

REFLECTION OF MALABAR JEWS HISTORY IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES: A STUDY OF COPPER PLATES, SYNAGOGUES, AND MONUMENTS

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Abstract: History has many tools to get herself revealed even in dormant situations. As the sources attached to it do not put a clear picture of the Jewish people, the community carved out their own history based on oral, mythical and cultural traditions. In order to distinguish history from story writing, it becomes inevitable to read these sources in the background of some historical data or tools. In order to do so along with some original documents from the contemporary period, the archaeological sources are very much important. Thus on the basis of available archaeological and physical sources this work will try to construct the history of Malabar Jews community. Copper Plates, Synagogues and Tombstone are the major source for this work. Though the archaeology is about doing the field work in this work I have tried to relocate history of Jewish community on the basis of written work based on these physical sources. More than providing knowledge about history of Malabar Jewish community, this paper attempts to arise questions and awareness regarding the use of archaeological sources for the Jewish history, which has been ignored so far. Due to the gradual decrease in the number of Jews people is posing danger on their historical heritage as well. There is no one from the community to save their own history that is why the Cochin Jewish community has been termed as “dying community”. As far as the historical importance of these archaeological sources are concerned in the canvas of floating legends and identity conscious facts and data, the need of unbiased source increase immensely.

Keywords: Archaeology, Cochin Jews, History, Indian Ocean Trade, Malabar Jews.

Introduction: History has many tools to get herself revealed even in dormant situations. The history of Jewish community situated on the western coast of India has been gloomy. As the sources attached to it do not put a clear picture of the Jewish people, the community carved out their own history based on oral, mythical and cultural traditions. In order to distinguish history from story writing, it becomes inevitable to read these sources in the background of some historical data or tools. In order to do so along with some original documents from the contemporary period, the archaeological sources are very much important. Study of Jews’ past in the light of archaeological sources can bring us more closely to the history of Jewish community along the Malabar Coast of India. Unlike the written documents, the archaeological sources will provide an unbiased history of the Jewish community. Though the importance of these sources is immense, less time has been invested in dealing with them. Through this paper, I would like to relocate the Jewish history within the frame of archaeology.

History Verses Myth: Before framing Jewish history according to archaeological sources the paper would seek to peep into the various myths and stories of origin related to Jewish community’s history at Malabar. Vast and chaotic bits of historical evidence mess with the conflicting legends and myths. Ample amount of trade was happening between South Asia and West Asia even during ancient times. This fact has been proved by the archaeological evidences available for the prehistoric times. Although in the

absence of proper sources one has to depend on the legends, folk songs, oral traditions and memories for the construction of past. The history of Jewish presence on the west coast of India goes back to a very remote past. According to the local tradition, the Jews first landed in India in the sixth century B.C., following the scattering of Jews with Babylonian conquest and captivity. It is also generally believed that the first batch of Jews had come before first century C.E. and settled on the Malabar Coast of India.

Cochin Jews has been also believed to arrive from Majorca in 370 C.E. According to Moses De Pavia, it happened in the background of Cochin Jew’s forefathers being made captive by the Titus Vespasian. According to another belief in 499 C.E., Jews moved to Cochin from Persia in order to escape persecution by King Kobad. Their arrival has been also attached to the Mahammedan rule and the activities of Radanites. Apart from this there are more ancient claims for their origin and arrival to India or specifically to Malabar. According to one famous legend it is said that Cochin Jews arrived in Malabar even during the destruction of the Second Temple at Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Due to the use of Aramaic by the earlier generations of Cochin Jews, it is assumed that they could have also migrated from Yemen. Moreover, one of the Paintings kept in the Synagogue at Cochin depicts the story of Jewish origin as the caption of the painting reads: “There was trade between King Solomon’s Palestine (992-952 B.C.) and Malabar coast. The Biblical name for India was,

"Odhu"[Hodu]. Teak, Ivory, Spice and Peacocks were exported to Palestine." Another painting with the caption: "The raja of Cranganore receives the Jews," tries to refer to the arrival of the Jews at Shingly (Cranganore) in 72 C.E. Shingly is considered to be the ancestral home for the Jews, so they always try to link their past with Cranganore as the matter of pride.

The Jewish community created their history in order to position their self in the vast canvas of Malabar region where other communities also existed. For them history, more than their past, was a matter of prestige and priorities. This attitude towards history has been termed by Nathan Katz, famous Scholar of Jewish Studies, as *identity-generating myth*. For these sorts of sources, one need to be very careful and it must be reset against the background of historically proven data and facts. Archaeological sources, in this task, can play a vital role.

Copper Plates as a Source of Conferring Jewish Settlement on the Coast

The nature of Jewish settlements and their changing character over years has been a puzzling issue. While the ancient indigenous sources, particularly the *copper plates* from Kerala, indicate the permanent Jewish presence on the west coast of India, the Genizsa sources hardly refer to any such fact. The public and private correspondences of Jewish merchants active along the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean trade routes reflect their tendency of going back to their homeland rather than settling down. For example, Abraham ben Yiju, one of the most famous personalities of India trade and often mentioned in Genizsa records, did not settle down permanently in India despite having a bronze factory at Manjarur (modern Mangalore). He went back to his homeland Tunisia after finishing his trading ventures. However, the gap of sources remains a hurdle in way of knowing the history of Jewish settlements in India for pre-modern period. By keeping archaeological sources on the base, other epigraphic, and written sources (Genizsa materials) can help us in unfolding the journey and presence of Jewish merchants on the West Coast of India.

Most initial and striking example of Physical evidence available for the study of Malabar Jewish community is the *Tharisapally* Copper Plate grants from 849 C.E. According to the decree of this specific Copper Plate, King Sthanu Ravi of Kollam grants certain ceremonial and trading privileges to Mar Sapir Iso, founded the city of the Syrian Christian community.

It is said that this grant was witnessed by the four Jews named Hassan, Ali, Isaac ben Michael and Abraham. The grant confers that along with Christians, Jews were also bestowed seventy-two privileges by the then King. *Tharisapally* copper plates also have, Hebrew signatures on a grant-deed

conferred on the church of Tharisa of Quilon. Moreover *Anjuvannam*, which has been considered by most historians as a merchant guild of the Jews in Kerala, was given the responsibility of taking care of the church as its guardian (*karalar*) along with Manigramam merchant guild, which has often been viewed as a Christian merchant guild.

Another most noteworthy archaeological source for the study of Malabar Jewish community present is the Copper Plates of 1069 C.E. These copper plates are engraved in ancient Tamil language and written in the archaic and obsolete Vatteluttu script. These plates have been preserved by the Jewish community of Cochin as their historical legacy which they often cherished. The *paradesi* synagogue of the white Jews in Cochin is the place where these plates have now been preserved. The text of this inscription, according to the generally accepted version reads as follows:

"Hail! Prosperity! (The following) gift was made by him who had assumed the title "King of Kings," His Majesty the king, the glorious Bhaskara Ravivarman, in the time during which (he) was wielding the sceptre and ruling over many hundred-thousands of places, in the thirty-sixth year after the second year, on the day on which (he) was pleased to stay at Muyirik-kodu:-

We have given to Issuppu Irappan (the village of) Anjuvannam, together with the seventy-two proprietary rights, the tolls on female elephants and (other) riding animals, the revenue of Anjuvannam, a lamp in day-time, a cloth spread (in front to walk on), a palanquin, a parasol, a Vaduga (i. e., Telugu) drum, a large trumpet, a gateway, an arch, a canopy (in the shape) of an arch, a garland, and so forth. We have remitted tolls and the tax on balances. Moreover, we have granted, with (these) copper leaves, that he need not pay (the dues) which the (other) inhabitants of the city pay to the royal palace, and that (he) may enjoy (the benefits) which (they) enjoy.

To Issuppu Irappan of Anjuvannam, to the male children and to the female children born of him, to his nephews, and to the sons-in-law who have married (his) daughters, (we have given) Anjuvannam (as) a hereditary estate for as long as the world and the moon shall exist. Hail! "

The above information in the copper plates, not only refers to the presence of Jews on the Malabar Coast of India, but also signifies their privileged status. According to the tradition, the Chera ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varman (962-1020) bestowed commercial privileges to his favorite Jewish merchant, Joseph Rabban, who was given copper plates enshrining these privileges in the year 1000. Those plates provided him and to the whole community, the right to ride an elephant, to be carried in a litter, to have a state umbrella, to be preceded by drums and

trumpets, to call out so that lower castes might withdraw from the streets at his approach. Along with the exemption from taxes, the Jews were also entitled to enjoy the benefits of the Ruler's administration just like the native people. The special favor to the Jews must be bringing benefits to the state which motivated the ruler to do so. The Jews had then been contributing to the economic development of the Chera state.

Synagogue: Source of History for the Malabar Jews Community : The greatest physical structure and archaeological source available for the study of Jewish communities history, situated on the Malabar region is their prayer house "Synagogues". The presence of religious structures is the symbol of harmony. Thus, the construction of Synagogues from 13th century onwards is the reflection of harmonious and prosperous period for the community. Though the period in which these Synagogues have been constructed were bit bitter days for Malabar Jews. The arrival of Portuguese mercantile wave from Europe brought them some difficulties along with the opportunities. The Dutch governor Adriaan Moens writes: "This nation [Portugal] was no friend of Jews and compelled many of them, by contemptuous treatment and arbitrary taxes, but especially by their religious intolerance, to leave Cranganore and to beseech the protection of the King of Cochin".

Although during Portuguese period (1498-1663) the Jewish community of Malabar faced anti-Semitic activities, it was during this period only they built their beautiful Synagogues. At one side the documents of Inquisition speak the past of destruction, simultaneously on the other side the construction of Jews Prayer houses reveal a completely different story. The Jewish community of Malabar claims that they had eight Synagogues- one in the State of Travancore, three in Cochin, two in Ernakulam, and one each in Parur, Chendamangalam and Mala. At present one among them is only in use, two are empty in Ernakulam and rest of them are getting ruined. Soon after the 1341 Periyar River flood, Jews migrated from Cranganore to Cochangadi, a village near Cochin. It is said that during this time Joseph Azhar built Cochin's first Synagogue there in 1344 C.E. There were two major Synagogues in Shingly, popularly known as Riverside or Kadavumbhagam and Thekumbhagam Synagogue. The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue which was built in 1539 C.E. is located on the river side of the Maharaja's palace and hundred meters farther South. This Synagogue was demolished in 1970, and is being used as a warehouse now. The Thekumbhagam Synagogue built in 1647

C.E. is situated on hundred meters South along the Synagogue lane. The Thekumbhagam Synagogue was demolished in 1970. It was constructed in 1580 C.E.

There are two more Synagogue at Ernakulam with the same name mentioned above. The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue is believed to be built in 1200. Later on, this Synagogue was reconstructed in an octagonal shape and was used by the community till 1972. But now it is being used as a flower nursery since 1985; and the Thekumbhagam Synagogue constructed in 1580 is now a poultry farm. This Synagogue was closed permanently in 1954.

Next in the row is most famous Paradesi Synagogue of Cochin, built in 1568 C.E. This structure was built by the efforts of Eliahu Samuel Kastiel (Representative of Merchants), David Balilia, Joseph Levi (Representative of Merchants), and Epharim Saala. This one is the oldest synagogue in the British Commonwealth. It is located on the northern end of the Jew town and adjoins the grounds of the Rajah of Cochin. This is the only functioning Synagogue of Cochin, attracting tourists for its magnificent architecture. The floor of the Synagogue is made up of hand painted Chinese blue willow patterned tiles. Regarding the architecture of the Synagogue Nathan Katz writes: "A sloping red roof covers each whitewashed, two story building. The entrance is a plain wooden door through an exterior wall which is as high as is a treeless courtyard completely surrounding the building. The walls of the Synagogue are thick, and each shuttered window has a wide, comfortable window seat before it. The sanctuary itself is gaily decorated with chandeliers of silver and brass and oil lamps, brought from Belgium. The ceiling is made up of wood. The wall and the courtyard closely resemble Kerala's Hindu temples. Passing through the external door on the southeastern side of the building, one enters a small anteroom known as a *talam*. To the left a stairway leads into the courtyard and the entrance to the Synagogue proper." The very first room of the building is an anteroom (*azara*), made especially for the mourners, latecomers, mourners and women. Most striking feature of the Synagogues of Kerala including of this one is the presence of a separate women's section which reflects the high position of women within the community. It also has a graceful clock tower built by Ezekiel Rahabi II in 1761 C.E. The numeral on the clock is of three types- Hebrew, Roman and Indian. The side of the clock facing harbor is in Indian number, side facing Synagogue lane is in Roman and the side facing Synagogue are in Hebrew.

Moreover, inside the building there are ten paintings kept which reflect the identity conscious history of the Malabar Jewish community. These paintings are sketched by the local artist S. S. Krishna. Captions for the ten paintings are as follows respectively: "There was trade between King Solomon's Palestine (992-952 B.C.E.) and Malabar Coast. The Biblical name for India was "Odhu". Teak, ivory, spice and peacock

were exported to Palestine.” “Destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. by the Romans and the subsequent scattering of the Jews people on the four corners of the world from Palestine.”; “Landing of the Jews at Shingly (Cranganore) in 72 A.D.”; “The Rajah of Cranganore receives the Jews.”; “Joseph Rabbban, leader of the Jews, receiving the Copper Plates from Cheramperumal. He was made prince of Anjuvannam and thus a Jewish kingdom was established at Cranganore in 379 A.D.”; “Two of the original silver trumpets, used in the temple of Jerusalem, with the ineffable Name, craved on them were brought to Cranganore and were blown by Levites on the eve of Sabbath. Once the Levites were late and the laity (non-Levites) usurped their privileges and in the resulting quarrel, the trumpets were unfortunately destroyed”; “Construction of the Cochin Synagogue next to the Maharaja’s palace and temple in 1568.” “Destruction of Cranganore by the Moors and Portuguese in 1524. Joseph Azar was the last Jews prince, swam to Cochin with his wife on his shoulders. The Jews placed themselves under the protection of the Maharaja of Cochin”; “The Maharaja of Travancore presenting a gold crown for the Torah in 1805.”; “The last reigning Maharaja of Cochin addressing Jews subject in the Synagogue before relinquishing his throne in 1949.”

Another Synagogue which needs proper attention in order to reach up to Jewish history is the Chennamanagalam which was built in 1614. This Synagogue was built during the troubled days of Jewish community as the Portuguese inquisition had started by that time. This Synagogue is surrounded by high walls. In front of the synagogue heichal (Ark), a temporary Ark has been made in order to Place the Torah scrolls, the holiest books of the Jews. On the upper floor of this Synagogue, there is a room for Talmud Torah which is a school for reading, writing and Torah. The renovation work of this Synagogue was undertaken by the archaeological department of Kerala in the late 1990s. According to popular stories, the town of Chennamanagalam was designed on the religious tolerant ideology as there are four houses of prayer present for Hindu, Jews, Christian and Muslims respectively. The town has temple, mosque, church and synagogue within the area of one kilometre from each other. The study of this place lets modern scholars assert that the temple is the oldest building whereas the mosque is recent one. The church was constructed by the Dutch in 1663. As far as the date for the Synagogue building is concerned, it was built in 1614 C.E. for the first time and reconstructed a few times later on. Since last fifty years the Synagogue is not in use as most of them have moved from Chennamanagalam during 1950s after the formation of state of Israel. The Synagogue was getting damaged by the time as it was out of use.

Soon after death of the last member of Jewish community of Chennamanagalam, with the order of State of Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archaeology, under the supervision of Dr. V. Manmadha Nair and his staff, skilled restoration professionals and area craftsmen, the prayer house was restored. After the restoration, the building no more looked like a typical structured synagogue. The reflection of the traditions Keralan vernacular thachusasthra design was clearly visible on the newly made Synagogue. Thus the synagogues are one of those physical evidences which speak about the history of the Jewish community. Synagogues have also been considered as one the major components of urban set up. Time and place of these synagogues confer their presence within some specific time period and also area of their influence and existence. The architecture of these buildings denotes their art and culture along with their mingling with other socio cultural groups. The construction of these synagogues mostly happened between the period from 14th to 17th century, which tells the story of their prosperity and influence along the Malabar region. Afterwards as the community shrunk, the use of these synagogues were also decreased which finally led towards the closing of these prayer houses. In current period of time, there is only one synagogue at Cochin where prayer is being offered; rest of them are demolished or used for some personal or private work. Through this paper, I wish to draw the attention towards these demolished and vanishing Synagogues which needs immediate study.

Reflection of Malabar Jewish Communities’ Past in the Monument

In the queue of physical evidences, there is another archaeological source which is of immense value. The tombstone of Sarah bat-Israel dated 1269 C.E. is situated outside the Chendamangalam Synagogue. According to popular belief, this tomb was earlier located at Shingly. When the internal struggle broke out among the Jews community on the matter of succession of the line of Joseh Rabbban, many Jews fled to various places like Parur, Mala, Mattancheri and Chendamangalam etc. During that time, the grave of Sarah who is supposed to be the member of above mentioned community, displaced from Shingly was brought to Chendamangalam. This tombstone belonged to a Jewish women named Sarah has been inscribed in Hebrew and is counted among one of the oldest texts in the language. It has been marked as the grave of Sarah, daughter of Israel. Unlike the other Jewish tombstones, this one has a quotation from Deuteronomy 32.4. The letters inscribed on the tombstone is clearly visible and the Hebrew used is the classic one. According to modern scholars, the language inscribed on the tombstone lead to two

major assumptions- The Cochin Jews were not only familiar with the Hebrew language; they were also using it for various purposes. But the knowledge of Hebrew the Cochin Jews had was deficient. This flaw of language again reflects the seclusion of the Cochin Jewry from those of European Jewry. As there was difference in the conduct of cultural and social life as well, these things also varied. One could also assume that in absence of improper knowledge of Hebrew language, they must have been dependent upon the local language of the region which was Malayalam.

Apart from the tombstone of Sarah, there are no such specific monuments which have come into light. Though near Kadavumbhgam Synagogue, there are two cemeteries present in Ernakulam, this synagogue is more like a tombstone. Abba Isaac Joffe, a messenger from Jerusalem, reached Cochin in 1880 and stayed there for decade. When he died, his tombstone was created at Ernakulam itself. But this was unaccepted by the paradesi Jews community of Cochin as the person was "White Jews". So the cemetery of Abba Isaac Joffe, was immediately removed from Ernakulam to Jew Town at Cochin.

Few interpretations come out with the study of these tombstones and cemeteries. One of the languages used on these graveyards were Hebrew which shows their keenness to preserve their traditional culture even though on a foreign land. Second, the removal of the cemetery from one place to another could be attached to the social distinctions among the Jewish community of Malabar. However, due to the lack of proper care and decrease in the number of Jews, these archaeological sources available for the historical understanding of Jewish community are dying.

Migration of most of the members of Jewish community of Kerala to Israel after 1949 is giving the government an opportunity to encroach these places for some office or public use. For example, the Cochin Municipal Corporation wanted to build a stadium on the site of older cemetery of Ernakulam. Thus it has become very essential to save these historical heritages of Jewish community as they are pages from the past which should not be removed.

Conclusion: Thus on the basis of available archaeological and physical sources this work tries to construct the history of Malabar Jews community. Copper Plates, Synagogues and Tombstone are the major source for this work. Though the archaeology is about doing the field work in this work I have tried to relocate history of Jewish community on the basis of written work based on these physical sources. More than the providing knowledge about history of Malabar Jewish community, this paper attempts to arise questions and awareness regarding the use of archaeological sources for the Jewish history, which has been ignored so far. Due to the gradual decrease in the number of Jews people is posing danger on their historical heritage as well. There is no one from the community to save their own history, that is why the Cochin Jewish community has been termed as "dying community". As far as the historical importance of these archaeological sources are concerned in the canvas of floating legends and identity conscious facts and data, the need of unbiased source increase immensely. Thus with the help of these physical evidences historians can try to carve out the history of Malabar Jewish community which would be less biased and less exaggerative.

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