

A JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN DECLINE

by Taya Zinkin

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Fifteen hundred years ago Kelappan the Scribe engraved in the original Tamil a copper plate, and seven dignitaries witnessed it. "Hail and Prosperity! His Majesty King Sri Parkaran Iravi Vanmar, whose ancestors have been wielding power for many hundreds of thousands of years is pleased to grant Joseph Rabban proprietary rights over tolls on boats, revenue, drums and trumpets, the produce of the female elephant, the palanquin and the lamp . . . To Joseph Rabban, Prince of the Anjuvannam, and to his descendants, so long as the world and the moon exist. Hail!"

A Jew was made overlord of Anjuvannam, and of the 72 Jewish families who had settled in five villages along the coast of Malabar. Thus, long before the creation of Israel the Jews had—thanks to Hindu tolerance—been given a little corner of their own, a corner now dying the slow death of decay.

The Jews of Cochin and their copperplate have aroused scholarly controversy for more than two hundred years. There seems to be biblical evidence for a small Jewish settlement in Malabar as far back as 1000 B.C.; King Solomon's ships of Tarshish used to bring cinnamon for the Temple and ivory for the Palace from Cranganore. When Tiberius sacked the second Temple some Jews sought refuge with the Cranganore traders so that the settlement grew until it is said some ten thousand Jews were engaged in trade and agriculture. Intermarriage and conversion must have been frequent in those days. When the Apostle Thomas landed in Malabar he preached his first sermon in Hebrew to a Jewish congregation, bringing the latest Messianic news, and it is said that his first converts in India were Jews.

Jews, Christians, and Hindus flourished in peaceful coexistence until the Moorish and Portuguese invasions. However, meanwhile, a few families of Levantine Jews had migrated to Cranganore, bringing with them such conceit that the local Jews had to assent: "As a result of centuries of residence in India we have deteriorated in colour and thus differ in appearance from our direct ancestors who emigrated from Jerusalem." But this did not prevent their becoming known as the Black Jews, and losing to the White Jews their copperplate, with the right to the boat tolls and the produce of the female elephant.

The Black Jews, thus despoiled, gave up commerce to become the tenants and the employees of the White Jews. Undoubtedly the original settlers, the Black Jews, were soon kept at Untouchable's length by the White Jews, whom they despised but feared.



Women playing cards outside their homes in Jew Town, Cochin, Madras

With the copperplate as key to prosperity, the White Jews thrived, money making up for ancestry until they could genuinely look down on the Black Jews' standard of living.

The White Jews followed the local custom of keeping slaves, even after they had converted them to Judaism—in flagrant contravention of biblical writ. Slavery was abolished by the British a century and a quarter ago and the descendants of these slaves are known as the Brown Jews. The Black Jews, who had seven synagogues of their own, could not enter the White synagogue, which stands in the middle of Cochin's Jew Town. But the Brown Jews, without a temple of their own, were allowed to stand outside this one; they would have nothing to do with the Black Jews.

Shortly after independence an elderly Brown Jew, following the Gandhian example, began a fast unto death inside the White synagogue; as a result of this satyagraha the Brown Jews were allowed to sit inside the temple, on the floor, and now there are benches at the back for them.

The White Jews have clung desperately to the whiteness of their skin, at the cost of constant inbreeding and racial devitalisation. There are between eighty and ninety White Jews in Cochin descended from five families. The majority of the population is old and the fertility rate of the young is very low. Marriages are very rare: two marriages are to be performed before Christmas, but after that it will take at least fourteen years before

another boy is old enough to be married; and there are seven or eight girls to every boy.

Five years ago Jew Town was shocked: a White Jewess married a Brown Jew. The couple had to elope to Bombay as there is a taboo on intermarriage at the synagogue. When they returned the problem of seating the bride during service was a grave one. Should she sit with the White women or with the Brown?

The liberal leader of the White Jews was faced with this dilemma: "If we had insisted that she remain White, though of course not her children, the orthodox would have broken away and we would not have been able to continue as a congregation, for we need ten adult males to make a quorum. So we compromised. The bride sits with the Brown women, but nobody minds if she comes to chat with her White relations, and there has been no serious social boycott. Already there has been a second intermarriage.

Of the three thousand and more Black Jews, only five hundred are left, the rest have migrated to Israel. The Black synagogues have been closed, destroyed, or like the one at Mala, turned into a village council hall. In Jew Town itself, where there are only eight Black Jews left, they must go to pray at Ernakulam, where there still is one Black synagogue. If they are too sick or too old to make the 20-mile round trip—Jews must not ride on the Sabbath—they are permitted to stand outside the White synagogue. They still cannot go in.