

## KERALA AND HER JEWS

This short history is compiled from a paper read by Mr. S. S. Koder before the Kerala History Association in 1965, his article in the Souvenir printed on the occasion of the inauguration of the Nehru Memorial Town Hall, Mattancherri in 1968 and Miss Fiona Hallegua's thesis "The Jewish community of Cochin - its twilight years" for her Master's degree in Sociology written in 1984.

In attempting to speak on the history of the Jews of Kerala one becomes at once conscious of the difficulty of the task as many important and interesting facts connected with this ancient colony on the South-West coast of India are shrouded in obscurity. How and when they arrived in the ancient port of Cranganore or Shingly as the Jews called their old settlement are still some of the unsettled problems of their ancient history, but whatever be the date of their first settlement, it is an undisputed fact of history that from the 5th to the 15th century, the Jews in Cranganore have had virtually an independent principality ruled over by a Prince of their own race and choice. The fame of this little Jewish kingdom spread far and wide. Thus said Rabbi Nissim, a 14th century Hebrew poet and traveller.

I travelled from Spain,  
I had heard of the city of Shingly  
I longed to see an Israel King  
Him, I saw with my own eyes.

Cranganore, known as Muzhiris to the Greeks and Shingly to the Jews was the only sea port in India known to the outside world, It was to this port therefore the Jews turned for a haven of refuge and a centre for trade. The destruction of Cranganore is often compared to the devastation of Palestine in miniature and the consequent dispersal of Jews from their Holy Land.

The attachment of the Jews, especially of those of Parur and Mala, to Cranganore was so strong that till recently a handful of Shingly sand found a place in the coffin of every Jew along with that from the Holy Land. The majority of the Jews even now avoid visiting Cranganore, and, if business brings a Jew thither, he hurriedly leaves the place before sunset.

A small hill known as "Jooda Kunnu" a tank known as "Jooda Kulam", the Jewish copper plates and the Syrian Christian plates with the signature of four Jewish witnesses in Judeo - Persian, which incidently is the second oldest inscription in Judeo- Persian in the world, are a few of the ancient relics that can still be seen to remind one of the glorious past of this forgotten outpost of the Jewish world.

As to the probable date of the first Jewish settlement in Shingly, opinion is sharply divided among many schools of thought. The early intercourse between the East and the West makes it probable, according to Basnage, that the first Jews arrived in Kerala in King Solomon's merchant fleet. The close resemblance between the Tamil names for the South Indian ape and peacock and their Hebrew equivalents tend to support this view. "The oldest Tamil word found in any written record in the world," says Dr. Caldwell, "appears to be the word for peacock in the Hebrew text of the Books of Kings and Chronicles. The old Tamil word 'Takai' became in Hebrew "Tuki". Just holds that the first colonisation of Jews in Cranganore

was the result of the exodus of the Jews from Persia in the fifth century during the reign of King Kobad. Another theory is that the Kerala Jews are descendants of the tribes taken into captivity by Shalmanezar and that after being freed they came to Cranganore or, as another historian would have it, that they are the descendants of the Jews taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. In his book, 'Noticias dos Judeos de Cochim' the oldest printed book on Cochin Jewish history, Moses de Paiva, a Dutch Jew who visited Cochin on the 21st November 1686, asserts that seventy to eighty thousand Jews arrived on the Malabar Coast in 370 A. D. from Myrcia where their forefathers had been taken as captives by Titus Vespasianus. Rabbi Rabinovitz is of the opinion that the first clear evidence of a Jewish community in India dates from the period of Mohanunedan rule and the activity of the Radanites. The tradition of the Cochin Jews on the other hand, maintains that soon after the destruction of the second Temple in the first century, ten thousand Jews were graciously received by the then Hindu Ruler and were allowed to settle in different parts of the country of which the majority made their home in Cranganore.

Amidst the confusing thoughts and the conflicting theories about the date of the first settlement in Cranganore, there are at least a few instances of direct evidence of a Jewish settlement on the South – West Coast of India during the first century of the Christian era. In a wedding song of the ancient Christians of Malabar, mention is made of one Habban, a Jewish merchant, who was sent by a Royal decree to fetch a man who would build a temple more beautiful than the one King Solomon had built in Palestine. Habban accompanied by St. Thomas arrived in Cranganore in 55 A. D., St. Thomas was welcomed by a Jewish flute girl. He stayed in the Jewish quarter of the town and some Jews are said to have been baptized by him in Cranganore. A Roman merchant ship that plied regularly between Myes Hormes on the Red sea and Arabia, Ceylon and Malabar found a Jewish colony in Cranganore in the second century. The Babylonian Talmud compiled in Babylon between the third and sixth century refers to a Rabbi Judah, a Hindu convert to Judaism who was held in high esteem. As there were no Jews then in any other part of India, the conversion must necessarily have taken place in Cranganore.

Like the date of the first Jewish settlement, the exact date of the Jewish copper plates and their correct translation of the 'Vattezhuthu' characters - the original Tamil alphabet once prevalent in all parts of the peninsula south of Tanjore, and also in South Malabar and Travancore - are also under dispute among scholars. The Dutch Governor, Moens gives the date of the grant of the Jewish plates as 426. A. D. - Dr. Buchanan 490, Bishop Middleton 508, Lawson 750, Paolins the 10th century and the Cochin Jews 379 A. D.

The following is the translation of the plates adopted by the Jews of Cochin :- "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 thousand years, in the thirty-sixth year after the second year on the day on which he dwelt in Muviricote, was pleased to make the following gifts. We have granted to Ioseph Rabban the village of Anjuvannam together with the seventy two proprietary rights, tolls on boats and carts, the revenue and the title of Anjuvannam, the lamp of the day cloth spread in front to walk on a palanquin, a parasol, a Vaduga (ie. Telugu) drum, trumpet, a gateway, a garland, decoration 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 the other cities pay the Royal Palace, and that he

may enjoy the benefits which they enjoy. To Joseph Rabban the Prince of Anjuvannam and to his decendants, sons and daughters, and to his nephews, and to the sons-in-law who married his daughters in natural succession, so long as the world and moon exist, Anjuvannam shall be his hereditary possession.

With the knowledge of .-

Goverthan Marthandan

Kodaj Chirikandan

Manavepala Manavian

Kodai Iravi

Moorkan Chathan

Vandalacheri Kandan

Chief of Venadu

Chief of Venappallinadu

Chief of Vallunadu

Chief of Nedumpurayumadu

Sub Commander of the forces

The Prime Minister

### **Written by Kelappan**

According to Mr.Thurston, there is a peculiarity in the Jewish plates which is absent in the other charters and that is Jews alone were permitted, among other privileges to (1) fire three salutes at the break of day, (2) fire an equal number of salutes on the day of a marriage feast of one who entered upon the marriage state. These privileges have always been reserved, even to the present day, to the Kings of Cochin only.

The existence of the Jews in India long before the Christian era was first brought to the lime-light of history by Anquitol Du Perron. In this book, Zent Avesta, mention is made of his meeting a rich Jew who informed him that a colony of his co-religionists had settled in Malabar and that certain privileges had been conferred on them by a Hindu Ruler. Mediaeval travellers beginning with Abbu'I Kassim Ubaidullah Abdullah b Khurdadaba and others in the 9th centry and Nicolo Conti. Venetian merchant traveller in the 15th, mention Jewish settlements in Malabar and Ceylon. According to them, the Jewish colony was between two places called by Friar. Odoric, Cyngilin and Flandrina. It is also seen from the writing of

mediaeval travellers that Cyngilin was a sea coast town in Malabar. Friar Jordanus mentions the King of Cyngilin besides the King of Molibar (Malabar) who reigns over the whole coast. It is agreed generally that Cyngilin is identified with Cranganore, though it is difficult to prove the similarity between these two names on etymological grounds. According to Abulfedas' geography, Shinkaly was situated near Shalvat which is in the vicinity of Cranganore of today. Both these towns are mentioned as Centres of Jewish settlements, Cyngilin according to mediaeval travellers and Cranganore by writers of the 16th century. It is interesting to learn that even today some of the hymns chanted in the synagogues specially on Jewish Holy days are called Shingly melodies.

The second great centre of Jews in Malabar was Flandarina which is also known under various names. Flandarina is identified with Pandarini by the 16th century writers. Marvel is mentioned as the third centre of Jews by mediaeval travellers. This was only a village, a suburb of a better known place known as Mount Delly or Elimala of Malayalam writers. Travellers of the 15th and 16th centuries speak of Jews in Calicut. Ibn Batuta, who travelled from Calicut to Quilon through the backwaters refers to Kanjarakara as a Jewish town under a Jewish Governor who pays tribute to the Ruler of Quilon. Marco Polo alone among ancient travellers mentions Jews in Quilon.

The Jewish settlers enriched by an influx of Jews from Spain and other European countries continued to prosper for more than a thousand years after the grant of the copper plates. Tradition has it that renowned Jewish poets and scholars visited the little Jewish kingdom of Singly. With the extinction of the line of Joseph Rabban, dissension arose between two brothers of a noble family for the chieftainship of the principality of Anjuvannam. The younger brother backed by his converted slaves killed many of those who came under his elder brother. The neighbouring princes intervened and dispossessed the Jews of their principality of Anjuvannam. In 1474 the younger brother escaped to Cochin by swimming across the backwaters with his wife on his shoulders. He was followed soon after by his elder brother and his followers. In 1524 on the pretext that the Jews were tampering in the pepper trade, the Moors made an onslaught on the Jews, burning their houses and synagogues. The destruction was so complete that when the Portuguese arrived in Cranganore in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century they found only a few destitute Jews, who continued to eke out a miserable existence for forty more years. Due to the devastation of the country by fire and sword, the Jews finally deserted their ancient settlement of Anjuvannam and fled to Cochin and placed themselves under the protection of the Hindu Rajah of Cochin, who in the words of an English historian, "with a liberality that can be hardly understood" granted them a site for a town by the side of his own palace and temple. Here was built in 1567 Jew Town and in 1568 the Cochin synagogue.

The year 1500 saw the Portuguese in Malabar. The nation that was helped to discover a new sea route to India, by Jewish astronomers, travellers and interpreters soon forgot their services and subjected them to persecution and torture. The hundred and sixty years of the Portuguese occupation of Cochin were the darkest period in the history of the Jews of Malabar. The spirit of the age is exhibited in a letter written by Albuquerque in which he brought to the attention of the King of Portugal that there were at that time a large influx of Portuguese and Castilian Jews and enquired of His Majesty whether permission would be given to exterminate them one by one as he came across them. The Portuguese not only completed the destruction of the already shattered Jewish principality in Cranganore but also

sacked Jew Town in Cochin with its houses and Synagogues. The original documents pertaining to the history of this ancient community were lost in the Portuguese loot and destruction. According to the Portuguese, the Rajah's best fighting men were the Jews and consequently a battle had to be postponed in 1550 because the Jews did not offer battle on their Sabbath day. The Rajah was therefore called by early Portuguese writers as King of the Jews.

When the Dutch appeared to Cochin in 1661, Jews openly supported them for which action they paid a heavy penalty in blood when the Dutch were forced to withdraw to Ceylon. With the reappearance of the Dutch in Cochin in 1663, the scattered remnants returned to their settlement and regained their past glory under the tolerant rule of the Protestant Dutch. During the one hundred and thirty two years of Dutch supremacy, the Jews of Malabar continued to be prosperous. Interesting accounts of their condition are available from the memoirs of Dutch Governors and Jewish travellers. The presence of the Jews in Cochin aroused the interest of the Jewish community of Amsterdam. A delegation headed by Moses Pereya de Paiva was sent to Cochin in 1686. His report is the first of the most important historical documents of the Jews of Cochin ever written or published. According to this rare report-there are only 135 copies in existence-there were 4 Synagogues and 128 families in Cochin. 2 synagogues and 150 people in Angiceymal. In Palur one synagogue and 100 well-to-do people, in Parur one Synagogue and 10 families in Chenot 1 Synagogue and 50 well-to do people and Muttam one synagogue and 35 families. In 1795 the country passed into the hands of the British under whose rule the Jews continued to live in peace and happiness.

The solicitude of the new rulers for the community can be seen from the following letter written to the congregation by H. E. Lord Curzon.

Viceroy's Camp,

20th November 1900.

Gentlemen,

It was a great pleasure to me in the course of my visit to Mattancherri yesterday to be able to pay a visit to your Synagogue and to make the personal acquaintance of the leaders of your small but historic community. I inspected with interest the tablets that record the grant of privileges to you by an early ruler of the Malabar Coast, and I rejoice to think that under the enlightened administration of His Highness the Rajah of Cochin you now profit by a toleration similar to that which you would enjoy were you resident in the dominions of the British Sovereign.

It is gratifying to learn that you are alive to the necessity for educational advancement in your community and I hope that in prosecuting your endeavours you may receive the encouragement to which your efforts, if sincerely pursued, will certainly entitle you.

I am

Gentlemen

Yours faithfully

Curzon.

The tolerant rule of the Perumals was continued with zeal by the Ruler of Cochin. The Jews not only enjoyed complete religious toleration but their holy days and Sabbaths were gazetted holidays for them in the State.

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The following reply of H. H. Rama Varma, the last Ruler of Cochin, to an address of welcome presented to him by the Jews of Cochin on his first visit to the Syrtagogue on the 24th March 1949, closes a glorious chapter of unbroken love and affection on the one hand, and deep devotion and loyalty on the other, between the Maharajas of Cochin and their Jewish subjects.

"I thank you most sincerely for the hearty welcome that you have very cordially and warmly extended to me today. I am deeply touched by the spontaneous expressions of love and loyalty to my family and myself and also by the very noble sentiments that prompted you to make kind references to my illustrious predecessors.

Cochin and its people owe much to you. The memory of your early association with this country has always been pleasant. It is recorded by historians that your people began to visit this coast as early as the days of King Solomon and they formed one of the earliest links binding the East and the West, fast with each other. It is told later on, in the early centuries of the Christian Era, some of them left their hearths and homes for good and finally settled themselves in Cochin. Without diving deep into the reasons that made you seek pastures new, the people of Cochin received you with open arms; the Ruling Family protected you from plunder and persecution. The tie of friendship between your community and the Royal Family became only stronger and closer in course of time. It may interest you to know that my grandmother used to tell us of the very pleasant hours she and the other princesses of herage spent in the company of your womenfolk who usually gathered at the Palace in the afternoon.

This famous temple of historic importance that you have built here is not only a place of worship, but also a standing monument of the religious toleration and hospitality that prevailed in this part of the country from time immemorial. It is a thing of beauty and an architectural achievement in itself; a clear and visible evidence of the material prosperity and progress, attained by your community under the kind patronage of the Royal Family ever since you came here as the honoured guests of the people.

But I am glad to say that no other people deserved such treatment better. You have, on occasions more than one, shown you unflinching loyalty to the King and country that adopted you and gave you shelter. Of course, your community is small but its historic importance is really great. I assure you that all the legitimate interests of the minorities will always be scrupulously safeguarded, and will never be sacrificed for the selfish ends of the majority. The prosperity of the State and welfare of the people, irrespective of caste, community or colour, shall always be upper-most in my mind and I shall endeavour to promote them to the best of my abilities. 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 fore-fathers, and I heartily congratulate you on this very happy occasion.

Before I close let me thank you again for all your good wishes which I shall ever cherish in the innermost recesses of my heart with feelings of most sincere gratitude.

Of all the maritime nations that traded with ancient India, the Jews were the first to come to India not only as traders but as settlers. They made their home on the South-West coast of India as early as the first century, if not earlier. The Jews then were the first aliens to settle in India and it was as a result of the generosity and tolerance shown to the Jews by successive Hindu rules of Southern India, that India first earned the name as the land of tolerance and understanding of all religions. Menasseh ben Israel added weight to his petition to Oliver Cromwell before 1655 for the resettlement of the Jews in England from where they were expelled in 1290, by referring to the happiness and tolerance enjoyed by the Jews of Cochin under a Hindu ruler.

Though there are many records to show the contribution of Jews to the economic prosperity of Malabar during the Dutch period from 1663 to 1795, there are interesting references to trading activities of the Jews between Malabar, China and Egypt. It is said that the old Jewish settlement in China under the Hung dynasty was an offshoot of the Malabar Jews. An interesting fragment of a letter written by a Jewish slave on behalf of his master to his business correspondent in Cairo in the 13th century, if not earlier, throws a welcome light upon the commercial relations of the Jews of Malabar and Egypt, Aden acting as a port of exchange. There is abundance of source material in Batavia and India that throws light on the role and activity of the Cochin Jews in the service of Dutch East India Co. From these sources we learn that the Jewish merchants were engaged in import and export of pepper, timber, amber, coral, rice, cotton goods and other commodities and that they were contractors, fortress-builders, woodcutters, book-binders, gun-powder manufacturers, estate—agents and jewellers. These Jewish merchants whose ships were plying in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Bengal and the Persian gulf, were held in high esteem both by the European trading Companies and the Rulers of Cochin. Of all the Jewish families during the supremacy of Europeans in Cochin, the Rahabi family contributed most to the economic prosperity of Malabar. The Rahabi family came to Cochin from Aleppo in 1646. Ezekiel

Rahabi, born in 1694 played a notable role as a merchant-diplomat of Malabar in the service of the Dutch East India Company for almost fifty years. He was the central figure in all economic as well as political matters. His house in Jew town, Cochin was the meeting place of all local rulers, notables and envoys from all over Malabar. Numerous historical records and treaties exist in Holland and Cochin with the signature of this merchant-prince in Hebrew.

Ezekiel Rahabi's commercial and diplomatic activities brought him in close contact with the Dutch, English, French, Portuguese and Danish merchants in Europe and Muslims, Parsis, Hindus and Christians in India. It was no wonder, therefore, that when St. Thomas Christians wanted a bishop, it fell to the lot of this eminent and international figure, to bring a bishop for them from Basra in 1747. Despite his pre-occupation with the affairs of the Dutch, he found time for cultural, literary and religious activities on behalf of his community by building synagogues for them, beautifying the existing one with Chinese tiles, maintaining correspondence with Jews all over the world; attending to the religious needs of the community by importing Hebrew bibles, talmuds and other religious works from Holland. He was also responsible for getting printed special prayer books for the Cochin Community in Amsterdam. His Hebrew letter of 1768 to a Jewish merchant in Amsterdam about the history of the Jews in Malabar ranks next to the rare report of Paiva of 1686. Mention is made in a Hebrew manuscript of the Rahabi family, that to avert an attack on Cochin by Hyder Ali in 1766, Ezekiel Rahabi sent his three sons and placed in their hands saltpeter, white sugar, which was a very rare commodity then, and precious stones as presents to Hyder. The Ruler of Cochin also sent through him two hundred thousand rupees and eight elephants. Hyder, instead of attacking Cochin, turned towards Canara. It may be of interest to know that David Rahabi, the father of Ezekiel took an active part in the dispute of adoption to the Cochin throne. In 1690 the Ruling family was again to become extinct & a dispute arose between the Perumpadappu family and the Vellat family. The heir to the throne from the former family was banished by the rebel chiefs. He with his mother approached David Rahabi for help. David through his influence with the Dutch Governor succeeded in quelling and defeating the rebel chiefs and enabled the boy of the Perumpadappu family (the present rulers of Cochin belong to this family) to ascend the throne. For this action David Rahabi was given an honoured place in the Royal Household. The commercial contact of the Malabar Jews was not only confined to the old world. An interesting letter in Hebrew was sent in 1787 by a Jew of Cochin to Solomon Simon of New York.

In 1968, the Synagogue celebrated its 400m anniversary. The fiends of the Jewish community of Cochin, belonging to all religions gave unstinted support. The occasion was graced by the presence of the Smt. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, who inaugurated the celebrations. A special stamp of the synagogue and a first day cover were issued to commemorate the event. It was a great day for Jews in India and abroad, who came in large numbers to take part in the celebrations.

The Prime Minister in her speech said that every visit of hers to this ancient Synagogue was a reminder of the long history of this country with which the Jews were associated and also to the tradition of religious and cultural tolerance which was their great heritage.

The Prime Minister stressed the need to remind themselves of this tradition today, because there were many in the country who would have then forget it.

She said their tradition had not been one of communalism or parochialism, but of tolerance, mutual exchange and peaceful living together. That was the teaching of great men.

Mrs. Gandhi said her father believed that tolerance was the basis of their unity, and indeed the foundation on which world peace could be built. She concluded by wishing the dwindling community a hearty "mazel tov" (Good Luck).

Unlike their brethren in Europe and elsewhere, the toleration of Hindu rulers and the fraternal feeling of all the communities in Malabar, enabled the Jews in Kerala to weather the stormy events of history and survive for nearly two thousand years.

It was religious sentiment that was the primary reason for the first wave of emigration. The establishment of the Jewish State of Israel brought an immediate response from the religious Jews of Kerala. One important point was that religious Jews in Kerala, who were in service with Government or in the private sector had to work on the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). Changes were taking place in the educational scene also. Examinations began to be held even on the important religious holidays of the Jews like New Year, Passover and Tabernacles. The Cochin Jews were of course appreciative of the tolerance and kindness shown to them from time immemorial. But the desire to live in a state where their religious laws would have complete sway proved irresistible. A thesis written by a Jewish student of Cochin in 1984 for her Master's degree in Sociology incorporated a questionnaire which was given to all the members of the community. Among the reasons for emigration the highest importance is given to religious sentiment and lack of marriage partners, followed by better employment opportunities.

After some years the story of the Jews of Malabar which has marked an interesting episode in the chequered history of the Jewish people may come to an end. If this happens History can record that their emigration was not motivated by intolerance or discrimination by Government nor by external political or social pressure but their deep sense of religious fervour to live and die in the Holy Land.

#### CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

Advent of Jews to India and  
colonization of Cranganore -- C.E. 72

Grant of the copper plates  
to Joseph Rabban -- 379

Advent of more Jews from

Babylon and Persia -- 490-518

Jewish colony in Cranganore

contacts China -- 900

Arrival in Cranganore of Hachamim

including Judah Halevi -- 1141

Advent of Joseph Azaar to

Cochin Town -- 1344

Building of Kochngadi Synagogue -- 1345

Expulsion of Jews from Spain -- 1492

Arrival of Castiel family in Cochin -- 1511

Arrival of more Spanish Jews -- 1514

Moorish attack on Jews in Cranganore -- C.E. 1524

Final expulsion from Cranganore

by the Portugese -- 1565

Jew Town built and occupied -- 1564

Building of the Cochin Synagogue -- 1568

Appointment of the 1st Mudaliar – 1570

Maharikash's response -- 1600

Partial destruction of the Cochin

Synagogue by the Portuguese -- 1662

Re-building of the Cochin Synagogue -- 1664

Building of the Clock Tower

by Ezekiel Rahabi -- 1760

Tiling of the Synagogue with tiles

from Canton by Ezekiel Rahabi -- 1762

Presentation of a Gold Crown to the

Synagogue by the Maharaja of

Travancore -- 1805

Celebration of the 400th, anniversary

of the Synagogue -- 1968