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Research Article

Cochin Jews

Negotiating Identity in a Shrinking Community: The Cochin Jews of Kerala

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This paper presents findings from ongoing PhD research on "Jews in India: An Ethnographic Study," focusing specifically on the Cochin Jews of Kerala. As one of India's oldest Jewish communities, the Cochin Jews have experienced dramatic demographic decline, with fewer than 20 individuals remaining in Kochi today. Despite decades of migration to Israel, population aging, and family dispersal, the remaining Jewish members and their descendants abroad continue to maintain faith, memories, and heritage, demonstrating how communal identity can persist even in conditions of extreme demographic vulnerability. This research examines how communal continuity is negotiated among a nearly vanished population, exploring how traditions survive when critical mass for religious practices cannot be achieved. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kochi, including interviews with elderly residents and younger diaspora members, this paper analyses the negotiation of Jewish identity alongside Indian and Keralite identities, the persistence of historical divisions between Paradesi and Malabari Jews, and the commodification of Jewish heritage within Kerala's tourism industry. The study contributes to anthropological understandings of identity formation, cultural preservation, and the methodological challenges of researching disappearing communities.

Keywords: cochin jews, identity negotiation, demographic decline, cultural continuity, heritage preservation

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1. Introduction

The story of the Cochin Jews represents one of the most remarkable narratives of cultural persistence and communal resilience in the Indian subcontinent. For over two millennia, Jewish communities have existed along the Malabar Coast of Kerala, creating a unique synthesis of Jewish religious tradition and South Indian cultural practices. Today, this ancient community may be nearing the end of its journey. With fewer than 20 Jews remaining in Kochi, the community is close to demographic disappearance, but its cultural presence remains significant.

This research is part of a wider study of Jewish communities in India and explores how small minority groups maintain their identity in vulnerable conditions. The Cochin Jewish community offers an important case because it raises basic questions about community, identity, and cultural continuity. What does it mean to be a community when there are too few people to carry out regular religious practices? How is identity sustained when younger generations live far away? Can cultural heritage continue when parts of it are shaped by tourism? These questions guide this ethnographic study.

The significance of this study goes beyond the case of the Cochin Jewish community. As migration increases, people grow older and pressures to assimilate grow, many small minority communities around the world face similar challenges. The ways in which the remaining Jews in Cochin maintain their collective identity offer useful insights into how cultures survive under severe demographic pressure. Their experience also helps to explain the complex relationship between heritage preservation, tourism, and everyday community life.

1.1 Literature Review: Scholarly Engagements with Cochin Jews

The Cochin Jewish community has been studied by scholars for more than a hundred years. One of the most important recent works on contemporary Cochin Jewish life is Edna Fernandes' The Last Jews of Kerala (2008). This book provides detailed journalistic accounts of the community at a critical moment in its history. Based on interviews with elderly Cochin Jews in Kerala and Israel, Fernandes traces the community's long history and its recent decline.

The book documents internal divisions between Paradesi and Malabari Jews, experiences of migration, and the challenges Cochin Jews faced in Israel. While this work is valuable for recording personal stories in an accessible way, it is more descriptive than analytical and leaves scope for deeper theoretical discussion on identity and community change.

Other key studies provide important background. Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg's The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India (1993) offers an anthropological analysis of how Cochin Jews maintained their religious identity while living in a Hindu-majority society. Their work explores cultural interaction, adaptation, and the ways boundaries were maintained, themes that are also central to the present study.

Barbara Johnson's Our Community in Two Worlds (1986) is based on fieldwork in both Kerala and Israel and shows how community identity changes through migration. Her comparative approach highlights how Cochin Jews adapted to life in Israel while maintaining links to Kerala. Although Shirley Isenberg's India's Bene Israel (1988) focuses on a different Jewish community in India, it provides useful comparative insights into the wider experience of Indian Jews.

P. M. Jussay's writings, including The Jews of Kerala (2005), offer detailed historical information and an insider perspective from within the Cochin Jewish community. While this provides valuable local knowledge, his position within community life also shapes his interpretations. Shalva Weil's research on Indian Jewish communities contributes sociological insights into migration, community organisation, and diaspora connections.

More recent scholarship, including Ophira Gamliel's work on Judeo-Malayalam language and culture, as well as contributions in edited volumes on Indian Jewish communities, continues to deepen understanding of Cochin Jewish history and culture. This study builds on this existing body of work and adds new ethnographic material from recent fieldwork, using anthropological perspectives to examine how identity is shaped and negotiated under conditions of demographic decline.

2. Historical Context: The Cochin Jews through Time

from community stories and legends. Some stories say that Jews came after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE or even earlier. There is no clear archaeological evidence for these early dates, but historical records show that Jews had already settled in Kerala by the early Middle Ages. The Cochin Plates, copper plate grants given by the ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varman to Joseph Rabban in the 10th–11th centuries, are important written proof that Jews lived in the area. These grants gave Jews rights like owning land and not having to pay taxes. This shows that Jews were doing well financially and were well-integrated into Kerala society while still being true to their faith. Jewish merchants traded spices, textiles, and precious stones along trade routes that connected the Malabar Coast to the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia. These things helped pay for the construction of synagogues and other community buildings.

The Portuguese colonial rule that began in the early 1500s was a hard time for the Jewish community. The Inquisition caused people to be persecuted, forced to convert, and trade to be limited. During this time, new Jewish immigrants from Spain, Portugal, and the Middle East came to Kerala. These groups, called "foreign Jews" or "Paradesi Jews," brought with them different ways of doing things. Even though they were refugees, they said they were better than the local Malabari Jews and said that they had mixed with the local people, which they thought made their family history less pure. People in the community became very divided between Paradesi Jews and Malabari Jews, who are often called "White Jews" and "Black Jews." These words didn't mean real skin colour; they meant ideas about religious status and authenticity. The Paradesi Jews made their own synagogues and didn't let people from Malabari families marry them.

The community was fairly stable while it was under Dutch and later British rule. In the 18th and 19th centuries, synagogues were built and fixed up. One example is the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry, which combined Jewish religious needs with local Keralite architectural styles and influences from around the world. The British brought English education and new job opportunities to the country.

In the early 1900s, people in the Jewish community also started to talk about the idea of a Jewish homeland in Israel. This led to arguments about who they were and where they would fit in in the future.

The founding of Israel in 1948 had a big effect on the Cochin Jewish community. Many people moved to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s because of their religious beliefs, job opportunities, and worries about being a small minority in independent India. It was harder to keep community institutions going as more people left, which made even more people want to leave. At the end of the 20th century, there were only a few old people left in Kerala. There are less than 20 Jews living in Kochi today. This is the end of one of Asia's oldest Jewish communities, even though tourists, researchers, and descendants living abroad are still very interested in Cochin Jewish history and culture.

3. Methodology Researching a Disappearing Community

3.1 Research Design and Fieldwork Approach

This research used an ethnographic approach based on observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival research. Fieldwork was carried out in Kochi and Ernakulam through multiple visits, which helped in building relationships with the small remaining Jewish community. From the beginning, the study recognised that researching a community of fewer than 20 individuals involves specific methodological challenges that are different from those of traditional ethnographic studies.

The ethnographic approach focused on in-depth engagement with individual life histories rather than on statistical generalisation. Because the population is very small, each remaining Jewish resident is not only an informant but also a holder of unique knowledge and experience. This required methodological flexibility, with the research moving between formal interviews, informal conversations, and spending time in places where community memory is located, especially around synagogues and former Jewish neighbourhoods.

Archival research supported the ethnographic fieldwork by adding historical context. Materials such as documents from synagogue authorities, old photographs, letters, and community records helped

in understanding past community life and in comparing it with present-day realities and personal memories. This historical perspective was important for showing how current identity negotiations are connected to longer processes of change within the community

3.2 Locating and Accessing Research Participants

One of the main methodological challenges were simply finding potential participants for the study. Unlike research with larger communities, where sampling methods can be used, studying the Jews of Cochin required locating and gaining access to almost every remaining individual. This was difficult, even though the community is very small.

The remaining Jewish residents are scattered across different parts of Ernakulum and are no longer concentrated in historically Jewish areas. Some live near synagogues, while others live in apartment buildings or residential areas with no visible signs of Jewish identity. As most members of the community are elderly, many have limited mobility and small social networks, which made them difficult to reach through usual networking methods.

Initial access to the community was gained through formal contacts, such as synagogue caretakers and community representatives who look after Jewish properties and religious objects. These key contacts helped with introductions, but they also influenced which community members the researcher could reach. Some elderly residents were reluctant to participate, as they felt tired of repeated attention from researchers, journalists, and tourists who often describe them as the "last Jews of Cochin." Respecting their boundaries became an important ethical concern, even when it resulted in limited coverage of the remaining community.

In addition to the residents in Ernakulum, the study also included members of the diaspora who grew up in the Jewish community of Cochin but now live elsewhere, especially in Israel. Contacting these dispersed individuals required different methods, such as using social media, referrals from residents in Kochi, and links through Jewish community organisations. Many of these interviews were conducted through video calls and offered important insights into how community identity is maintained across distance and over time.

3.3 Ethical Considerations in Urban Fieldwork

The ethical aspects of this research required careful attention to several concerns. A key issue was the risk of being intrusive: how appropriate is it to ask elderly individuals to give their time and emotional energy for academic research? Many of the remaining Jews are in their 80s and 90s and face health problems, limited energy, and the emotional weight of seeing their community decline. Asking them to speak about these experiences often brings up strong feelings, such as grief, nostalgia, and sometimes bitterness or acceptance.

4. Multiple Identities: Being Jewish, Indian, and Malayali

4.1 The Layered Nature of Identity

The identity of the Cochin Jews can be understood as layered, with different forms of belonging existing together, sometimes smoothly and sometimes with tension. Jewish religious identity forms an important base, linking individuals to a long global religious tradition. Indian national identity places them within the social and political life of India. Malayali cultural identity connects them to Kerala through language, food, and everyday social practices. Moving between these layers shows the ongoing effort involved in maintaining a coherent sense of self across different social worlds.

Unlike some Jewish communities in the diaspora that kept strict boundaries between Jewish life and the surrounding culture, Cochin Jews became closely integrated into Keralite society while continuing to follow distinct Jewish religious practices. This was not complete assimilation, as their religious identity remained central. Instead, it was a form of cultural adaptation that allowed them to move easily between Jewish and wider Keralite social settings. This is visible in everyday language use, as many elderly Jews speak Malayalam as their main language and use Malayalam terms when talking about Jewish beliefs and practices.

Ideas of being "Indian" add another layer to this identity. For Cochin Jews, Indian identity is not secondary but deeply felt, shaped by centuries of living in India. Cochin Jews see themselves as indigenous to the country and do not view their community as being in exile from another homeland.

This became especially clear during migration to Israel, when some experienced life in Israel not as a return home, but as a form of displacement from what they considered their true home in Kerala.

4.2 Religious Practice and Keralite Culture

The synagogue serves as the primary site where Jewish religious identity is enacted and preserved. However, even within this explicitly Jewish space, influences from Kerala are visible. The design of Cochin's synagogues follows Jewish religious needs but uses local building styles and artistic traditions. For example, the floor tiles of the Paradesi Synagogue reflect Kerala's long history of trade, and the wooden ark for the Torah scrolls shows local carpentry styles.

Religious services followed Sephardic traditions brought by the Paradesi community, but over time the music and style absorbed Indian influences. Elderly members recall that services were conducted in both Hebrew and Malayalam, with explanations given in Malayalam for those who did not know Hebrew well. This mixing of languages created a distinctive local form of worship that was connected to global Jewish traditions while also rooted in Kerala.

Maintaining religious practice has become challenging because the community is now too small to form a minyan, the required group for certain prayers. As a result, some prayers are no longer performed, and major festivals are sometimes observed in a limited way or postponed until visitors from outside the community arrive. While this decline in practice is painful for elders who remember full synagogues, it also shows how religious traditions are adapted under difficult demographic conditions.

Food is another area where Jewish and Keralite identities come together. Cochin Jews followed kosher rules but adapted them to local ingredients and tastes. Dishes such as fish curry became part of Shabbat meals, prepared according to Jewish dietary laws but using Kerala spices and coconut milk. Foods like appam and stew were served at Jewish celebrations along with traditional Sabbath bread. During Passover, meals included both matzo and local fried snacks. These food practices reflect not a loss of tradition, but a creative blending shaped by the community's historical experience in Kerala.

4.3 Language and Cultural Expression

Language use among Cochin Jews shows the strong influence of Keralite culture on everyday life. Malayalam is the main language used for daily communication at home and in the community, and even for some business activities. Hebrew was mainly used in religious settings, and people's knowledge of Hebrew varied depending on their religious education.

Because Malayalam is the main language of everyday life, many aspects of Jewish religious and community life were understood and expressed through Malayalam ways of thinking. Jewish ideas were often explained using Malayalam terms, which sometimes changed their meanings slightly. For example, the Malayalam word for synagogue, "Jew palli" (literally "Jew church"), uses the general word for a church to describe a Jewish place of worship. This shows how Jewish concepts were interpreted through local cultural language, not just translated.

Younger generation of the community, especially those who later migrated to Israel, experienced language differently. Many grew up learning English and Malayalam, with less knowledge of Hebrew than older generations. After moving to Israel, they had to learn Hebrew as adults and at the same time lost regular use of Malayalam. This often created a sense of linguistic dislocation, as they were no longer fully comfortable in Malayalam, not yet fluent in Hebrew, and used English as a middle language that did not fully belong to either cultural world.

Naming practices also show how identity is managed across different settings. Many Cochin Jews had both Hebrew names for religious use and Malayalam names for everyday life. For example, a man might be called Yosef in the synagogue but known by a Malayalam name in business. Similarly, women might have a Hebrew name for religious contexts and a Malayalam name for daily use. These dual naming practices helped individuals move between Jewish and wider social worlds. Many elderly residents today still prefer to use their Malayalam names, even when speaking about religious matters, showing the deep roots of Keralite identity in their lives.

4.4 Citizenship, Belonging, and the Question of Home

The large-scale migration to Israel brought clear questions about home and belonging to the surface.

For those who chose to stay in Kochi, this decision reflected a belief that India, rather than Israel, is their true home. They do not see this choice as a rejection of their Jewish identity, but as an affirmation of their belonging to India and Kerala. Many speak about their attachment to Kerala's landscape, their ties to specific places, their comfort within familiar social relationships, and their feeling that Kochi is where they belong.

Those who migrated to Israel faced different challenges. In Israel, their Indian background often set them apart from the mainly Ashkenazi Jewish mainstream. Many Cochin Jews experienced discrimination, doubts about their Jewish identity, and pressure to adapt to dominant Israeli cultural norms. Their use of Malayalam, Indian styles of dress, and food habits were sometimes seen as foreign or exotic rather than as valid forms of Jewish expression. This created a difficult situation: although they moved to Israel seeking a Jewish homeland, they often felt only partly accepted and continued to be seen as outsiders.

The Indian state has generally recognised and protected its Jewish citizens, with no history of official, state-led antisemitism. The Paradesi Synagogue has heritage status, and the government has supported some efforts to preserve Jewish sites. This relatively supportive relationship between the Indian state and its Jewish minority differs from the persecution Jews have faced in many other contexts. For Cochin Jews who remain in Kerala, this history of acceptance strengthens their sense that India is a safe and legitimate homeland, making their decision to stay a reasoned choice rather than only an emotional one.

5. Internal Divisions: Paradesi and Malabari Jews

5.1 Historical Origins of Community Division

The division between Paradesi (foreign) and Malabari Jews is one of the longest-lasting and most painful divisions within the Cochin Jewish community. This split began in the 16th century, when Jewish refugees who were forced to leave their homeland in Iberia arrived in Kerala and met an already existing Jewish community that had lived there for many generations. Instead of forming one united community, the two groups developed separate institutions, maintained distinct social identities, and kept strict boundaries between themselves, especially in relation to marriage.

The Paradesi Jews, even though they were refugees themselves, claimed a higher social status based on ideas of genealogical purity. They argued that Malabari Jews had married local people over many generations, which they believed weakened their connection to ancient Israelite ancestry. This belief led to a social hierarchy expressed through terms such as "White Jews" for Paradesi and "Black Jews" for Malabari. These labels not only reflect actual differences in skin colour, but also the terms were used to express ideas about purity, authenticity, and religious legitimacy.

The Paradesi claim of higher status appeared in many areas of community life. They built their own synagogue in Mattancherry, known as the Paradesi Synagogue, and chose not to pray together with Malabari Jews. Marriage between the two groups was not allowed, as such relationships were seen as breaking important community boundaries. The Paradesi Jews also claimed special rights to certain religious roles and leadership positions. At times, some even questioned whether Malabari Jews were truly Jewish, although this view was not shared by everyone in the community.

Malabari Jews did not accept claims that they were inferior. They emphasized their long history in Kerala, their own old traditions and synagogues, and their continued practice of Jewish law over many generations. They formed their own community organisations, religious leadership, and social networks that were separate from Paradesi institutions. Ernakulam became the main centre of Malabari Jewish life, with several synagogues serving different Malabari groups. This physical separation in the city strengthened social divisions, creating distinct neighbourhoods and separate social worlds.

5.2 Social Practices of Separation and Hierarchy

Maintaining the boundary between Paradesi and Malabari Jews required constant social effort. Marriage was the most important way this boundary was maintained. Paradesi families strictly opposed their children marrying Malabari Jews, as they believed such marriages would affect family purity. These rules were enforced through social exclusion.

Those who married across this boundary could face being distanced from their families, denied roles in the synagogue, and pushed to the margins of community life. Individuals who crossed this boundary often paid a high social price.

Economic life also reflected these divisions. Paradesi families were strongly involved in international trade and maintained connections with other Sephardic Jewish communities in the Middle East and Europe. Their success in trade supported their claims to higher social status. Malabari Jews followed a range of livelihoods, including some trade and other forms of work. Differences in economic position between wealthy Paradesi merchant families and many Malabari households further reinforced social inequalities within the community.

6. Religious and Cultural Continuity under Demographic Constraint

6.1 Synagogue Maintenance and Religious Objects

The physical structures that support Jewish religious life in Kochi are both helpful and a problem for the rest of the community. There are still five historic synagogues in the Kochi area, but not all of them are still used for worship. Because of Kerala's humid climate, these buildings, some of which are hundreds of years old, need constant care to keep them from falling apart. The remaining Jewish population doesn't have enough people or money to properly care for all of these buildings, making it hard to decide which ones should get the most attention.

The Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry is the most well-known and visited by tourists, so it gets the most regular maintenance. Tourism money and donations from diaspora members and heritage groups pay for repairs, but chronic underfunding means that maintenance always falls behind need. The synagogue's well-known Chinese porcelain tiles need to be cleaned carefully and replaced from time to time. Termites and humidity are threats to the wooden structures. The Belgian glass chandeliers need special care to be restored. Every maintenance problem is a danger not only to a building but also to historical artefacts that can't be replaced.

Torah scrolls and other religious items are also hard to deal with. Kochi's synagogues have many Torah scrolls, some of which are very old and delicate. Jewish law says that these scrolls need to be stored in certain ways, checked for damage on a regular basis, and maintained in a certain way. Since there is no trained scribe (sofer) in the community, even small repairs to Torah scrolls are hard to do. This means that scrolls have to be sent to experts in other countries or specialists have to come to the community. Because of this, sacred objects that are very important to Jewish religious life are not being used. They are too valuable to risk damage, but they are too damaged or uncared-for to be used in services.

Silver Torah crowns and pointers, spice boxes for Havdalah ceremonies, Hanukkah menorahs, and Passover seder plates are just a few of the other ritual items that fill synagogues and private homes. Some families leaving for Israel took portable ritual items with them, but many larger or less portable items stayed behind. These objects are now in a strange state: they are still technically in use, but only sometimes, and they are kept as heritage items as much as active religious tools. They are displayed for tourists but still have religious meaning for the Jews who still use them.

6.2 The Minyan Problem and Religious Services

It is becoming harder and harder to find ten adult Jewish men to form a minyan, which is needed to hold full religious services. There are usually fewer than ten Jewish men in Kochi, so full services can't happen. This reality has made religious practices painful changes, each of which means losing a part of tradition and community religious life.

Shabbat services used to happen every Friday night and Saturday morning, but now they happen at different times. Sometimes there are fewer than ten men at a service, so prayers that need a minyan are not said. There are times when there is no service at all. Major holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur may still draw enough people, especially if members of the diaspora plan their visits to coincide with the holidays. But the regular weekly worship that used to structure community life has been badly disrupted.

Reading from the Torah scroll, which is one of the most important parts of Jewish communal worship, is becoming less common. It takes more than just a minyan to take the Torah out of the ark,

process it through the congregation, read certain parts, and put it back. It also takes people who can read Biblical Hebrew with the right Life cycle events like circumcisions, bar mitzvahs and weddings that used to be a big part of synagogue life have all but stopped. There are no Jewish children being born or raised in Kochi, so there are no coming-of-age ceremonies. When people die, the few deaths that do happen are handled with whatever minimal services can be arranged. This is often very difficult because of the requirements for Jewish burials. These absences mean that important ways for passing on Jewish identity and practice from one generation to the next are no longer available.

6.3 Celebrating Holidays and Festivals

Jewish festivals, which used to be the most important times for people to come together and celebrate and pray, are now shorter and more focused on the community's demographics. Passover is one of the most important holidays in Judaism. It usually involves a lot of planning over several days and a ceremonial seder meal that follows certain rules. In modern-day Kochi, older Jews may celebrate Passover alone or with only a few other people, since they can't recreate the big family gatherings they remember from their youth.

For older people who live alone, getting ready for Passover, cleaning the house to get rid of all leavened foods, making special foods, and setting up the seder table, can be hard on their bodies. Some parts of traditional Kochi Jewish Passover food have been lost because recipes need a lot of time to prepare or special ingredients.

7. Conclusion: Persistence, Loss, and the Future of Memory

This study has shown how the Cochin Jews of Kerala negotiate identity and community life in conditions of severe demographic decline. For the remaining members of the community, identity is not fixed or inherited in a simple way. Instead, it is shaped through everyday negotiation between Jewish religious belonging, Indian national identity, and Malayali cultural rootedness. These different layers of identity exist together and are managed in practical and contextual ways.

Although the historical division between Paradesi and Malabari Jews remains part of community memory, it has lost much of its practical importance due to the shrinking population. With so few people left, maintaining strict social boundaries is no longer possible. However, memories of these divisions still influence how individuals understand their family histories and place within the community.

Religious and cultural life now faces serious challenges. The small population makes it difficult to conduct regular prayers, pass on knowledge to younger generations, and sustain community institutions. Adaptations such as simplified religious practices, reduced services, and reliance on visiting members from the diaspora allow some continuity, but they cannot fully replace the vibrant communal life of the past. The transformation of living religious spaces into heritage sites reflects this shift from active community life to symbolic preservation.

Tourism and heritage preservation have created both opportunities and tensions. While heritage initiatives provide resources for maintaining synagogues and public awareness, they also raise concerns about how Jewish life is represented. The remaining Jews often find themselves balancing their role as caretakers of heritage with the feeling of being observed as cultural objects. This highlights the complex relationship between living tradition and heritage display.

The research also points to ethical and methodological challenges in studying communities that are close to disappearing. Finding participants, avoiding intrusion into the lives of elderly individuals, and working with very small populations raise important questions about how research should be conducted with care and respect. These challenges themselves reveal what it means for a community to be nearing its end.

Looking ahead, the future of the Cochin Jewish community is uncertain. The most likely outcome is that no resident Jews will remain in Kerala within the next decade, leaving behind physical heritage, historical records, and memories preserved mainly by diaspora descendants and institutions. This represents both a powerful story of cultural persistence and a profound loss. The experience of the Cochin Jews reminds us that communities depend on people, institutions, and intergenerational transmission. Without these conditions, even long-standing communities can disappear. Their history deserves careful documentation and respectful remembrance.

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