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MUZIRIS, THE CRADLE OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS

The St. Thomas Christians, known in Malayalam as “Marthoma Kristianikal,” is arguably the oldest known Christian community in Kerala, (and the second oldest in the world, the first being that of Alexandria, established by St. Mark the evangelist in 29 AD, and was subsumed in the Coptic Church that got established in Egypt and the Abyssinian empire), dating back to the legendary landing of St. Thomas at Azhikode, a village on the bank of river Periyar, about six kilometres from Kodungallur. Though there have been doubts raised-- for the first time since the 18th century in European intellectual circles--as to the veracity of the St. Thomas connection to St. Thomas Christians, mainly because they were described also as Syrian Christians or Suriani Kristianikal, because of the liturgy they followed in Suriani, or the East Syrian language and the origin story related to St. Thomas got subsumed in it. However, as modern historians like Marc Bloch and D.D. Kosambi have established that the people themselves are the most reliable primary source, much more than the evidence offered by

records, as argued by Dr. Pius Malekandathil, Professor in History, JNU, New Delhi, in his paper “Debate on the Apostolate of St. Thomas in Kerala” posted on July 20, 2020, in the website <https://www.nasrani.net/>, the very existence of the people or the community of Christians named after St. Thomas, itself is proof of the St. Thomas connection.

Within the Muziris Heritage Project area, there are two major shrines directly connected to St. Thomas—the Mar Thoma Pontifical Shrine at Azhikode (Kodungallur), and the Kottakkavu Forane Church in the centre of the municipal town of North Paravur. “Pontifical” means, “recognised and approved by the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church.” “Forane” means a church which is at the head of several parishes, as assigned by a bishop in charge of an Episcopal See. The full official name of the church is, “Kottakkavu Mar Thoma Syro-Malabar Pilgrim Church.” Obviously, this church is a pilgrim centre attracting St. Thomas Christians from all over the world, as one of the earliest churches founded by St. Thomas. This church is also known as an Apostolic Church, since it was founded by St. Thomas, the Apostle of Christ, and fell within his Apostolate, or area of Apostolic activity. In the famous ancient song known as Ramaban Paattu, it is mentioned that the Saint reached Kottakkayal (Kottakkavu), where he preached the sacred teachings of Christ, and converted 1770 of the local citizens into Christianity. Hence, the traditional belief that the Christian community here dates back to 52 AD, the year of founding of the



church by St. Thomas, which makes this the second oldest Christian community in the world, after the Christian community of Alexandria, founded in 29 AD as already stated.

There is a very deep-rooted, but flawed belief, that St. Thomas had converted Namboothiri Brahmins, making them “high caste” Christians, which notion many traditional families cherish even today. The historical fact is that Namboothiri Brahmins arrived in Kerala along with the mass migration of Brahmins to south India in the 7th and 8th centuries AD (Kesavan Veluthattu, Brahmin Settlements in Kerala: Historical Studies, Calicut, 1978, pp.21-31, as quoted by Pius Melekandathil in his essay). The first communities that St. Thomas mixed with and preached the Kingdom of God to, would certainly have been the Jews in the enclaves in the Muziris area. We still have standing synagogues in North Paravur, Chendaman-galam and Mala—the most ancient in the entire region, with memories of the Jewish diaspora beginning in the 4th century BCE.

“According to popular Christian tradition, St Thomas arrived on the Malabar coast and was invited to the wedding of the daughter of the king of Cranganore(Kodungallur). There, St Thomas sang a Hebrew bridal song which none of the company could understand, except for a Jewish flute girl. After the wedding, St Thomas retired to the Jewish quarter in Cranganore, and took up residence there”(Jussay 1986).

Both the Mar Thoma Pontifical Shrine at Azhikode, Kodungallur, and Kottak-

kavuForane Church at North Paravur, belong to the group known as Ezharappallikal (Seven Churches and a Half Church) believed to have been built by St. Thomas (the ‘built’ part maybe for the very naïve; but these churches and the communities around them are directly connected to the memory of the Apostle, held in place by centuries of tradition). The other five and a half churches are: Niranam, near Tiruvalla, Kollam, in the old seaport area of the present town,

the Apostle, which was brought from Ortona in Italy. Hence, this shrine is very special, and is a centre of attraction for St. Thomas Christians spread out all over the globe. Moreover, this church is marked as the spot where St. Thomas landed and hence, deemed sacred as an invaluable landmark for all the Christians of Kerala and India at large.

Azhikode Mar Thoma Pontifical Shrine.

Kottakkavu Mar Thoma Church also has seen the historical development of the St. Thomas Christian community during the last two millennia. The church houses a Persian Cross, a stone cross carved with inscriptions in the Sassanid Persian Pehlevi script, which is the hallmark of the St. Thomas Christians, and found in St. George’s Orthodox Church, Kadamattam, near Puthencruz, Ruhad’qudishia Syro-Malabar Catholic Church at Muttuchira, two at Knanaya Jacobite ValiyaPally (Big Church) at Kottayam, and at St. Thomas Mount Catholic Church, Madras,attesting to its antiquity.

Two missionaries from Persia, bishops Mar Sabor (Mar Sapir) and Mar Proth (Mar Prot), who landed in

Kollam in 823 AD, had

Built or rebuilt a number of churches in the Apostolic territory St. Thomas had marked. They are believed to have built the second church of Kottakkavu. They were venerated as saints in the St. Thomas Church after their death, and the second church at Kottakkavuwas named after them. The Persian Cross here in the ancient chapel in front of the church, is believed to have been erected by them.

The Kottakkavu Mar Thoma Apostolic Pilgrim Church

Kokkamangalam near Cherthala, Palayoor near Chavakkad, and Nilakkal (Chayal) where the foothills of Sabarimal begin, and the half church or Arappally (also a church ordered to be built by the Arachan or king) at Thiruvithamcode, in the Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu.

In the Azhikode Pontifical Shrine, Kodungallur, there is a relic of St. Thomas, installed for veneration by the public—the bone of the right arm believed to have been of St. Thomas



TRACING THE LAST JEWISH WOMEN IN NORTH PARAVUR



● Dr. Babitha Marina Justin



It was as if by magic I walked into the oldest Jewish tomb in Indian history. It was as if I was coming straight out of a magic movie. Here I was, in search of scintillating stories which were almost entirely or partially erased. It did not look comfortable at all. I understood that I had a task to trace the footsteps around and retrace the steps of women who have walked before me. I also had to make sense of the plethora of her-stories around me. I came to dig around for stories and relive them and write those unwritten, untold, and unsung stories buried with the history of the land.

Those untold stories were palpable around me. I heard them beckoning me, right from my gut, though I was not firmly grounded. I did not know where to begin, and I took a cab and roamed around for a cue. I had no idea how I had to proceed as I could only see the vague traces of footsteps ahead of me; I had to travel far to a past where the women have had not left their written stories behind them, or that is what I thought. They have told their stories to the elements. The wind, earth, water, sky, all resounded with their stories. I had to retrieve them.

Soon, I was standing in front of an old synagogue in Chennamangalam. I knew that I had reached the tipping point. I began my search for the women in Kodungallur. Ironically, the first woman I found was clapped in a casket and

buried under an enormous, bell-shaped tomb. The writing was in Hebrew. I squinted at the Hebrew words engraved on the tomb. Sara Bath Israel, 1269. Sara, the daughter of Israel, 1269. This tomb is perhaps the oldest Hebrew text in India. History took me eight centuries back, and I was itching to push my pen. I witnessed the first sign; I looked at one of the past's dark recesses, where I was trying hard to evince women's lives. The oldest tomb of a Jewish woman stared right in front of me, asking me to disinter her bones and tell her story to the whole world. Who was she? What did she want? How did she live and die? I had no clue.

I had just begun my journey, and this is the journey of no return. So many voices were calling out to me, and I must patiently follow my intuition, listen to every bird song, or the way where the wind led me and walk into the trapdoor of forgotten stories, as if in a trance. Like an oracle, I walked my first steps into a whirlwind of untold tales.

My first research steps in that direction were to look at the history of Jewry in Kerala as a rare piece of information. The information that folklorists, historians and archivists knew for so long but did not become popular. This history did not even find a decent mention in texts books or Kerala's standard cultural symbols. It was something invaluable, antiquated, and exceptional. Jewry in Kerala

and its narrative skeins were woven into our diversity and the secular heredity of our land.

An outstanding scholarship in Kerala's Jewry found its highlights in MGS Narayanan's in-depth study of the eleventh-century Jewish copper plates. His research, *Perumals of Kerala*, remains the fundamental source for all scholarship in Kerala's Jewry. It is quite surprising that, even though the Jews had been a part of Kerala's socio-cultural landscape for almost two thousand years, we have hardly historicised Jewish contributions to Kerala. We can also find that they also seldom become part of the public discourses in Kerala.

We can learn about Jewry in Kerala from various sources like historical documents, trade letters of exchange, royal edicts, and oral narrative systems, like songs and proverbs. Pliny, Periplus, and a word of Tamil origin in the Hebrew Bible mention Muziris as a flourishing port inhabited by people of many ethnicities and religious entities. Jussay believes that it could have been in Solomon's ships that the earliest Jewish settlers reached Kerala's coast.[1] He thought that there were



more Jewish influxes during the conquest of Palestine by Assyrians in the 8th century BC, the Babylonians in the 7th century and the Romans in the 1st century AD.[2]

Another interesting anecdote is the story of St. Thomas reaching the Kerala shore meeting a Jewish girl with a flute.[3] At that time, there were Jewish colonies in Palayur, Pulloot, Madai and Maliankara which are places in and around Muziris. They were so numerous that they seem to have had eighteen synagogues and houses of study.

Almost all Kerala rulers exuded hospitality towards new people, tradespeople, new religions, and religious institutions. The inscriptions on copper plates retrieved from Mattanchery, Chennamangalam and North Paravur are testimonials to the warmth and hospitality extended to the Jewish Diaspora. One of the most crucial documents is the copperplate gifted to the Jewish leader, Joseph Rabban by the Kulashekhara King Bhaskara Ravivarman (962-1021) in the thirty-eighth year (AD 1000) of his rule at his capital Mahodayapuram (Kudungallur). The copper plates are also known as Joothapattayam or Joothasasanakal (the Title Deed of the Jews). These titles included seventy-two rights and benefits and the right to collect tax and travel on a palanquin for perpetuity.[4] With these rights, the Jewish leader secured the title "anchuvannasthanam," a merchant guild's tradesman status[5].

In the thirteenth century, in Ibn Batuta's ten-day expedition in Kerala's backwaters by boat from Calicut, he embarks on a five-day journey to Kunjakiri, which had a Jewish settlement on top of a hill. Historian Jussay identifies Kunjakiri with Chennamangalam.[6] Many travellers, mostly Jews, used the term "Shingly" to denote the place they lived. Therefore, historians call this Ur-Jewish settlement a variation of Changala Azhi corrupted by the European travellers as Shingly, Cingilin, Cingalah, Zinglant.[7] In the sixteenth century, in his account, David Reuben[8] met the King of Portugal, who asked him about the presence of Jews in Kerala. The captain mentioned Shingola, a place that is ten days' walking distance from Calicut, where there were many Jews.

In the seventeenth century, we can infer from "The Song of Evarayi" an intriguing account of Arivalen Evarayi who travelled from Jerusalem to a distant land, Cranganore somewhere in the distant past. The song tells us about the

migration of the Jews traced from Jerusalem through Egypt, Yemen, Persia to Palur, north of Cranganore, and finally to Chennamangalam. There they get permission to build a synagogue. Then as the song goes, the Jews joined the Nairs in a deer-hunt, and they lived in close companionship with each other as the nobility readily accepted them. Evarayi also mentions the fact that there was a closely-knit harmony with their neighbours for three hundred and fifty years. The Jewish social life was built around a local organisation called "yogam," and the Jewish children went to Talmud Torah, for writing, reading and Torah recital which took place on the upper floor of the synagogue. Later, in the twentieth century, Jewish children started attending high school and began attending universities. The Jews quote the Kerala State Education Department memorandum to the Jewish Youth Organisation in Chennamangalam which marked all the Jewish holidays in the departmental calendar and observed them. Saturdays, which were usually working days, were declared as holidays in the calendar.[9]

Where did the Jewish women figure in these narratives? Other than the mention of the Jewish girl with a flute when St. Thomas arrived in Kerala, to the tomb of Sara, the daughter of Israel in 1269, I had no clues left. How can history or the series of her stories leave no footprints behind? Was it because of a lackadaisical approach to her stories historically that silenced her participation in history? Why couldn't I find any traces of her stories interred with the beads and bones of history? Have her stories hemmed into the fringes of the excellent port town, disappear like a breath of air? Or were they still waiting to be breathed in, seen, tasted, heard, and touched? I thought that the best way to explore "her stories" of the Jewish women were through the senses and instincts. In my investigation, I let myself get into a trance and dispose of my rationale, scientific thinking,



logic, etc., and allowed myself to be handheld by instincts, and intuitions. I let my senses lead my path. If women were never inscribed with importance in history, then definitely, we should allow their stories written in the elements to guide you. I did not have to look back; I felt the spooky presence of the apparitions of women who lived before me. They led me on with music, visions, touch, taste, and smell. I felt them all around me, and I had to walk with unsteady steps and wait for them to lead me.

When I opened all my senses, I came across a book gifted to me by a friend. The book of songs gave me the first auditory key to the Jewish stories I was searching for.

[1] Jussay, P.M. "The Origins of the Kerala Jews - An Evaluation of Their Traditional Sources." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 51, 1990, pp. 66–74. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44148189. Accessed 25 Dec. 2020.

[2] Ibid p 2

[3] Kollaparambil, Jacob. "The Babylonian Origin of the Southists Among the St. Thomas Christians." *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 1992

4] Totaling 72, including the princely right to ride on an elephant's back, to be carried on a litter, to use the royal umbrella, to be preceded by drums and trumpets, to have the lower castes move away so as not to be polluted by their sight or touch, to hunt deer, exemption from paying taxes and the granting of all the privileges of the royal administration, etc....

[5] Narayanan, M. G. S.

Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin. *Indian Historical Review*. 2002;29(1-2):66-76. doi:10.1177/037698360202900204

[6] Orpa Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1995). Shalom Sabar, "The Illuminated Ketubah," in Slapak, *The Jews of India*, 167–202.

[7] Sternbach, L., "India as described by the Medieval European Travellers", *P/HC*, 1945, 10-28.

[8]

Ervin Birnbaum: "David Reubeni's Indian Origin- *Historia Judaica*. *Journal of Studies in Jewish History*. Vol. X

[9] Page 1 - CochinBrochure



ONE-DAY WORKSHOP

As a part of the process of selecting Local Guides in the Muziris Heritage Project, a One-day Workshop was conducted in the Kodungallur Muziris Visitors' Centre. Mr. P.M. Noushad, Managing Director, Muziris Heritage Project, inaugurated the workshop and delivered the inaugural address. About 85 individuals selected from the Project Area, participated in the workshop. Mr. Ibrahim Sabin, Marketing Manager, and Museum Managers Mr. Midhun C Shekhar and Ms. Nimmi K.B. also spoke on the occasion.

MUZIRIS HERITAGE CYCLING SERIES



For the purpose of exploring the Muziris Project Area, a Heritage Cycle Ride was started off, as part of the Muziris Heritage Cycling Series which incorporates the various cycling clubs of Kerala. In the 10-day programme that lasts till 3 January 2021, 500 cyclists from all over Kerala will participate, and visit the various museums and monuments of the Muziris Heritage Project.

During the first day's ride, following the COVID-19 protocol, 50 riders participated. The purpose of the cycling trip is for the rider to go around and see the Muziris Project area in its entirety.

Each day, a group of 50 cyclists will start off the ride, from Muziris Munakkal Beach. From here, they will visit Muhammad Abdur Rahman Saheb Museum, Kottappuram Fort, Kottappuram Water Front, Paravur Synagogue, Paliyam Palace, Paliyam Naalukettu, Chendamangalam Synagogue, etc. The first cycling stars, after finishing their ride, made a boat cruise up to the estuary at Azhikode. The riders were received at the various centres, by Ms. Sajna Vasantraj and Ms. K.B.Nimmi, Museum Mangers, and Junior Executive Mr. Akhil S. Bhadrans.



Mr. P.M. Noushad, Managing Director, Muziris Heritage Project, announced that as part of the Muziris Heritage Cycling Series, cycling events would be organised co-ordinating among various cycling clubs of Kerala in January 2021, with rides starting from Ponnani and reaching Alappuzha Heritage Project, passing through Muziris Project-Area.