The Calcutta-born novelist Amitav Ghosh tells the tale, in his novel *In an Ancient Land*, of a medieval traveler by the name of Abraham Ben Yiju who conducted an import-export business from Cairo through Aden to India. Ben Yiju was a member of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra, or the “Synagogue of the Palestinians”, as it used to be known while it was still standing, in Cairo, at the end of the nineteenth century. It was in that synagogue that congregation members used to accumulate and store their papers and manuscripts. The last document that is known to have been deposited in this Genizah was a get, a divorce settlement, authorized in Bombay (today Mumbai).

The amazing thing about Ghosh’s novel is that Abraham Ben Yiju was a real person. He was born in Tunisia, and had extensive commercial connections with Hindus, Muslims and Christians, as well as with other Jews. In a recent monumental volume entitled “India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza”, which was edited by the illustrious Prof. S.D. Goitein, who devoted his life to the study of the Geniza manuscripts, and Prof. Mordechai Friedman, his long-time research assistant (who himself worked on the “India Book” since 1962), some 80 documents mentioning Ben Yiju and his family are mentioned. So for years, scholars have known about trade between the Middle East and India in pepper, cardamom, perfume, betel nut, gold and silver.

Linguistic evidence points to an even earlier commercial connection between Israel and India’s Malabar Coast. In the Book of Kings it is narrated that the ships of King Solomon (c. tenth century...
Travelers’ tales in the Talmud mention trade with India (Hoddu) and include specific Indian commodities, such as Indian ginger and iron. In the Book of Esther, the kingdom of King Ahaseurus stretched from Hoddu, generally accepted to be India, to Kush, generally accepted to be Nubia or Ethiopia.

From the ninth century CE Jewish merchants known as Radanites traded from the Middle East to South Asia and back. The documents discovered in the Cairo Genizah mentioned above describe the trade in spices, pharmaceuticals, textiles, metals, gold, silver, and silks from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries between Arabic-speaking Jews and Hindu partners.

Until recently, archaeological evidence has been scanty to “prove” early maritime trade with South India. Now, in one of the world’s most fascinating archaeological excavations, the legendary port of Muziris, mentioned by the Romans and in Tamil texts, has been discovered in Kerala in South India. In 2006, the Kerala government launched the Muziris Heritage Project to “scientifically retrieve and preserve the legacy of Muziris.” Muziris or Pattanam, near Cranganore, mentioned so often by the Cochin Jews of the Malabar Coast in their oral history and folksongs, is believed to be that legendary port. The archaeological excavations are being undertaken by the Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) at Pattanam with the collaborative support of major research institutions inside and outside India. They are in consultation with researchers in history, archaeology, geology, paleo-botany, archaeozoology, physical anthropology, geophysics, chemistry, marine archaeology, chemical oceanography, metallurgy, epigraphy and conservation sciences.

When I asked Dr. PJ Cherian, Director of the Pattanam Archaeological Research since 2007, whether the excavations have revealed any link with Jewish settlement in South India, he replied: “Not yet but we are optimistic of finding some material evidence of their ancient Indian contacts - even I would say dating to the pre-Roman period. One of the interesting finds of the last season was the Turquoise Glazed Pottery (TGP) of west Asian origin in the pre-Roman layers. We are awaiting its analytical report and hope it will be of help in tracing the early Jewish links with the Malabar Coast.” To date, 650 sherds (also known as potsherds) of glazed table wares and 850 sherds of torpedo jars from Iraq and western Iran have been dug out of the Pattanam trenches along with Mediterranean pottery sherds. Dr. Cherian is hopeful that the excavations will reveal a direct Jewish connection.

The Department of Tourism, Department
of Culture and the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Kerala are not oblivious to the potential that may come from Jewish and Israeli tourists, and from the increasing globalized interest in minority groups.

The beautiful Paradesi synagogue in Jew Town, Cochin, constructed in 1568, has been a well-known tourist site for years now, ever since Indira Gandhi attended its quarter-centenary celebrations in 1968. The Indian government issued a special commemorative stamp on the occasion. Today, sadly, there are exactly ten Paradesi Cochin Jews left in Jew Town in Cochin. Malabar Cochin Jews also lived in other settlements on the Malabar Coast before the vast majority of the community made aliyah in 1954. They had seven synagogues in Mala, Parur, Chennamangalam, two in Ernakulam and two in Cochin on the same road as the more famous Paradesi synagogue.

In 2005, the Kerala government agreed to undertake the renovation of the abandoned Cochin Jewish synagogue belonging to the Malabar Jews in the verdant village of Chennamangalam, though the Chennamangalam Jews now live in Israel. In February 2006, the Chennamangalam synagogue was re-opened with an exhibition on the Cochin Jews and the synagogue has become a popular tourist destination. Galia Hacco, a Malabar Jewess who grew up in Chennamangalam said, “The Chennamangalam Synagogue Museum opening in 2006 gave me the courage, hope and joy that the restoration of other of Kerala’s synagogues may be possible during my lifetime and indeed, shaping the legacy of my community is my passion. Communicating this legacy in India to Indians is the purpose of this involvement.”

In April 2010, the state government decided to aid the Kerala government bodies and fund a new project to restore the next of Cochin Jews’ abandoned synagogue, the Parur synagogue. Marian Sofaer, project director of the Chennamangalam exhibition, says that the Parur synagogue reminds her of the Second Temple: “The Parur synagogue’s exquisite design, with its small-scale colonnaded walkways leading to the sanctuary, brings to mind some elements of the Second Temple depicted in the model at the Israel Museum. When did a Jewish community start to settle on the Malabar Coast, and was it early enough so that they had a collective memory of the Temple?” she muses.

Jay Waronker, an American architect who has specialized in Indian Jewish synagogue architecture, said, “The present synagogue was erected in the 17th century, but probably stands on an older structure dating to the 12th century.” He further explained, “As with other
Cochin synagogues, the synagogue is made up of not one building but a collection of parts forming a distinct compound. Parur is notable for having the greatest number of connected and consecutive pieces which have survived fully intact, albeit rotting and crumbling. Unique to this synagogue is the way its parts are formally arranged and linked in a highly axial and ceremonial fashion. This same organization is also seen in some Hindu temples of Kerala and at later churches in the region."

Benny Kuriakose, the South Indian architect in charge of the reconstruction, has made every attempt to conserve the former structure and has gone to great pains to try and reconstruct features that were long ago gone. A case in point is the stairway that once was connected to the second entrance house of the synagogue, where the two square storerooms are located that are adjacent to the breezeway that led up to the women’s gallery, which disintegrated. He has turned to members of the community to help him to draw it as it once was in order to produce an authentic reconstruction. Another example is the entry door of the gatehouse, where the original ground floor had wooden slatted shutters on the outside windows, but today there are only broken rolling blinds covering the windows.

The reconstructed Heichal or Ark will once again be a work of art. The previous one was taken by the Israel Museum in a curious turn of events when it imported the Malabar Jewish Cochin Kadavambagum Synagogue in the 1990’s. It is on display in the newly-opened Israel Museum.

Back in South India, the newly reconstructed Parur synagogue is almost complete. Today, visitors to Kerala can visit the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin, as well as the Chennamangalam synagogue. Soon the Parur synagogue will be added to the list of sites the Jewish tourist must see. Memories of ancient trade with the Middle East will be revived. One can only speculate whether the Jewish trader Ben Yiju, who has gained immortality in Amitav Ghosh’s novel, reached Kerala and whether he prayed in one of the Cochin synagogues. 

Dr. Shalva Weil, a Hebrew University researcher, is a specialist on Indian Jewry. She is founding Chairperson (with Maestro Zubin Mehta as President) of the Israel-India Cultural Association. She co-curated the exhibition on Cochin Jews in the synagogue of Chendamangalam.