

Changing Architectural Identity: A Case of the Jewish Settlements in Cochin

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Abstract

Kerala, the southernmost state of India, has a colourful social and cultural history. Its society, from times immemorial, has assimilated and sustained a multitude of indigenous and foreign cultures. Cochin on Kerala's western coast is one of the finest natural harbors in the world and has held cultural and trade relations with several civilizations of the world from early days. The Jews made their way to the Kerala coast in 70 AD and settled near the ancient port town Muziris (Kodungallur) laying the foundations of a strong community life based on religious and commercial activities. In 15th century, they were forced to flee to Cochin due to various political reasons. This was the beginning of the Jew Town settlement in Cochin in the beginning of the 16th century.

The paradigm shifts in the original physical and cultural factors that contributed to the evolution of the settlements are examined. Like most of the earlier settlements, the drastically changing cultural milieu resulted in the breakdown of traditional usage patterns and in the adaptation of spaces and buildings to new applications and needs. The paper attempts to study the changing spatial requirements resulting from massive cultural upheavals and how these have influenced the current utility patterns.

Keywords: Jews, settlement, culture, tradition.

Introduction

Kerala is a narrow strip of land sandwiched between mighty Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian Sea in the west, in the south-western end of peninsular India. It has a diverse and pluralistic society, comprised of a number of varied religious, cultural and communal groups. Maritime trade with the Arabs, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Chinese, etc., formed the backbone of early Kerala's economy. Ancient ports along its western sea coast served as windows for exchange of commerce as well as culture and functioned as gateways to the early introduction of faraway Semitic religious faiths and cultures such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity in this little land. Almost all major religions of the world have their representations and places of worship here among the broad-minded and tolerant people of this land. Kerala's society and its people, from the very early times, were flexible and accommodative to admit, assimilate and sustain a multitude of indigenous and foreign cultures.

Jewish Communities in India

Judaism is one of the oldest religions in the world and frequent persecution by other religions scattered the Jews all over the then known world. They came to the Indian subcontinent as traders as well as refugees/settlers. India's record of welcoming religious refugees is one of its most noteworthy cultural achievements (Katz & Goldberg, 2005). Jewish populations resided in small pockets and settlements scattered all over the country; each absolutely insulated culturally and economically from one another, bound by the common religious thread of Judaism. Although Jewish identity can be defined in both national as well as cultural terms, religion is still its key stone that differentiates Jews from their immediate neighbourhood (Weil, 2006).

India's six distinct Jewish communities include:

- Cochin Jews or Malayali Jews, who lived inside the modern city of Cochin.
- *Bene Israel* or *Marathi* Jews, clustered along the coastal *Konkan* area of Maharashtra.
- Persian-speaking traders and courtiers of the Mughal period.
- Arabic speakers, mostly from Iraq and Syria, who settled in Bombay, Kolkotta, and Rangoon, from the 18th century onwards, known as "*Baghdadis*" – they were rich merchants who established thriving business enterprises and well laid out Jewish communities.
- European Jews including Russian, German and Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim, many of whom came as refugees from Hitler's Holocaust and
- Manipuri Jews, the mysterious *Chin-kuki* tribes of Manipur, Mizoram, and Assam states of India, descendants of Chinese origin, who migrated to Assam and Manipur from Burma (Katz and Goldberg, 1989).

The Jews in India were fortunate, unlike their fellowmen elsewhere in the world, to experience a history of peaceful existence. Despite the fact that economically they have never been able to match up with their foreign counterparts, they led a relatively happy life there.

Kerala Jews

The Jewish communities of Kerala differ physically, culturally, linguistically and socially from other Jewish communities settled elsewhere in India and they occupied an important position in trade between India and the west and later, between India and China, since their arrival on Malabar's hospitable shores (Chemama, 2002). The old testament of Bible refers to goods then available only in the Malabar Coast, such as spices, ivory, etc., proving the existence of trade relations. The Cochin tradition has it that first Jewish tribe arrived after the conquest of Judea by Babylon in 600 BC and the second wave of over 10,000 Jews, upon the destruction of the Second Temple by Romans in 70 AD. Thanks to the warm welcome and generosity of the enlightened local rulers, they are believed to have settled initially near modern *Kodungallur*, the most famous port in ancient India known all over the then world as *Muziris*. The Jews gradually put down roots and built a

number of synagogues and settlements, laying the foundations for a strong community life.

Oldest documentary evidence of Jewish settlements in Kerala is found in the copper plates of 379 AD, preserved in the *Pardeshi* (Foreigner's) Synagogue (Weil, 2006), in which the *Chera* King Bhaskara Ravi Verma 'granted the hereditary possession of Anjuvannam, (a small village near *Kodungallur*) with the right to live and trade as long as the sun and the moon shine', to Joseph Rabban, leader of the Jews. The grant is unique in Jewish history and it indicates the degree of acceptance the Cochin Jews had earned (Israel, 1982). They occupied this land for over a thousand years till the 15th century AD, when political and social compulsions forced them to flee from *Kodungallur* to Cochin on account of frequent wars with *Zamorins*, the ruler of *Kozhikode*.

Their exodus from *Kodungallur* was completed in the 16th century, when they took refuge under the Hindu Rajah of Cochin in 1524. He gave them a strip of land just next to his palace and allowed them to build a place of worship—their first synagogue here—barely 30 yards from the royal Bhagavathi temple. With the Rajah's permission, they built a small settlement with a synagogue, later leading to the rise of the Jew Town in 1567. The *Pardesi* Synagogue itself was built with financial assistance from the Rajah in 1568. They became a prosperous trading community and controlled a major portion of worldwide spice trade. They also enjoyed a high standard of living and included among them rich merchants and professionals.

The Cochin Jews were historically divided into two distinct sects. The Black Jews or *Malabaris*, who are believed to be the descendants of the original settlers, formed almost 85% of the population while the White Jews or *Paradesis*, were descendants of later immigrants from Middle East and European Communities. These sects of Jews in Kerala had individualistic cultural traits and did not intermarry. The *Pardesi* Jews thought of themselves purer in origin and blood, while the Black Jews refuted this claim, insisting that they were original settlers. The Cochin Jews had a distinctive dual cultural identity—Hebrew culture in the Hindu world. The religious and social beliefs and customs in Judaism enabled them to live in harmony with the Indian communities without however compromising their principles and values (Chemama, 2002).

Organization of Settlement

The Jew Town settlement is located immediately south of the erstwhile palace of the Maharajah of Cochin in *Mattanchery*. The frontage of the buildings on the street side is continuous with adjoining buildings sharing common walls in the pattern of row houses. The street patterns are evolved in a linear organization with two distinct streets called the Synagogue Lane and the Commercial Street. Synagogue Lane, the principal street, is a narrow street lying in the north-south direction culminating in a cul-de-sac at the northern end near *Paradesi* Synagogue

(Fig 1). The synagogue adjoins and shares a courtyard wall with the Maharajah's private *Pazhayannur Bhagavathy* Temple. The street also houses another synagogue of the Black Jews, now abandoned (Fig 2). On either side of the synagogue lane, houses once owned and lived in by the Jews can be seen. Facing the street at the north end stands a clock tower with the synagogue to its west, and to its east, a play ground for children.



Fig. 1: Entry to Paradesi Synagogue

Fig. 2: Abandoned synagogue of Black Jews

The Commercial Street which was full of trade activities runs parallel to the Synagogue Lane with interconnections between the two. It was also called the Bazaar Road and comprises of houses and go-downs abutting the backwaters. The long, prominent go-downs run parallel to the street, stretching along the water front, with splendid doorways leading from the road to structures that extend to the water's edge. There is an open space for the ferry near the go-downs for water transportation of people and goods. The general defensive nature of the settlement layout is obvious in the planning with narrow streets and row housing pattern. The pattern exhibits a clear demarcation between the religious activities and commercial activities by segregating the streets.

Synagogue:

Synagogue was their place of worship as well as a social and religious assembly space. It constitutes the major Jewish contribution to the field of architecture. The synagogue compound is laid out as a cluster, with spaces built or linked around a series of small indoor and outdoor rooms. Entrance of the synagogue is highlighted by a clock tower and is placed along the adjacent wall to the west along the street. On entering, the visitor goes through a gradual progression from secular life to the sacred domain, finally reaching the sanctuary proper and lastly the *heckal* (Ark), the central hub of all religious worship. The focal point of the synagogue includes a central altar on a stone base, an ark with the traditional Kerala entablature, a balcony and an exclusive women's gallery.

House Forms

The approach to the main street of the Jew Town is marked by a prominent Jewish house built in 1761 with a characteristic Dutch door, providing an attractive visage to the town. Rather than isolated residential islands, the individual houses emerge as integral parts of the space continuum of the whole settlement. In general, a typical row housing pattern can be seen, with the buildings sharing common side walls and abutting the street. The architecture is largely influenced by a mixture of Dutch and traditional Kerala styles. The façade of the external wall is mostly simple and plain, devoid of any prominent decoration. Generally single or two stories tall, the pitch-roofed, well-ventilated houses are high ceiled and thus rather airy and spacious, the large eaves offering ample shades. The use of stained glass and grills with Jewish motifs (Fig 3) are observed occasionally on top of windows. One can effortlessly perceive certain homogeneity in terms of form and architectural style among the buildings of the settlement since they share a common socio-religious legacy.



Fig 3: Jewish motifs on windows

The access from the street to the house is into a corridor. On one side of the corridor is the living room and at the end is an ante-space from where the staircase is accessed. From the living space and from the ante-space, the dining room can be reached. The basic plan of Jewish residences (Fig 4) show two separate kitchens and associated storage spaces, one for daily use and one reserved exclusively for religious festivals for the preparation of separate sacred food items. Both these kitchens and the stores are placed typically as an ancillary structure across the back yard, which also houses the well and the toilets. The large and spacious bedrooms were located mostly on the first floor. In general, the Jewish settlement pattern and residential dwellings can be seen to be influenced by a blend of physical and climatic factors moulded by the essential elements of their social and religious sensibilities and requirements.



Fig. 4: Floor Plans of a typical house

Cochin Jews Dwindle to a Dozen

Dismantling of the Cochin Jewish community began inadvertently in the early decades of twentieth century under the British reign. Attracted by the rapid industrial and commercial growth of large new cities such as Bombay and Delhi, the newer generations migrated there in search of better social and financial prospects. They integrated into the Indian Jewish communities wherever they settled. Ultimately, the formation of the independent State of Israel in May 1948 sowed the seed for a modern exodus of Cochin Jews from their home for centuries. This created a stir of religious sentiment among them and prompted many to leave for their 'Promised Land'. The mass migration that began in the early fifties was followed by a second wave in the end of seventies to early eighties, leaving behind only a few dozen elderly families.

Religious compulsions were not the sole motivation for the migration, in spite of the Biblical call to return to their own God-given land. Israel, the Promised Land, also was a source of inspiration and adventure for them—an explorative opportunity to start afresh, particularly to the pioneering and enterprising youth. This was in stark contrast to centuries of staid though secure existence in India, following the traditional livelihoods of forefathers.

Economic considerations were another major catalyst for the mass migration. The financially weak had nothing to lose in trying out newer pastures. The once-rich, who lost most of their wealth with the changing economic scenario after India's independence, also wanted to make newer fortunes. Several business enterprises run profitably by the resourceful Jewish community were either taken over or proscribed by the politico-economic policies of the new Government of India. Import of luxurious foreign goods, in which they were pioneers and well established market experts, were banned altogether. Highly lucrative and path-breaking Jewish endeavors such as the regional ferry service and the electric company were taken over by the Government. Land ceiling regulations imposed by the first Communist

Government in Kerala seized the vast tracts of land owned by the Jews for re-distribution. Thus they lost many of their generations-old family businesses, their key means of livelihood and well-recognized economic opportunities.

Certain pseudo-political factors also played concealed roles. The Cochin Jews gradually began to feel alienated and left out of the social milieu, once their prominence declined and their socio-economic powers and privileges ebbed. Migration to Israel was also a cover-up to conceal various personal, business and family disappointments and failures, including social constrictions such as lack of eligible marriage partners - it was a respectable escape route for many. All these factors persuaded them towards a resettlement in newer, greener pastures. The Cochin Jews had numbered about 2500 at their peak in the 1940's and 50's, sprinkled around Cochin, Paravur, Chendamangalam, etc. Since then, they have almost wholly migrated or lived their life fully and presently only about 10 members remain.

Transformations

The collective migration of the Cochin Jews was the major driving force for the transformation of the settlements. The dying markets and trade operations hastened the demise of this once-vibrant settlement. It is seen that in the totality of the study region, the dwindling number of inhabitants played a major role in rendering the original purpose of the largely residential settlement redundant. In their hey days, the Cochin Jews used to occupy virtually all the houses on Jew Town Road and used to control a major portion of the lucrative spice trade. However, most of the homes and businesses have been sold out and now many of them belong to non-Jews. The ownership of most of the buildings has been transferred from the original Jewish settlers to other non-Jew real estate entrepreneurs. Majority of the last generation of the original settlers have migrated, leaving behind a near extinct settlement containing a conglomeration of houses abutting narrow streets, inhabited only by a handful of Jews.

The study showed that the houses used by the original Jewish settlers/traders have been morphed largely into shops. The tall, double storied buildings of the settlement must have presented a formidable, unified façade continuum during the better days of its Jewish occupation. However, the frontages of the buildings are much less intimidating today, having lost most of their original vitality. The usage pattern of the buildings have been modified in a good number of cases, the earlier residences completely altered into shops (Fig 5) selling mostly traditional goods including old furniture, religious articles, dismantled building parts, and an ensemble of small artifacts such as old lamps, statuettes, jewelry and other curios.



Fig 5: Street showing original and altered usage patterns

In majority cases, the residences are being used as display areas for the exhibition and sales of exclusive ancient and ethnic items. If we walk through the Jew Town today, almost every single house can be seen to accommodate two or more shops in the ground floor. The upper stories mostly lay vacant or act as storage space for these shops. It was observed that in a few cases, the houses have also been renovated into offices, restaurants, etc (Fig 6).



Fig 6: Residences converted to restaurant and shops

The transformations in the Jewish settlement are also a reflection of the history and growth of the new mainland metropolis of modern Cochin. The Jew Town settlement was located in close proximity to the heart of the earlier Cochin City, namely, Mattancherry and Fort Cochin. Gradually, the old port at Mattancherry was shifted to a newly formed, man-made Wellington Island and is recently again moved to another island Wallarpadam with the commissioning of the International Shipping Terminal. Old city areas lost their sheen and importance as the new city swelled more and more into the mainland town area of adjoining Ernakulam, with its business districts and IT hubs. The historic markets and earlier city cores and centres such as Fort Kochi and Mattancherry became deserted as the major marketing activities and trading operations were reallocated to the modern, bustling commerce hubs in the mainland. Thus the locational advantage of the Jew Town was entirely lost, killing its prominence.

Conclusion

The enormity of the transformation of the spaces and their original usage patterns is itself remarkable. The houses of Jew Town and its streets, once vibrant and energetic with business and social life, are nowadays primarily waiting for the scant footfall of tourists and curio shoppers. One can see radical and severe alterations all around, to the streets, spaces and houses, changing the architectural identity of this settlement. The quiet, narrow residential street of yesteryears is now functioning as a glorified small mall. Out of the several synagogues that once graced this street, only one—the Paradesi—is still open, that too, mainly as a tourist attraction.

Thus, various political and social factors as mentioned above in this study conspired for the ultimate downfall of the settlement. It has lost its original vitality and socio-economic utility in today's context. The few remaining Jews there have nothing but mere memories of a golden period when religious prayers, social gatherings and weddings were held in all their full magnificence and grandeur at the local synagogue. Under the constant threat of imminent extinction, this miniscule marginalized Jewish community in Cochin often finds it unviable to maintain their ancestral homes with the small number of inhabitants. Unless urgent conservative measures are initiated, the time is not far when this rich architectural heritage which has been handed down through centuries by successive generations, would be lost forever to the realms of time.

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