TRACING BACK TO THE GLORIOUS PAST OF JEW TOWN: A WALK THROUGH MATTANCHERRY, KOCHI

By: Julie Ann Thomas

Located less than 10 kilometres from the heart of Kochi lies Mattancherry. Once a hub of the spice trade, this part of the island often gets upstaged by its cooler neighbour Fort Kochi. Stepping down from the boat at Mattancherry, I found myself on Jew Street on a rainy morning where I was wondered by the images of the street which have a different architectural setting apart from the city of Kochi. The streets spread with long parallel clean roads, antique shops on both sides with yellow and red walls, and some aesthetic wall paintings which tell the tales of Mattancherry when it was a prominent centre for Jews who came here on ships and settled in. Yet Mattancherry was once a famed spice and tea trading centre in the late 20th century. Today, it has transformed into antique shops, cafes which made a transition in culture too, where different beliefs, customs and faiths sprawl together in harmony. The Jew Town was once a street that was full of spice traders and Jewish residents of Kochi. The spice trading houses and godowns have now been changed into antique shops, hotels and coffee shops. By the 17th century, the Jews in Kerala had set up synagogues in Mattancherry, Ernakulam, Paravoor, Mala, Chendamangalam and Angamaly. They also built many mansions and buildings in Jew Town, many of which have now been converted to heritage hotels and cafes. After the birth of the nation of Israel in 1948, the number of Jews in Kochi dwindled so much that, often, the weekly prayer service at the Synagogue cannot be conducted due to an inadequate number of male members. With only a handful of members left in the Jewish community of Kochi, the same has happened with the houses of the former Jewish residents of Mattancherry. There used to be many Jewish families in Mattancherry long back.

HALLEGUA HOUSE, JEW TOWN

Figure 1: Front view of Hallegua House.

The 250-year-old heritage Hallegua house in the Jew Town witnessed the life and times of the Hallegua family, a Jewish family. The place is named Hallegua House in memory of the family that lived there for centuries. Their lineages trace back to the Jewish communities that had

migrated to all parts of the world including Kerala, about two thousand years ago. They've been living here ever since. In 1948 when Israel was formed, Jews started returning to their promised land. Some of them stayed back, considering this to be their home. Juliet Hallegua and her daughter Yael Hallegua were some among them who chose to remain here. Juliet Hallegua, a retired teacher, she used to live with one of her daughters. But when her friends and relatives left for the new homeland, her life turned solitary here. She spent many eventless years in the house where generations of her community thrived, (Aazhi Archives). When Juliet was a girl, like the other children, was in and out of the homes that lined the street. The dominant families were the Koders, Cohens, Salems, Robys, Ashkenazis and Halleguas. Juliet studied at St Mary's Convent in Fort Cochin and graduated from Maharaja's College. After a teacher training course, she began teaching at the same school where she had studied. Marriage with Joseph Hallegua, her uncle's son, brought her to this house. (Hindu, 2019) And finally, she too decided to leave. Nima Hallegua, the daughter living in Israel, came by to pick her family. Juliet was leaving the land where she had been born and raised. Soon, Juliet Hallegua and her family left for Israel. Only two members of the Hebrew community now live in the Jew Street, Mattancherry. Later, the house was sold to Edgar Pinto of the Kashi group and it is now opened a multidisciplinary art exhibition at Kashi Hallegua house from 13/12/2022 to 30/04/2023 as a part of the project, Sea A Boiling Vessel by Aazhi Archives (looks at the sea as a constant reminder of histories of migration, lineages of cross-pollination and synthesis: of cultures, livelihoods and religions, settlements and segregations, also of colonial plunder and slave trade that have effectively shaped the long sea coast of what is now called Kerala.) This house is the primary site for the show.

Figure 2: Hallegua Family, online resource

Figure 3: Hallegua Family, online resource

The building has rosewood doors, long wooden windows, a corridor with some open arches on the right side which can be understood from the pictures below and double-height ceilings. The house is distinctive and hosted many Jewish festivals and related parties in its days of glory. It also has a vintage chimney and an old-style kitchen called a cucina. (Hindu 2019)

Figure 4: Different styles of wooden windows in the Hallegua house.

Figure 5: Ceiling of Hallegua House – Before (online resource) and After

Figure 6: Corridor of Hallegua House – Before (online resource) and After

Figure 7: Hallegua House before the renovation, online resource

CUISINE OF COCHIN JEWS

The book of Esther David's 'Bene Appétit: The Cuisine of Indian Jews' is divided into eight chapters, out of which each subcategory of the Indian Jews and their geographical location is discussed separately in six chapters. The first two chapters offer a general introduction to the culinary culture of the Jews in India. David's chapter on the Cochin Jews is very interesting. The Cochin Jews adjusted their recipes to the South Indian culinary regimen and "started using curry leaves, tamarind juice and coconut milk, along with a variety of bananas and chillies". They follow their community tradition of covering the Shabbath bread with ceremonial cloth and at the same time, they prefer eating a vegetarian meal on a plantain leaf or steel thali(plate). In this manner, cultural hybridity has become a part of Jewish life in India. . They adapted themselves to the geographical and the socio-cultural conditions of their habitat. When the Jews

arrived in Kerala, they began trading in spices which included pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger and mace. They infused the taste of the curry leaves, tamarind pulp and coconut, and into their foods. A long coastline teeming with some of the finest edible fishes in the world contributed to great seafood medleys. The staple food of Cochinis remains unpolished/parboiled rice, which takes on many incarnations throughout the day. Items like the *dosa, idli, appam* and *puttu* continue to be eaten with relish in Cochini households/restaurants throughout Israel as it is done in homes across Kerala. One of the distinctive rice delicacies is the Cochin Jewish coconut rice. It is prepared by adding thinly shredded coconut flesh and spices to cooked rice or cooking the rice in coconut milk and then adding spices to unleash a delightful aroma.

Figure 8: old-style kitchen called a Cucina.

Figure 9: Stove and Roller Stone.

JEWISH DIETARY LAWS

Kosher is the Hebrew word for 'fit'. *Kashrut* is the Hebrew word for keeping *kosher*. Jewish cuisine owes its ingenuity and originality to *Kashrut*: the prohibition of mixing meat and dairy, the ban on pork and fishes with no fins and scales (this means no seafood like shrimps and lobsters, scallops, crabs etc.)

In Cochin, the Jewish housemaker found that coconut milk was the ideal alternative to milk to use with meat. Gelatin was never used; instead, food starch and tapioca became binding agents. One of the major commandments of *kosher* law is: "You shall not boil a kid in the mother's milk". Cochinis observe a waiting period of six hours after meat is consumed before ingesting a dairy product or anything containing milk.

NARRATIVES OF OLD JEW TOWN: INTERACTION WITH NATIVES

The Mattancherry Palace, the Jewish Synagogues, the spice and tea trade, the diverse communities that form its cultural matrix are what Mattancherry is best known for. Now, Jew Town is full of curio shops teeming with contemporary and antique artifacts. The large buildings on the two sides of the lanes are two-storied and are very similar in structure, although the façades are different. Some of them are painted in flamboyant colours, while others are not so well maintained. Windows are the main attraction of the Jew Town which opened to different sights of the street. (Figure 10 clearly indicates the windows of shops opening into the streets.) They all have many windows openings into the street and sloping roofs, mainly tiled which I found really interesting. Many of them have charming little balconies overlooking the street and the sound of flocking pigeons made a good aesthetic vibe. I have noticed some artificial pieces of stuff to attract tourists which make a visual impact, it has completely transformed into a tourist destination. I haven't seen the busy street as I expected. I thought the day will be ruined due to the heavy rain but my assumption was wrong, I accidentally acquainted an old age person who brought his images of an old Jew Street, about thirty years ago, from his own experiences. I got to know about the glorious days of spice culture in Kochi. He still reminisces about the busy days of streets hustled with people and vehicles which opened a wide range of job opportunities to people. He highlighted that there was no space even to walk in the street as it was busy with pushcarts, heavy trucks and people. I could smell the fragrance of the past town from his words. He added, Jew Street was a great hub of spices like pepper, cinnamon, ginger, cloves etc. The workers protested frequently against low wages and this made them leave the business and made a drastic change in the spice trade. I find changes in the social determinants of health like unemployment, poverty and development. He also mentioned the lack of work after the Jews left. It reflected the fall in the coming of visitors and foreigners due to some restrictions on passenger ship services. The decline in trade left most of Mattancherry's workforce unemployed and a lack of education denied many a chance at jobs that required higher skill levels. Men were pushed into the construction industry and women into domestic labour. Poverty levels among unskilled workers began to rise and with it, the quality of life dropped significantly. Then it gradually transformed into the culture of antiques and artifacts. He also added that the Covid-19 pandemic has a great impact on it. The Street lost all foreign passengers due to restrictions and it reduced the business The native people do the same in fear of infectious diseases. Seasons play a vital role in living conditions. Profit is relatively low during monsoons and it leads to the condition of daily wage people becoming pathetic. He believes that the Jew Town will not be the same as the old one. Now many shops are owned by Kashmiri people. The old Jew residents used to come here to explore the culture and celebrate their festival every December to maintain their old traditions and for the remembrance of the past glorious days. There will also be rituals at the Synagogue on that

eve. I could understand how this decline in the spice trade affects the people and their living conditions. Now, Mattancherry is a place that can be identified through lost opportunities, mixed priorities and resilient communities.

Figure 10: Jew Street.

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