



The Jews of Cochin

Recording Community History

Feature

by Bala Menon

One of the tiniest and most ancient of all Jewish communities in the Diaspora is the Cochinim or the Cochin Jews in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. They trace their history on the Malabar coast to approximately 2,000 years ago, first landing on those pristine shores as sailors in the fleets of King Solomon to purchase spices, apes, peacocks and precious metals.

Songs and oral traditions of this community give us a glimpse of their early settlements in Malabar in places like Paloor, Madai and the port of Cranganore (today's city of Kodungalloor), soon after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. They call this the 'First Diaspora'. One of the stories suggests they are descendants of Jews taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar in the 6th century BCE and came to India after being freed by the Persian king Cyrus the Great.

The community is today disappearing quickly with only about 40 left in Kerala state, seven in the town of Mattancherry in Kochi and the rest spread around the city of Ernakulam and surrounding areas. There are no services or prayers although one of the most famous of the synagogues, the Paradesi in Mattancherry, is still open and functional during festival days when Israeli tourists gather or when a Chabad Rabbi visits from Mumbai. Most members of the seven Jewish congregations emigrated en masse for Israel during the 1950s with the stragglers following them in the ensuing decades.

Recorded history shows that Jews were present in Kerala in 849 CE. Hebrew names were engraved on copper plates granted by a Kerala Hindu King Ayyan Adikal Thiruvadikal of Venad (near modern-day Kollam or old Quilon) to Syrian Christian settlers, led by one Mar Sapir Iso, who were part of a trade guild



called Manigramam. The Jews signed these Tharissapalli plates as witnesses, along with others who signed in the Pahlavi and Kufic languages. The plates were given on behalf of the Chera ruler Sthanu Ravi Varman.¹

In 1000 CE, the legendary Kerala emperor Cheraman Perumal Kulashekhara Bhaskara Ravi Varman, from his palace at Mahodayapuram in the Cranganore area, is-sued two copper plates to a Jewish merchant Issappu Irrappan (Joseph Rabban), believed to be of Yemeni descent. The plates conferred on the Jewish community 72 proprietary rights equivalent to those held by the Nairs, the then nobles of Malabar.² This was during the 100-year war between the Kerala Cheras and the Imperial Cholas of the Tamil kingdoms and it is believed that the Jewish community contributed men and material (especially naval forces) to help the Chera emperor in the war efforts.³

Replicas of these plates were presented to a delighted then-Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres on September 9, 1992, when he visited India - a heart-warming

piece of evidence that there was a safe haven for Jews in this little corner of India, centuries before the dream of Israel became a reality.⁴

The original copper plates are preserved in the magnificent 460-year old Paradesi Synagogue in Cochin, the oldest functioning synagogue in the Commonwealth. (Israeli president Eizer Weizman visited the synagogue in January 1997, hailing Cochin as a "symbol of the persistence of Judaism and of aliyah ... I pay tribute to India for taking care of the Jews and their places of worship ...").⁵

The copper plate inscriptions mention that several land rights and other honours were being given to the Jews in perpetuity "as long as the earth and the moon remain". Rabban was also made chief of a powerful trade guild called Anjuvannam. (Many early Western writers believed Anjuvannam to be a princely state.) Thus began the privileged existence of the Jews in Kerala. For almost five centuries, they thrived in their major settlement of Cranganore as traders and artisans.



Today, there are several flourishing Cochini moshavim (settlements in Israel) - Nevatim and Shahar in the south, Aviezer, Mesilat Zion and Taoz near Jerusalem and Kfar Yuval in the far north. (Mesilat Zion boasts signs like Rehov Cochin and Rehov Malabar - rehov means street in Hebrew - dating to the early 1950s.) Sizeable numbers of Cochinis live in Binyamina, Petah Tikva, Rishon Le Zion, Ashdod, Jerusalem and Haifa. Moshav Nevatim also boasts a beautiful Cochini synagogue. The interior is a copy of the Kadavumbhagam synagogue of Ernakulam and the Holy Ark and the Torah scrolls were all brought from various synagogues in Cochin. A Cochin Heritage Museum has been set up near the synagogue. [†]

By the 17th century, there were 11 congregations with their own synagogues – three in Mattanchery (Kadavumbhagam, Thekkumbhagam and Paradesi), two in Ernakulam (Kadavumbhagam and Thekkumbhagam - yes, same names!), one each in Chenamangalam, Mala, Paloor, Muttam and Tirutur, and a splendid one in Paravur (at that time under the control of the King of Travancore). Cochin Jewish songs also tell of a synagogue in a place called Southi (this has not yet been identified!) ⁶

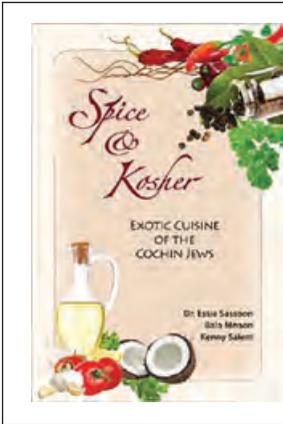
In his 1920 book *Jews of Asia*, Sidney Mendelssohn tellingly wrote: “While the Jews of Europe, from the 10th to the 16th centuries, were living under conditions, which, for a portion of the period, were stigmatized by Milman as the ‘Iron Age of Judaism’, and while persecutions drove the scattered race in turn out of England, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Germany, as well as other less important regions, their brethren in the Far East, in the lands of the ... potentates of India, were living a life of peace and plenty, far away from the bigots, the robber kings, the conversionists, the Inquisitors, and the

Crusaders.” ⁷ It is of interest to note here that in the late 18th century, Cochin was more important to the Jews than New York.

Walter Fischel, a scholar of Oriental Jewry, wrote: “Cochin, one of the oldest Jewish settlements on Asian soil, had a much larger Jewish community than New York and surpassed it not only numerically, but also culturally. The Cochin Jewish community in 1792 had about 2000 Jews... and 9 synagogues of considerable antiquity, while New York had only 72 Jewish families and only one synagogue.” ⁸

1 Aiyya, V. N. Nagom, *Travancore State Manual*, p. 244.
 2 Menon, Sreedhara A., *A Survey of Kerala History*, p. 45.
 3 M.G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, p.3 4.
 4 <http://www.hindu.com/2003/09/11stories/2003091108060400.htm>
 5 From video of Weizman's visit to the Paradesi Synagogue. In possession of Bala Menon.
 6 This was documented by a delegation of Jews from Amsterdam, led by Moses Pereyra de Paiva, that visited Cochin in 1685. Pereyra wrote about this visit in his *Nostesias os Judeos de Cochin* in 1687. (The synagogues of Paloor, Muttam and Tirutur have disappeared - believed to have been abandoned or destroyed.)
 7 Mendelssohn, Sidney, *The Jews of Asia*, Chapter VIII, p. 99.
 8 Walter Fischel - *From Cochin, India, to New York*, pp. 265-67, cited by Katz on page 102. Harry Austrynn Wolfson Jubilee Volume. Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, pp. 255-75.

Photography by Erica Lyons



Bala Menon is the co-author of *Spice & Kosher - Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews*, along with Essie Sassoon and Kenny Salem, Tamarind Tree Books Inc. (June 14, 2013), 222 pages. See *Asian Jewish Life*, Issue 14 for some of the beautiful recipes from this collection. The book includes about 200 recipes and fascinating notes about the history of this unique 2,000 year-old community.

You can find more of Bala Menon's work on his blog <http://jewsofcochin.ca>