

TheChennamangalamSynagogue: Jewish Community in a Village in Kerala



*Wooden relief over a door in the
Chennamangalam synagogue*



*Chennamangalam synagogue
after restoration*

The Jews of Chennamangalam

A tombstone outside the recently restored synagogue in Chennamangalam has Hebrew letters inscribed, which are clearly visible, with the words "Sara bat Israel" *Sara, the daughter of Israel*. The Hebrew date corresponds to 1269, making it the oldest Hebrew text in India. How did this Hebrew writing reach the quiet, verdant village of Chennamangalam?

The Jews of Cochin have lived on the Malabar coast for centuries, some say from the time of King Solomon. Others claim that the Jews arrived in the



*Gathering of the Chennamangalam
Jewish community, 1952*

first century A.D. after the destruction of the Second Temple. In a popular Christian tradition, St. Thomas arrived on the Malabar coast and was invited to the wedding of the daughter of the King of Cranganore. There, St. Thomas sang a Hebrew bridal song which none of the company could understand, except a Jewish flute girl. After the wedding, St. Thomas

retired to the Jewish quarter in Cranganore, where he took up residence. This local Christian narrative confirms the existence of Jews on the Malabar coast as early as the first century. Local tradition also has it that in 1341, after the harbour of Cranganore silted up, the Jews moved from Cranganore to Chennamangalam and other centres.

Cranganore was also known as Shingly. To this day, the Jews of Chennamangalam, like the other Cochin Jews, follow the Sefardi liturgy, but pray according to the "Shingly rite". According to the scholar P.T. Nair, the kingdom of Shingly (a corruption of Tiruvancikulam where the Perumals had their seat of Government in ancient Kerala) is that part of Cranganore town which goes by the name of Kottapuram today.

The medieval geographer Ibn Battuta (1307-1377) mentions Jewish settlement in Malabar five days journey from either Calicut or Kowlam (Quilon) via Kunja-Kari. He describes this place, "which is on top of a hill; it is inhabited by Jews, who have one of their own number as their governor, and pay a poll tax to the sultan of Kowlam."

P.M. Jussay analysed Cochin Jewish folksongs in Malayalam, and identified Kunja-Kari with Chennamangalam, on the basis of the location of the summit and the Jewish self-rule. As is well known, the Jews of Cochin received copperplates from Bhaskara Ravi Varman (962-1020 C.E.) granting them 72 privileges: the right to use a day lamp and a decorative cloth to walk on; the privilege of blowing a trumpet and erecting a palanquin; and the right to obtain exemption and collect particular taxes. These privileges were bestowed upon the Cochin Jewish leader Joseph Rabban for "as long as the world, sun and moon endure".



*Ketuba (wedding contract) of
Tiferet Haim Muttat and Leah Tukatum,
Chennamangalam synagogue, 1942
[Courtesy of Leah Muttat]*

In the Cochin Jewish Malayalam song, "The Song of Everayi", Jussay traces the migration of the Jews from Jerusalem through Egypt, Yemen and Persia to Palur, north of Cranganore, whence they moved to Chennamangalam. There, according to the song, Evarayi, the Jew, joined the local aristocratic Nayars in a deer hunt, which Jussay interprets as signifying that the Jews were accepted as members of the nobility.

In "The Song of the Bird", which recounts the transmigration of a bird to India in search of a guava fruit, the bird flies "to a green mansion...in an elevated spot", which Jussay identifies with the hill at Kunja-Kari in Chennamangalam. This interpretation would tally with the conclusion drawn by P. Anujan Achan, the Kerala State Archaeologist of Cochin, in 1930. In his discussion of the Hebrew inscription on the abovementioned tombstone of Sara, the daughter of Israel, he concluded that the Jews must

have migrated to Chennamangalam from Cranganore around the date of the inscription in the mid-thirteenth century.



In "The Song of Paliathachan", also recited by the Jews of Cochin, Jussay claims that the Paliath Achan represented the Chennamangalam Nayar noblemen, who bestowed upon the Jews, in the words of the song, "gifts and books to all those who come, and titles to foreigners". The Paliath Achan reigned in Chennamangalam until 1809. Visitors to the village can still find the Paliyam Palace, the abode of the famous Achans of Paliyam, who were hereditary prime ministers of the Maharajahs of Kochi Kottayil Kovilakom. Their palace is situated on a hill overlooking the places of worship of four major world religions: the Hindu temple, the Muslim mosque, the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue.

The Chennamangalam synagogue was constructed in 1614, during the period of the Portuguese Inquisition. It was surrounded by a high wall, either for safety or to mirror the wall encompassing the Paliyam palace.

The Jews of Chennamangalam lived side by side with their neighbours in harmony and tolerance for over 350 years. They believed in monotheism, yet respected the customs of the peoples of other religions. They observed all the major Jewish festivals, fasting on the Day of Atonement, and baking matzot (unleavened bread) on Passover.



Chennamangalam Jewish community remembers Chaim Weizmann one year after his death, 1953

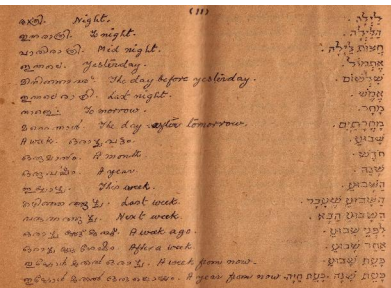
A distinctly South Indian flavour permeated some of the rituals. For example, on Simchat Torah, the festival of "Rejoicing of the Law", the Jews of Chennamangalam, like the other Cochin Jews, erected a temporary Ark,

or manara in Jewish Malayalam, in front of the synagogue heichal (Ark) for the Torah scrolls, the holiest books of the Jews. The scrolls were displayed throughout the holiday with their silver and gold covers, adorned with jasmine garlands.



[©Zeev Radovan,
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Social life was built around the community (yogam) and the extended family. All the Jewish children in Chennamangalam, boys and girls alike, attended the Talmud Torah (school for reading, writing and Torah), located on the upper floor of the synagogue.



Malayalam, English, Hebrew primer

During the twentieth century, Jewish children from Chennamangalam started attending high schools outside the village; a number become educated both in Malayalam and in the English medium, and also attended university. The renowned playwright Dr. Pinhas ben Abraham Pallivathukal (1937-1989), born in the village, was the son of the hazan (cantor) at the synagogue.

The Malabar Jews never suffered from any anti-Semitism and always experienced religious tolerance. A 1955 Kerala State Education Department memorandum to the Jewish Youth Organisation in Chennamangalam officially declared that all the Jewish holidays were to be observed in the departmental calendar. It stated that: "The Director of Public Instruction... [has] also been informed that the Jewish pupils and teachers may be granted special leave on all Saturdays which are working days."

The Jewish community in Chennamangalam was always minuscule, even in relation to the Jewish community on the Malabar coast. In 1848, 164 Jews were recorded in Chennamangalam out of a total number of 1,344 Cochin Jews. By 1857, another observer stated that 65 Jews were residing in Chennamangalam out of a total of 1,790; only three years later, in 1860, the Jewish emissary Jacob Sapir counted 30 families at



*Early photograph of
Malabar Jews*

Chennamangalam; in 1950, there were only 46 families in the village.

In 1948, the State of Israel was declared. The Cochin Jews, who had always recited prayers for the return to Zion, decided en masse to immigrate to the new state. In 1949, when the first group of 17 Jews left the Malabar coast for Israel, it included members of the Chennamangalam community.



Kadvil family in Chennamangalam

Dr. Immanuel Olswanger, an eminent linguist and emissary from Israel, visited Kerala in January, 1950. He met with the Jewish communities of Cochin, Ernakulam, Mala, Parur and Chennamangalam, and offered them the opportunity to help realize the Zionist dream. Planning the emigration took several years. Once medical matters were resolved, in 1954, most of the members of these Jewish communities were flown to Israel by the Jewish Agency. By the end of the twentieth century, all the Jews of Chennamangalam had departed.

In the late 1990's, after a visit by Kerala Governor Babu Paul to Israel and contact with local Israeli Cochin Jewish organizations, including the Kol Mevasser association, the Kerala Government decided to initiate a master plan to renovate synagogues and holy places of worship in Kerala. The first site to be restored was the synagogue at Chennamangalam. The Department of Archaeology of Kerala undertook the task of renovating the synagogue without disturbing the original structure, and the Department of Tourism allocated funds for the project. After the last trustee of the synagogue, a local lawyer, Aaron Aaron, passed away, the restoration of the synagogue began. The Kerala Department of Archaeology dedicated the newly-renovated Chennamangalam synagogue in February, 2005.



*David Ben Gurion and Bezael Eliyahu
[Courtesy of Simcha and Yosef-Hai Eliahu]*

The Jews of Chennamangalam integrated well into the new state in Israel. At first, nearly all settled in moshavim (agricultural settlements); today, some are married to non-Indian Jews and many live in the cities. Some Jews from Chennamangalam have made their mark on Israeli and world agriculture, including horticulture. Their children study at institutes of higher

learning in Israel and work as doctors, laboratory assistants, scientists and teachers. They retain great affection for their homeland, India, and continue to cultivate ties with their friends and former neighbours in Kerala. (© 2006)

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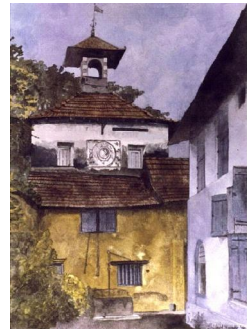


Clockwise from top: Yitzchak Avraham, Moshe Mordechai, and Eliahu (Sharett) Avraham. [Photos © Dr. Shalva Weil, 2005]

The Architecture of the Chennamangalam Synagogue

India has 34 Jewish houses of prayer dating from the 16th to the 20th century, and the oldest ones are in Kerala. Earlier synagogues, built from the 13th through the mid-16th century, no longer exist. The Jewish community, living in and around the ancient port town of Cranganore (also referred to as Muziris, Shingly, or other names at various times), were driven away by the intolerant Portuguese and the Moors in the 16th century. In the process, they were forced to abandon previously built synagogues.

Shifting to various places south of Cranganore, the Jews built new synagogues. While some of these houses of prayer also do not survive since the Cochin Jews remained in certain locations temporarily (among them Muttath, Palur, and Southi), fortunately other synagogue construction dating from the mid-16th century onwards survives - albeit often in altered states. Until the mid-20th century, Kerala had eight Jewish communities each having its own synagogue. Collectively known as the Cochin Jews, they were divided into two subgroups. The Malabar Jews, who had lived in Kerala far longer than their Paradesi coreligionists, had seven synagogues, including the one in Chennamangalam. The Paradesi Jews had just one building, of the same name, which was originally built in 1568 (left). The synagogue has become a prominent tourist attraction and is the only Jewish house of prayer in Kerala where religious services are still held. It can be found in Jew Town in the Mattancherry area of Kochi (Cochin).



A popular account goes that the town of Chennamangalam was planned no later than the 1600s by a liberal and tolerant Maharajah who wished to have four major religious faiths equally represented in town. He designated a site on each of the cardinal points for the construction of a Jewish synagogue, a Christian church, a Hindu temple, and a Muslim mosque. At the crossing of the axis, so the tale continues, was the palace for his minister set on a hill.

All four religious structures remain within one kilometer from one another, although all have been altered, enlarged, or rebuilt over the years. It is difficult to discern whether these houses of prayer were built to this formal plan since there seem to be no direct roads or perceivable axial links from one to another. The low-slung Hindu temple is a modest structure but is built on the most impressive site overlooking the countryside and town. The mosque, a recent concrete building, is located near the busy ferry jetty. The church, the largest of the four and built closest to the synagogue, has an interesting history. Along with a seminary, it was built in 1663 by the Dutch

and destroyed by the Muslim leader Tippu Sultan in 1790. (It was he who fought and captured British soldiers, including some Bene Israel Jewish ones, during the Second Mysore War. The Jewish lives were spared once Tippu Sultan's mother discovered their identities as members of the Kingdom of Israel. One of the surviving soldiers, Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, settled in Bombay and, in 1796, founded the first Bene Israel synagogue Shaar Harahamim, or Gate of Mercy, in 1796. To this day, the congregation remains small but active. The church ruins, now overgrown and picturesque, can still be seen on site. Built just nearby is the 19th century Holy Cross Church, a large open trussed structure with its façade added only in 1976. An accessory building, a residence for the church leader, is the oldest surviving portion of the church complex. Considered a fine example of the vernacular architecture of this region, with its whitewashed walls and high pitched tiled roof, its design resembles the synagogue.

Historians assert that the existing synagogue at Chennamangalam is the third to be constructed on the site. The first building, likely dating from 1614, and then its replacement were both believed to have been destroyed by fire. The current synagogue, a small building, thrived for many years. Yet for the past five decades, it sat empty. Most of the Jews in the village had moved from Chennamangalam in the early 1950s after the establishment of the State of Israel. In the 1980s, with the Jewish community in decline, arrangements were made for possession of the building to be eventually deeded to the Indian government. Unattended to during these years, the synagogue deteriorated to the point where portions of the roof and floor collapsed, large sections of the whitewashed veneer eroded, and the structural integrity was severely compromised. By the 1990s, vegetation had consumed the building, and its doors and windows had to be sealed against the elements and from vandalism (left).



By the end of the 20th century, the last of the Chennamangalam Jews had emigrated or passed on. This allowed the State of Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archaeology to embark on the restoration of the Chennamangalam synagogue in 2004. Under the direction of Dr. V. Manmadhan Nair and his staff, skilled restoration professionals and area craftsmen meticulously brought the building back to form. The Chennamangalam synagogue thus is the first of the Malabar Jewish community sites to be restored by the government of India and made accessible to the public.

Although not original to the synagogue, a high, thick wall surrounds the Chennamangalam synagogue site. Its arrangement can best be described as a "peninsula", since the perimeter wall aligns with the façade of the synagogue

yet frees itself of the building along the three other edges of the property (right). The synagogue, penned in the wall, is bordered with narrow strips of space to the rear and two sides, while the front zone is replaced by a deep covered porch with a second floor classroom above. The front façade of the second floor is thus co-planar with the perimeter wall.



Influenced by Indian building traditions coupled with the influences of visiting traders and imperialists over the centuries, the Chennamangalam synagogue is a wonderful example of the traditions of Kerala vernacular thachusasthra design (above left). Until the 16th century and the arrival of the Portuguese in India, roofs of local buildings were often bamboo framed and covered with thatched palm leaves (this technique can still be seen in Kerala villages). The roof system would have been set on mud walls or simple masonry walls. In time, this construction technique was replaced with wood framed roofs (often teak) covered with terracotta tiles set (above center) on thick-bodied laterite stone walls veneered in chunam (a polished lime plaster) (above right). The local components were thus fused with foreign building techniques introduced by outsiders, first the Portuguese and later the Dutch and British. These influences also affected synagogue architecture and were combined with the Jewish ritual and liturgical requirements.

Architecturally, the Chennamangalam synagogue's clean-lined aesthetic results from its simple geometry and minimal yet decorative detail. Found at the building are fan patterns at its façade, thick bands of casings and coursings, deep open eaves with exposed rafters, flat white-washed surfaces with rolled or soft





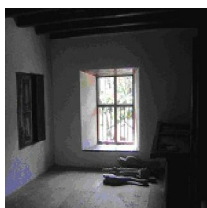
edges, and a star-patterned vent at its gabled front (left). The building also features various intricately hand-carved and colorful interior ornament that is nicely accented against otherwise plain surfaces. The decorative areas above the entry door and on the bimah (the raised platform where the service is led) are examples (below).



Centered within the Chennamangalam synagogue's façade is a pair of solid wood doors opening into the covered porch (14'-8" or 4.5 meters deep). A small opening in the wall was provided for the delivery of oil, and can still be seen (left). On each side of the porch is a dressed stone column with carved teak capital, and, to the front, are built-in benches (left). Facing these seats is the entryway to the azura, a space measuring 11' x 20'-6" or 3.3 m x 6.15 m. This anteroom is reached via three stone steps and another pair of solid wood doors that swing inward.



Engaged in the front right corner of the perimeter wall, and independent of the synagogue proper, is a small enclosure added only in the early 20th century. Here can be found a spiral stair that connects to the room directly above the covered porch. This well-lit space, surrounded by windows on three sides features a wood floor and an exposed beam ceiling. It once served as a Jewish school (below left). Beyond the classroom is a smaller room. This area was reserved for women, who sat in a section apart from the men according to religious tradition (below right).



The women's area leads to a third space (right), a narrow zone with its bowed railing made up of turned wood gilded balusters and a second, very

steep wood stairway leading down to the main sanctuary. As with other Cochin Jewish houses of prayer, this small gallery overlooks the men's prayer area and is supported by a pair of shaped wooden columns (both structural as well as recalling those at the ancient Jewish Temple). This space is unique to synagogue architecture worldwide in that it was used as a second bimah (reading table) for Shabbat, holiday, and festival services.



The ground floor sanctuary measures 36' x 20'-6" or 10.8 m x 6.15 m. Of special notice is its painted paneled ceiling with lotus flower medallions, curved bimah (with its tiered railing) where the Torah was read, terracotta tiled floor, shuttered windows set in very thick walls, bracketed underside of the balcony, and the beautifully hand-carved heichal (or ark - a place for storing the Torah scrolls) fabricated out of local teak and highlighted in gold, red, and green (right). When the synagogue was in use, wooden benches and a myriad of hanging colored glass lanterns would have decorated the interior of this delightful space.



Professor Jay A. Waronker is a practicing architect as well as interim chair of the Department of Architecture at Southern Polytechnic State University in Atlanta, Georgia. He has documented the synagogues of India and southern Africa on two Fullbright grants. His architectural watercolors have been published and exhibited internationally.

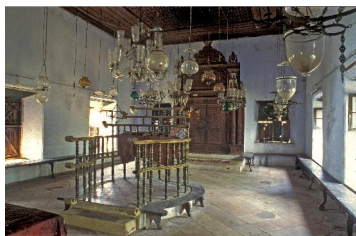
Images by Professor Jay A. Waronker and the Kerala Office of the Indian Department of Archeology.

The Paradesi Synagogue in Cochin, built in 1568 and still functioning as a synagogue, is open to visitors during business hours, except for the Jewish sabbath and holidays. It is in the Mattancheri area of Kochi, to the south of Fort Cochin, in Jew Town, where you will find bookstores, curio shops and stores with local crafts.



*Paradesi Synagogue
Fort Cochin, Kochi*

Restoration of the synagogue in Parur, 2 kilometers from Chennamangalam, is in the planning and fund-raising stage. Access must be arranged in advance to see the synagogue, which dates from 1621. Look for granite pillars marked "Jew Town" at the entrance to the street where the synagogue is located.



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The two synagogues in Ernakulum, the synagogue in Mala, and the Kadavumbagam and Tekkumbagam synagogues in Mattancheri, Kochi, are not open to the public at this time.

The Kerala Department of Archaeology carried out the restoration of the synagogue in Chennamangalam with funds from the Department of Tourism.

The exhibition in the synagogue in Chennamangalam was funded by The Koret Foundation, The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, Marc and Anita Abramowitz, and other private donors.

The Chennamangalam synagogue is open daily except Mondays.

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