

SYNAGOGUES: THE JEWISH CULTURAL REMAINS IN KERALA

Article Particulars

Received: 25.8.2017

Accepted: 10.10.2017

Published: 30.10.2017

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Abstract

Synagogues are Jewish places of worship (Prayer Halls). The Jewish communities who came to Kerala settled in Kodungallur and Kochi. They received special rights and privileges from the local Kings and engaged in trade. The Jews who settled in and around Kodungallur constructed their prayer halls which is one of the cultural remains left by them. There were 12 synagogues in Kerala. When Jews began their return to Israel, there was worship in eight synagogues, out of which seven were in the old Kochi kingdom and Paravur synagogue in Thiruvithamkode (outside Kochi). The synagogues in old Kochi include Kochangadi Synagogue, Kadavumbhagam synagogue (Ernakulam), Kadavumbhagam synagogue (Mattanchery), Mala Synagogue, Paradesi Synagogue, Thekkumbhagam synagogue, and Chendamangalam synagogue. In fact, these are the synagogues, the Jewish cultural remains in Kerala.

Keywords: *Jews, Settlements in and Around Kochi, Construction of Prayer Halls, Synagogues, Cultural Remains in Kerala.*

The history of Jewish contact with Kerala goes back to BC 10th century during King Solomon the great was in power in Jerusalem. Old Testament mentions Jewish traders engaged in the business of pepper, ivory, and diamonds from ancient Kerala. But the earliest history of Jewish settlement took place many years later probably, during the seventies of 1st century AD, consequent upon the Roman invasion of Jerusalem that resulted in the massacre of Jews. But the exact dating of the history of Jews starts from the time of the Jewish copper plate of 1000 AD. The importance of the documents is that it reveals the recognition and importance given to Joseph Rabban, leader of the foreign and minuscule but thriving trading community by the powerful native ruler, Bhaskara Ravi Varmanthe Perumal of Mahodayapuram (ancient Kodungallur). The Jewish copper plate, which conferred 72 special privileges to the Jewish leader, reveals the fact that the Jews had become an influential community in Kerala by the end of the 9th and 10th century AD. The Jewish who came to Kodungallur and settled there gradually began to move nearby places such as Chendamangalam, North Parur, Mala, Ernakulam and Mattanchery due to several reasons such as business

interests, invasion of moors and Portuguese and due to decline of Kodungallur and the rise of prominence of Kochi and also due to a natural calamity that took place in 1341. The Jews who settled in the above-mentioned places constructed their prayer halls which is one of the remains left by them.

Synagogues are Jewish places of worship (Prayer Halls). The Jewish communities who came to Kerala settled in and around Kodungallur in different times. They were involved in trade and built Synagogues to worship their God. They received special rights and privileges from the local Kings and engaged in trade. Many aspects of Kerala culture were absorbed by them. The invasions of Portuguese, Dutch, and Mysore Sultans inflicted damages on the Synagogues. When Israel State came into being, many Jews returned to Israel. The Synagogues were left unattended due to the absence of the Jews and worship came into a stop. There were 12 synagogues in Kerala. When Jews began their return to Israel, there was worship in eight synagogues, out of which seven were in the old Kochi kingdom and Paravur synagogue in Thiruvithamkode (outside Kochi). The synagogues in old Kochi include Kochangadi Synagogue, Kadavumbhagam synagogue (Ernakulam), Kadavumbhagam synagogue (Mattanchery), Mala Synagogue, Paradesi Synagogue, Thekkumbhagam synagogue, and Chendamangalam synagogue. Even those who returned to Israel carry their family names from the ancient synagogue. Among the existing seven Jewish prayer halls in Kerala, only one belongs to the Paradesi community, and all others are of Malabari Jews. But, even today, the mainstream Kerala society is not aware of the antiquity of Malabari Jews, and their synagogues do not get the required attention. This paper tries to explore the hidden history of Jewish Cultural Remains existing in and around Kochi.

Kochangadi Synagogue

The Kochangadi Synagogue was built by the Malabari Jews of Kerala in Kodungallur. After they had to abandon the Kodungallur area due to the great flood of Periyar River in 1341 that was lost and never rebuilt, it is also believed that Tipu Sultan's army demolished it during his raids in Kerala in 1789 during the Second Anglo-Mysore War. The Jews did not rebuild the Synagogue, and moved to Kochi and carried with them an inscription stone taken from Kochangadi, and planted it in the Kadavumbhagam Mattanchery Synagogue.

Kadavumbhagam Synagogue Ernakulam

The Malabari Jews built the Kadavumbhagam synagogue in Ernakulam. Following the attacks of Arabs, the Jews who fled from Kodungallur migrated to Ernakulam in circa 1154. According to records, the synagogue was built in 1200 A.D. It is said that there was a Torah cask made from 300 sovereigns of gold, the porch, which is of other synagogues in Kerala, is absent here. The front portion is shaped like a hexagon. The

Jews had constructed a Hebrew printing press here. When the Jews returned to Israel, worship came to a stop. The synagogue is situated in the western side of market road Ernakulam located about 50 meters from Jew Street and is not far away from Thekkumbhagam Synagogue. The striking feature of the synagogue is the most interactively ornated Ark. The members of the Kadavumbhagam synagogue claim that the Jewish copper plate was granted to their forefathers. Although Jewish tradition is that both the Thekkumbhagam and Kadavumbhagam Synagogues were built in 1200 AD. When Kochi rose into prominence as a major port that the nearby Ernakulam developed into an important trading Centre. Jews being a traditional trading community, might have settled there only after this. However, the very name 'Jew Street' in Ernakulam itself is indicative of the role played by the Jewish community in the trading business of Ernakulam.

Kadavumbhagam Synagogue Mattanchery

One can see the remains of Kadavumbhagam synagogue near the Paradesi synagogue. The Jews built it when the Kochangadi synagogue was abandoned. The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue was therefore constructed in Cochin by Baruch Levi, the father of the first Mudaliar in 1544 and completed in 1550 with a unique architectural beauty. There were murals over the walls and the chambers. The tablet with details of the Kadavumbhagam's front wall is also displayed, in the eastern wall of Paradesi synagogue courtyard along with the Kochangadi synagogue's cornerstone. This tablet mentions that Kadavumbhagam Synagogue's front wall was built in 1550 AD. In 1991, the synagogue's remains were purchased by an English Jewish couple, Della and Fred Worms from London. They removed the remains and sent them to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The synagogue is now unidentifiable and near to extinction.

Mala Synagogue

Jews who migrated to Mala, which is 24 Kms to the east of Kodungallur, built a synagogue. It was constructed in the 11th century AD. This synagogue is situated in the heart of Mala in a 23 cent plot hardly 25 meters from Mala- Trissur road. The folk songs mention that the Kodungallur King wanted people of all tribes to co-exist in his kingdom. "There are all tribes in my kingdom/, But there are no Jews/ so ten of you gather together and settle here." According to a Jewish Malayalam folk song, the synagogue was built on the land donated by the ruler Joseph Rabban who gave permission to cut trees for the construction of the prayer hall in Mala. It has been renovated many times. According to experts, the present synagogue must have been built around 1909. In December 1959, the Jewish community prepared an agreement and handed over ownership of it to the local government authorities. Before their departure to Israel the Jews had entrusted their synagogue and cemetery in Mala to the Panchayath

authorities for conservation in its original form as per document No. 6 of 1955 registered in the sub - registrar office, Mala, on 4/01/1955. The present synagogue was renovated during 1906-12. The wooden staircase, gallery and roofing are intricate and artistic.

Paradesi Synagogue

Paradesi Synagogue is constructed in Jew Street in Kochi. This is the only Synagogue in Kerala where Jews continue worship. This is the oldest Synagogue in the British Commonwealth. The supervisor of Paradesi Synagogue was called Mudaliar. (Mudaliar was a chief, appointed by the Cochin Rajah, from amongst the Jews, as their recognized spokesperson, invested him with special privileges and prerogatives, and with jurisdiction in all internal matters). The rulers of Kochi and the Dutch-British colonial powers helped the Jewish community to prosper. The Synagogue records show that the Mudaliar of Paradesi Synagogue, as a community leader, worked in association with other traditional Jewish Synagogues. Acclaimed to be the oldest (built - in 1568) synagogue in British Commonwealth, the Paradesi Synagogue is the only functional one in Kerala today.

Thekkumbhagam Synagogue

In the early days, Jews constructed a Synagogue to the south of Kodungallur town. When they migrated to Ernakulam, they built a new Synagogue to the north of Jew Street. They named Thekkumbhagam (south side) Synagogue as a memorial to the old one. According to Jewish sources, the Synagogue was constructed in 1200 CE. The Jews who fled from Kodungallur after the Portuguese attack developed a close alliance with the Kochi King and, with his help, built the Synagogue in 1580. In 1980 they decided to demolish the Synagogue to reconstruct a bigger one, and the foundation stone laid in 1936. When the Jews returned to Israel, the Synagogue was left half - finished. In fact, the Thekkumbhagam Synagogue of Ernakulam is a renovated structure from the late 1930s. According to a tradition, the Rajah of Cochin donated the land to the Malabari Jews of Ernakulam, here the present synagogue stands. The Ernakulam Thekkumbhagam Synagogue 18-lined song depicts the synagogue as a precious and beautiful structure with four courtyards and a nice black pebbled path to it. The synagogue is presently maintained by the Association of Kerala Jews

Chendamangalam Synagogue

The Jews migrated to Chendamangalam from Cranganore in the mid-thirteenth century constructed a prayer hall in 1420 AD. Traditional folk songs among the Jews like 'Songs of Evarayi' claim this fact, and historian P. M Jussay identifies, the ancient Jewish settlement, Kunjakkari as Chendamangalam. The architectural style was also inspired by the Portuguese during the colonial period. The Kerala style of architecture is evident in its construction. The current building served the needs of the Jewish community for

many years. Most of the local Jews moved from Chendamangalam to Israel by 1960s and 70s. Unattended to during these years and into the 1990s, the synagogue deteriorated so badly. Hence, the Department of Archaeology, Government of Kerala, under the direction of Dr. V. Manmadhan Nair, the then Director of Archaeology and his departmental staff, skilled restoration professionals, and artisans brought Chendamangalam Synagogue back to form.

During the Colonial period, Jews in Kerala are known to belong to two communities. The early Jewish migrants and their descendants, the black Jews and those who migrated from Europe, are Paradesi Jews or White Jews. The Black Jews are also called Malabar. There are records that indicate even conflicts between the two. There were restrictions to the entry of Black Jews inside Paradesi Synagogue, and they had complained to the Dewan against this discrimination. The Jews arrived in Kerala around the beginning of the Common Era. During the Colonial period, their population reached its peak. It grew into seven active Synagogues and a population of 3000. When Israel became free, they started returning. In the 1950s, more than 2400 Jews from Kerala returned to Israel. At present, a few numbered of them are living in Kerala. In fact, the synagogues are the Jewish cultural remains in Kerala.

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