

REMEMBERING **THE JEWS** *of Kerala,* *India*

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When I was an international teacher in India, I joined two of my expat colleagues on a short trip to the Malabar Coast in the state of Kerala. Our journey included a stop in Kochi, formerly Cochin. Years earlier, I had admired a picture of one of Kochi's synagogues in a calendar highlighting unique synagogues. The Paradesi Synagogue was built in 1568 near the maharaja's palace in Jew Town. It is considered to be the oldest active synagogue in the Commonwealth. I never imagined that I would visit this synagogue twice and also search for nearby Jewish communities.

Bits and pieces from historical records, foreign travelogues, stone and copper inscriptions, Jewish women's songs (some were published in *Oh Lovely Parrot!— Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala*), and oral histories create an incomplete picture of the Jews who once lived in Cochin, Ernakulam, Chendamangalam, Mala, and Parur.

The "White" or Paradesi Jews were primarily exiles from the Spanish Inquisition in Spain and Portugal and settled in Kochi while the "Black" or Malabari Jews migrated centuries earlier and lived in several places. Before colonial times, the reigning rulers extended special privileges to this tiny Jewish population, which included land for their synagogues. After the Second World War, there were eight active synagogues servicing a small population of approximately 3,000 Jews. Shortly after Israel became a nation in 1948, almost all of these people made aliyah even though they had not experienced any anti-Semitism in their communities.





Houseboat on Kerala backwaters. Kerala, India SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTO

First visit

On my last day in Kochi in 2010, I searched for Sarah Cohen's Embroidery Shop. Out of the handful of remaining Jews, Sarah was the only Jewish entrepreneur left in Kochi's Jew Town. While purchasing one of her embroidered challah covers in the crowded store, we could only chat briefly.

The Paradesi Synagogue was closed. As I stood looking at the synagogue's famous clock tower, my non-Jewish colleagues pounded on the door until the caretaker appeared. He responded positively to their plea, "She's a Jew. She's a Jew. She's come from America to see the synagogue."

With limited time, I glanced at the teak ark, the centralized bimah with brass rails, the Chinese hand-painted, willow-patterned, blue-and-white imported floor tiles and upwards at the 19th-century Belgian chandeliers and lamps and the women's section.

We passed by a few goats on our way to the nearby cemetery. Looking through the metal gate, I saw dozens of above ground crypts partially hidden behind tall grasses. Too much Jewish history lay silently in those graves.

Second visit

In January of this year, I returned to Cochin, this time, with my husband, eldest son, daughter-in-law, and young grandson. In intense heat, we waited in a long line of people conversing in multiple languages. Once inside, I asked the caretaker if there were Shabbat services. He shook his head and answered, "With just a few Jews left in Jew Town, the synagogue has services when tour groups make special arrangements." A short time later, I entered Sarah's embroidery shop. I recognized her immediately. The aging process had taken its toll. Her words were now incomprehensible.

Before heading to the airport, we drove about an hour-and-a-half north of Kochi to two other synagogues – Paravur and Chendamangalam – and also visited a secluded cemetery.

The Muziris Heritage Project, an Indian preservation organization, rehabbed the abandoned Paravur Synagogue and turned it into a Jewish history museum. The exact dates for the original construction and renovations are unknown. While an earlier structure most likely existed in the 12th century, this building dates to the late 16th or early 17th centuries.

Outside the Paradesi Synagogue. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO





Knesset Eliyahoo Synagogue, Mumbai ALAMY PHOTO

I walked into a small area with two rooms called a padippura, a unique feature of Kerala architecture. From that point, my eyes focused on a long courtyard with white columns that led to another entryway. Following the local custom, we removed our shoes before entering the azara, a room that leads into the small, rectangular sanctuary. Sunlight splashed through the large windows that lined the whitewashed walls. At the far end, a few white stairs led to a hand carved wooden ark that was framed by two of the large windows. Partially obstructing my view was an elevated round bimah that was encircled by woodwork. A nearby sign stated that the original bimah is on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

At the back of the room were steep steps up to a second bimah. The wood planked floor creaked as I made my way into the adjacent women's prayer room followed by a long corridor that flowed into the rabbanim, a place where the scriptures were once taught. The whole time I was inside, I kept looking upward at the wooden ceilings, which represent an extraordinary level of craftsmanship.

After exiting through an outdoor stairway, I meandered along the walkway that showcased the mature landscape. As I passed moss-covered gravestones with Hebrew inscriptions that were propped up against the wall, I thought about the women who used to sing songs in Malayalam about their Jewish heritage.

The Chendamangalam Synagogue, a simple two-storey white structure with a pitched roof and arched windows, is easy to miss. Had it not been for an oversized blue sign across the street, we might have driven by. The sign described how Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians had lived in harmony for centuries. Behind a locked gate was a Jewish residence.

Once again, we walked through the padippura and azara before entering the sanctuary. Just like the Paravur Synagogue, natural

light flowed through large windows onto the centralized bimah. This synagogue's ark was carved out of teak wood and was decorated with red, green, and golden paint. Glass lanterns dangled from a tall wooden grid ceiling that shared the same colours as the ark. The upstairs had a second bimah, a prayer room for women, a rabbanim and two staircases.

I learned that the Malabari Jews established this community in 1420 after the local king offered the land to build the structure. A fire caused the synagogue to be rebuilt in 1614. In 1938, the building was renovated and protected as a heritage site. A Jewish lifestyle museum now stands as a placeholder for a community that no longer exists.

After following the street signs to the Chendamangalam Jewish Cemetery, our car reached a dead end. While we were using our Google Map app, it felt like we were playing a treasure hunt game. We trudged through thick foliage and eventually found Jewish gravestones scattered on a hilly terrain camouflaged by shrubs and grasses. An older man from the neighbourhood approached us. He told us that Jews once lived happily in his community, but left long ago. The man assured us that efforts were being made to restore the cemetery and that relatives occasionally come back to visit their deceased ancestors. A few yahrzeit glass candleholders are a visible reminder that Jewish life continues to move forward, but at the same time remains tied to the past.

It always feels odd to walk into a synagogue that has either been abandoned or turned into a museum. Jewish continuity is dependent on worldwide communities creating synagogues that address the needs of its vibrant congregants. In this case, Jews left willingly and transported their culture to Israel. Meanwhile, others graciously help to preserve Jewish landmarks and cemeteries so visitors will not forget the Jews who once lived there. ☆