

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

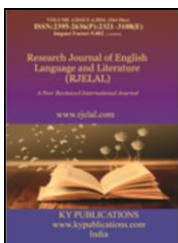
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

TRAVEL AND HISTORY: EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REINSTATING THE JEWISH REMAINS OF KERALA

ARYA M. P

Guest Faculty, Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara, Kerala

E-mail: aryamp3@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Travel has always served the purpose of intermingling of communities across the world, leading to acculturation and assimilation. The reasons of travel may have been different, but in a postcolonial world, they have led to multicultural societies and shared histories. A regional example of such a presence is the Jewish association that places like Kochi, Mala, and Chendamangalam (all in Kerala) render in their history and culture. This research paper explores how travel has led to the establishment of the strong Jewish presence in Kerala's history. It traces how the Jewish connection has shaped, and has been shaped by their settlement and life in Kerala. Using ethnography as the method of research, the paper's theoretical background is based on Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" and Salman Rushdie's idea of "imaginary homelands". The major findings of the research throw light upon how the negligence of Jewish remains in Kerala has caused them to disintegrate; and return to their roots in the West. The attempts at conserving the existing remains, protests against the possible destruction of such cultural habitats by corporate forces, and the reaction of the Jewish community to such destruction are investigated. The scope of the research lies in revealing why the preservation of such historical remains (that travel and trade has endowed the postcolonial societies with) are important in carving out a world whose history has moved from mere 'national identities' to that of a "world state", as proposed by H. G. Wells.

Keywords: Travel, Exile, Assimilation, Acculturation, Imagined Communities, Imaginary Homelands

©KY PUBLICATIONS

The history of the Jewish race stands a miraculous example of a community's capability at survival. No other community would have been so fiercely hunted down and tormented in the history of the world. In the case of the Jews, it dates back right from their Hebrew origins in the BCs. Beginning from their forefather whom the Bible celebrates as Abraham, to the present day, the Jews have constantly suffered persecution at the hands of the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and European

Christians over the centuries. They have been victims of brutal anti-Semitism, but survived as victors, be it by devising Zionism or in winning over a nation for themselves post the Second World War, say Israel. Even in the contemporary times, the Jewish community has not been spared off the claim to a peaceful social life, as is evident from the brewing Palestine-Israel conflict, and Israel's fluctuating stances at the U.N.

The major reasons behind the never-ending atrocities that the Jews have had to endure have been their unequivocal intellect, creativity, and devotion to the one God and his Torah that they hold forth. Ever since the establishment of the Nobel Prize, around one by fifth have been awarded to members of the Jewish community. Be it spheres of science, humanities, art, social commitment, or any notable area of human interest, the Jewish presence has been far from negligible. Many civilisations that tortured them have disappeared without trace from history (Romans and Greeks, to quote examples), and many dictators who murdered millions of Jews have been wiped out (Hitler, for instance). But the Jewish presence in the world has remained stable, even though they account for less than half per cent of the total world population.

Travel and exile have been two defining features of the Jewish life. Travel may be considered as the consequence of the exile the Jews have faced due to the constant attacks of their initial settlements in Jerusalem and the surrounding territories. At various junctures in history, travel has served to be a necessity forced upon the Jews, rather than a choice they made for themselves. The Jewish travels took place mostly at two phases, once when they had to leave behind their Holy Land, and secondly their return to their Holy Land (the present Israel). At the first phase, travel became the force that scattered the Jewish population all over the world; in the second phase, it gathered them back together in one faith and dream of being united with their God. Anyhow, the Jewish exiles and ensuing travels have resulted in the Jewish Diaspora settled in the United States, Australia, Latin America, Canada, and various parts of Africa and Asia.

One of the famous Jewish settlements of the Diaspora belongs to those in various parts of Kerala, especially Kochi, due to the trade relations that linked Kochi to Europe through the ancient port of Muziris. Right from the time of the Babylonian exile in the BCs, Jews have found Kerala, particularly places like Kochi, Chendamangalam, and Mala as their abode. Further exiles and the resulting travel of the Jews have opened a continuing inflow of the Jewish population to these places over the centuries. An exact date regarding the origins of the

Jewish settlements in Kerala has not been traced. However, the allocation of land by the then *Chera* king Bhaskara Ravi Verma Perumaal to the Jewish merchant Joseph Rabban in tenth century AD, and the entry of the Jews from Spain to Kochi in 1568 are notable instances of Jewish settlement in Kerala.

What is striking about the Jewish settlement in Kerala is their acceptance by the rulers and the people of Kochi, which led to their assimilation and acculturation into a Keralite way of living. Benedict Anderson, in his work on nationalism titled *Imagined Communities*, suggests that a nation is a socially constructed community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. In the case of the Jewish roots in Kerala, a feeling of belonging to the 'national community' has been generated in the Jewish Diaspora by the timely assistance provided by the rulers. The rulers recognised the Jewish charm at business and creativity, thereby providing them ample atmosphere that enabled them to feel part of the native community, and not be separated as a minority race.

Though basically merchants who maintained their Jewish identities, the Jewish Diaspora did contribute in their own means to the economic and cultural development of the Princely States/Provinces of which they were a part of. With the help of the Keralite rulers, the Jews established their synagogues (place of worship), cemeteries, and Jewish streets that defined and propagated their beliefs and ritualistic practices, though they were in a land alien to their origins. There even exists historical evidence of the allocation of a Jewish teacher to teach Hebrew (official language of the Jews) to the Jewish children who attended the public educational institutions in Kochi. The Jewish intellect and commercial success through overseas trade brought forth economic stability to Kochi, leading to their assimilation into the economic participation leading to the 'nation's/State's' growth.

The Jewish community's acculturation into the Keralite society was also aided by the social acceptance that the multifarious society of Kochi/Mala/Chendamangalam offered them. The Malayali writer Sethu reminisces in an article

titled "Marichavarude Smarakangal; Jeevikunnavarude Vishvasangal" ("Tombstones of the Dead; Memories of the Living") about a childhood spent in the midst of a religious conglomeration of friends at Chendamangalam, among whom the Jewish presences were strong. The sharing that happened in such societies extended to the food habits, tolerance and promotion of each others' festivities, dressing patterns, and cultures at large. Though it has been a process of centuries, the Jewish assimilation and acculturation into the Keralite society was one complete process; when the unprecedented change came forth in the Jewish history across the world.

This state of a multifarious, but peaceful co-existence continued till the end of the Second World War, when the state of Israel was set up as a permanent settlement for the Jewish population across the world. This move was a compensation of sorts for the Jewish community that had suffered huge dislocations and were scattered across the world due to the continuous attacks and exiles. Its immediate cause was triggered by the death of around six million Jews at the hands of Adolf Hitler. Israel thus became a modern equivalent of the ancient Caanan, the land Jehovah promised His people according to the Torah (the holy book of the Jews). This initiated a second phase of travel for the Jews, this time a return to the 'promised holy land'. This happened in the mid-1950s, and amidst apprehensions about seeking an unknown refuge, while leaving behind the place of their business, settlement, and by now, the culture to which they assimilated.

It is by selling their residences and property to the local population of Kochi that the Jews left for Israel. But they ensured by the Indian law of the times that their synagogue and cemetery be protected as they were, and assigned the local governmental bodies to take care of the repair and maintenance of the same. The synagogues and cemeteries of Chendamangalam, Kochi, and Mala remain the monuments that silently speak of the Jewish life and their established roots that were once so much part of the Keralite culture as is any other community's place in its history.

History and culture are inextricable factors that maintain a status of inter-relation. A nation's identity is defined by its history that is in turn shaped by its culture. Borrowing Anderson's perspective about a nation's definition, any community that has been part of a country's geography and has significantly contributed to the growth (economic/cultural) of the country may be counted as belonging to the nation itself. Hence, the Jewish presence in Kerala is of ultimate importance; their synagogues and cemeteries speak of how an originally alien race has helped maintain the multicultural societies that India has always accommodated.

Though the state government initially took measures to safeguard these Jewish monuments in Kerala, surveys conducted in the years post-2010 and the ethnographic studies made indicate a twist in this decision. 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. All of these attempts at manhandling the Jewish monuments have been observed as politically driven motives to achieve electoral victories, by infusing the idea of development and progress in the minds of people. The only difference here is that those dislocated are not the population, but their memories.

Salman Rushdie comments about the general political encroachments in his work "Imaginary Homelands". He writes, "Redescribing a world is the first necessary step towards changing it. And particularly at times when the State takes reality into its own hands, and sets about distorting it, altering the past to fit its present needs, then the making of the alternative realities of art, including the novel of memory, becomes politicised" (5). Though Rushdie speaks particularly about the writers' resistance through writing, this could be applied to any individual in a civilised community who stands up to safeguard history from the hands of political and corporate hands that endeavour to destruct its heritage. Rushdie also quotes Milan Kundera's statement that writers and politicians will always be at odds with one another.

In the case of the Jewish remains in Kerala, there have been strong resistance from the local population of Kochi, Mala, and Chendamangalam against their encroachment by political forces. They have been guided and aided by intellectuals, officials, and writers like Professor M. G. S. Narayanan, Dr. M. G. Sashibhooshan, Sethu, and K. Venu. Citing the partial destruction of the Jewish tombs in Mala, Prof. Narayanan writes in an article titled "Samarakangal Ormakalaanu Thakarkaruth" (Monuments are Memories; Do Not Destroy Them):

Destroying the Jewish monuments in Kerala is an insult not just to the Jewish heritage, but to the history and heritage of Kerala as well. We are, in fact, questioning the Indian legacy of multiculturalism through these acts of destruction. We are thus spoiling the strong bonds that we ought to maintain with the Jews who have emigrated from India to Israel. (Narayanan 13)

The Jewish remains have presently been saved from the hold of the corporate forces that had once aimed, and even attempted to turn them into dust for political motives. But currently they have turned into becoming sites of dumping waste. This has been the result of the negligence of the local government and unaware citizens.

There needs to be an attempt at analysing the need to preserve such monuments that speak of Indian cultures, and history. The latest trend in terrorism has been the destruction of historic monuments, as the world witnessed in the case of Palmyra in Syria. The intention of such terrorist and insurgent groups is to erase the history of the world, and re-write them with an alternate history that protects only the interests of those groups. The Jewish remains in Kerala are an evidence for the highly civilised accommodative spirit of the Indian culture and history, which points towards the need to protect them.

The synagogue at Kochi is an example of how Jewish remains can be turned into centres of tourist attraction. This can be achieved not by destroying them or converting them into something else, but by maintaining them as monuments protected by the government and taken care of in their original

splendour that the Jews considered them to have possessed. The Cochin synagogue attracts the attention of an international tourism spot, aided by the government. But the same attention needs to be provided for the Jewish cemeteries and synagogues in the other parts of Kerala, especially Mala, and Chendamangalam. Only by preserving such monuments can India hold her head up in reinstating the tolerant and progressive spirit of the Indian culture in the international scenario. It is travel that has endowed us with such a varied culture and history. To preserve what has been endowed is the responsibility of a cultured society that shares its credit with the foregone Jews.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2010. Print.
- Narayanan, M. G. S. "Samarakangal Ormakalaanu Thakarkaruth." *Mathrubhoomi* 20 Sept. 2015: 8-13. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism: 1981-1991*. London: Penguin Books, 1992. Print.
- Sethu. "Marichavarude Smarakangal; Jeevikunnavarude Vishvasangal." *Mathrubhoomi* 20 Sept. 2015: 14-17. Print.

A Brief Biography of the Corresponding Author

Arya M. P. is a research scholar hailing from Ernakulam in Kerala, India. She has completed her graduation in English Literature from Union Christian College, Aluva, Kerala. She pursued her Masters' degree in English with Communication Studies from Christ University, Bangalore, Karnataka. She did her M. Phil. in English Studies from The Gandhigram Rural Institute- Deemed University, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu. Her area of research is ecocriticism, with a special focus on ecospirituality. Interested in travelling, and writing, she is a bibliophile who prefers ethnographic studies and action research as her areas of interest. Currently she is employed as a lecturer in the Department of English, Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara, Kerala.
