) identifies him as Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven of Girona, Catalonia, born in 1310 or 1320 CE.
pollution. *Shiriyā* commemorates the destruction of the Holy Temples (in 586 BCE and 70 CE), but for the Cochin Jews, it also commemorates the destruction of Shingly by Muslim invaders in the 14th century and by the Portuguese in the 16th century, around 1524 and 1566, who drove out the Jews and destroyed much of their property (Katz 2000; Weil 2003).

**Social position**

One aspect that is often brought out by writers is the fact that Jews in India rarely ever faced any anti-Semitism. In fact, communities from all faiths coexisted peacefully with the Hindu population (Narayanan 2002; Spector 1972). On the hillocks at Kottayil Kovilakom, one can see a Krishna temple, a Syrian church, a mosque and a synagogue, all within the radius of one kilometre. The oldest dated Jewish tomb is also located in a graveyard here, dated to the early 13th century.

However, Hindu society itself was extremely stratified. The 16th-century Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa describes 18 castes in Kerala, 11 of which were untouchable. Touching between castes was forbidden and carried with it varying levels of punishment from being disowned to excommunication to death (Barbosa [1512] 1918).

The Jews slotted in near the very top of the caste pyramid. While they occupied the position of merchants, they also proved their worth on the battlefield. The Jews were good warriors and fought alongside the king’s army in exchange for his protection and favour.

They also served as advisors, interpreters, ambassadors, and managed economic and diplomatic affairs (Chemana 2002). The Jews are credited with substantial contributions in the field of trade and commerce in Kerala, including forward trading, money-lending and banking.

The copperplates given by the Raja conferred upon the Jews 72 special rights, including the rights to ride an elephant, to be carried in a litter, to have a state umbrella, to be preceded by drums and trumpets, and to call out so that lower castes might withdraw from the streets at their approach. They also exempted the Jews from paying taxes while giving them the right to collect taxes.

One example of the Jews being integrated into the caste system was a man called Barukh Joseph Levi. Originally from Cranganore, he was given the hereditary caste title ‘*mudaliar*’ by the Raja of Cochin (Chemana 2002). This title followed only the leading families. The *mudaliars* went on to build several of the main synagogues in Kerala.

**White Jews and black Jews**

By collecting land revenue and participating in the caste system (accepting and practising distance pollution), the Jews ended up creating a kind of caste system amongst themselves too.

There were different types of Jews – Myuchasim, meaning ‘of lineage’ or pedigree, Meshuchrarim, meaning ‘freed slaves’, and Malabari, who were presumably the original Jews (Spector 1972).

The Malabari Jews are thought to have come from Yemen, Babylonia, Persia and Israel after the destruction of the second temple in the 1st century CE. They integrated well into the culture, and spoke a mixed language of Judeo-Malayalam. Benjamin of Tudela described them as having the same colour as the locals (Adler 1907).
Sephardic Jews arrived several centuries later from Spain, Portugal, Holland and other European countries after the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition. They formed the Paradesi Jews (Katz & Goldberg 1993) and were referred to as White Jews, especially by foreign writers. While they adopted the Malayalam language and identified with the Kerala customs and traditions, at some point they stopped marrying the Malabari Jews, setting themselves above the others.

The Paradesis brought their slave labour (Meshuchrarim) with them, but while they were free, they were still relegated to the back of the synagogue and the bottom of the social ladder, and were excluded by not only the White Paradesi Jews, but also the Malabari Jews.

Like the Christian communities, the Jews too reflected the Hindu caste system in their social setup.

**Jewish women in Kerala**

Orthodox Jews often forbid men from hearing the voice of the woman in the synagogue, usually keeping men and women segregated during worship and even preventing the latter from studying the Mishnah and Talmud (a codification of oral Jewish law).

The women of the Cochin Jews, however, were educated and played a prominent role in the music of the Cochin Jews (Johnson & Zacharia 2004). Bake’s 1938 audio recordings (discussed later in this paper) show women leading the hymns and forming most of the chorus as well. This was possibly the influence of the matriarchal Nair society, whose women enjoyed considerable freedoms. They were educated, respected, could participate in any occupation and were often heads of large households of up to 200 members.

The Nairs were the gentry of the land, and operated a matrilineal family structure. The women had the right to polyandry and divorce, and so marriages may have been unstable. Thus, the male heir was usually a man’s sister’s son, rather than his own.

The women of the Cochini Jews recorded the words of Malayalam-language Jewish songs in notebooks and handed them down from one generation to the next, from mother to daughter (Johnson & Zacharia 2004). The oldest of these books dates to the mid-19th century. The songs are about wedding processions, gold-clad brides with colourful flowers in their hair, an illustrious ancestor arriving by sea from Jerusalem on a wooden ship, and there are ‘parrot songs’ addressed to the local tropical birds. Many were based on biblical narratives. As is usual in oral tradition, it is unclear who authored the songs (Johnson & Zacharia 2004).

The songs preserve historical information about the building of several synagogues; for example, the ‘Kadavumbagam Synagogue Song’ from Cochin accurately specifies the number of panels in the ceiling and the red colour of the original woodwork. Another song from Cochin recounts how the Tekkumbagam congregation decided to separate from the Kadavumbagam and build their own synagogue.5

**Archived recordings of the Cochin Jews**

Recordings of the songs of the Cochin Jews were made by Arnold Adriaan Bake, who was a Dutch teacher of Indian music at the School of Oriental and African Studies. He travelled extensively throughout India and Nepal, recording and documenting folk and classical music, looking for

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5 Johnson and Zacharia (2004) have published transcripts and translations of these songs.
musicological and religious historical material especially during the years 1937–46.

Bake visited the Cochin Jews in April of 1938 and came away with these recordings.\textsuperscript{6} There are seven tapes totalling around 28 minutes of recording. The only information accompanying the audio is contained in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>Jewish Community Songs, Psalm 29</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>Jewish Community Songs, morning hymn</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>Jewish Community, Purim</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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<td>30.7</td>
<td>Jewish Community, Onam</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>Jewish Community, Rejoicing (black Jews)</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>Jewish Community, Prophet Jesaya, 57 days of atonement</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.10</td>
<td>Jewish Community, Leviticus (chapt. 16)</td>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>7/4/38</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Most of the songs are related to worship or festivals – Yom Kippur and Purim are Jewish festivals. Psalm 29 and the morning hymn fall into the category of \textit{piyyutim}, liturgical poems or songs, sung in the synagogue. However, one of the songs in this short collection is about Onam ('Onam' in the table), an ancient harvest festival celebrated till this day by the entire state of Kerala, regardless of caste or religious affinities. The recordings have a mix of male and female vocals, and solo and group singing, but do not feature any instruments.

The group singing seems to be mostly monophonic, except for some places in Psalm 29, where a simple parallel harmonization can be heard. Psalm 29 also features a call-and-response format.

Musically, the recording that stands out the most is titled 'Rejoicing', and further labelled 'black Jews' in parentheses. This has a very different melody and phrasing from the others, mostly stressing minor notes but periodically closing with a major phrase. The singer uses plaintive melisma and ornaments.

We haven’t yet decoded the lyrical content but it does not appear to contain identifiable Malayalam or Tamil language. A Hebrew-speaker familiar with the verses being sung (for example Leviticus, or Psalm 29) should be able to throw some more light on this.

\textbf{References}


\textsuperscript{6} These Cochin Jew recordings are a part of the Arnold Bake Collection. They may be accessed at the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in Gurgaon, India. The tape number is 30:36:84. Parts of the Bake collection are available in several libraries and institutes such as Instituut Kern in Leiden, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and the British Library.


Narayanan, M.G.S. 2002. 'Further studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin'. Indian Historical Review 29(1–2): 66–76.


