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A historical study of the Jewish community in Kerala

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Abstract

Apart from the Christians the Jews also have formed part of the community in Kerala from very early days. Till the 15th century the Jews enjoyed a high status in society and established trading monopoly without any challenge. The Jews of Kerala made substantial contributions to the socio-economic life of the land.

The present study intends to discuss the origin and development of the Jewish community in Kerala.

Keywords: Synagogue, civilization, settlements, persecution

Introduction

The Jews of Kerala made substantial contributions to the socio-economic life of the land. They are one of the oldest communities in Kerala, India. It is believed that the earliest Jews in India were sailors from King Soloman's time. Till the 15th century the Jews enjoyed a high status in society and established trading monopoly without any challenge. They were very influential in their society. They are called 'Cochin Jews' because they lived in the city of Cochin in South India.

Origin and Development

The history of ancient Hebrews or Jews comes to us from their most important work, the Bible. The Jews or Hebrews were originally nomads who came from the Arabian Desert into Palestine. The Hebrews belonged to one of the Semitic tribes living in Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C. Their great patriarch was Abraham who led his tribe from the Mediterranean coastal region called Palestine around 1400 B.C. They considered this region as their "promised land" by God Jehovah, when their land was affected by a severe drought during the 13th century B. C, when the Hebrews were forced to leave and settle in northern Egypt. The new pharaohs of ancient Egypt enslaved the Hebrews till Moses an official came to their rescue ^[1].

Led by Moses, the Hebrews escaped from Egypt and reached Mount Sinai. It was there that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. The people reached the "promised land" and settled around 1000 B.C. Their king Saul built a kingdom after many wars and united his people. After his death, his son in law, David succeeded in uniting all the Hebrew tribes. He captured Jerusalem and made it his capital. David's son was Solomon, who gave up simple living and liked luxury.

After his death the Hebrew kingdom got split in two parts the northern part called Israel and the southern part, Judea. During the next few centuries these two kingdoms did not live in peace. However, Israel grew prosperous with more people, living in big towns and cities. A great Hebrew Prophet Amos went to kingdom of Israel and led them to simple ways of living and belief in one God Yahuvah ^[2].

Family quarrels were usually bitter and there was continued wrangling between the brother kingdoms. Then the long arm of the Assyrian empire reached out over Palestine and put an end to the bickering.

Israel as a kingdom was blotted out and Judah survived but when the Assyrians gave up their place to the Chaldeans, Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C destroyed Jerusalem and carried off large numbers of the unhappy Hebrews to Babylon and there, they remained for at least fifty years till the Chaldeans went down in their turn and their Persian conqueror, Cyrus set the exiles free to return home.

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They had not spent all their time weeping by the waters of Babylon. They had acquired a great deal of the polished civilization of their masters. And they had completed the process of religious education which their race had been undergoing through long centuries of suffering and subjection. In their early desert days their god Yahweh had been to them a fierce tribal and many others had taught them a loftier conception of divinity.

The returned exiles and these successors over a long period rebuilt Jerusalem and its temple and set up the rule of the high priests in place of the old monarchy. They assembled the ancient Hebrew writings and divided them into three parts: a code of laws which constitutes the religion of the Jews; the works of the prophets; and a body of sacred songs for use in the temple services, together with other writings. In Christian times all these writings were collected and became the Bible of the Jews and the old testament of the Christians [3].

Time brought new task masters. The Romans engulfed Palestine, and in A.D 70 a fanatical Jewish revolt brought new calamities. The Emperor Vespasian's son Titus laid Jerusalem in ruins and destroyed the temple. The Sanhedrin (Jewish national council) and the high priesthood were abolished. Long before these dispersing from their homeland in 132-35 during the Emperor Hadrian's reign, the suppression of another revolt completed their national destruction.

Judea was practically depopulated and the Jews barred from Jerusalem. In the ensuing centuries the scattered exiles alternately tolerated or persecuted. The eighteenth century brought relief, and in the twentieth a new promise dawned. In 1948 the republic of Israel was proclaimed and their two million Jews vigorously carved out a national home [4].

Jews have suffered a long history of persecution in different lands and their population and distribution per region has fluctuated throughout the centuries. Today most authorities place the number between 12 and 14 million. The majority of whom live in the United States and Israel although the total number of Jews is difficult to measure and is controversial.

Jews in India

The earliest Jews came to India two thousand years ago. They were escaping the persecution in Galilee, some came after the destruction of the temple in 17th century. The 16th & 17th century migrations created important settlement of Jews from Persia, Afghanistan and Khorasan in Northern India and Kashmir. Jews settled in different areas from Kashmir in the North, to Cochin in the South, Calcutta in the East and Bombay in the West. Today only a few thousand remain in India. Most of them have migrated to Israel, England, United States and Australia [5].

There are five distinct groups of Jews in India. They are the European, the Baydadi, the Manipuri, the Marathi and the Malayalee [6]. The Malayalam speaking Jews in Kerala include both the white and brown Cochin Jews and the black Malabar Jews who represent the surviving remnant of what were once numerous trading communities along the Malabar Coast, which was connected intimately with Yemen Bagdad and Cairo. The Arabic and Persian speaking "Bagdadi" Jews represent the continuation of the commercial interest of the major West Asian Jewish centres in trading with India. The present community started arriving in the later eighteenth

century, primarily from Iraq but also from Syria and Iran as well [7].

The Malayalee Jews known as the 'Cochini' could be found until recently living in small groups in Kerala in South India. India's Jewish population started declining in the 1940's with heavy immigration to Israel, England and the United States [8].

Advent of Jews in Kerala

The origins of Jewish and Christian communities in the world and in India are not clear. It has been pointed out that West coast of India especially South India, was known to the Hebrews even during the base of Solomon. The Jews and probably Syrian Christians had a considerable share in the East West sea trade of Roman Empire in Arabian Sea in 78 A.D. This trade was mentioned in contemporary Greco-Roman works and in Sangam literature [9].

There is very little reliable information about the origin of Jews in Kerala. One belief is that ten Jewish families were released from jail by a Persian king in B.C 605 who came to Kodungallur by ship. Another group must have followed in B.C 586 when Judea was defeated by Babylon. In A.D 68, when the second temple of Jerusalem was destroyed, another migration of a thousand Jews took place. There were subsequent waves of migration in A.D.369 and A.D.490. One source states that a large group of Jewish refugees came from Mesopotamia in A.D.486. Most historians agree that the local Hindu rulers did everything to settle the new immigrants [10].

The Jews were already here when St. Thomas arrived in A.D.52.

A Jewish emissary named Habban, mentioned in ancient Christian songs was supposed to have arrived in A.D.52. For another thousand years, after the awarding of the copper plates the Jewish community of Kerala flourished with new arrivals from countries like Spain. In 1941 there was a split between two brothers as to who should rule. The younger brother won the struggle and fled to Cochin with his wife. Both sides sought favour from Samutiri and later overran the Jewish settlements. The first Jewish temple was built in Cochin in 1344 A.D. In 1524 with the help of the samutiri the Arabs clashed with the Jews and temples in Kodungallur and Cochin were destroyed [11].

In the 16th century when Portuguese arrived by sea the Jewish presence was very nominal. The Portuguese considered the Jews as accursed creatures. As Portuguese influence led to further decline in Jewish settlements the remaining Jews took refuge with the Raja of Cochin. The ruler gave all support to them by providing them lands and money. Gradually the Jews town and synagogues were built in 1567-1568. The Portuguese period starting in A.D.1500 was considered as the dark ages for Jewish settlements.

The Dutch period was the golden era for Cochin Jews. They provided services for the Cochin rulers and the Dutch East India Company. They dominated export trade and Lk Rahabbi was a trader at Mattancherry. He had close links with other local community and European countries. A Jewish observer Rabbi David D Beth Aillel, reported that during the time of the Dutch, the white Jews of Cochin were great and wealthy merchants, that they have since sunk weak and is even in a miserable state, living chiefly by the sale of trinkets and furniture purchased in more fortunate days [12].

The British period was also favourable for the Cochin Jews. During 1835 an English school was started to teach English and Hebrew for Jews. A Hebrew Malayalam press was established in 1877.

Soon after India became independent in 1947, Israel also came into existence. The Cochin Jews wanted to take part in the building of their new homeland. The first Jewish community that migrated was from Mala. After handing over their cemetery and church to the local panchayath the entire Jewish community of Mala sailed off to Israel on December 12, 1954. The Jewish churches in Cochin's south side and 'Kavumbhagam' are also closed now with most of the community having migrated to Israel ^[13].

Conclusion

The Jews of Kerala made substantial contributions to the socio – economic life of the land. They have assimilated the customs and manners of the people among whom they lived and unlike the Muslims, and to some extent the Christians, they have accepted the local language as a medium of their prayers and devotional songs. The synagogues are the outstanding monuments of the Jewish heritage in Kerala. It is one of the most beautiful and magnificent synagogues of the world.

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