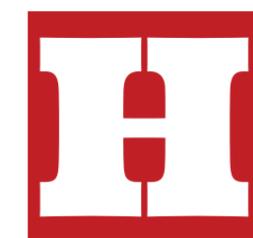




Shabbos Shoes and Jewish Rues IN COCHIN

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan

The shul on Jew Town Road was locked and the one on Market Road was hidden behind a tropical fish store, but that didn't deter us from discovering remnants of the rich heritage of the Jews of Cochin in faraway India. Today their descendants have become Israeli, but we wanted a firsthand view of this ancient kehillah on the Malabar Coast



How many Jewish communities managed to flourish for well over 1,000 years, and then, after centuries of prosperity, picked up en masse and moved to Eretz Yisrael – and not because of intolerance, discrimination, or external political pressure, but out of a sense of religious fervor? One such *kehillah* is the Jewish community of Cochin, India.

In the years following Indian independence from Britain in 1947 and the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, most of the Cochin Jews immigrated to Israel; but as we were planning our upcoming trip to India, we wanted to search out what remains of their original community on the tropical Malabar Coast. And so we made contact with several Cochin Jews living in Israel, who told us we were in luck with our timing: It seems the Cochin Jews in Israel get together once a decade to celebrate their communal aliyah, and their 60th anniversary celebration, scheduled to

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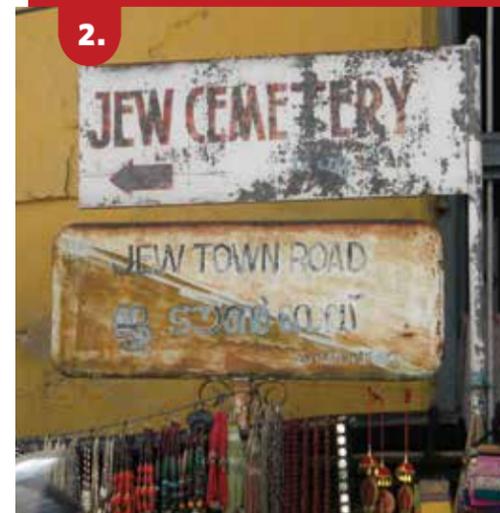
take place in Moshav Taoz, about 15 minutes from where we live, was to happen a few weeks hence.

We of course attended, and it was a joyous — and quite an amazing — celebration of the successful integration of their community. From old to young, spanning all segments of the Israeli population, they gathered from all corners of the country, with music, skits, and lots of camaraderie. And that's where we got our first glimpse of the community's interesting, if not unusual, customs. For example, there were unique Cochin *kippot*, or "*topis*" as they call them — of many different colors on display. The *kehillah* once had a tradition of wearing a different colored *topi* for each holiday: festive white on Rosh Hashanah, plain white on Yom Kippur, shades of green on Succos, shades of red on Simchas Torah, blue on Pesach, and yellow/orange for Shavuot.

Shoe-In The reunion was fun, and gave us an incentive to continue our research. And so our next stop was Moshav Nevatim, located in the Negev just east of Be'er Sheva. (Nevatim is probably best known for the large air force base located nearby.) The moshav's shul is a replica of one in Cochin, including the original style *bimah*. The moshav also houses the Cochin Jewish Heritage Center, which we were shown around by Miri, the center's very knowledgeable director.

She briefed us on many of the unique customs of the community. Their most significant holiday is Simchas Torah, for which they build a special platform known as a *manara*. Their weddings are three-week-long affairs and a boy under the age of bar mitzvah reads the *kesubah*. And among their most unusual customs are their special Shabbos shoes. These shoes, called *paduka* or *methiyadi* in the local Malayalam language, consist of nothing more than a sole plus a peg that goes between the big toe and the second toe, and that is all that keeps it in place. These shoes are India's oldest and most quintessential footwear, which the Jews then adopted for a holy purpose. They would wear the *paduka* on Shabbos in order to prevent taking large steps and running, a questionable practice in Shabbos observance. We were looking forward to our trip to Cochin and had hopes of buying some of these unique Shabbos shoes for ourselves. (While in India we didn't succeed in finding them, but one of the contacts we made while there found a pair after we returned and sent them to us.)

The Cochin Jews trace their roots at the least back to the 12th century — and some believe the original community goes all the way back to the time of Shlomo Hamelech. For at least the last several generations, the Cochin Jewish community has been in two cities (Cochin and Ernakulam) and three suburbs (Parur, Chendamangalam, and Mala). Our plan was to travel



1. CARRIED AWAY The suspended matzah was used to mark the *eiruv* in the Jewish towns, but while the Jews left half a century ago, the matzah is still hanging on

2. LOOKING FOR SIGNS This is where the Jews lived, worked, and prayed in the Ernakulam neighborhood. Would there be anyone to give us a tour?

3. FIRST SHACHARIS Babu has been guarding the old Kadavumbagam Synagogue since the Jews left in 1972. There was no minyan this morning, but we had a *mezuman*

there and see the places for ourselves. But our contacts in Israel told us that the few remaining Jews in Cochin, all busy individuals, are not keen on hosting every tourist that comes to visit. With a lot of arm-twisting we finally succeeded in establishing contact with an older local Jewish man who agreed to help us out. The best-laid plans do not always come to fruition, though, and upon arriving in Cochin our contact said he was "too busy" and we were left to fend for ourselves.

Armed only with the names of the streets (Jew Town Road and Market Road) that housed the two shuls that are still standing in Ernakulam, where we were staying, we headed out at 7 p.m. to explore — and the *siyata d'Shmaya* that comes with our halachic adventuring didn't fail us this time either. Although it was well into evening, it was still hot outside, and the town was hopping. The first shul we reached was the Tekkumbagam, located on Jew Town Road not far from Market Road. It looked like an absolute *churvah*, and was gated shut. The phone numbers posted on the clearly old sign were useless. The next day we did manage to get hold of the phone number for the only member of the Jewish community who could open the shul, and he was more than willing to grant us access. However, his business schedule and our visiting schedule were out of sync, and there was never an overlapping window in which we could see the shul together. Hopefully on our next trip.

Fish Tank Barricade We next headed to Market Road, on which Kadavumbagam Synagogue was supposedly located. We didn't see any signs for a shul, but we did soon see a "Na Na Nachman" sticker stuck on the outside of a tropical fish and plant store. As luck would have it, the owner, Elias Josephai, was closing the store, which is in front of the old shul. We asked in Hebrew if we could see the shul and he was more than happy to take us back in and show us around.

In order to get to the shul, one first has to pass through his store full of fish tanks, potted plants, and supplies for both. We then crossed a small open area and entered into a rundown, dusty, but still clearly magnificent shul.

No one knows for sure exactly when Jews first settled in Ernakulam or when the first shul was built here, but it was at least 500 years ago. The present structure dates to the late 16th or early 17th century. Its front is set back from the busy Market Road and the shul likely once had a large courtyard prior to the construction of the building now housing Josephai's store. The front of the shul had a room that was used as a social hall, and the rooms above once housed a Jewish school. All this rapidly changed when the community moved to Israel en masse.

Sometime in the early 1970s the shul held its last minyan and the Torahs too made aliyah to Nevatim — but in a sad irony, those scrolls that came all the way

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from India were stolen in Eretz Yisrael by Bedouin. This was followed by a damaging storm in Ernakulam and then a robbery of many of the remaining Jewish items. Thus, in 1979, Josephai, one of the last remaining Jews in the town, took responsibility for the building and in 1985 set up his business in a place that enabled him to keep an eye on it.

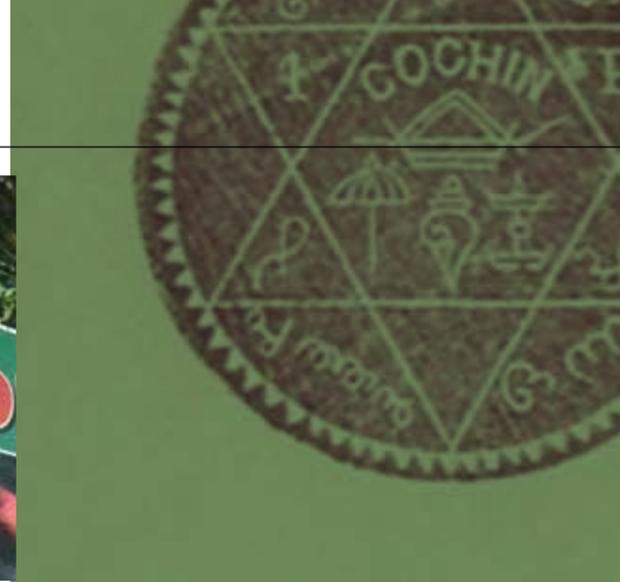
Babu, as Josephai is nicknamed, invited us back to his house, where we joined him and his wife, a Bene Israel from Mumbai. He reminisced about the community and sang some Cochini Jewish melodies for us. He recollected about the old days when the shul was full and how he would bring the Havdalah light home on Motzaei Shabbos. In Cochin each family would light a candle from the *ner tamid* in shul and take it home to use for Havdalah. He then wistfully told us about the difficulties of Jewishly educating his children in modern-day Cochin. One daughter is now in school in Mumbai and the other in the Technion.

The following morning, we went back to the shul with Babu, where we sang Shacharis to an audience of none. Babu told us that other than him, this was the first davening in the shul since 1972. Naturally we started looking around and walked up the stairs to the women's section.

Here we saw *in situ* what we had seen and heard about in Moshav Nevatim, regarding the Cochini Torah reading. Every Cochini shul has the exact same architecture — in the back of the shul is a balcony, and on top of the stairs, before the *mechitzah*, there is a section of balcony protruding slightly over the shul and containing a table. On Shabbos and holidays the Cochinites take the Torah upstairs to the special Torah-reading *bimah* and *lein* from up there. When we asked Babu why, he said, "Why should the women not hear the Torah reading as well?" But no one knows when or where this custom originated.

Walking into the women's section, we were greeted with the type of decor we're always happy to see — piles of dusty old boxes and broken furniture. This is where treasures can sometimes be found. Sure enough Babu showed us large glass globes, originally blown in Europe, which were used to light the shul, and he graciously offered us a few as gifts. Then we spied a small cabinet full of papers written in Tamil, including deeds to property owned by the community over the years. He asked us to take a pile of these back to the museum in Nevatim, which we of course gladly did. Back down in the main sanctuary, Babu showed us a large safe, where the community members used to store their valuables.

Another Fifty We exited the shul and strolled around the corner with Babu, but it was obvious that his mind had drifted back 40 or 50 years. He began to describe for us the side entrances that once existed to accommodate the crowds. He named the families that had lived in the houses on that street, which



4. FLOWERS IN FRONT We had to pass through the nursery and tropical fish store to get to the shul, but the Na Nach sticker meant we weren't far away

5. SHADES OF BROWN While the Paradesi Synagogue had its years of segregation, today it's a repository for treasures — including this tablet taken from the even older Kochangadi shul that was built in 1344



had once been all Jewish. As we walked, he was reliving the past and suddenly smiled as he relayed how the Jews would help each other in business.

He explained that when a non-Jew would walk into a Jewish shop and start to negotiate a price, another Jew would come in acting as a customer and start negotiating too, thus hiking up the price. The other Jew would say in Hebrew something like "*od chamishim*," meaning you can get away with charging another 50. Eventually the non-Jews caught on and to this day, although not understanding the Hebrew, when they come into a friend's store and see some haggling going on, they'll say "*od chamishim*," pulling off the same trick.

We arranged a driver for the next day to take us to see the remnants of the old Cochini shuls in the countryside. These synagogues are all built with the same pattern — an entrance with a walkway to the main building, a low doorway that obligates one to bow upon entering, and a long room above the walkway that often served as the school. Then there's the main sanctuary with a *bimah* in the middle, *aron kodesh* in front, and a set of stairs in the back going up to the Torah-reading *bimah* and women's section. Today all of these shuls have been taken over by the government and restored as tourist attractions and museums.

The first shul we visited was the Parur Synagogue. The *aron kodesh* was spectacularly hand-carved, but, mysteriously, clearly new. It turns out that the original *bimah* and *aron* were brought to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1992 and can be seen there in a fully restored, spectacular Indian Cochini shul; in their

place in Parur, reconstructions have been installed, as part of a restoration project of the shul building that began five years ago.

The synagogue, located on Jew Street, was built in 1615 CE, but local tradition says it was built on top of a previous synagogue from the year 1165 CE. There is a fascinating Hebrew inscription on the wall of the shul, date unknown but clearly many centuries old, that reads: "He who dwelt in rock and bush / Let him live for His sake in my house / Let there be light in the House of Jacob / Alas, darkened in my exile / Said David Jacob's son / Renowned noble seed of Kastiel / At the completion of the holy sanctuary. May it be His will that the Redeemer come." There are several old tombstones (not their original location) in the courtyard, including the oldest known Indian Hebrew writing, the 13th century tombstone of Sarah bas Yisrael.

Our next stop was the Chendamangalam Synagogue. (Try saying that five times fast.) Jewish tradition dates the original structure to the 15th century; archaeologists who renovated the then-decrepit building in 2005 believe that it was originally constructed in 1565 and repaired in 1621. When we went up to the women's section, we were surprised to see what looked like a matzah hanging from a string. Although the shul is now a museum and there is no Jewish community, a Jewish woman from Cochin comes each year to hang a matzah as was done in years gone by when that was the communal *eiruv*.

Alligator Alert We wanted to see what the cemeteries looked like, so we drove out into an overgrown area. On the way to the remnants of the Jewish cemetery, our

A Thousand Years in Cochin

driver told us about the death practices of another Indian minority. The Parsis came to India from Persia (Iran) about a thousand years ago with their Zoroastrian faith. Zoroastrianism once dominated Iran, but due to the spread of Islam, a large group of its adherents fled persecution in Iran in the 10th century and settled in India. Today, fewer than 70,000 remain in India. The Parsis have an unusual method of disposal of the dead. They believe that burying or cremating the dead pollutes the ancient elements of nature, and they therefore take a corpse to designated towers or simply leave it on the roof of a building, where it is exposed to the sun and is then devoured by vultures.

After that lesson, we felt fortunate that even after so many decades and centuries, we could still visit the marked graves of our brethren. Eventually, we arrived at the Jewish cemetery to see just a few stone markers in the overgrowth and were told to watch out for snakes.

But then as we started pulling branches away to expose the monuments, our local driver mentioned very casually, “Watch out for alligators.”

We turned around and smiled at him; it sounded like a good joke. “Are you serious?”

He looked back and said, “Dead serious.”

That ended our brief visit to the cemetery.

We next made our way to Synagogue Lane in the quarter of Old Cochin known as Jew Town, to the Paradesi Synagogue, also known as the Mattancherry Synagogue. The small street used to have three active shuls, but today there is only one, and it is more a popular tourist site than a house of prayer. Constructed in 1567, it is one of the oldest continuously active shuls. (The 400th anniversary celebration was attended by the Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.)

This shul is the repository for some of the remaining treasures of the community. It is here that the famed copper plates given to Joseph Rabban — the 13th-century Jewish merchant chief who was granted land rights — are kept. On the outside of this synagogue is a tablet taken from the ancient Kochangadi Synagogue built in 1344, stating that the building was constructed in the year 5105 as “an abode for the spirit of G-d.” In the *aron* is a 22-carat Kiddush cup that was used at every Cochini wedding for centuries, as well as on Motzaei Yom Kippur and on Simchas Torah.

Kochi, as Cochin is now officially called, is located in the Indian state of Kerala and is one of India’s largest seaports and home to the International Pepper Exchange and Indian spice board. Throughout history that area has been an important port, and that may have played a role in the Jews originally settling the region. But the origins of the Cochini Jewish community are not entirely clear. What is certain is that the history of this unique *kehillah* stretches far back in time, as evidenced by the famous writing on thousand-year-old copper plates given to the community by a local ruler, granting the Jews certain rights.

One version of their history dates their arrival to the time of Shlomo Hamelech, whose sailors came to the region as traders. A first-century arrival is not implausible either; Jews were involved in Roman trade with India. And there is evidence that Jews in both Bavel and Israel were aware of India in the Talmudic period. The first physical evidence of Jews in the region is an ancient copper plate from 849 in which the king grants certain rights to the founder of the city’s Syrian Christian community and it is signed and witnessed by four Jews.

Another piece of evidence are two famous copper plates written in the ancient Tamil language, recording a charter granted to the Jews by the then-ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varma, placing them under the rule of a Jewish “king,” Joseph Rabban. The Jews were also granted certain privileges relating to taxes and communal affairs. In 1344, Joseph Azzar, a later successor to Joseph Rabban, built the first shul outside of Cranganore, in Cochin. Over time, other Jews continued to move southward toward Cochin and by 1565, the rest of the Jews followed. The Rajah of Cochin gave the Jews land next to his palace and in 1567 they built a neighborhood called “Jew Town,” featuring the Paradesi Synagogue — both are still in their original location.

For centuries life had been good for the Jews of the Malabar Coast, yet it was inevitable that the expansion of European colonialism would have an effect on the Cochini Jewish community. Portugal, which had initiated its own Inquisition in the very late 15th century, occupied the Malabar area around 1500. The situation for the Jews consequently deteriorated and in 1545 the first Jesuit missionary to India wrote to the Portuguese king begging to be allowed to establish the Inquisition in India. These events were the impetus for the final move of the Jews from Cranganore to Cochin, which was not initially occupied by the Portuguese.

The 165 years of the Portuguese occupation were the darkest period for these Jews. The occupiers destroyed whatever was left of the Jewish principality of Cranganore and sacked Jew Town in Cochin. These events are also what likely destroyed any historical documents of the ancient Jewish community.

The liberation of the area by the Dutch in 1661 restored freedom to the Jews, and created a tight relationship between the Cochini and the Amsterdam Jewish communities. From a detailed census, we know that there were four shuls and 128 families in the city of Cochin; one shul and 110 well-to-do Jews in Palur; and one shul and ten families in Parur. Yet all the Jewish holy books had been destroyed following the dark period of Portuguese control, and the arrival of a *seforim* shipment from Amsterdam on 15 Av in 1690 was celebrated as a holiday for many generations.

After the Dutch, the British ruled the territory from 1795 until Indian independence in 1947.

Black and White There is a sad and unpleasant story revolving around this shul. When Spanish and Portuguese Jewish exiles arrived in the 16th century, they initially got along with the local Cochinis, but with time, an enmity developed on the side of the Portuguese. They took over the Paradesi Synagogue and began to treat the Cochinis as second-class citizens. It is from here that the synagogue gets its name, *paradesi* meaning “foreigner” in Malayalam and Hindi.

Eventually, the synagogue developed three classes of Jews. The “white” or Paradesi Jews, who were mostly recent arrivals and descendants of Sephardim from Spain and the Netherlands, were full members. The “black” or Malabari Jews, the original Jewish residents of the area who had many of their own shuls, were allowed to daven but were not treated as equals. The third group, the “brown”

meshuchrarim, supposedly descendants of freed slaves, were required to sit on the floor or on the outside steps.

The earliest mention of this infighting comes from a question sent to the Radvaz in Egypt in 1520, where the letter writer described a community of 900 families with caste-like divisions and wanted to know if they could marry each other. The Radvaz said yes. *Tzitz Eliezer* quotes the 19th-century Jerusalem emissary Rav Yaakov Sapir as describing “white” and “black” Cochini Jews. He reported that on Shabbos the “white” Jews davened Shacharis with Sephardic *nusach*, pronunciation, and tunes, and then davened Mussaf as Ashkenazim.

By the middle of the 20th century these divisions had started to erode, as the Jews of Cochin made their way to Israel. Today there are but a handful of Jews residing in Jew Town, surrounded

by non-Jewish merchants hawking Judaica to the tourists. Another 20 or 30 Jews still live in Ernakulam, and the only shul still functioning is the Paradesi Synagogue.

So where are all the Jews from the Malabar Coast today? Between 1952 and 1954 the vast majority of them moved to Israel. It is estimated that there are about 15,000 Cochini Jews living in Israel, their aliyah a paradigm of successful group immigration. Originally, the vast majority settled in moshavim such as Nevatim, Taoz, Mesilat Tzion, Aviezer, and Kfar Yuval, all of which once had entirely Cochini populations. The subsequent generations have integrated into all walks of Israeli life. Their story is like a *midrashic* fable: The community — the people, the synagogues, all that was sacred — has been transplanted back into the Land of Israel, in preparation for the final redemption. ●

