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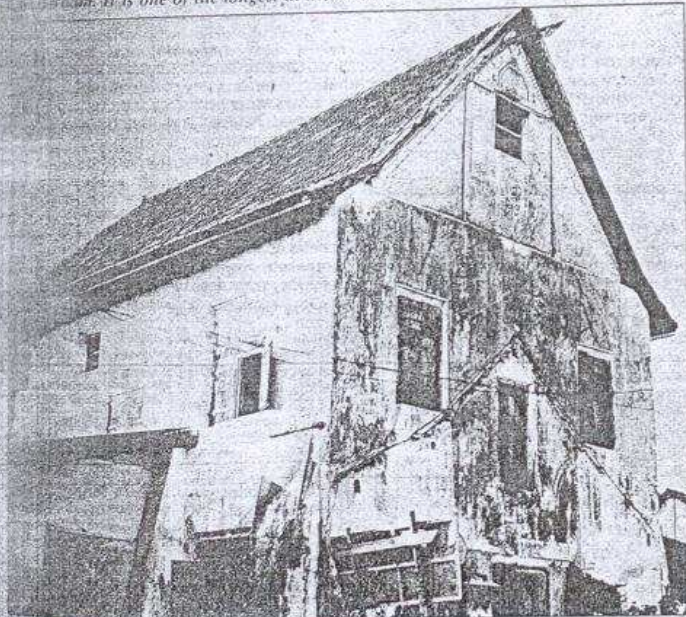
February 6-12, 1983, 1983



# Jews of Kerala End of the road

DEE P. PULIMOOD

They are calling Jackie Cohen, the caretaker of the Cochin synagogue with a 200-year-old shofar (horn) brought from Spain. It is one of the longest in the world.



Gone are the days. An old synagogue in Mattancherry. It is a godown now.

Feb 6-12

THEY are on a melting island of time—the Jews of Kerala.

Legend has it that they were 10,000 in number when the first batch set up a home in Kerala in A.D. 68. Today they

are just 45 at Jew Town in Mattancherry and six other families scattered in Parur, Alwaye and Ernakulam.

Among the 45 at Jew Town is Linda Salem, groping in the dark tunnel of centuries, searching for an answer to the agonising question that haunts the Jews left in Kerala—to return or not to return to Israel.

Though her mind bleeds when she thinks of bidding goodbye to the surroundings in which she grew up, beautiful Linda has found the answer. She must leave. If not, she might have to remain a spinster all her life with only her shadow to lean on.

Armed with a rank in psychology M.A. from the University of Kerala, Linda is getting her papers ready to leave for Israel.

It is in the Bible that we all must





Test and  
rest. Koder

The youngest  
member. Rachel

Sad to say  
goodbye. Linda

In love with  
India. Nima

Retired principal  
Esther Hallegua

For a quiet life.  
Len

No quitting.  
Keith

... day return to Israel. Cannot say  
... or how or when. But what is said in  
Bible will take place, it has been so  
in the very beginning," says Elias.

Elias is doing business at Broadway,  
main shopping centre of Ernakulam,  
believes his ancestors had come to  
Kerala long before the birth of Jesus  
Christ. For centuries, the family has  
been in business. They are nine brothers  
and sisters. A brother and two sisters  
are already in Israel. The others would  
follow.

Of his sect, there are only a few  
families left in Kerala—three in Ernakulam,  
two in Parur, one in Alwaye. They are  
the only Jews.

Unlike Elias, who banks on the Bible  
to explain the exodus, Keith at Jew  
Synagogue in Mattanchery, where today's  
synagogue functions, has different  
views on going back to Israel. "No

wouldn't leave India unless I am forced  
to. If I get a job here I would like to stay  
on..." So does Len who is a final B. Com  
student at Cochin College. "I would prefer  
a small job in India to a better one in  
Israel. There are many things that I love  
in this place. The kind of ties that exist  
here. I have a lot of friends here includ-  
ing Muslims. And also the relaxed,  
tension-free life here is dearer to me  
than a few more comforts which are the  
fringe benefits of the hectic, westernised  
life in Israel... I do not want to go, if I  
could afford it."

Len wants to become a lawyer. He is  
the arts club secretary of the Cochin  
College. He defeated a candidate of the  
Students Federation of India—student  
wing of the CPI(M)—in a keenly fought  
college union election.

What is it that these young men are  
trying to convey when they say 'unless

we are forced to leave India', 'if we could  
afford to stay on' etc? Linda is a bit more  
frank: "I am leaving, not because I hate  
this country. Because of certain other  
things. I have been so happy here that  
possibly I'd like to come back and settle  
down here. But there are things that  
force me to leave... There is no 'com-  
munity life' here. Perhaps there is social  
life, yes. But this thing what I call 'com-  
munity life' is important when the  
question of settling down in life comes.  
You know, the question of finding a  
partner of matching age and education  
within the community."

Linda thus touches the vital prob-  
lem facing the Jews of Kerala today—  
3000-year-old bondage—the Jews  
came to Kerala aboard the ships  
of Solomon for business—has begun  
to hurt. There are many biting links  
today's rusty chain that keeps them  
bound. While Linda is trying to free her-

## Till moon exists

THE record of the Jewish  
community in Kerala is enviable.  
Rabbi Nissim, a 14th century Hebrew  
poet and traveller sang:

I travelled from Spain,  
I had heard of the city of Shingily,  
I longed to see an Israeli King,  
Him, I saw with my own eyes.

Nissim sang about the Jewish  
prince of Anjuvanam in Kerala.  
Anjuvanam, the only Jewish  
kingdom in Kerala had an area of 27  
square miles. Though small in size,  
the prince of Anjuvanam built up a  
reputation for fair and just rule.

The copper plate granting him  
power is still preserved at the  
synagogue in Cochin. Translated, the  
copper plate reads as follows:

Hail and Prosperity: The following

A 600-year-old Hebrew inscription of the Kochangadi synagogue, built in 1344.



was graciously made by him who has  
assumed the title of King of Kings.  
His Majesty the King Sri Parkaran  
Iravi Verma (?), whose ancestors  
have been wielding the sceptre for  
many hundred thousand years, in the  
36th year after the second year of the  
day on which he dwelt in Muziricote,  
was pleased to make the following  
gifts:

We have granted to Joseph  
Rabban the village of Anjuvanam  
together with seventy-two propri-  
etary rights, tolls on boats and carts,  
the revenue and the title of Anjuva-  
nam, the lamp of the day, a cloth  
spread in front to walk on, a  
palanquin, a parasol, a vaduga  
drum, trumpet, a gateway, a garland,  
decoration with festoons, the right to  
wear weapons, and so forth. We  
have granted him the land tax and

weight tax; moreover, we  
sanctioned with these copper plates  
that he need not pay the dues of  
the inhabitants of the other cities of  
the Royal Palace, and that he may  
enjoy the benefits which the King  
To Joseph Rabban, the Prince of  
Anjuvanam and to his dear  
sons and daughters and his  
nephews and to the sons-in-law  
married his daughters in  
succession, so long as the  
moon exist, Anjuvanam shall be  
hereditary possession.

With the knowledge of:

- Gowanthan Marthandan Chief of Vannar
  - Kodai Chirikandan Chief of Vannar
  - Manavepala Manavian Chief of Vannar
  - Kodai Iravi Chief of Nannar
  - Moorkan Chathan Sub Canon
  - Vandalacheri Kandan The Prince
- Written by Kerala

The Jewish Kingdom  
of Anjuvanam survived for this  
There is no agreement  
historians on the date  
Some say the copper plate  
presented in 1000 A.D.  
Bhaskara Ravi Varma  
of Kerala argue that it  
379 A.D. by Emperor

## Wedding

Before the wedding, the bride is dressed up in a white sari. From there, they sing *thenda* and songs to the home. Then there is a procession in the community at the

morning, even Malayalam songs are sung by the Jews. To mark the occasion, all the married women in the community drop grapes into a basket to be used for the wedding

the morning of her big day, she is dressed up in traditional lungi. The blouse is gold-colored to match that twinkle

in her eyes. She is in a new white, long white dress, a crown covering her face, a crown on her head and flower girls. Her brother escorts her to the synagogue. At its doorstep her father leads her into the hall.

She is in a long white circular veil, which you can't see her face through. She is surrounded by her friends as she sits on a chair. The bride's dream of dreams, her wine in a golden goblet, then the ring.

A small boy reads out the marriage document, the bridegroom signs and gives it to her. Just one ceremony in which he is asked to take care of her. Yes, it is the bridegroom who conducts the ceremony except for the last part when an elder also joins in.

The veil is now lifted and she is seen. She is his.



Scenes of last Jewish wedding four years ago.

to escape to a brighter future awaiting them across the continents and seas, little girls growing up at Jew Town sheds their teenage inhibitions to confess: "No, I don't want to remain single all my life, even if I am the only one left at Jew Town. I won't quit this place." She is in love with India. Blindly.

Shabdar Samuel Koder, 75, the oldest member of the Jewish community in Cochin is doing well in business. He runs a chain of departmental stores spread all over Kerala. Koder puts the problems facing Kerala Jews in a nutshell as religious, dietary and matrimonial. "We need at least ten men above the age of 13 for any religious ceremony. Now it has become difficult to find the quorum at the synagogue."

The food habits of the Kerala Jews, especially of those at Jew Town have changed a lot in recent years. It is long ago they cooked beef or mutton. The Jews do not eat mutton or beef unless

the animal is killed by a Jewish butcher. They have no butcher now. The last one, whom they brought from Parur, another Jewish settlement which has died out barring two families, left for Israel.

There are a few trained to kill chicken in Jewish style. Hence, on certain

days they have chicken. But not all can have chicken every day. So they have to be satisfied with vegetables and fish. What's the speciality in killing animals the Jewish way? A rustless knife first cuts through particular veins rendering the animal unconscious before death. Thus it does not know the pain of death.

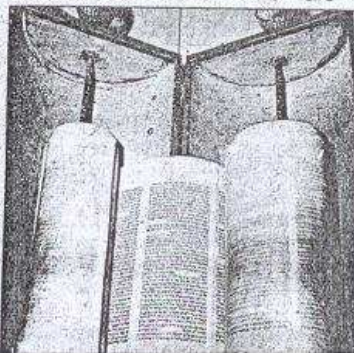
"When we kill, we want to make sure that death is made least painful," explains Koder.

The third problem is the gravest. There are a few boys and girls of marriageable age. As their numbers dwindled, it became increasingly difficult to find matches. Jews allow first cousins to marry. Yet, wedding bells are distant for many of them. Sometimes the boy is younger than the girl or he may not match her in education. Here, we come back to Linda Salem.

Linda is not alone.

"What choice do they have in a

### The scrolls kept in the Cochin synagogue.



# Kibbutz and Moshabs

WHAT happens to the Jews who go to Israel? Koder from Kerala once visited some of the immigrant settlements. There were two types, the Kibbutz and the Moshabs.

It is a kind of 'commune life' at the Kibbutz. All the needs of the settlers are taken care of, but no pay. They do not need salary, says Koder—they are given food, shelter and entertainment. Even their kids are looked after.

At the Moshabs, settlers get separate family quarters. The advantage is that at the Moshabs children are allowed to be with parents. At the Kibbutz, children are kept away from parents and this has caused problems.

The immigration and resettlement is funded by the Jewish Agency in Israel. (Annual outlay \$100,000,000.)

Even those who have reservation about leaving admit one thing. For the sake of children the elders must give up the little comforts that India provides and rough it out in Israel. Here they have servants, free time, social gatherings and a little more relaxed life than that awaits them in Israel. But Israel has other things to offer. Food is much cheaper. Many who left for Israel are leading the kind of life which they could never have dreamt of in Kerala. Especially those who were in small trade in Kerala, are now much better off.

The professionals, like doctors and engineers who migrated are pursuing their own line and have a comfortable life. Most of the educated youth have joined banks in Israel. Some others have found jobs in factories and farms.

The Israeli government has been



A mother and child from Jew Town who migrated to Israel.

very kind to the immigrants. Even when problems of racial discrimination crop up the officials are firm in dealing with the 'upper castes'. Koder remembers an incident. A member of the team that visited Israel was refused admission to a boarding house by the woman running it on the ground that he was a coloured Jew. The officials threatened to cancel her licence.

She let him in.

community of 457" asks Esther Hallegua, who retired as the principal of the Government College for Women in Eranduram. "There are just 45 white Jews in Jew Town. And mind you, the only one includes Rachel who is just four," she adds.

There are Jews in Bombay (the Bene Israel) but there has been very little contact between the two groups, says Koder. "And about marrying non-Jews, we feel it may not work out well."

"There were many boys on the campus of the University of Kerala, but I could not meet any one interesting enough to make me think of inter-caste marriage," confesses Koder. On second thoughts, perhaps not

to hurt anyone, she adds: "They were all very good to me, very helpful... but you know, I would prefer someone within the community..."

"It will be difficult for us to adjust because there are so many things that are so different..." adds Esther. She is worried, she has a daughter doing her medicine. She too might have to go to Israel, leaving her parents here, to find a husband.

There were girls who broke the communal barriers to find their partners among Keralites. A lady doctor from among them married a Christian. There is another case where a girl, Cynthia, took her Hindu lover to Israel

and he became a Jew. Yet another case might upset Begin. A coloured Jew girl from Ernakulam married a Muslim. She was excommunicated. But such cases are very few.

Did the birth of Israel toll the knell of Jew Town? A million theories may float about the winding up of Jew settlements the world over, but not one of them would be true in the case of Jew Town. It is true that with the birth of Israel the exodus did begin from places like Mala, Parur, Chendamangalam and Ernakulam in Kerala. In fact, the first coloured Jew from Mala was among the first to make the words in the Bible come true. The others followed. But the white Jews of Cochin, at Jew Town. Ask them and the learned and educated will reel out statistics that cannot lie. An authoritative member among them counted ten families that had left India to find their new heaven on earth Israel. Just ten.

Still, why is it that Jew Town is dying slowly? Esther Hallegua says that in her generation alone many have remained single. She counted six spinsters. There are more bachelors. In a community of 45, this is no small number. Family planning has also had its share.

However, the leader of the community, S.S. Koder, has observed a curious phenomenon in his time: "14 years, 14 babies were born. In some 30 years ago this happened. All them were girls. Not a single child was a boy..."

He looks up and sighs. God's mysterious ways of calling his child back to the promised land?

— MAXWELL FERNANI

Magog. Inset—a clock-tower at the entrance, built in 1760.

