

THE LAST OF A DIASPORA COMMUNITY: THE JEWS OF KOCHI



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Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “*The Last of a Diaspora Community: The Jews of Kochi*” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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Abstract

“The Last of a Diaspora Community: The Jews of Kochi” is an ethnographic study based in Jew Town, Mattancherry, Kochi. One of the most culturally diverse cities in India, Kochi is home to the first foreign religion to settle down in India – The Jews of Kochi. They were welcomed with open arms by the then Maharaja of Kochi and have lived in harmony with the locals ever since. They faced oppression and alienation in the form of the Portuguese invasion. But Jews, who are known to be fiercely protective of their religious practices and customs, have managed to keep them intact, despite the hardships they faced, while incorporating local ideals; which strengthened their bond with the locals.

Through an extensive exploration of literature on the topic, we found that there are very few Jews residing in Mattancherry. Due to the limited sample size of participants and reliable information from academic papers and other sources, some questions were left unanswered. For instance, there was very little specification on cultural and social implications of the Paradesi Jewish community’s presence in Indian society in general or Fort Kochi in particular in the sources we referred to. There have been multiple and conflicting versions of stories regarding the origin, identity and relevance of both the Paradesi Jews and the Malabar Jews of Fort Kochi. There is also little-to-no insight into the current lives of the Jews still residing in Mattancherry, which is essential for an all rounded understanding of the community.

A qualitative research method was used for our field-research, which included interview and observation methods. We focused on interviewing key informants and participants who were contacted based on the snowball sampling approach. We also visited important Jewish places – Paradesi Synagogue, Hallegua Hall, Sarah’s embroidery shop, Kodavumbagam Synagogue, Sassoon Hall, David Hall etc., which we tracked through our study of various research based academic papers. The field-research conducted in Jew Town has led to many compelling findings. During our research, certain information was corresponding to the pre-field research. However, some of our most prominent findings were not mentioned in any of our secondary sources.

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CHAPTER 1:

Introduction and Methodology



Figure 1: Chinese Fishing nets at Kochi beach

1.1 Introduction

“Travel and exile have been key characteristics of the formation of multi-cultural societies and shared histories like in the case of the Jews” (Arya, 2017). Throughout history, their people and their faith have continually been attacked by Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Babylonians and Europeans. The most horrific of their persecution being the holocaust, which was the mass genocide performed by the German Nazis from 1933 to 1945. Their survival proves to be miraculous as the powers that dominated them seem to have diminished during the course of history, but they remain relevant and prospering. While the Jews trace their origins back to the ancient Hebrews of Israel, exile has forced them to travel far and wide to protect themselves. Thus, the diaspora, which is the migration of the Jews from their homeland Jerusalem, was born. Today, they are found scattered across the four corners of the world. Their identity has been largely influenced by the place of their settlement.

With Judaism being one of the first foreign religions to arrive in India, the country has the “fourth largest Jewish settlement in world following Israel, Asian Russia and Iran”. (Vashishth, 2017) There are three major Jewish communities that settled in India. They can be classified as per their geographical location and origin myths: The Bene Israel Jews of West Maharashtra, the Baghdadi Jews of Kolkata and the Paradesi Jews of Kochi. “Each arrived at different points in time and formed and lived through their Jewish identity as per the historical forces operant in India at that time” (Roychowdhary, 2017).

Our study narrows its focus onto the remaining Jews of Kochi. The question that is most commonly asked about them is “are they Jewish or are they Indian?”. For a microscopic community like this, it is surprising that they have managed to preserve and maintain their cultural heritage in the alien host city of Kochi for such a long period of time. Perhaps, the answer is that they are inherently and fully both. They live “side by side but not submerged, accultured but not assimilated” (Katz, 2000). To mark their place in Kerala, they have created a selective narrative to firmly place themselves in history and constructed a balanced Indian-Jewish identity for themselves. However, a community that was once bustling, is now down to its last twenty-five members. Twenty of them being Malabari Jews and five being Paradesi Jews, all barring one being above the age of 80 years. In the face of disintegration, we wish to capture the unique practices of the last Jews of Kochi, and understand the perception of their identity,

both as individuals and as a community, to preserve their Jewish heritage which is such an integral part of not only Kochi's, but India's own cultural history.

1.2 Historical and Geographical Overview:

The Kochi Jews claim to have arrived in the ancient period for spice trade, during the rule of King Solomon. In fact, the Book of Exodus shows evidence of trade and the Hebrew Bible also contains texts suggesting trade between India and King Solomon. It was the destruction of the Second Holy Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D at the hands of the Romans that caused the Jews to flee from Israel, giving birth to the diaspora. It was this that led to some of the Jews arriving at Shingly (Cranganore) by boat in 72 A.D. Here, they claim that they were warmly welcomed into the ancient trade center by the Rajah of Cranganore. It is believed that their leader, Joseph Rabban was made Prince of Anjuvannam and thus a Jewish kingdom was established in Cranganore in 379 A.D.

It was either the destruction of Cranganore by the Moors and the Portuguese, or the floods that caused the Jews to flee to Kochi where they were placed under the protection of the Maharaja. Eventually, they were granted their own area of land in Mattancherry, which came to be known as Jew Town. They were given complete freedom in their affairs and since their arrival, have never been subjected to any alienation, discrimination or persecution for being a foreign religious community.

Kochi is flanked to its east by the Western Ghats which are covered with dense forests rising around 8,000 feet and to the west is the Arabian Sea which made it a great port for all the colonizers and traders. Apart from that, the coast is extremely fertile for cultivation. This made the city an attraction for merchants who came to buy commodities. It is a common belief that this area laid under water until a seismic force elevated the city and the region around it to produce such a fertile landscape. Now it consists of huge lagoons, and islands which are divided by narrow inlets of rivers making it rich with nutrients for growing rice, tropical fruits, spices and coconut trees. Being along the coast it also makes for s a good fishing port.

“There are 15 ethnic groups living in 15 settlements and the Jewish quarter is one of them” (KJ Sohan, ex-mayor). This was the case only because of the leniency of the Chera Maharaja ruling in this period. Communities that came from all around the world looking to settle in Fort Kochi or Mattancherry were a give a piece of land by the Maharaja. They were given copper plates that had the engraving, “You can live here and prosper in peace as long as the Earth and the moon exists.” These various ethnic groups consisted of the Marathi’s, Gujarat is, Jains, Tamil Brahmins, Tamil Bonars, Christians, Malabari Muslims, Kachi Merman Muslims, Pathan Muslims, the Vaishya Jain settlement and the Kudumbi settlement. This goes to show just how culturally diverse Kochi is. All these communities have a peaceful co-existence while being able to maintain their unique cultural identities.



Figure 2: Map of Jew Town

In the residential area of the Jewish community, Jew Town, the Paradesi Synagogue stands right at the top of the street, with a few shops and a police station around. There are houses lined up along the Synagogue Lane that are now either empty or have been rented out to Kashmiri or Christian Traders. These have several different religious symbols painted on them as well as flags with symbols like Swastika, Star of David and Crescent of Islam etc. mounted on them. The houses are neat and clean and are adjoined through their courtyards. Once a bustling area with inhabitants, it is now a big attraction, with flocks of tourist coming from all across the globe to come see this dying community.

1.3 Research Questions:

1. What are the cultural, social and religious practices unique to the Kochi Jews?
2. How has the understanding and beliefs about their origin and history influenced their identity as a community?

1.4 Objectives:

1. To gain an insight into the impact that the Jews of Kochi had on the society
2. To understand the construction of their identity with respect to their historical, socio-cultural and religious contexts
3. To understand factors that have influenced their migration and identity

1.5 Research Methodology:

We conducted a qualitative research study which was exploratory in nature. This form of research generally seeks to gain an insight into underlying reasons, opinions and motivations. Of all the qualitative research methods, we decided on an ethnographic approach, which is generally used to observe groups of people or a culture in the field or, in other words, in a natural setting. The researcher becomes immersed in the culture as an active participant and records extensive field notes.

Qualitative research allows for multiple methods of data collection. So, while observations are the main form of data collection, interviews are often used to clarify the researcher's observations. The researcher pays attention to the context, artifacts, and environments of the participants in addition to their interactions with each other to understand how the culture and beliefs of a community affect the behaviors and thoughts of individuals within that community. In our study, we examined the culture, society and religion of the Jews of Kochi while gaining an insight into their lives and history through interactions to understand their identity.

For our study, we got our primary information from two main sources:

1.5.1 Key Informants:

Key Informants are individuals who have first-hand knowledge about a community and its people, and can provide for a wide range of opinions and information. In our research, the key informants were people who grew up in Kochi and have interacted with the Jews on a regular basis, business owners who worked with the Jews in the past and had an understanding of their contribution to society and researchers who have conducted studies on them and gave us more academic perspectives. We also included a government official from the Tourism Office, and the Ex-mayor of Kochi in our study to share their opinions of the current state and future of Jew Town.

Sampling Technique: We used the Purposive sampling technique which entails that the interviewers select their samples based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. For our research, we interviewed people who were well versed with Jewish culture, religion and traditions, and had had continuous interaction with them, or conducted research on them.

Method for Data Collection: We used Semi-Structured Interviews to get information from our key informants. These usually follow a basic framework of questions, that allow the interviewer and interviewee the flexibility of diving into details at required points. This permits a two-way conversationalist approach to the interview. Our objective was to use this method to interview the key informants for our research. There was a basic set of questions that we desired to ask them, whilst allowing and encouraging them to elaborate on points that we might have omitted that could benefit and build our research.

Tool for Data Collection: We used questionnaires as the tool for data collection. They included open ended questions, allowing the key informants to give extensive and elaborate answers; providing us with information that added to our research.

1.5.2 Participants:

Participants are individuals who can best enhance the researchers understanding of the phenomenon in focus. In our study, the participants were the Paradesi and Malabari Jews. We tried to capture their identity and unique religious, culture and social practices.

Sampling Technique: The dearth of Jews in Jew Town, limited the sample size of interviewees for our project. Thus, we used the method of snowball sampling to reach our participants. This method is used to interview subjects who are hard to reach or hidden; and is used to gain access to such masked populations.

Method for Data Collection: We used in-depth unstructured interviews for our participants. This entailed that the interviews were taken in a formal setting wherein, there was a clear focus and plan that guided the discussion. Questions tended to be open-ended, which allowed respondents to feel comfortable and give detailed answers.

Tool for Data Collection: We used an interview guide, which is a broad list of topics an interviewer covers, by framing questions from them to ask the interviewees. This was the perfect tool for us to interview our participants in Jew Town because we could not have anticipated the kind of information we received in advanced, but did have some broad areas of interests and lines of inquiries.

1.6 Limitations:

While we went on-field with an extensive plan of action, our project was not without difficulties which caused changes to the course of our study. We faced the first constraint on-field on day one when we tried getting in touch with the Jews in Kochi. Due to the decreasing community size, the Jews have been under the spotlight, and the Paradesi Jews in particular feel like they are being scrutinized. Researchers, tourists and journalists alike are continually knocking on their doors and looking through their windows, trying to catch a glimpse of them and get their comments on the current situation. Thus, as of late, they haven't been as open to the public as they were in the past and have been reluctant to answer strangers' questions about their community and lives. We tried multiple channels to get to get to them.

We initially tried to ring their doorbells and catch them on the street, but they refused to talk to us. We even asked shopkeepers and restaurant owners to call us if they saw any of them passing by. We then spoke to close acquaintances of theirs and asked them to get us in touch with the Jews, but the Jews still denied our request. The Malabari Jews on the other, barring one, were

difficult to find as nobody in Jew Town knew them well. In the end, we spoke to just one Paradesi Jew (Sarah Cohen) and two Malabari Jews (Sam and Elias Josephai) on-field and one before and after we went on-field (Basil Koder). This makes a sample size 16% of the total population of 25 Jews. We thus, had to learn more about them through their close friends, locals, the shopkeepers in the Synagogue lane, researchers and businessmen in the area. They knew the Jews personally, so they had a lot of information to offer.

Another big limitation was that the visiting Rabbi was willing to talk to us about their culture and the differences between the traditions the Jews of Kochi follow and those that the Israeli Jews follow, but was restricted. He could only have talked to us on Sunday for two main reasons. The first was because he was busy with carrying out the rituals for the ongoing festival. The second impediment was that on a Saturday, Jews are restricted from using electricity or any electronic gadget. This is one of their *Shabbat* customs wherein they have been restricted from using fire. In today's day and age, fire is equivalent to electricity. We thus, could not record the interview for our documentation, but we were able to take notes.

CHAPTER 2:
Exploration of Existing Literature

For our literature review, we devised a plan wherein explorations were made into various fragments of what we thought were the essential aspects of a community – the Jew of Kochi’s religious practices, cultural artifacts, traditions, architectural style, economic activities and their impact, the story of community’s origin and its history. While our focus was on the Paradesi Jews of Fort Kochi, we did consider general Jewish culture to gain a reference point for the study.

2.1 The Jews of Kochi:

“The study of Indian Jewish communities demonstrates that in Indian culture, an immigrant group gains status precisely by maintaining its own identity” (Katz, 2000). Till date, the exact origin of the Paradesi Jews of Kochi remains uncertain since varied accounts of their history have been recorded by travelers and traders who visited Kochi.

Orpa Slapak conducted a study on the three Jewish communities in India that speaks about one set of records that say Jews had sailed to south India on the ship of King Solomon (970-928 BCE) and another contradictory set that states they came at the time of the Assyrian exile of 722 BCE. The study “*Jews of India-A Story of Three Communities*” mentions records that trace their origin to the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE, that is the destruction of the Second Holy Temple in 70 CE and a fourth Century migration from Majorca. Whereas, the Book of Esther contains the first written mention of Jews in India when King Ahashverosh refers to the Jews dispersed across his wide empire from *Hodu* (Hebrew for India) to *Kush* (Ethiopia).

The Jews of Kochi are said to have created a local legend that states their belief of their ancestors having first arrived in Cranganore, 47 kilometers north of Kochi, in the first Century CE. The Jews called Cranganore “Shingly” then. “They cite two copper plates written in the ancient language of Vatta Eratha — a mix of Tamil and Malayalam — to support their claim” (Devasia, 2017). According to one account, the Jews left their ancient home in Shingly after a flood in 1341, silted up Kodungallur and opened a new harbor in Kochi, while others believe that they were driven out by the Moors and Portuguese. While one group reached Ernakulam (Malabari Jews), and settled down in the busy market area, the other made Mattancherry (Paradesi Jews) their home, calling the area granted to them Jew Town.

While living in Kochi for so many years the Jews adopted and mirrored the Indian caste system dividing themselves into three different castes namely; the White, the Black and the Meshuhrarim. The castes were formed based on the colour of skin and were banned from inter caste marriage or dining. The White Jews are essentially of European and Middle Eastern origin and are said to be part of the merchant and other professional classes. They have full membership at the Paradesi synagogues. The black Jews or Malabari are more representative of the locals of that region. They usually were occupied in the trades and crafts industries. They could worship at the Paradesi synagogues, but without full membership. Some accounts even state that they had separate synagogues all together. The *Meshuhrarims* are basically freed slaves. Up until this century they didn't have communal rights. They have no synagogue of their own, so instead to worship, they are expected to sit on the floor of the steps outside of the synagogue. With the White Jews being at the top of the hierarchy, and as the colour of the skin grew darker, the lower they were in that hierarchy. It is referred to as 'Jewish Apartheid' social system, after the racial oppression in South Africa, between the Jewish caste groups in Kochi. There are often disputes on whose blood is purer or who is superior. Having acculturated into Kerala, Kochi Jews were able to live fully Jewish lives, never experiencing discrimination. (Katz, 2000)

The number of Jews in Kochi has reduced drastically over the years, in the early 50's there were still over a thousand Jews present in Kochi. Today that number has dropped to twenty-five. The small community of the remaining Paradesi Jews have adopted the local language- they have become fluent in Malayalam, but this does not indicate they have given up on their own culture as they still follow their own traditions. (Khan, 2015), (Lal, 2009), (Lizbeth, 2017) From the remaining Paradesi Jews of Kochi we have been able to gather second hand information on three of them, they are Sarah Cohen, Joseph Ellias Joseph and Yaheh Hallegua. Over time, the Jews slowly adapted and truly made themselves a part of the Kochi culture. They built several monuments which will always be of high significance in the city of Kochi. With the Jewish community ceasing to exist in a few decades, the Jews themselves have left their indelible mark in the history of the city of Kochi and their impact will never be forgotten. It's still a wonder how they managed to maintain their religious identity in the diverse host city of Kochi.

2.2 Judaism and the Kochi Jews:

Judaism is a monotheistic religion developed among the ancient Hebrews. It is portrayed by a belief in one transcendent God who appeared before Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets and by a religious life in agreement with scriptures and rabbinic conventions. It is the unpredictable wonder of an aggregate lifestyle for the Jewish people, comprising of theology, law, and endless social customs.

The Jewish people have many beliefs which they believe help them lead meaningful and progressive lives. Some of these beliefs include the fact that Jews trust that God named the Jews to be his picked individuals to set a case of sacredness and moral conduct to the world. Also, Jewish life is particularly the life of a group and there are numerous exercises that Jews must do as a group.

A lot of Jewish religious life is based around the home and family exercises. For Jewish people, their entire life turns into a demonstration of love. Being part of a group that takes after specific traditions and guidelines helps keep a gathering of individuals together, and it's detectable that the Jewish gatherings that have been best at dodging absorption are those that comply with the principles most entirely - at times called ultra-standard Jews.

2.3 Practices and Everyday Life:

Judaism remains relatively constant in terms of basic beliefs and practices. Jewish life is guided by the Godly commandments derived from Torah. According to an excerpt from the Handbook of Religious Beliefs and Practices, “A devout Jew is required to pray three times a day – morning, afternoon, and evening”.

The Jews of Kochi came together and strictly followed the fundamentals like devotion and Biblical Judaism. They also strictly followed their traditions and customs. The Jews listened to and sang a certain kind of hymn called *Piyyutim* and Jewish prayers were also chanted during the festive seasons along with songs of the Judeo-Malayalam. In Kochi, one of the big aspects of the musical culture is the Shingly tunes. These tunes are basically songs of prayer that are mainly sung on festival days and such occasions. There are four different types of Shingly tunes; simple,

complicated, drawn out and tunes of an intermediate position between simple and complicated. Simple tunes like '*Imri Ma*' can easily be mistaken for a Yiddish song with an added smoothness that makes it seem Indian. Religious music of the Kochi Jews for the most part is Sephardic with the influence of the Yemenite style.

Folk songs also account for a good portion the Jewish Kochi culture. Originally, the Jews had clearly defined roles for both men and women and neither could break this sharp separation. This however changed as the world got more modern. While this is also the case in Kochi, there is a percentage of the population that still follows this traditional method of folk music. There are two main types of folk songs performed in Kochi. Songs for various occasions in Malayalam which are generally sung at functions like weddings, festivals or the commemoration of a historical event or a person of importance. The other type is just folksongs of Kerala and India sung in Malayalam and other North Indian languages. (Ross, 1977-78)

Every religion has a place of institution where one can go worship or devote towards their beliefs. A synagogue is to Judaism, what temple is to Hinduism. It is a house of prayer. "When various circumstances forced the Jews themselves at Kochi, the local Jews, granting them a plot of land to build their synagogue and residences, adjacent to his palace and temple". The Paradesi synagogue was completed in 1568 and is and has always been the focal point of every social activity that has connected many followers together. It is the scene of most festival gatherings and the setting for all joyous occasions.

2.3.1 Festivals: The Jews of Kochi have several activities in the form of festivals that they celebrate in the memory of various people and instances throughout the year.

Shabbat: This is a day devoted to God through religious activities weekly, and it is the most important of all Jewish holy days. Foods that are fit [kosher] for consumption by Jews and the manners in which they are handled are specified in the Torah and further defined through rabbinic law⁶. The Jews of Kochi follow the same laws with their own integration if the adopted culture. For instance, during Shabbat, the chants sung by the Hazzans, have a melancholic Malayali rhythm to the Hebrew words with Jewish context. Secondly, even though every family has their own timings to light the candles in the evening, the Jew town doesn't light up at all until

the end of the evening service. Lastly, traditionally, coconut oil is a trademark of Keralites, assimilating that element into a Jewish culture, the Jew town lights candles on the eve of Shabbat using coconut oil and lights up the entire street with these lamps.

Hanukkah: This is a Jewish festival that takes place during the winter solstice. It is a rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in December 165 B.C. (Russak, 21) To put it simply, Hanukkah is the festival of lights that celebrates one of the greatest miracles ever taken place in Jewish history, which lasts for eight days. The date it falls upon changes every year according to the Western calendar, however it usually falls in November or December. Lighting of a candle is an extremely important part of this festival because according to history, a group called the Maccabees fought against the Syrians 2000 years ago to recapture the Jerusalem. However, in the process the Jewish Temple was broken down; but after repairing and cleaning it they lit a candle to feel God's presence. Although, there was only enough oil to light the candle for one day, but just like a miracle, it continued burning for eight days, which explains why the Jews celebrate it for eight days. The Jews residing in Kochi, celebrate Hanukkah more as a ritual instead of a festival. They claim that Hanukkah goes unnoticed among the common people of Kochi, including the Christians. The caretaker of the synagogue is responsible for lighting the lamp inside the temple, however he claims that celebration Hanukkah is not usual in Kochi, because a minimum of ten men are required for any prayers to be conducted inside the synagogue. Joy, a local Christian in Kochi said, "When there are no people to celebrate, what is a festival" to the Metro News reporter. (UCAN, 2015)

Rosh Chodesh: The name literally means 'Head of the Month', which marks the beginning of the Hebrew month. The Jewish Calendar is a combination of the solar and lunar aspects consisting of 12 months, just like the English calendar. Rosh Chodesh is a minor holiday where the Jews recite grace before their meals and add an extra paragraph to the 'Amidah' which is a prayer they are required to read out. However, for the women, this holiday is very special. This day they get a holiday and can rest. To this day, women gather together on this day and do various activities like work for social change, reciting religious texts and share a meal. (Rosh Chodesh 101)

Rosh Hashanah: This is the Jewish New year that is a time of joy and celebration but also of reflection and learning. It takes place in the 7th month of the Jewish year. It starts in the month of Tishrei, by a trumpet like sound from a ram-horn that works like a wakeup call to prepare for

the upcoming holidays. As tradition, people have Challah, which as mentioned above is a kind of sweet, soft bread that is circular in shape, representing the circle of life. Sweetness is key for New Year, for the hope of a sweet year ahead. This time of the year, we look back on our sins and good deeds done by them individually and in a society, and let Lord decide our fate for the upcoming year. These holidays emphasize on the God's rule over humanity and the need for humanity itself to embrace the need for God in our daily lives.

In Kochi, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Jews are dressed in their best clothes- the boys' attire themselves in suits and old men dress in loose white trousers with a knee-length shirt and colorful kaftans. While the women wear waist clothes and blouses. It is in the synagogue that the individual blooms and is given the opportunity to be different from his fellow-mates. (The Jewish way of Life in Kochi, 1939)

Passover: This is one of the most essential festivals celebrated in the ancient Israelite community. It is a mix of a few spring festivals, which celebrate the Passover of God over the Israelites in the time of the tenth plague. It is one of the most celebrated and beloved holidays. The Passover requires a major spring clean session, where the people are required to get rid of any leavened foods that may be in their house. Along with this, the Passover hosts special synagogue services, such as biblical readings and praises and thanksgiving for the Lord's act in history. (Passover 101). In Kochi, Jews paint their houses right before Pesach and Rosh Hashanah, welcoming the new year. (More Memories of the Kochi Jew Town,41) (Spector, 1972).

Simchat Torah: This is one of the main festivals among the Jewish culture. This day is meant to be Rejoicing the Law. "In vivid contrast to the low pitch of the Day of Atonement, it is a day of exuberant release, of hilarious celebration. The synagogue is fragrant with long strings of jasmine wreaths, and aglow with many candles. In front of the synagogue entrance, a great pyramid of coconut oil lamps, taller than a man, blazes forth. The interior of the synagogue is adorned with a dress of ark curtains and China silk. The curtains are commemorative donations, and have as a centerpiece the rich ceremonial waistcloth of the person in whose memory the curtain was given. The scrolls, in their brightly polished silver cases and gleaming gold crowns, are taken out of the ark and set up on a platform in front of it, flanked by tall silver pillars which support a canopy." (Mandelbaum, 1939)

Over the course of many decades, there have been countless documented researches on the Jews residing in Kochi. While a lot has been covered about their daily life and practices, most of them don't mention the development of their religion as it is now. Kochi has influenced the practice of Judaism heavily but none of the journals dive into it deeply enough for us to understand exactly how different it is to that practiced in Israel, the United States of America or any other country for the matter. While most of our sources talk about the Jewish festivals and how they have been celebrated in India, what it does not talk about are the various Indian festivals, which have been adopted by Jews who migrated back to Israel. There is a need for more details about the festivals of both Indian and Jewish origin that are celebrated amongst the Paradesi Jews living in both Kochi and Israel

2.4 Livelihood and Economic Activities:

Jewish merchants known as Radanites began traveling by sea and land between the Mediterranean and China in the ninth century, stopping at ports along the Malabar coast. This was a result of the spice trade via the Malabar harbor, which was monopolized by the Jews. The harbor acted as a major commercial hub and trading point for Western countries such as Portugal, Netherlands, and Britain. The Jewish traders contributed highly towards the export of pepper and various other spices. Commercial documents from the Cairo Genizah give glimpses of Jewish trade with India in the centuries that followed.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese, Jewish communities were present in various coastal sections of Kochi carrying out trade duties. This was no longer a viable option after a flood which shifted the coastline, slitting up Cranganore and opening a new harbor spot for trade in Kochi. This incident resulted in the shift of the whole Jewish community next to the new coastline.

The Indian community along with the raja at that point of time were extremely generous and welcoming to the first Jews of Kochi. The Raja of Koch presented them with copper plates which also held economic importance because amongst other rewards, the withholders of the plates and their future generations were provided exemption on taxes. They were also provided with land and didn't have to pay any tax on land as well, except for the annual fee to the kingdom. The paleographic records show that Jews commanded high posts in the raja's kingdom

as they were given important state duties and richly rewarded, materially, and symbolically, for the services they provided to the kingdom. “As top businessmen, lawyers, government officials, doctors, and academicians, the Jews were once prominent members of Indian society.

The issues began when the Portuguese colonial rule (1498-1663) brought suffering to all the minority communities of South India.” (Kulshrestha, 2017) The economic power of Jews declined when the Portuguese cut off their monopoly of trade between Malabar and the West. The Jews were subject to contemptuous treatment and arbitrary taxes along with oppression and major restrictions on domestic trade. The Kochi Maharaja protected Jews under his rule but only after the Dutch defeated the Portuguese in 1663, did the situation improve.

Under Dutch management (1663-1795) the status of the Jews of Malabar enhanced, as the Dutch looked positively on the cosmopolitan Paradesi community. A couple of Paradesi Jews, eminently individuals from the Rabban family, rose to high positions as operators in outside exchange and as monetary and political counsels to both the Dutch and Hindu rulers. There were moderately rich landowners in various Jewish communities.

During colonial rule, monetary challenges drove various Kochi Jews to move to Bombay and (less frequently) Calcutta. Economically, there was a huge contrast between the livelihood of white and black Jews. White Jews were usually either traders or working for the state at high positions whereas the black Jews were considered of slave descent and earned money through physical labour carrying out roles of sawyers, carpenters, masons and produce merchants. However, during the last half of the nineteenth century, the status of the Jewish white community deteriorated severely which led to them resorting to other avenues such as collecting hides from the interior, bookbinding and making casks.

The few Jews left in India mainly engaged in petty trading in the towns in which they lived on the Malabar Coast. They often traded in food goods, such as eggs and vinegar, although they rarely grew their own produce. The men usually had small shops that carried various goods, these shops were situated on the verandas of their houses. The women engaged in domestic pursuits in the early days but then moved onto owning boutiques and other such shops to provide further income to their family.

“In general, the Paradesi Jews have a higher standard of living and numbered among their ranks several merchants, including international spice merchants, and professionals (lawyers, engineers, teachers, and physicians). The Kochi Jews did not tend to sell or trade industrial goods but instead make ritual objects. In Kochi, families owned their own land and built houses on it.” (The synagogues also owned large tracts of land, which were sharecropped. Today, the few remaining Jews make a living off petty shops selling antique goods, stitching traditional garments for sale on a small scale and other types of unskilled work.

Until fifty years ago, the head of each household sold his fowls, eggs and produce. Many of the women were into needlework, but that occupation alone wasn't enough to cover for the long hours of leisure. The men also used to have a lot of time for leisure as they didn't have access to any steady occupation. Although the Jewish population walked about with pride and were provided respect, the financial situations were far worse when compared to their glory days. Presently, there are only 2 sane Jews left in Kochi. One of them has an embroidery shop and there is no detailed documentation about the other. The problem with all the present articles and documentation is that the information has a lot of intervals when no data is recorded. There are major flashes when there is no information about the community's occupations.

2.5 Architectural Style:

Mattancherry is a centuries old settlement with over 37 communities with ancient temples, mosques, churches and synagogues still standing today. Jew Town is one of the oldest parts of the region and is located between the Mattancherry Palace and the Synagogue. (Varnelis, 2011). The architecture of Jew Town was influenced by many external and internal factors. With the arrival of the Europeans, came the change in the architectural style as well as the materials used.

The architectural monuments were being categorized into three categories mainly those being; indigenous, Indo-European and religious. Indigenous style drew styles from Kochi itself. Indo-European combined forms of both Indian and European architecture. Religious buildings were built for each community to perform their own religious practices and these monuments had distinctiveness to their style of architecture. The regular homes of Kochi were built of laterite plastered with lime and roof thatched with coconut or Palmyra leaves, with an open quadrangle

present in the center (Varnelis, 2011). This style of architecture was known as Nalukettu or Ettukettu and was usually designed to occupy larger families who were of a higher caste.

Jewish buildings in Kochi usually stand out due to their extra ordinary height. False ceilings were used to cover this extra ordinary height of the roof. “In the grills of the windows the star of the David is seen. It is a symbol denoting their original rightful land Israel. The entrance doors to all Jewish houses are distinguished by the ‘*miseus*’ a Hebrew prayer rolled into a gold-plated casting” (Varnelis, 2011).

“The differences between the architecture of the Kochi Jews and other communities were very significant. For instance, the Konkani community in that area had houses arranged linearly boarding the streets. These are known as lane houses and it allows the entry of god into their home during the festival season. The Tamilian Brahmins lived in houses which were in a continuous row and they shared the same wall.” (Varnelis, 2011).

This makes it evident that the Jewish community used their own style of architecture rather than adopting the indigenous techniques of Kochi.

The distinct architectural style of the Kochi Jews can be further understood by studying the Synagogue. According to the traditional customs, a synagogue is supposed to be the highest building in the city, but the synagogues were not allowed to be higher than the Christian churches. Heavy fines were imposed on the violation of this rule and in some cases the synagogues were even demolished and stopped from reconstruction. Some examples of the synagogues that were subjected to this were the ones built in Prague and Worms during the medieval period (Borsky, 2005).

The synagogues in India are more focused on the functional quality of the synagogues and not so much on the aesthetic. They are significantly different than the ones prevalent in other parts of the world and mark an important milestone in Judaic history as the Jews in Kerala were allowed to construct synagogues according to their religious needs. They followed their own architectural style with incorporations from various contemporary and local influences. At present, there are seven synagogues in Kerala but the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry is the sole synagogue that is completely intact (Waronker, 2010).

One of the most important and striking feature of the synagogues was the ‘tebah’. Like most other norms associated with the synagogue, there are no fixed parameters as to how the ‘tebah’ should look. However, the Kerala synagogues follow a similar form for the ‘tebah’, i.e. the shape of a lyre. The ‘tebah’ is supposed to be surrounded by some type of railing to mark the special space. In all the Kerala synagogues, the railing greatly bears a resemblance to the guardrail with its entryway at the Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh (Waronker, 2010).

Although there has been extensive research conducted on the style and nature of Jewish architecture, the research fails to explain the reason behind the ambiguity and inconsistency prevalent in the architectural style.

2.6 Aliyah-The Migration:

On 14th May, 1948, the establishment of the State of Israel was proclaimed by the head of the Jewish Agency, David Ben-Gurion, with Jerusalem as its capital. That same day, Truman, the President of the United States of America recognized the new nation. This development caused great flurry of activity among Jews across globe, many of which wanted to return to their true homeland. This came to be known as Aliyah, which literally means “to go up” in Hebrew. It was characterized by the large-scale emigration of Jews towards Jerusalem.

In Kochi, the preceding years had not been particularly successful. Like the rest of their people, they too had a strong inclination to return to Israel after the years spent in an alien host land. Although they faced no persecution unlike in other parts of the world, the urge to be amongst their own was ever-present. There are some common reasons for their migration that have been outlined by numerous researchers:

1. During the British era itself, since Kochi remained a princely state, the colonizers focused on the development of Bombay and Chennai as the main port cities which had an adverse effect on the economy as they were primarily a trading society.
2. After India gained Independence, they feared that lack of patronage by the kings in India would result in the community being politically insignificant after the amalgamation and nationalization of private Jewish owned companies (Fernandes, 2009)

3. Others emphasized the desire to live a more religious life, or to be involved in building the new Jewish state

1954 was when the greatest number of immigrants arrived in Israel, leaving Jew Town and the few remaining Jews behind. Slowly, Jew Town became almost deserted with people selling their businesses and properties to start a new life. Today, the dwindling community has only six to seven members left.

Initially, following the migration, the government of Kochi took steps to ensure that the Jewish monuments were safeguarded, but recent developments suggest otherwise. The Jews left for Israel by selling their property, but ensured that the government would maintain the synagogue and cemetery. But now “there are reported attempts by the changing local governments to dismantle and convert the Jewish remains and the surrounding places into stationery shops, shopping malls, and stadiums to be used for the purposes of tourism”. (Arya, 2017) These attempts seem to be driven by political motives, promising development and progress to get electoral votes. This is not only an insult to the Jewish heritage, but to Kochi as well, which is characterized by its rich multicultural history.

2.7 Gaps in Literature:

While our literature review enhanced our understanding, and provided us with a broad overview about our topic, we also found some inconsistencies in the accounts of different researchers, travelers and tradesmen. For one, there was very little specification on cultural and social implications of the Paradesi Jews community’s presence in Indian society in general or Fort Kochi in particular in the sources we referred to. In terms of historical records, we found multiple and conflicting versions of the stories regarding the origin of the Paradesi Jews and Jew Town and regarding their identity, there is no mention of how the Jews in Kochi situate themselves in the immediate society, nor how they view themselves as individuals and a community. Most importantly, we found that most of the research and information about them deals with their past, uncovering evidence that supports their claims. There is no focus on the everyday life and experiences of the Kochi Jews, which needs to be documented for a complete understanding of the community. We found that it was best to do a qualitative study using an

ethnographic approach to conduct our research on the Paradesi Jews of Fort Kochi. Thus, it is from these gaps that our study was conceived and conceptualized.

**OSERVATIONS, INFERENCES
AND ANALYSIS**

Overview:

The Jews of Kochi are one of the many communities that have contributed to the diversity and vibrancy of Kochi. A community with dwindling numbers, our time in Kochi did not allow us to talk to too many of the Jews themselves. However, we spoke to four categories of people who were all extremely valuable assets:

1. Researchers
2. Business Owners
3. Friends of the Jews
4. Locals and Shopkeepers

All of these individuals have either been keen observers of the Jewish way of life, or have had direct contact with them and were hence able to give us authentic information.

In terms of their history, we found that varied versions still exist. Even in the same area, just meters apart, the Synagogue and Mattancherry Palace have very differently recorded versions of how the Jews arrived in Kochi. Starting from their first contact with India, their arrival, their time in India, we heard a host of stories, right up to *Aliyah* (the act of immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the Land of Israel), which left us wondering how much to believe, given that the information is largely based off oral histories.

Even though the Jewish communities are settled all across the world, Judaism has remained intact everywhere. Similarly, the Jews of Kochi also follow and keep to most of the traditional Jewish customs and traditions. They do however, seem to have some unique cultural and social practices that have been influenced by the host city of Kochi and the various communities around them. While these differences may not be significantly large as the basic traditions are still maintained, they are what sets them apart from the Jews across the world.

Looking into the economic lives, the Jews impacted society in the most beneficial ways. The Paradesi Jews who arrived during the 1500s from Portugal and Spain are very well off but the Malabari Jews who arrived before the Paradesis about 2000 years ago after the destruction of the temple in Israel were at the bottom of the table. One would assume that Mattancherry's economy suffered when they migrated, but fact is that their business oriented economy was simply replaced with tourism.

There are many contradictory views about the history of the Kochi Jews and their largescale migration. Some believe it was purely religious, some believe that it was economic, while others believe that it was to ensure the furthering of their community. With not many Jews left, one is left wondering how they identify themselves and we found that they are simply Indian Jews – truly Jewish and fully Indian.

In India, the preservation of their heritage is in question. It is a common belief that even if the government does not actively help with preservation, the people will rise to the occasion to protect such an important part of their cultural history.

CHAPTER 3: Profiles



Figure 3: Sarah Cohen, a Paradesi Jew

3.1 Participants:

i. Basil Koder:

Basil Koder is a Jew who was born in Kochi but migrated with his family when he was 11 or 12 years old. He studied at Saint Dominic de Brito in Fort Kochi and then later at Loyola school in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala. He is married to an Israeli girl and has three children. He is one of the descendants of one of the most influential families of Kochi in the earlier years. The Koder family provided electricity to Kochi. The Koder family also controlled most of the spice trade in Fort Kochi. His father had a factory building boats as well as a couple other businesses. Currently he works in the food business where they manufacture products such as gluten free products, milk products and others for the local market. By the time Basil Koder was born, most of the families already left the community. He still has a few cousins living in Kochi, but they too do not like to be bothered by people who aren't from their community.

ii. Sarah Cohen:

Sarah Cohen is one of the last and oldest Jews left in Kochi. She studied in Kochi until she was in the 4th standard but then shifted to Ernakulum where she eventually met and fell in love with Jacob Cohen. She got married to him in Bombay but quickly moved back to Kochi after the wedding. Sarah grew up in a family of five, with two brothers and two sisters. Her Grandmother was also a large presence in her life. After Jacob Cohen passed away in 1999, Taha has acted as her caretaker. Till date she follows all Jewish traditions, she still only eats kosher food. She has the choice to still follow all these traditions because Taha has learnt all the preparation methods necessary for all festivals. Sarah has a famous embroidery shop in Kochi which has become a great tourist attraction over the years. Unfortunately, at the age of 95 she has lost her memory, but she still greets customers who enter her store very gracefully and loves engaging them in conversation.

iii. Elias Josephai:

Elias Josephai commonly known as Babu, is one of the last Jews remaining in Kochi. He is singlehandedly responsible for the maintenance of the Kadavumbagam synagogue which also caters to the Malabari Jews as equals. Elias Josephai is a Malabari Jew and has done a lot to try and ensure that Malabari Jews are treated the same as Paradesi Jews by society. He owns an aquarium which is attached to Kadavumbagam synagogue. Elias is planning on moving to Israel along with his daughter, but he hopes that he can find a way to raise funding to ensure the smooth running of the synagogue after he leaves.

iv. Sam Josephai:

Sam Josephai is a Malabari Jew who has been living in Kochi for the past 60 years. He lived in Kochi till 1972 and then left for Israel. After which, he returned to India again in 1985. At present, he runs a used car dealership in Kochi. He is also the president of the association of Malabari Jews in Kochi. This association looks at maintaining and restoring their monuments that are of great significance to them, such as the Synagogues and the cemeteries.

3.2 Key Informants:

3.2.1 Locals:

v. Rocky:

Rocky is the owner of a store called “The Ethnic Passage”, which is located very close to the Jewish Synagogue. His father, who was a very enthusiastic bridge player, would join the Jews for their games that they would play in the evening. This is how Rocky’s interaction with the Jewish community began. His father’s friend, Samuel Hallegua, was made the local guardian for Rocky. Ever since then, the Jews treated Rocky like he was one of their own family members. He would go to the Hallegua’s house at least once a month for either lunch or dinner. The Jewish community was very helpful to Rocky throughout. Long ago, when Rocky made plans of buying

a house which belonged to a Jew, Samuel Hallegua talked him out of making a very bad decision. Rocky still has a close and personal relationship with the remaining Jews in Jew Town.

vi. Taha Ibrahim:

Taha Ibrahim was born and brought up in Kochi. He had studied in a government school in Kochi till the 6th standard after which he gave up his education and went to work in his uncle's shop. In 1984 Taha realised that lots of tourists would come to Kochi to visit Jew street so he decided that's where he wanted to sell things. He made friends with Jacob Cohen while visiting this area and constantly meeting. One day his uncle locked the shop and left leaving Taha alone and without a place to stay, he was offered shelter by Jacob Cohen and his wife Sarah Cohen. Now after Jacob Cohen passed away, Taha has acted as a caretaker for Sarah Cohen who is now 95 years old. He even helps in the running of her embroidery shop

vii. Thomas:

Thomas is a historian with a post-graduate degree in history. He has done specialized research on Jewish History, especially the migration. Apart from this, he is an Incredible India regional level guide. He has made friends with the Jews that are in still in Kochi.

viii. Hiam:

Hiam was a Kashmiri shopkeeper who was selling Pashmina's in his shop on Jew Street. He too was very interested in the Jews that remained in Kochi but didn't have the means or opportunity to do research on them. He could not be of much help to us as he had only recently come to Kochi to do business. Therefore, he had no chance of interaction with the remaining Jews.

ix. Ann Matthew:

Ann was born and brought up in Kochi and is a friend of the Jews that are still in the city. Currently, she lives in Michigan and some of the Jews of Kochi moved there with her and are still in contact with her to this day

3.2.2 Business Owners:

x. Junaid:

Junaid is a restaurant owner in Pune who was born brought up and educated in Kochi. He set up his restaurant Mocha Art Café in Jew street in Kochi in a house that was once owned by a Rabbi.

xi. Vidyasagar:

Vidyasagar owns a shop called South Indian Exports in Kochi. The shop is more than four hundred years old. Before the building was a shop however it was owned by Jews. This is seen clearly just from the architecture of the building. The building has no resemblance to any form of Indian architecture.

xii. Akm Sulieman:

Akm Sulieman was born and brought up in Jew Town and has been living there for the past 65 years. He is a spice dealer, exporter and commissioner. He has had brief interactions with some of the Jews, namely, Cohen Jeffery, Sarah Cohen and Samuel Hallegua.

3.2.3 Researchers:

xiii. Bonny Thomas:

Bonny Thomas is a cartoonist who was born into a Christian family but still practices all the festivals of Kerala such as Vishu and Onam. He has written a book about the Jewish community which concentrates on the cultural pluralism in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry areas. His collection of articles, Kochikar, focuses on telling the stories of the people, religions, cultures, celebrations, culinary specialities, clothing and vocations of the various communities of Kochi. His study of these communities began 15 years ago and explores the lives and legacies of these communities. He would initially scribble some illustrations as his research and then it would be later converted into essays. Studying these communities for so many years gave him the opportunity to meet and interact with some of the members of the Jewish community.

xiv. Ananya Rajoo and Sudhith Xavier:

Ananya Rajoo is the Editorial Lead and Sudhith Xavier is the Founder and Art Lead for the online magazine, “Route Cochin”. The magazine delves into the history and culture of Kochi, through the stories of the various communities around. This is a research based magazine looking into the different aspects of the city like urban design and the spice route. It is a continuous research project which concentrates more on the communities. They do research on each aspect separately. Since there are a very limited number of Jews, they have been finding it difficult to speak to them. They have been trying to build a trusting relationship with the remaining Jews for the past 2 years. About 4 to 5 years ago, there was a gathering of Jews at David Hall and they managed to have an open discussion with them. So far, they have had a very minimal interaction with the Jewish community.

xv. Klara Trencsenyi

Klara Trencsenyi is a researcher from Hungary, Budapest. She is an individual filmmaker. She was in Kochi at the time because she was making a feature length documentation on the Jews of Mattancherry and Ernakulum. She had started the process of research for the documentary four years ago.

3.2.4 Government Officials

xvi. Mr. Shine:

Mr. Shine is a tourism officer whose office is in Fort Kochi. He was able to provide us with some insight on the government’s role in the restoration and preservation of the Synagogues. The government has managed to restore the Parul Synagogue and the Chenamangalam Synagogue.

xvii. KJ Sohan:

KJ Sohan was the ex-mayor of Kochi. He grew up in Kochi but also spent some of his time at Mattancherry. He studied at an Anglo-Indian school in Fort Kochi. Over the years, he has grown up noticing the changes and growth in the vast number of communities in Mattancherry. All

those who grew up in this area were very aware of the various cultures and practices that constituted the identity of the communities. Growing up and studying with people from such communities gave him the opportunity to interact with all of them. KJ Sohan mentioned that he had two Jewish classmates growing up, who later moved to Israel. When they were young, they used to go to each other's' houses, and as he said, they were no barriers created because of the differences in their backgrounds. They were not considered to be separate communities; they were all one large community. If one person died, everyone would grieve. If there was wedding, everyone would celebrate together.

3.2.5 Other Jews

xviii. Pennit:

Pennit, at present lives in Israel but her parents are originally from Jew Town. Her parents moved to Israel when they were very young, at around the age of 20. She was in Kochi to visit the place where her parents were born and brought up in. She wanted to bring her mother as well, but she was too old to travel. She also gave us some insight into how the festivals in Israel are practised with much more grandeur than it is in Kochi. Although her parents do not visit anymore, she has an Uncle who has built a house and comes almost every winter. She also mentioned how quite a few people come to visit but they never want to come back to stay in Kochi.

xix. Aviv Mizrachi:

Aviv Mizrachi is a Rabbi who came from Israel to visit his friends. He was convinced to stay for longer to guide the remaining Jews through the correct methods of conducting prayers as all the remaining Jews in Jew Town were now too old to do so.

CHAPTER 4:
The Community and its History

4.1 Tracing the Origin and History:

Over the past decade, there has been much speculation over the Jewish migration to Kerala, with many sources citing different theories. Because of their being scattered across the globe, Jews all over the world are known to be fiercely protective of their religious practices and values (Brawer, Naftali. A Brief Guide to Judaism: Theology, History and Practice.)

According to the Aviv Mizrachi the visiting Rabbi, the people track their origin back to Abraham, who accepted the belief that there is only one God, who is the creator of the universe. After Jacob's wrestle with the angel, he demanded a blessing from the Lord. The angel in turn, blessed him, and gifted him a name to go with it: *Isra-El*, which meant "He who prevails with God" (Genesis 25: 24-26). Hence, the country was called "Israel". Abraham, his son – Yitshak and his grandson all lived in the Land of Canaan which later was named as the Land of Israel. They were known as the patriarchs. Jacob had twelve sons and the name "Jew" is derived from his fourth son, Yehuda (Judah). His sons became the kernels of the twelve tribes of Israel which built the Jewish Nation.

After Yahweh freed the Israelites from the bonds of slavery from Egypt, which later came to be known as the Exodus, the descendants of Abraham formed into a nation around 1300 BC under the leadership of Moses. The Bible states that Moses led them to the Land of Israel which was promised by God to the descendants of the patriarchs after 40 years in the Sinai desert. Their rule on the Land of Israel starts with the conquests of Joshua in 1250 BC and the period between 1250 BC and 587 BC is known as the "Period of the Kings". The most significant kings were King David (1010 BC – 970 BC) and his son King Solomon (971 BC – 931 BC). King Solomon built the first temple of Jerusalem which was then destroyed in 587 BC by Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar and his army and then exiled the Jews to Iraq (then known as Babylon).

From the Babylonian rule, a succession of superpowers ruled Israel in the following order – Persian, Greek, Roman, Islamic Crusaders, Ottoman and the British Empires. After being exiled by the Romans, these Jewish people migrated to several different continents and a huge bulk of them travelled to Europe and Africa where they led rich cultural and economic lives. During the first half of the 20th century, huge groups of Jewish people moved back to Israel from Arab countries because they were being subject to violence and massacres by the Arab civilians. This

period was a very difficult time for the Jewish community as they faced the Nazi regime in Germany, where around 6 million Jews were killed. This was known as the great Holocaust (Goldberg, David, and John Rayner. *The Jewish people: Their history and their religion*).

4.1.1 Arrival in India:

The most widely accepted theory about why the Jews migrated to India was due to the Spanish Inquisition that occurred about 600 years ago. The Spanish Inquisition was founded in 1478 by Ferdinand and Isabella, the reigning monarchs of Spain, whose marriage became the basis for the political unification of Spain. During this period, the Jews were being forced into Christianity and resistance resulted in death. After Vasco De Gama discovered a sea route to Kerala, a lot of Jews who were fleeing Portugal and Spain followed by immigrants from Baghdad, Yemen and other parts of the Middle East decided to migrate to India because they were being offered protection, instead of being prosecuted. The Portuguese period wasn't a very pleasant time for the Jews as the Portuguese were doctrinaire Catholics and were against Judaism and everything it stood for. Then came the Dutch in 1663, when a war ensued between the Dutch and Portuguese, two European powers, fighting over control of Kochi. The Portuguese lost the war in 1663 itself, and the Dutch began ruling Kochi, much to the relief of the Jews present in Kochi at that time. This meant they could go about freely practicing their religion and live in harmony with the locals, without being subject to living under the microscopic view of the government.

There are two communities of Jews present in Kochi at this point in time. One - "The Malabari Jews are believed to have arrived in Kochi 2000 years ago when the temple in Israel was destroyed by the Romans somewhere around 62 AD" (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). Then the ones who arrived in the 1500s were termed as the Paradesi Jews- the Hindi term for the word "foreigners". "Why call them foreigners? Because we already have a Jewish community that was 2000 years old. Then came the Paradesi Jews from Spain and Portugal." (Thomas, Local Historian). Both communities were said to have been welcomed with open arms by the locals, and the government alike. There is said to be a one thousand six-hundred-year difference between the reports of origin of the Malabari Jews and the Paradesi Jews. The Malabari Jews

were recorded to have migrated to Kochi 2000 years ago, while the Paradesi Jews arrived only 400 years ago.

4.1.2 Malabari Jews:

The Malabar Jews arrived in India during the reign of King Solomon. It is believed that following the destruction of the first temple in the siege of Jerusalem (587 BC), some Jewish exiles came to India, but it wasn't until after the second temple was destroyed in 70CE that a larger number moved to India. The first Jews were traders from Judea who settled here, and, while following their religion, merged with the locals seamlessly. Their first settlement was at Cranganore, as Kodungallor was then called, near the erstwhile port of Muziri, located in Kerala. A massive flood in the Periyar forced the river to change its course, and along with it, the fortunes of the land. As Muziris was forgotten, Kochi rose in importance, and the Jews, along with many other communities, shifted to Fort Kochi. Here, under the protection of the kings, they built a new synagogue, which was later destroyed by the not-so-benevolent Portuguese, under whom, the Jews suffered the most.

A central aspect of the Kochi Jews' is their close relationship with the rulers, which was eventually codified on a set of copper plates, which granted the community some special privileges. It was gifted to Joseph Rabban, the leader of the Malabari community. Joseph Rabban was a merchant who was said to be from Yemen. He was named the "prince" of the Jewish community by the Chera ruler Bhaskara Ravivarman and given the rulership and tax revenue of a pocket principality in Anjuvannam, near Cranganore. The Hindu king gave permission in perpetuity (or in the more poetic expression of those day: "as long as the sun and moon shall exist") for Jews to live freely, build synagogues and own properties, "without conditions attached". In 1341, a disastrous flood hit the port of Cranganore, which forced some Jews to move to the smaller port of Kochi. In 1504, the Portuguese captured the port of Kodungallor and looted the houses of the Jews and Muslims residing there. The Jews considered this the destruction of what they believed was their "holy city". This marked the end of their settlement in Kodungallor. Within 4 years of their move, the first synagogue was built in Kochi. The 12th century Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela wrote about the Malabar coast of Kerala: "The inhabitants are all black and the Jews also. The latter are good and benevolent. They know the law of Moses and the prophets and to a small extent the Talmud and the Halacha"

4.1.3 Paradesi Jews:

The *Sephardic Jews* are European Jews who settled in Southwest India, in Goa, Madras (now Chennai) and, primarily on the Malabar coast, after leaving the Iberian Peninsula. Sephardic Jews were called ‘Paradesi Jews’, literally meaning ‘foreigners’, a clear distinction from the Cochin or Malabari Jews who had arrived centuries earlier. The synagogue, therefore, is, even today, called the ‘Paradesi Synagogue’. Based on the stories told by various sources and the locals of Jew town, it is believed that the Paradesi Jews consider themselves to be the “more pure Jews” and don’t interact much with the Malabar Jews.



Figure 4: A bathroom inside Sassoon Hall, a 250-year-old house

One of the most influential names in the history of the Paradesi Jewish presence in India is that of businessman Shaikh David Sassoon who arrived in Bombay in 1828. Once in Bombay, he dominated the import-export trade. He began with opium trade before moving his trade interests to real estate and textiles. Gradually, he became the patriarch of one of the most prosperous Jewish empires in the world. The Sassoon Empire soon spread from Bombay to Calcutta to Shanghai, Amsterdam, London and New York. As much as he was known for his business achievements, he was also a reputed philanthropist and went on to build several synagogues, hostels, schools, hospitals, libraries and charitable institutions.

“It's been 2000 years since the temple has been destructed of Israel” (Ann Matthew, Local). The Jews were essentially traders who did a lot of business with the Dutch people. The economy of Kerala flourished during this time. While most Jews were well off, one prominent family that stood out, were the Koder's. They introduced electricity to Mattancherry, and controlled electricity supply in all of Kerala. They were known to be very social people, who threw lavish parties, but at the same time were very humble and devout Jews. Saul Basil Koder, one of the descendants of the Koder family explained the extent of the family business and how everything, right from their house to the various businesses had to be left behind during Aliyah. “5-6 generations of people built the business and all the people have inherited the building and did business and have all lost the business and all have perished” said a former employee of the Koders when asked about the whereabouts of a factory or business formerly owned by the Koder family.

4.2 Social Lives:

Kochi is booming with various communities that have been residing there for many years. It all began with the Chera Maharaja's rule, who happened to be very tolerant and accepting of people from almost any community. The Maharaja would give a piece of land to these communities for them to settle down in, so that while living in close proximity, each could maintain their unique identities.

“The Jews as a community were a very close-knit and welcoming” (Ann Matthew, Local). People would walk in and out of people's houses like it was their own. The street would be lively in the evenings as they would lay tables outside their homes in the evenings to play cards and other games. It seemed like almost every evening was a festive one, with lots chatter bringing life to the small area. Fridays, during the *Shabbat* were the days that the Koders would have an open-house, which was usually open to public. They would invite people from their community and some of their friends as well. Being one of the most affluent families of the Jewish community, they were respected by everyone. Hence, for all their parties' various ministers, such as the chief minister were invited.

Looking into their normal lives, we were told that “the Jews would usually have a two-storeyed house. They would stay in the upper storey of their house while running their businesses out of the lower storey of the house” (Akm Suliman, Business Owner).

The Jewish community was very harmonious with the other communities of Mattancherry. They never had any trouble. In fact, they used to help each other out whenever they could. Although some of the families were very wealthy, they were all very down to earth.

At present, due to the small numbers, the Paradesi Jew community has become an object of attraction for the media. This caused a lot of problems for the few who still live there. Hence, they want to keep their private life intact. Usually they are very friendly but due to the frenzy caused by the media, they refuse to speak to anyone other than those from the community.

The remaining members of the Paradesi Jewish Community are:

1. Queenie Hallegua
2. Yahah Hallegua
3. Sarah Cohen
4. Juliet
5. Keith

We were however, unable to get a list of names of the twenty remaining Malabari Jews.

CHAPTER 5:

Unique Religious, Cultural and Social Practices and the Economy



Figure 5: The eighty-two-candle structure put up for Simchat Torah, a practice unique to the Jews of Kochi

5.1 Religion:

Due the constant exile and persecution, which led to largescale migration, “Jews are people who have a presence all over the world; and slowly but surely they adopt some of the culture of the region and add that to their own religion” (Thomas, Local Historian). The problem with this is that there is no way to communicate this change to the Jews of the other regions, leading to differences in religious practices between the Jews from different areas.

The Jews in Kochi would hence obviously have some differences in their religious practices as compared to the Jews in the other parts of the world. Apart from Kochi, India has a Jewish settlement in Kolkata as well as Mumbai, and the Jews from Kochi had different practices from the Jews of Kolkata. Hence in Israel there are lots of variations of celebrations for the same festivals. This however, doesn’t mean there are many different versions of Judaism or that there are many different types of Jewish religions. In fact, “most of the second and third generation Kochi Jews don’t follow most of traditions that were followed by the Jews of Kochi” (Klara, Researcher). Today, differences that exist in the religious practices are reducing since most of the Jews are in Israel. However, doesn’t mean that these differences still don’t exist.

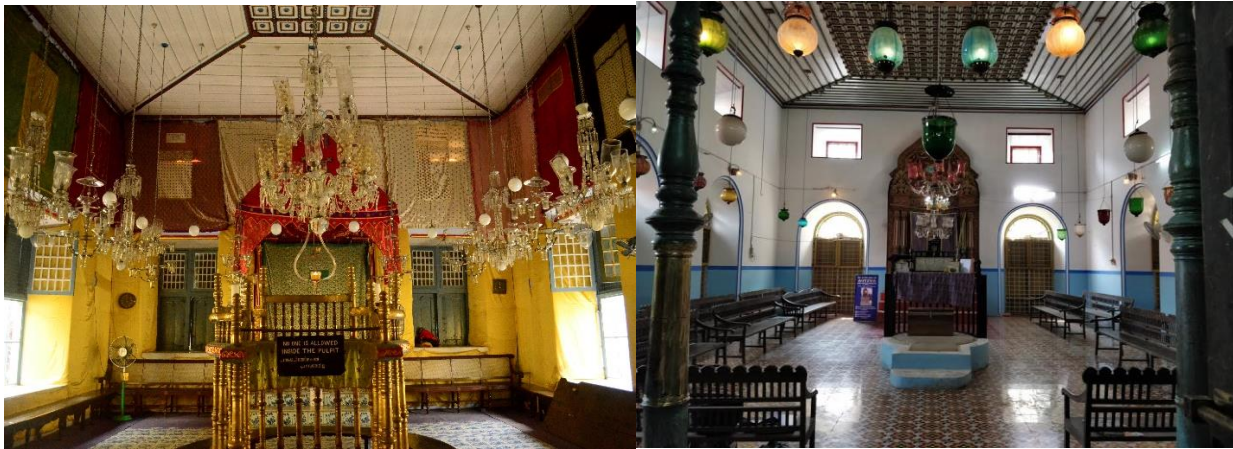


Figure 6: The interior of the Paradesi Synagogue, decorated for Simchat Torah, with the red curtain, compared to the Kadavumbagam Synagogue which remains as is

One big difference between the two Jewish communities is that “the synagogue in Kochi is very different from the Synagogues of Israel” (Basil Koder, Paradesi Jew). The synagogue in Kochi is

a beautiful monument whereas their Israeli counterparts are just simple places of worship. Moreover, there are no architectural similarities between the two buildings. The Synagogues in Kerala have ten windows to signify the ten commandments, while those in Israel, and the rest of the world has twelve, symbolizing the twelve tribes. Another unique aspect is that the door behind which the *Torah* is placed has carvings. Across the world, “these are carvings of biblical fruits, but in Kochi we have a mango as well” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). This simply highlights the extent to which they identify Kochi as their homeland.

“They have taken elements, but essentially they have left their religious practices intact. They modified the material things to match the Kerala culture. When the ceremonies happen, they don’t allow anyone to get into the ceremonies. They preferred to keep it exclusive to the Jewish community.” (Sudhith and Ananya, Researchers) This basically confirms that most of the religion is practiced exactly how it is in Israel with some changes having to be made due to culture of the locals and the city of Kochi’s influence. An effort is being made in Israel though to see that the Kochi Jewish culture and religious practices are not lost to the people of Kochi who have moved to Israel, a Cochin Jewish Heritage Museum has been built in Israel to help this cause.

During our stay in Kochi, we also visited the tomb of Nehemia Mota who was a cabalist (a student, interpreter or devotee of the Jewish Cabala) which is a place where Paradesi and Malabari Jews pray together. Bonny Thomas, a historian who we interviewed said “Nehemia Mota. that's the name. he is a black Jew. he was a cabalist. cabalism is equivalent to Sufism. just like Muslims sing preaching universal love, Jewish also there are people speaking about universal love. this fellow Nehemia Mota is a cabalist. his tomb is there. all the people go the white Jews and black Jews are going there and praying”.

In terms of conducting prayer services, we were told that “Jews need a priest in Israel and America. But in Kochi any educated Jew can do it” (Sam Josephai, Malabari Jew). Also, the Paradesi Jews of Kochi have been experiencing various issues regarding the conducting of various religious ceremonies. “It is hard to conduct minyan, which is a quorum of ten Jewish men over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship.” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew) Since there aren’t ten Jews to conduct public prayer, the Kochi Jews are not able to

complete this Jewish practice. Elias seemed to be trying to convince some Jews to come to Israel so that they can conduct these practices.

The most unique feature of the religion in Kochi is the famous song, *Manavari*, which is hummed in the Synagogue, on all auspicious days, like festivals and the weddings. Although written in Hebrew and Arabic, and known across the world, the version they sing in Kochi has typical Indian music in terms of the tune. The fact that they have a modification for something so intrinsically Jewish, truly shows the extent of the influence of Kochi, which they consider home, on their religion.

5. 2 Festivals:

The Jews of Kochi celebrate all the traditional Jewish festivals like *Hanukkah* and observe all auspicious days. The main difference is that in Kochi, their celebrations carry on for two days instead of one day unlike that of Israel. Another unique feature of their celebrations, is their extensive use of lamps, which isn't seen anywhere else in the world. The number of lamps do, however, differ from festival to festival. Taha gave us the example of how for *Simchat Torah* in October they light 82-candles, but in December for *Hanukkah* they light only 9. During all festivals, the Synagogue is beautifully decorated with silks from Andhra and all the colorful lights inside are turned on. Even the curtain covering the door that houses the *Torah*, the *Parochet*, is of a specific colour, depending on the festival. "For *Simchat Torah*, it is red in colour with golden on it, so it's very grand. For *Rosha Shana*, it is white and blue, for *Yom Kippur*, we have white and *Sukkot* it is green colour" (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). These are the only times that the *Torah* is taken out. While each of the festivals evidently have their separate customs around them, the one common practice for all festivals is that they must eat before entering the Synagogue.

The respect the Rabbis are given during these auspicious times was very heavily stressed upon by Taha. The Cohen's were a priest family, so when they returned from the Synagogue, the rest would sing traditional songs and make way for them. A 13-year-old Cohen too would demand this kind of respect. "Even if there is a new coconut tree, the first coconut would be offered to

the Cohens. Any fruit will be first blessed by the Cohen's" (Taha Ibrahim, Local). The Cohen's thus, seem to have taken up a position of great esteem in society and till date, Sarah Cohen is given great importance by both researchers and the community.

A truly special feature of this community is that they would celebrate the other Indian festivals like Onam, Diwali, Ramzan, etc. as well. All the communities would invite each other to celebrate with them and the Jews did the same. "While they always observed the services among themselves, strictly in the Synagogue, the celebrations after the prayers always included everyone else as well" (Ann Matthew, Local). The Jews were very strict about maintaining the privacy of their religious lives and never observed any of the religious practices of other communities, but they did go to other's homes to celebrate and vice versa. In fact, the Jewish festivals were given so much importance, that for some of the main ones, schools declared holidays. This truly highlights how well integrated the Jews were into the society of Kochi. They shared relationships of mutual kindness, which has often been linked to the fact that India is the only country in the world where the Jews were not persecuted.

We found that the Jews of Kochi gave most importance to the weekly Shabbat and were strict about maintaining the specific restrictions and their major festival is Simchat Torah, both of which we were in Kochi for.

5.2.1 Simchat Torah:

Unlike in other parts of the world, *Simchat Torah* is the most important Jewish festival in Kochi. This day marks the end of the yearly *Torah* reading cycle. The term directly translates to 'have a good year' in *Hebrew*. "It's a holiday in Israel also. There, it's a very huge ceremony where we finish reading the Bible and start all over it again. People dance and sing with the scrolls. But it is done differently here" (Pennit, Israeli tourist).

In Kochi, the most unique part of this celebration is the 82-candle structure placed in front of the synagogue. Around 5.30pm, Joy, the caretaker and three other men came and put up a Christmas tree like metal structure and started putting the lamps on to it. They use glasses as lamps and put cotton and thread inside a mixture of kerosene, oil and water. It usually burns for 2 to 3 hours. While nobody could tell us the exact significance, they did tell us that this was something done only in Kochi. "They might have picked up this material aspect from some Hindu temple very

early on, since lamps are an integral part of all Hindu celebrations” (Ananya and Sudhith, Researchers). The inside of the Synagogue is heavily adorned with jasmine, another feature assumed to be adopted only in India since the flower is very commonly used here since it symbolizes beauty as well as purity, when used in religious ceremonies.



Figure 7: Preparation for Simchat Torah

While a relatively smaller, simpler and quieter celebration due to the limited number of Jews, the significance remains. We saw all the Paradesi Jews, even the oldest members of the community, as well as some Malabari Jews make their way into the Synagogue for the service which was conducted by a visiting Rabbi. There were also many Israeli tourists who had come to see the celebration since it is unique and different. There were even some Israeli's who had returned for the second time. During the service, only Jews are allowed inside the Synagogue, so even Joy is obliged to wait outside until the prayers service is over. In this manner, they are very strict about their prayers, customs and ceremonies being exclusive to them. We saw the festival continue for two days until it rolled straight into the Shabbat on third day.

5.2.2 *Shabbat*:

The most important ritual, *Shabbat* is also, as it is everywhere else in the world, an integral part of their culture. Beginning on Friday night until sunset on Saturday, it signifies the day of rest, during which Jews do not perform any of the 39 tasks involved in the building of the *tabernacle*, their sanctuary. “One of them was lighting fire. The rulers, the judges of what would be the code of law of the Jewish people determined that in our day and age electricity is compared to lighting fire. And therefore, any type of photography or turning on or off lights is forbidden. Everything needs to be done in advance” (Aviv Mizarachi, visiting Rabbi). A day of complete restriction, they aren’t even allowed to cook food or spend and exchange money. Everything must be pre-arranged. We found the Jews of Kochi still strictly adhere to these rules.

While it is an intrinsically Jewish tradition, they always involved their friends and neighbors. In fact, the Koder family used to host an open house where they would serve food and drinks to anyone who visited. Sometimes, they used to have tourist popping in as well as Jewish law states that on this day, they cannot refuse letting people into their homes and have to feed them. Every time, they would raise a toast to the return to their promise land, Israel.

The only problem the Jews face regarding their festivals and celebrations is that they do not have enough people to conduct the prayer services. They need 10 men for some prayer services, so a couple of years ago, some of the Jewish men returned home so that they could have a proper service. “We too came to Kochi to help them with their prayers as they wanted someone who was better versed in the proper way of doing things” (Aviv Mizrachi, visiting Rabbi). With the remaining population being quite old, they needed some level of guidance to conduct the services for their festivals in the proper manner. Still, the Jews of Kochi celebrate their festivals to the best of their abilities despite their dwindling population. They even continue to make the special foods for the different celebrations.

5.3 Food:

When it comes to food, like the Jews across the world, the Jews o Kochi too follow a set of religious dietary laws known *Kashrut* or *Kosher*. The term is derived from the Hebrew word

meaning fit, or proper, *Kaf-Shin-Reish*. *Kosher* foods are basically those considered suitable for consumption. The locals have noticed that the Jews have remained very strict about their food. In fact, according to Taha, Sarah Cohen still only consumes *Kosher* food. These laws have limitations on meat, dairy products, vegetables, fruits and beverages as well.

“They do not combine foods. They do a coconut milk and chicken, not cow’s milk and chicken” (Ann Matthew, Local). This traces back to the law that meat cannot be cooked in its mother’s milk. In terms of meat, the *Torah* also states that a *Kosher* species must be slaughtered by a *Schochet*, a ritual slaughterer. These individuals have a special license that allowed them to slaughter animals in the correct manner. Each type of meat has a different way of being cut and it needs to be extremely precise. Previously, The Jews of Kochi had Elias Koder and some of the *Rabbi*’s killing the animals, but now with all the inhabitants of Jew Town being above the age of 80, barring one, they do not have access to meat very often. Sam Josephai is the sole inhabitant who has a license to cut beef, which had learnt it from the *Rabbi*. Chicken however is still a problem. Basil Koder told us that they probably get it from Bombay, but only twice or thrice a year.

Kerala does however have an abundant supply of fish, so the Jews of Kochi have now based their cuisine primarily around seafood. Although unsure of how strict they are now about the laws, “they had separate plates for chicken and fish and used different sponges to clean various vessels” (Ann Matthew, Local). In her own home in the US, Ann has a separate *Kosher* kitchen to accommodate her Jewish friends. Abroad, *Kosher* food is widely available and are in fact, sold in supermarkets with the *Rabbi* stamp on it for differentiation. “A Rabbi from there sends us packaged mutton occasionally” (Sam Josephai, Malabari Jew). Overall, the consumption of meat is definitely low due to inaccessibility.

“In India, we Kochi Jews still make some traditional food. Today is the festive day, so we make *Kubbeh*. It is not bread. It is a small bowl with rice, stuffed with minced meat and all the masalas, onions, carrots, and other things mixed in and boiled in a soup” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). While they still make an effort to prepare their traditional delicacies like the *Pasteil* and rice pancakes, Ann says that there was definitely some Indian influence on their preparations over the years, like the use of chilis. She reminisced in their delicious version of Chili chicken, which she still has the recipe for. They also have curries now, but prepare them

differently from the locals, keeping their food laws in mind. They also enjoy Indian food and learnt how to cook a lot of dishes over the years. Basil says that they took a lot of Indian recipes with them to Israel and his mother used to cook Indian food very often which reminded him of home.

5.4 Weddings:

The Jews of Kochi enjoyed involving their neighbors and friends in their customs and practices to a certain extent. Ann and other locals recall the weddings being the most exciting event. They would have tourists from the UK mostly, suddenly decide to get married. Since there would be barely any guests for the spontaneous union, the Jews and their friends and neighbors would make up for the crowd. They would split themselves – half as the bride’s side and half as the groom’s side. After the ceremony the groom and all the people who sat on his side would dance in front of the bride on the road. It was the best part of their lives there according to Ann, full of music, fun and laughter.



Figure 8: A photograph from Sarah Cohen's wedding

“They would all marry cousins” (Ann Matthew. Local). Their own weddings were kept within the community itself as they married each other since they were the only one’s considered suitable for marriage. There were a few wedding practices that the locals remember. One was the fasting, which would last until the couple’s first meal together after the wedding and another was circling, which involved the bride walking around her groom seven times under the *chuppah*, the alter under which the vows were exchanged. Another unique aspect about their weddings was that both parents walked the bride down the aisle, unlike in other traditions.

“There was also a stoned pond where the ladies or the men were supposed to take a dip before they took certain kind of special practices especially before marriages” (Thomas, tour guide). Apparently, every Synagogue used to have one. Another purely Indian Jew wedding ritual that “when a bride walks down the aisle, the *Manavari* is chanted by everyone. This represents the bridegroom pricing the bride. There are 7 steps and for each step, different chants are there. If you listen to the music, you can see the Indian music there. But if you go to the other Synagogue, they don’t have this type of music” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). Thus, we see a slight Indian influence in their ceremonies as well.

5.5 Clothes:

While they wore dresses most often, living in India amongst the locals, saw the women of the Jewish community wearing saris and salwar’s. However, what was most unique about their attire was this one outfit that consisted of a top and a lungi, which Ann said she hadn’t seen anyone else wearing.

The most Jewish aspect of their attire was the *kippah* the brimless Jewish cap. Sarah’s Embroidery Shop is the only place where these caps are sold. Initially Sarah herself used to do the embroidery work and sew the caps and taught Taha, her Muslim caretaker how to do it. However, she is now too old to continue doing so. “We could not find anyone in Kerala to do the embroidery. 16 years ago, when I went to Andhra for an exhibition, I found a person ready to do the work. That time he had 65 people working now he has 90 of them. I went and stayed there for a week and taught them how to do the work. Three months later they produced good quality

goods” (Taha Ibrahim, Sarah’s Caretaker). Sarah’s shop continues to sell embroidery work and the *kippah* as it remains the most popular shop on the street.



Figure 9: Kippah, the traditional Jewish cap sold in Sarah's Embroidery Shop

5.6 Jewish Apartheid:

Living in India for so many centuries, the Jews remained active observers to Indian social practices, like the Caste system. In fact, they adopted and reinstated the social order that was prevalent in Kerala at that time in the form of the Jewish Apartheid, which was the separation of the Jewish community into Paradesi (White) and Malabari (Black) Jews. The Paradesi Jews lived in Mattancherry while the Malabari Jews live in Ernakulum. Paradesi literally translates to foreigner, so undoubtedly, the skin colour is what sets them apart. But this difference can be attributed to the fact that both communities migrated to India from different parts of the world. The Paradesi Jews arrived from countries like Iran, Portugal and even Spain following the

Spanish Inquisition. The Malabari Jews on the other hand, trace themselves back to Egypt and also claim to have arrived as early as the time of King Solomon.

In context of this social practice, in the 17th century, there was a rich Jewish trader, Ezekiel Rahabi who was friendly with the king. He had written a letter to a Jew in Baghdad and one of our key informants, Bony happened to read the English version of it. The letter says that, “Here in Kochi, there are two types of Jews: White Jews and Black Jews. The white Jews have pure blood the other Jews are not pure, but they follow the Jewish system. We don't mingle with those people, our people don't get married to the black Jews and we don't permit the black Jews sitting on the benches in the synagogue, they have to sit on the floor and cannot even touch the religious books because they are inferior. They are from the generation of slaves.” From this letter, Bony says we can understand the kind of treatment the black Jews were getting from the white Jews.

They were so rigid with this system that there was no inter mingling accepted by society. Even the religion could not bring them together. “In Keralan culture, only certain tribes or high priests were allowed inside the royal temple while the low-profile people, that is those of lower tribes were not allowed” (Rocky, Local). This was mirrored amongst the Jews. The Malabari Jews were not given any respect, even in the face of God, not even allowed equality in worship. They were made to sit on the floor and had no access to religious texts. In fact, some versions of history write of both communities having completely separate Synagogues. But this can also be attributed to easier access since not everyone could travel far distances.

In terms of purity, a conversation with Aviv Mizarachi, the visiting Rabbi brought to light how neither community can comment on the others' faith. Being Jewish requires dedication and a desire to do good and contribute to the world in a positive manner. One is required to hold their faith above everything else and follow all practices to the best of their abilities to be considered Jewish. Since both communities follow the same practices, this is cannot be a differentiating factor.

Still a rather sensitive topic, the locals too agree that this separation was prevalent for a long time. “Everyone was part of this distinction and said that in Kerala, the white men are always rated higher. Since they migrated from Europe, they had more vindication and culture, having come from more cultured families”. (Rocky, Local). This seemed to be the reason why Keralites

preferred them - the White Jews were more cultured whereas people Black Jews were not so cultured. “If you look at their businesses, it was totally different layers of business” (Rocky, Local). For example, White Jews were engaged in very expansive or rather in the advanced technology businesses, not in low-profile ones whereas the Black Jews were doing petty business like selling fish, eggs and meat. With their endless contributions to the society, the Paradesis were thought of as more intelligent and thus considered more beneficial to society.

“There was love marriage, but they were shunned” (Ann Matthews, local). There was no inter-marriage between the two communities as the Malabaris were not viewed as fit candidates. This saw the Paradesis marrying among themselves, which wasn’t very healthy. In fact, it was Basil’s father’s sister who first got married to a Black Jew. Till about 2 years ago, the couple lived on Synagogue Lane. The lady's name was Reema, she was a White Jew and her husband's name was Gamiel, who was a Black Jew. When they fell in love and wanted to get married, all of Reema’s community (Paradesis) were against the marriage so they were not allowed to get married in the Paradesi synagogue. They ended up taking a train to Kolkata and got married there in one of the synagogues. They did come back but for a while, they were isolated. However, seeing such an influential member of the community mixing with the other community saw the beginning of the end of this practice.

“In Kochi, long time back, between the Jews there was a caste system, but not anymore. They (Paradesi Jews) probably felt more superior” (Basil Koder, participant). Today, since the Jews are dwindling in numbers, the two communities have come together so that their culture and heritage can be maintained and preserved on a larger scale. They pray together at the Paradesi Synagogue and celebrate festivals together. “They (Paradesi Jews) are the core. Every month we meet, sometimes at the Synagogue, sometimes in the house” (Sam Josephai, Malabari Jew). Initially, our research led us to believe that these were two separate communities, even today. However, they are all Kochi Jews, upholding the same beliefs, and practicing the same customs. On the surface, the problem of the apartheid does not seem to exist anymore.

However, down one of the narrow lanes in Jews Street in Ernakulum, behind an aquarium called Cochin Blossoms is *Kodavumbagam Synagogue*, where resentment toward the Paradesi Jews still exists. Elias Josephai, the owner, firmly believes that no matter how far humanity comes, those with a fairer complexion will always be preferred. He spoke about how when history is

being written, one needs to cross-check the facts and various versions, not just choose one and explain it. “When a white skin gives, its authentic. When a brown skin gives, it’s not authentic” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). This explains why researchers simply accept and record the history altered by the Paradesis without cross-checking.



Figure 10: Elias Josephai, a Malabari Jew

The Paradesi Synagogue has a series of paintings that place the arrival of the Paradesis in King Solomon’s period. However, historical evidence suggest that they arrived after the Portuguese Invasion in 1675 demolished The Parul Synagogue due to the baptism rule given by Queen Isabella. Most of the Paradesis who came were white skins. “This was our history that the Paradesis claimed as their own” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). For 25 years, the Paradesis perceived themselves to be the greatest people on earth resulting in people coming into Kochi after this era to believe the same thing. “When people come looking for answers or to learn more about the history of Paradesi Jews, they don’t get the answers as soon as they realize that the history of 1600s has been erased from the Synagogue timeline” (Elias Josephai, Malabari Jew). To show that the white skins are superior to any other race, they leave the truth about the 1600s a mystery to those seeking answers.

Even after a couple of centuries, this unfair preference toward the white skins seemed to reign the Synagogues of Mattancherry. In 1948, there were 1998 Jews and in 1952, only 252 them were Paradesi Jews. This number, 4 years later was not a majority of the population. However, the nominee for the elections into the Kochi government was still from Koder for the simple reason that they were white and rich. Even though the majority of the Jews were from Elias's community, the nominee was still from the Koder family.

Many years later, all the cemeteries were destroyed except for one and it was Namia Mootha's cemetery plot. History claims that Namia Mootha was part of the Paradesi Jews' congregation but Elias Josephai firmly states that Namia Mootha was part of his community. Even today for many in the West, and to a large extent in South India too, the history of Kerala's ancient Malabari Jewish congregation and their background is uncertain. The white skins have portrayed themselves as superior to other races to such a great measure, that only the famous Paradesi Synagogue comes to the mind of many when they think of Judaism in Kerala. Elias Josephai's belief in the unfair partiality toward the fairer complexion only reflects on the history the Paradesis made up of themselves, which is becoming a self-made authentic source for the Jewish past of Kerala.

5.7 Economic Life:

The presence of the Jewish community was not just a battle of a foreign community being integrated with a traditional one, but also a political challenge for India to overcome. However, one must consider that as easy as it is to form a new presence in a country, it's also that difficult to sustain the community as a whole in a foreign land. The economy of a community is as vital as its linguistic or political standing. The Jews had to build themselves a life, a home in a completely new country with very different people.

In the past, many Jewish merchants were travelling across the Mediterranean to China in the ninth century, making pitstops along the Malabar Coast. These traders had a huge role to play in the export of pepper and various other spices.



Figure 12: The Spice Market on Jew Town Road

While trade was booming, the Jews eventually moved to Kochi. We found two contrasting versions of the grounds for the shift. The Paradesi Synagogue has a set of paintings that states that the Jews were forcefully driven out by the Portuguese and Moors, “Kochi was one of the first places to become cosmopolitan because of the spice trade. The Jews did not come to Kochi because they wished to settle here, rather because of the famous trading market here” (KJ Sohan, Ex-Mayor). The Mattancherry Palace on the other hand, records a dreadful flood that shifted the coastline, opening a new location for the trade in Cochin. The then Raja of Kochi presented the Jews with copper plates as a welcome gift which held great economic value because the holders of these plates and their future generations were excused from paying taxes; which happened to be a boon on their already burdened mind and gave them one less thing to worry about.

5.7.1 Presence in Kochi:

Pre-Aliyah

The Jews all over the world represent the Business community. “They (Jews) had close ties with the King of Kochi, who helped them to establish a business community in Kochi the minute they

migrated to Kochi” (Bony Thomas, cartoonist). Additionally, he claimed, around 1663, the Jews had a business partnership with the Dutch and henceforth became a thriving and wealthy community in Kochi.

The economic conditions of the Jewish community in Kochi were prospering because of the spice trade taking place through the Malabar harbor, which was a major trading point for countries like Portugal, Netherlands and Britain. Apart from this, the Jews held high posts in the kingdom with extremely essential duties with favorable rewards for their services. However, the Jews were stuck in a financial turmoil with the arrival of the Portuguese. The Portuguese caused problems for all minority communities in South India. They (Portuguese) put a halt to their trade between Malabar and the West. The Jews suffered restrictions and arbitrary taxes along with oppression. The raja tried to protect the Jews under his rule, but he was not quite successful.

It was only under the Dutch that the Jews picked up their business again. The Jews were looked at as a ‘pardesi’ community by the Dutch. Some members of the Rabbi family rose to positions of economic and political advisors to both the Dutch and Hindu rulers.

Finally, the Britishers began their colonial rule in 1792, and during their rule Kerala in itself was going through a monetary stagnation because the Britishers had begun building new commercial centers in the North and the East. Many Jews in Kerala held positions from clerks, teachers and bureaucrats; to small merchants mostly dealing with fish and poultry.

Amongst the Jews, Samuel Koder was a very well-known name. He was responsible for introducing the town of Mattancherry to electricity. He was one of the many who held a prestigiously high post in their occupation and was in touch with many elite bureaucrats. This status of the Jews remained more or less the same until 1948, after which 3000 Jews migrated to Israel.

“There were various amenities the Koder family bought to Mattancherry, such as the boat ferry from Kochi to Ernakulum was run by the Jews. They were also into lot of social projects that have social benefits” (Bony Thomas, Researcher). The Koder family was well-respected and SS Koder ensured the employment of many Jews in his factories and companies.

Post Aliyah:

The remaining Jews in Kerala engaged in trading food items such as eggs, vinegar etc. while the men owned small shops the women engaged in domestic pursuits, but moved on to owning boutiques and helped bring income to their families. The Jews at the time did not trade industrial goods rather created ritual objects. The land from the synagogue grew shared crops which helped the Jews in income as well as sustenance. The synagogue also supported women who used to do needlework and petty trade.

The Jewish families had a lot of pride and were well respected. However, their financial statuses were not as great as they were before *Aliyah*. The economic situations were so terrible that it led to people migrating to Bombay and Calcutta for relief. Nevertheless, the silver lining to that dark cloud was that these Kochi Jews ensured that their Keralite identity always remained a part of them.

All the way in Israel, where there are currently over six hundred Jews from Kochi who began producing Avocados, olives, flowers, chicken etc. to sustain themselves and make a livelihood. Most of the labor is in agriculture, even though there are other occupations taken over by the Jews. But, in the younger generations both men and women make it a point to earn for the family instead of laying the burden over just one member of the family.

Currently, there is an extremely small population of Jews in Mattancherry, of which only one (Sarah Cohen) owns an Embroidery shop. There is minimum to almost no presence of the Jewish community in Mattancherry anymore, which is a terribly heart-breaking sight to see. The oldest shopkeeper on Jew street, Mr. Vidyasagar, spoke about the local trade between Cochin-Bombay and Cochin-Delhi. He gave us the progression of the location of Trade from Alleppey to Jew Town.

Basil Koder, the son of SS Koder spoke with us and elaborated on the differences between lives in Jew Town versus life in Israel. His work life is extremely intense in Israel, he's off to work at seven in the morning and is back only at eight at night. This is a drastically different lifestyle than the one's Jews in Mattancherry are used to. From the various accounts that were given by people close to the Jews, we know that the atmosphere of Jew Town years ago was energetic, lively and extremely festive round-the-year. They all shared a close and integrated relationship; everyone enjoyed each other's company and the festivals were celebrated in a grand manner.

The topic of tourism was a popular one for most of our interviews. One would assume that since the Jews were such big contributors to the economy, there would be an adverse effect on the economy following their departure. However, “tourism is much more now than it used to be at the time” (Ann Matthew, Local). In fact, many of our key informants, including the tourism officer, claimed that the rise of tourism was witnessed after the Jews left Kochi and not before. Thus, there was a complete change of economy itself.



Figure 13: Sarah's Embroidery Shop, the only business owned by a Jew, which is a big tourist attraction today

Economically, the disparity between the Malabari and Paradesi Jew was very significant. The Paradesi Jews mostly held positions of traders or high post workers at the palace; however, the Malabari Jews did more labor work than high-paying jobs, such as sawyers, carpenters and masons etc. Paradesi Jews, also known as ‘White Jews’ were much more prevalent on media platforms and considered superior because of the ‘foreign element’ they carried. However, they too began to deteriorate in terms of their employment opportunities and had to work in the areas of bookbinding and making casks. Jews all over the world are known for their money-lending

business; but, there were only few left who were capable of continuing this business in Mattancherry. While on our visit to Kochi, we came in contact with another researcher, Klara who was also studying the Jewish community in India and Israel. When spoken to about the distinction she observed between the two communities, she said “I think they are separated but I was really surprised to see the *Simchat Torah* festival that took place this week, there were some Malabari Jews coming to the Paradesi Synagogue which was really nice”.

CHAPTER 6:

Aliyah, Identity and Future Prospects

6.1 Aliyah: The Migration:

The migration of the various Jewish communities around the world to the state of Israel after its independence in 1948 is termed as *Aliyah*. This phenomenon took place within the community of the Kochi Jews as well and as a result, a population of above 4000 members has now dwindled into the mid-twenties. On 14th May, 1948, the establishment of the State of Israel was proclaimed by the head of the Jewish Agency, David Ben-Gurion, with Jerusalem as its capital. That same day, Truman, the President of the United States of America recognized the new nation. This development caused great flurry of activity among Jews across globe, many of which wanted to return to their true homeland. This came to be known as *Aliyah*, which literally means “to go up” in Hebrew. It was characterized by the large-scale migration of Jews towards Israel.

In most cases, the Jews migrated all at once to the Israel right after its independence but in the case of the Kochi Jews, there was a gradual departure of Jews from the country for different reasons. “The Jews made their *Aaliyah*, in the 50's, 60's and 70's and some even in the 80's. The need for migration started with a sense of fulfilment of the desire of religion and the thought of one's own country. The Jews which held these aspects dearly left for Israel first in the 50's” (Thomas, Local Historian).

The Paradesi Jews who had great economic prospects and did not want to leave their income and personal wealth behind decided to stay back a little longer and migrated through the 60's and 70's. “But when Israel was formed after independence everyone from here left. The people who left were poor. Cohen did not leave because they were well off, but all the others left because they were struggling” (Taha Ibrahim, Sarah's Caretaker). The Malabari Jews were willing to migrate as soon as Israel's independence but didnot have the monetary prospects to allow them to do so. The main reason for the Malabari Jews to migrate was to start afresh and better their livelihood but they had no money to reach Israel. A trust fund was created to raise money to charter a boat for the Malabari Jews to transport them to Israel, but they had little success. “Money was mostly never an issue with the Paradesi Jews as they were engaged in reputable work whereas the Malabari Jews had comparatively meagre occupations” (Basil Koder, Paradesi Jew).



Figure 13: The Koder House, now converted into a hotel

Both Malabari and Paradesi Jews wished to leave Kochi to move to Israel. One common reason for this was the belief that Israel was the promised land and the god’s country for the Jewish community and migration to it was motivated by this religious sentiment. Otherwise, the situation for both communities was quite different. The main problem was they did not have people to get married to, so they all left to further their careers and to find spouses. “My personal opinion is that if there was a huge community and you know which could sustain all the people here with marriages, I’m sure they would’ve stayed” (Ann Matthew, Local). As for those who did remain in Jew Town, many like Ann say it was due to their old age and strong ties to the land. Even though the marriage situation concerned the Malabar Jews too, they have had a history of being economically poor and of petty occupation. “It was a different community from Cochin, not our community. And the families were very small families. Between 1, 2 or 3 children. So, they diminished. The only way to keep the families was to go to Israel. We moved to Israel in 71. So, there were probably about 100 Jews over there. So, if we would’ve stayed, there would be much more inter-marriage and that’s not so healthy”. (Basil Koder, Paradesi Jew).

It is well documented how Jews were alienated and not welcome in many places due to the problems they faced in Europe and also, the places where they managed to find refuge would

often make them feel like outsiders. There was never a country which the Jews could call their own and Israel fulfilled that desire of belongingness. During the *Simchat Torah*, the Jews of Kochi used to raise a toast to their homeland cheering “next year in Israel”. However, India as a country handled the Jewish community quite differently. The Chera kings were fond of the Jews and provided them with property and other special privileges. Till date all Kochi Jews have an attachment to India and see it as their own country. Elias, one of the Malabari Jews in Kochi exclaimed that he wishes that he could bring some of the Jews back to India than to have to go to Israel. In the documentary “Where the Heart Lies”, Basil speaks of how the Kochi culture and language has carried forward to the state of Israel as a part of the Kochi Jews and till date when they have community meetings, they converse in Malayalam

6.2 The Identity:

There are a countless number of Jewish communities spread all across the globe. This is because of the fact that ever since the demolition of the first temple, the Jews have been forced to travel far and wide to protect themselves. As a result, one will find Jewish communities in almost every corner of the world. The uniqueness of these communities lies in their identity. Despite sharing the common Jewish heritage, history and humanity, each of these communities vary significantly from each other. This is evident as the Jewish communities spread all over the world, hold different attitudes, opinions and even have different traditions. The most significant reason for this shift in identity is the location and surroundings of the communities. For instance, the Jewish community settled in the United States of America is vastly different from the ones we have in India.

In a conversation with the Rabbi, he revealed the true meaning of being Jewish and the attributes one needs to possess to be considered Jewish. These qualities essentially consist of being a good human being. Some of the values that are expected of a Jew are doing good toward others, improving the world, connection to the land of Israel and so on. According to the Jewish law, the individuals who are born from Jewish mothers are considered to be Jewish. The Jewish status is carried on from the mother and not the father. The usage of matrilineal descent in Judaism is not a law but is indirectly mentioned in the *Torah*. For instance, many passages in the *Torah* mention

that the offspring of a Jewish woman is a Jew, irrespective of the father's faith. Another way to be considered Jewish is by conversion. Any individual who wishes to be Jewish has to go through the formal process of conversion. After his conversion, he would be referred to as much as a Jew as the individuals who are Jewish by birth.

As mentioned earlier, the identity of a community is very much influenced by the place of their settlement. This is because the community is influenced by the traditions, customs and ideologies of their neighboring community. At times, the Jews might incorporate the local traditions to feel accepted by the other communities or they might be forced to do so. Not just traditions, the architecture of their houses and places of worship is also influenced. As a result, their identity is a blend of themselves and of their surroundings. This also holds true for the Jewish settlement in Fort Kochi, who first came to India two thousand years ago.

In the case of emigrant communities, a certain level of acculturation is inevitable. Similarly, the arrival of the Jews in Kochi was also subjected to some acculturation, where in, they adopted certain Hindu practices, ideologies and values in their culture. Not only did they incorporate their beliefs, the Kochi Jews also began to feel one with the other locals and thus, emerged a sense of belonging. The one question that always pops up while studying the Kochi Jews is about their identity. People are most curious about whether they have been able to keep the Jewish identity intact after all these years.

Thus, the most frequently asked question about the Jews of Kochi is “are they Israeli or are they Indian?”. The closest to answering this question would be that they are inherently and fully both. In the sense that they have managed to construct a balanced identity for themselves based off their claim to a long-standing history in India.

The Jews residing in Jew Town, Mattancherry feel as much as a part of India as the other locals. “Despite being white skinned, the Paradesi Jews are pure Malayali's as they have been born and brought up there for generations. They not only refer to themselves as Indians but actively take part in many Indian traditions and festivals such as Diwali, Onam and Ramzan” (Taha Ibrahim, Sarah's Caretaker). In earlier times, the houses on Jew Town always had their doors open and anyone and everyone could enter as they please. All the Jews lived together like one big family and the locals were also equally welcomed. During the evenings, no vehicles were allowed on

Jew Town as the people from the community turned the street into their verandas. Tables were kept out with snacks laid out on them. The entire street had a lively vibe as everyone would play board games out on the street and children would be running around.

During the course of our interviews in Jew town we found some interesting evidence supporting the Indian Jewish identity. “You can take the Jew out of India but not the Indian out of the Jew” (Klara, Researcher). This means that the Indian aspect of their identity is so strong that they would stay true to it, despite living in a separate country. The Kochi Jews “who left from Kochi to Israel still referred to India as their home” (Pennit, Israeli Tourist). However, some of the second and third generations who were born in Israel do not feel the same way and are unable to connect with India and their Indian roots. This is clearly evident in his interview as he states that he did not feel at home in India and could not ever live here.

Basil Koder has also spoken about the Indian-Jewish identity and it is very evident that he identifies himself as an Indian Jew and refers to India as his homeland. The Kochi Jews that are residing in Israel still consider themselves as a part of India and celebrate certain Indian festivals. They also make it a point to meet for special occasions and are thus, able to preserve the Kochi Jew identity. He still continues to speak Malayalam at home and among his friends, referring to it as his mother tongue. However, he has not been able to pass on the language to his children who were born in Israel. Moreover, it can be said that speaking Malayalam is only prevalent among the Jews that were born in India and not amongst the second and third generations.

This is also supported by the research done in Israel by the filmmaker Klara Trencsenyi. Apart from documenting the streets of Jew Town for the past four years, she has studied the second and third generations of the Jewish families that migrated from Kochi. Her findings were that the Malayalam language will die out with the first generation and some individuals from the second generation. However, it will not be successfully passed on to the future generation. It is safe to say that language is a crucial aspect of one’s identity and the loss of it is a huge dent on one’s identity. In some time, when all the Kochi Jews have migrated to Israel, Malayalam will just be a language that the older generation spoke during their time in India and the significance that it holds in their history and the connection it has to the Jews might be forgotten. Thus, along with the language, the identity of being an Indian-Jew will soon die out and cease to exist.

In the interview with Mr. Shine, the tourism officer, he spoke about preserving the Jewish identity. In order to keep the identity intact, the Paravur Synagogue has been converted into the 'Kerala Jews History Museum.' The museum contains exhibits that focus on the history of the Jews, their arrival in India, present status of the community and so on. It gives an overview of the Kochi Jew identity and the factors influencing it.

6.3 Future Prospects: Protection of Jewish Heritage:

In Israel there is now Cochin Jewish heritage museum which uses an audio visual to explain the culture followed by the Jews of cochin at that time. This museum was made so that the Jews who live in Israel but had migrated from Kochi can know about their roots and will have knowledge of what life used to be like for their ancestors. The cochin Jewish museum was made to protect their heritage so hopefully there would be a link between the traditions of the original Jews of cochin and their later generations, but we've received information that the later generations of the Jews of Kochi are not well versed with these traditions. So, the third generation is really disconnected from the Kochi traditions" (Klara, researcher)

The Jews of Kochi were a thriving community until the formation of Israel in 1947. After the formation of this promise land that the Jews had always wanted to call their own however, they began to migrate at a rapid rate. While the reasons for migration often vary, the fact remains that most of them chose to leave. The state of the Jewish community in Kochi today is very different. There are only about twenty-five Jews left in Kochi and all of these people are past the age at which they can have children or extend the family line. Realistically speaking it is only a matter of time before there aren't any Jews left in Kochi at all. So, when the Jews of Kochi are no longer present, what will happen to the sacred buildings that have embedded themselves into the culture of the city of Kochi and what measures will be taken to ensure that the Jews of Kochi will be a community that is remembered?

The government in the past had given full indication that it was going to do its best to try and do its level best to try and protect the Jewish heritage. Two museums had been constructed in Muserisiyattam. There was a synagogue in North Parul that was converted into a Jewish history

museum after it was no longer in a state that it could be preserved. The Chenamagallam synagogue was also preserved. As of late however, there is some reason for concern, the Synagogue near the current Paradesi Synagogue was not preserved and is now in ruins with the land ownership transferred to Punjab National Bank. The Kodavumbagam synagogue was not being preserved and is being maintained only because of the efforts of Mr. Babu Elias Josephai. After he leaves and returns to Israel what will happen to the synagogue then? That synagogue will be in ruins too. The Paradesi synagogue which is the most beautifully maintained, that may not be preserved either. There is no guarantee that these important buildings nor the other sites like the clock tower and the Jewish cemetery will be preserved.



Figure 14: The top of the Clock Tower, an important Jewish structure

The Jewish community has played a significant role in the city of Kochi over last few centuries. At one time the electricity supply in Kochi was controlled by an influential Jewish family. The Jewish people started boat rides and ferry's and more importantly tremendously improved to trade practices in Kochi. The Jewish buildings and cemeteries that remain in the city of Kochi act as a symbol for the time the Jewish people were in the city and it should be preserved in homage to them so their contribution to the Kochi society is remembered. The people are firmly

behind the idea of saving and preserving the rich heritage of the Kochi Jews. They want to step in and raise funding to stop the demolition of the buildings themselves if the government refuses to step up. "I'm convener of INTACT, the Indian national trust for art and cultural heritage. As the convener of the heritage I firmly believe that even if nobody is there to look after we will care for that heritage. We will keep it alive., those memories we'll keep it alive." (KJ Sohan, Ex-mayor). When a community has been around as long as the Jewish community and have had as much impact as the Jews have had in Kochi they should not be forgotten by the future generations. They deserve to be remembered as a part of Kochi culture because they truly embedded themselves in the Kochi culture.

The Jews who migrated to Israel from Kochi could always come back but they are quite happy living in Israel. In fact, the few Jews who do live in Kochi are thinking of migrating to Israel because it is easier to find a match to get married to as there are more Jews in Israel than there are in Kochi and there are more people that can possibly get married to each other. There are a high number of jobs available in Israel more so than cochin this is something that could make the transition from Kochi to Israel quite a bit smoother. Sadly, another factor that is increasing the rate at which the Jews are leaving Kochi is the fact that a spotlight has been placed on the fact that the Jewish people are reducing which has made their community and society an attraction.

The treatment of the Jewish community and society as an attraction has unfortunately resulted in the Jews of Kochi feeling harassed. They have begun to cut themselves off from the rest of the society, they weren't willing to talk to us or communicate with us in any way because of the number of times that they have been asked if a research could be conducted on them. They feel attacked and are quite often rude and simply unwelcoming to people who try to communicate with them because of their past experiences. The hope is that once this generation of Jews leave Kochi people don't remember the community as one that was rude and unwelcoming because of how they spent their time right at the end in the city of Kochi.

People deserve a chance to know, and the Jewish community deserves to be remembered as one that was an important part of the culture of the city of Kochi and one that had truly left its full influence on the city of Kochi. The very immediate future should probably see that the Jews are no longer present in the city of cochin, but hopefully their important buildings are preserved as

the Kochi Jews have had a great impact on the city of Kochi. We will have to wait and see how the exit of the Jews of Kochi works out though, for now though all we can do is speculate.

CHAPTER 7:

Conclusion



Figure 15: Sign boards on Jew Town Road

Kochi is one of India's most culturally diverse cities with over fifteen different communities living together harmoniously, in close proximity to one another. Over the centuries, their stories have intertwined to form Kochi's complex and compelling history. The Jews, being one of the first foreign religion to settle down in India, have proven to be one of the most unique aspects of this combined history.

Our time in Kochi brought to light that there are so many versions of the origin stories, even in Kochi, people do not believe in just one version. The most widely accepted theory among the locals about the arrival of the Paradesi Jews dates back almost 600 years, to the Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834), The arrival of the Malabari Jews remains unclear, with some like Rocky attributing their darker skin to supposed arrival from Egypt. The Paradesi Jews on the other hand, claim to a longer existence in India, tracing themselves back to the spice trade that existed during King Solomon's rule. Then with the destruction of the second Holy Temple in Rome, their ancestors fled and arrived on the Malabari Coast by boat. However, the Malabari Jews contest their word, claiming that this is their version of events that the Paradesi Jews have spun into a story to establish a more complex history for themselves that provides more connection with their host country. On the topic of their move to Kochi, within the same radius itself, there are two contradicting narratives. The Paradesi Synagogue has a series of ten paintings which depict the Jews being driven out by the Portuguese and Moors while Mattancherry Palace has a write up about how Malabar was flooded, and the Jews had no choice but to leave. The common storyline is the generosity of the Chera Maharaja, who, in an effort to ensure the safety of the foreign community, granted them a separate area in Kochi, which came to be known as the Jew Town.

In Kochi itself, the Jews integrated themselves into society without any trouble, building close and harmonious relationships with the neighboring communities. One of the main focus points of our study was to find out how the Jewish community in Kochi stands out from the other Jewish settlements around the world – their unique religious, cultural and cultural practices. We found that although Judaism as a religion remained intact, slowly they did adopt a few practices that are heavily influenced by Kochi itself. In addition, their dwindling population has definitely affected the extent to which they are able to live by their principles.

In terms of religious practices, the Jews of Kochi have this one famous song called *Manavari*, which is hummed in the Synagogue on all the auspicious days. The song, while written in Hebrew and Arabic, has typical Indian tunes and music as it is not the *Ashkanavi*. This is hummed during weddings while the bride walks down the aisle, with not one, but both her parents. The Synagogues also have small differences. For one, both the Paradesi and the Kodavumbagam have ten windows, signifying the ten commandments while everywhere else in the world, Synagogues have twelve that symbolize the twelve tribes. Another interesting factor was that the carvings on the door behind which the *Torah* is kept, which are generally all the biblical fruits, also has a mango carved in, a symbol of their Indian identity.

They celebrate all Jewish festivals, but the festivities carry on for two days instead of one. There is also an extensive use of lamps, which is unique to the Kochi Jews. We were able to witness the eighty-two-candle structure put up for *Simchat Torah*, which we were told isn't seen anywhere else in the world. They try to keep to their principles as much as they can, but with all but one of the Paradesi Jews being above the age of eighty-five years, they struggle to do so. However, they still keep services strictly among themselves, and no non-Jew is allowed inside the Synagogue during their prayers. In terms of food, they still adhere to the *Kosher* Laws, but do not have access to meat since, barring Sam Josephai, who is a Malabari Jew, none of the Jews have the license to cut meat. They thus, get meat sent from Bombay (chicken) and the US (mutton). While they do still make traditional dishes like *Pasteil* and *Kubbeh*, there also has been some Indian influence on their cuisine as seen in the use of chilis and the making of curries.

Their social lives were very eventful. Between the celebration of all festivals including the Indian ones, and the involvement of friends in their everyday lives, the Jews had built strong relationships with the communities around them. We learnt that each community would graciously invite everyone to enjoy any kind of celebrations. A common example we were given, was weddings. Apart from their own weddings which were kept within the community itself, that is there was no inter-marriage between the Paradesi and Malabari Jews, tourists, mainly from the UK would come and spontaneously decide to tie the knot. Since they would not have any audience, the Jews and their friends would divide themselves for the couple and enjoy the festivities.

Their economic lives were extremely prosperous. Initially they were involved in spice trade and occupied high posts in the kingdom of Cranganore. Their shift to Kochi, apparently saw the decline of their trade relations, however, there is little information that exists on this period in their history. In Kochi, the Paradesi Jews became respectable businessmen. The lowest class of them sold provisions, but it was the Koders who had the largest impact on society. They brought electricity, started a ferry service and owned a chain of supermarkets, all of which had positive economic effects on Kochi. The Malabari Jews on the other hand were involved in low-income occupations like meat sellers and laborers. We initially assumed that their migration would have had an adverse effect on the entire economy since on all fronts, the Jews were important contributors. However, with their migration came the formation of an entire new economy to replace the other, i.e. tourism. Today, the streets are filled with flocks of tourists who come to see the Synagogue and the remaining Jews.

Our most interesting and controversial finding about their social practices was without a doubt the Jewish Apartheid. While we were aware that it existed, most sources we had previously referred to stated that it had long diminished. But we found that to be untrue. In fact, the issue remains unclear. While most sources consider the White and Black Jews as separate communities, we found that apart from their origin and skin colour, they are exactly alike. In fact, because of the small population the Jews claim that the two communities have come together so that they can properly observe customs and traditions. However, locals themselves still seem to view the Malabari Jews as inferior to the Paradesis, simply because of their skin colour. As the entire world believes that humans are moving past such racial discrimination, in the city of Kochi it still remains. Although this tension is not overt, there are definitely feelings of underlying hostility.

Elias Josephai links his resentment to the fact that although the Paradesis and Malabaris come together for religious purposes and have the same traditions, in an effort to create their own unique legacy, the Paradesis still don't consider them 'proper' Jews. In fact, according to him, history has been so indignant to their side of the story that they have combined the histories of both communities and attributed it only to the Paradesi Jews. Researches done in the recent years clearly state that there are only 5 five Jews left, with no mention of the Malabari Jews.

Despite all the influence Kochi has had on their lives, they are still intrinsically Jewish. So, as all the Jews scattered across the world, they too prayed for their promise land. When Israel was formed in 1948, most of the Jews, Malabari and Paradesi, sold their properties and businesses and migrated. Initially, we thought that it was purely religious and economic in nature. However, most of the people in Kochi informed us that the Paradesi left to further their community. They did not consider anyone but themselves as suitable for marriage, and they could not continue to marry within themselves. So, they left to find suitable partners and make sure their people survived. Yet despite moving away, those who were born in Kochi and spent a good portion of their lives here still consider it their home.

On the question of identity, we found that all locals consider them Indian despite their fair skin. This owes to the fact that they speak proper Malayalam. They were one with their host city and were nothing but friends to all. Even those in Israel still call themselves Kochi Jews. They are inherently both, Indian and Jewish and nothing can change that. However, despite the strong ties those who migrated feel to Kochi, the second generation does not feel the same sentiments toward their ancestral home. While they are fascinated with being Indian, they have not been taught their native language, and with nothing to link them to Kochi, they do not seem to identify themselves as Kochi Jews.

Barring Elias, the rest of the Malabaris consider themselves one Jewish community of twenty-five people. The Paradesi however, seem to want to maintain a separate identity, creating the legacy of the Kochi Jews as a small foreign community who has maintained religious autonomy, while also having been influenced by Kochi, keeping themselves well-integrated in society. Keeping this in mind, Elias wishes for unity among his people, the Kochi Jews. Jews are Jews, regardless of their skin colour and when they have made the same city their home, they are undeniably one. Yet, all prior researches still believe they aren't which makes it a sensitive issue for them.

The Jews have been one of the largest contributors to Kochi as whole. Besides adding to the cultural diversity, they were also large contributors to the entire economy of Kochi. They were friendly and welcoming, adjusting themselves well into society. Despite the strong influence Kochi has had on their culture, they have maintained a unique identity of being both fully Indian and fully Jewish. Today, with the dwindling population of Jew Town, the question of their future

arises. Everyone believes that the since it is already considered dead, the community will simply die out. With the extinction of this community, the business interests are looking at their prime settlement areas for redevelopment, but the Jews are working towards the protection of their heritage. In fact, ex-mayor KJ Sohan believes that if the government doesn't step up towards the preservation of Jewish monuments, the people will step up to do so. The Jewish community is after all, one of the most important parts of Kochi's cultural history.

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Glossary

1. *Aliyah*: The immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the Land of Israel. Also defined as the act of going up; that is, towards Jerusalem. Making Aliyah by moving to the Land of Israel is one of the most basic principles of Zionism. Zionism is the national movement of the Jewish people that supports the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland in the territory defined as the historic Land of Israel.
2. *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*: The ten-day period of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
3. *Chuppah*: A canopy underneath which a Jewish couple stand during their wedding ceremony
4. *Diaspora*: The dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel
5. *Hanukkah*: This is a Jewish festival that takes place during the winter solstice. Hanukkah is the festival of lights that celebrates one of the greatest miracles ever taken place in Jewish history, which lasts for eight days.
6. *Hebrew*: The native language of Israel
7. *Kaf-Shin-Resh*: The Hebrew letters KAF, SHIN, RESH, when put together form the Hebrew word
8. *Kippah*: It is a small hat or head covering. In traditional Jewish communities only, men wear *kippot* (the plural of kippah) and they are worn at all times (except when sleeping and bathing).
9. *Kosher*: Something that is considered pure.
10. *Passover*: This is one of the most essential festivals celebrated in the ancient Israelite community. It is a mix of a few spring festivals, which celebrate the Passover of God over the Israelites in the time of the tenth plague.
11. *Pastel*: It is the name given to different typical dishes of many countries of Hispanic or Portuguese origin.
12. *Rabbi*: The Jewish priest
13. *Rosh Chodesh*: The name literally means 'Head of the Month', which marks the beginning of the Hebrew month.
14. *Rosh Hashanah*: The Jewish New Year

15. *Rosh Hashanah*: This is the Jewish New year that is a time of joy and celebration but also of reflection and learning. It takes place in the 7th month of the Jewish year.
16. *Schemini*: A holy day connected to the spiritual features of Sukkot
17. *Schochet*: Translated from Hebrew means ritual slaughterer.
18. *Shabbat*: A day of rest and seventh day of the week in Judaism
19. *Shabbat*: This is a day devoted to God through religious activities weekly, and it is the most important of all Jewish holy days
20. *Shofar*: A musical instrument made from a ram's horn
21. *Simchat Torah*: A Jewish festival celebrating the completion of the annual cycle of readings of the Torah
22. *Sukkot*: A Jewish festival celebrating the final harvest and wandering in the desert
23. *Synagogue*: A synagogue is a Jewish house of prayer. Synagogues have a large place for prayer, and may also have smaller rooms for study and sometimes a social hall and offices
24. *Tabernacle*- A place of dwelling of God
25. *Tishrei*- The first month of the Jewish year
26. *Torah*: The complete body of Jewish teachings and law
27. *Yom Kippur*: The Day of Atonement in the Jewish calendar

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRES: Key Informants

Key Informant 1: Grown up in Kochi

1. Tell us about your childhood in Kochi
2. When did you first meet the Jews (circumstance) what was it like?
3. Did you continually meet them or was it only on rare occasions?
4. Why did you usually meet them?
5. When did the Jews start leaving? When did you notice they were migrating?
6. Do you remember any changes that occurred over time after they left? What kind?
7. Did their departure affect Kochi or Mattancherry in anyway?
8. What would you say was unique about their lifestyle (culture, social, religious)?
9. Were they major contributors to society through their businesses?
10. If you had to describe their identity as a foreign community in India, how would you?

Key Informant 2: Own businesses in Jew Town *(to be identified on-field)*

1. How long have you been in Kochi? Why did you decide to start your business there (if they shifted to Kochi)?
2. When was the first time you had an encounter with the Paradesi Jews, if you had any and what was it like?
3. What were your other meetings like?
4. When did you notice they were emigrating and how?
5. Did their departure affect your business/the economy of Mattancherry?
6. What kind of changes occurred when they left?

7. Did their departure affect Kochi as a whole or just Mattancherry?
8. Were they important contributors in any way to your business as well as others?
9. Were they major contributors to society through their businesses?
10. We heard that most of them sold their businesses when they left. Do you know what happened to them?

Key Informant 3: Conducted research on the Kochi Jews (*have contacted them, waiting for response*)

1. Why did you decide to research about the Paradesi Jews of Kochi?
2. When did you start researching about them?
3. What were your most prominent findings?
4. What aspects of the community did you conduct your research on?
5. Did you get to meet them in person?
6. What are your thoughts on them as a foreign community?
7. Can you please help us in collecting their life stories?
8. Can you please provide us with any insights with regard to our fieldwork?

INTERVIEW GUIDE: Participants

1. Childhood

- Birthplace
- Education

2. Family Background

- Brief about their Families
- When did they come to Kochi
- Family occupation

3. Occupations

- What do they do for a living presently

4. Experience of growing up in Kochi

- Their relationship with the other children or people living there.
- Their experience of settling down in Kochi

5. Why did they choose to stay in Kochi during the migration?

- Choices they had to make for their decision to stay back
- Were they happy/sad with their decision to stay back

6. Experience of being part of a different community than the others

- Experience of the behaviors of other communities towards them
- Any clash of religious beliefs amongst communities?

7. Influence of Mattancherry on the Jewish community

- Any changes in the community after coming to Mattancherry?

- Did they adopt any beliefs or other religious practices after coming to Kochi.

8. Significance of the synagogue to them

- How much value does the synagogue hold to the Jews?
- How was it built and any difficulties faced while building it?

9. Relationship with the other remaining Jews

- Their current relationship with the other remaining Jews

10. Practicing their communal rituals in Kochi

- Any challenges or difficulties faced while practicing their religious ceremonies in Mattancherry?
- Any kind of objection by other communities?
- Similarities and differences with those practiced in Israel
- Local influence
- Any practices from Kochi adopted in Israel?

11. Do they feel uncomfortable being interviewed/Under the microscope?

- Their experience of being interviewed so often by different people
- How they feel about being interviewed

12. Future of the Community

- Their views about the future of the Jews in Mattancherry

