

Theme: Access and Integration- working together with archives and other heritage institutions

Sub-theme: Building new alliances

## Title

Successful adaptation: The Changing role and function of Synagogues remodelled as museums in Cochin, Kerala

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## Abstract

This paper investigates collective memory facilitated by the synagogues which have been given an increased responsibility of connecting with larger base in Cochin, Kerala.

After the new state of Israel was established in 1948, a massive migration of Jewish community from Cochin to Israel happened, thereby disabling the surviving synagogues to perform their religious functions. Hence, two of the synagogues located in Chendamangalam and Parur in Cochin have been remodelled to museums under the Muziris Heritage Project by Government of Kerala with the Archaeological Survey of India.

The Chendamangalam Jewish museum is India's first Jewish museum, opened in February 2006. The Jewish museums display Jewish history and heritage through architecture and exhibition of ritual object. Preserving the Jewish heritage and tradition will enrich the awareness, responsibility and sense of belongingness among the Jewish as well as the non-Jewish community.

This paper will discuss how these two Jewish museums contribute to the Jewish heritage. This may, probably, give a new lease of life to the Jewish heritage and existing synagogues in India.

## **From Synagogue to Museum**

Cochin is undoubtedly the first and one of the best study cases to discuss the role of synagogues converted into museums in India.

After the changing role and functions of synagogues as they have been remodelled into museums in Cochin, the architectures have to be re-examined in the context of memory and explore how new places have developed to allow a counter-memory to challenge the dominant narrative of museum in general. The historical authenticity of the revival/restoration is a goal pursued in the synagogues converted into Jewish museums, in which the historical design is the most impressive element of the exhibition.

With the Muziris Heritage Project, a renaissance of the Jewish heritage in Cochin is taking place and synagogues are recovering their glory not regaining their prevailing role as a place of worship but as a public institution by being transformed into museums. Due to only a negligible percentage of Jewish community residing in Cochin now, there rise a tendency to change two of the synagogues to museums, depicting the history of the Jewish community through relevant sites and its objects, which act as expression of continuity of the Jewish heritage in Cochin.

Slowly but surely, we are losing the sense of time. Jews provide a reference point for the perception of 'the other' in Indian society. We began to forget what happened when, what came earlier and what later, and the feeling that it really doesn't matter overwhelms us. Past events seem fixed in the landscape where they occurred. Written texts can be edited or even created, films can recast key narratives, and photos can be airbrushed. Landscapes, by contrast, feel immutable. Jews are among one of the most ancient and persistent minority ethnic, cultural and religious groups in Kerala, India. One site of representation of Jews and Jewish history is the museum where Jewish identifications are ascribed meaning as 'the other' in mainstream history and popularized to a mass audience.

## **Cochin Jews and their synagogues: Chendamangalam and Parur**

The interest in reviving memories of Jews in Cochin came initially with Muziris Heritage Project<sup>1</sup>, the four museums<sup>2</sup> envisaged during the first phase of this project; Chendamangalam and Parur are among them. Many anthropological work related to the Kerala Jews have been done by scholars from Israel, India and others but the transforming synagogue to museum was not done.

There are five Jewish communities<sup>3</sup> in India named Bene Israel, Baghdadi Jews, Cochin Jews, Bene Menashe of north-eastern part of India (also referred to as the Mizo-Kuku-Chin), and Bene Ephraim in a small village of Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. While some synagogues were constructed over the centuries; India has thirty-six synagogues, some are functioning as synagogue, and some are not: the oldest synagogues belong to the Cochin Jews. Eight synagogues once belonged to the Cochin Jews and among two of them converted into museums: Chendamangalam and Parur. A distinctive mode of architectural expression

emerged from a broad range of natural conditions with materials, plans, and techniques in socio-economic considerations with religious practices of Cochin Jews. These architectures realized not by a homogenous community of Jews but rather autonomous groups having diverse backgrounds and origins. Synagogues were erected in urban or rural areas in different styles, sizes and spatial arrangement influenced by surrounding architectural traditions and techniques in their considerable levels. Hence, a mode of vernacular architectural expression emerged not necessarily by architects but rather by trained craftsmen with regional materials and environmental conditions.

Parur and Chendamangalam is typical Kerala small town, located twenty six kilometres north of Ernakulam, about forty kilometres to the north of Mattanchery and between the two synagogues distance three kilometres.

Parur is the largest synagogue in Cochin, and it has architecturally distinctive from the other seven synagogue buildings. Structure of Parur synagogue is seen secular orientation, too. Originally, Jewish people may not have come to the synagogue primarily to pray or study, only. They conducted local business in the synagogue, promoting the general welfare of the Jewish community as well. According to local legend and historian named Prem Doss Yehudi, the first synagogue may have been built in 750 C. E. and rebuilt in 1164 after the first one was destroyed by the Moorish's persecution Jews in Cranganore and Jews shifted to Parur and eventually settled down. This story is generally accepted among the Jews and locals and another building was erected in early-seventeenth century. In the mid-1950s, most of the Parur Jews immigrated to Israel and since mid-1970s synagogue was not in active place of worship. The synagogue building was not adequately cared till the Muziris Heritage Project has been implemented.

The synagogue has been built in the traditional techniques and materials, depicting Portuguese incorporated colonial details such as the thick wall, alette decoration (fan-shape decoration) and swirling rope patterns. The roof frame has been covered by clay roof tiles and exposed with local wood cut frame and ceiling has been decorated with geometric or floral pattern in colourful paintings.

Three kilometres from the Parur synagogue to the south is Chendamangalam synagogue which has been rebuilt over a centuries, Kerala style of construction was maintained. With white-washed walls of laterite stone veneered in a polished lime plaster, and Portuguese colonial style has been adopted such as painted panels, fan-shape alette on walls, roof was covered with clay tiles, large windows and doors deeply revealed into the thick walls. Locals narrated about this synagogue which was built in early-fifteenth century, and later rebuilt in seventeenth century. Archaeologists from Government of Kerala responsible for the restoration of the Chendamangalam synagogue in 2005 have a slightly different opinion on the dates of the building. They believe that it was built in 1565 and repaired in 1621.<sup>4</sup>

Until the 1990s, there were some elderly Jews stayed in but within a span of time all had emigrated or died. The smallest synagogue in Chendamangalam followed other Keralan synagogue style has been transformed into museum in 2006. With intricately-carved and

painted teak Ark (Heckal: cabinet for Torah) and tebah (Bimah: stand for reading Torah), two pillars in the main room referred to the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. It has also women's gallery in separated by partition wall.

Now we have to forget the contradiction between the artistic value of synagogue with decorated inner space and its primary role in the functioning of the synagogue as a house of worship. The two converted into museums, former synagogue, have to be identified as museums and documented in the standard format, have to be interpreted in different ways and be produced different meaning and values to public not only Jews but public audience. As Spalding states that the challenge museums now face is to see themselves no longer purveyors of the truth, but as seekers after truth on a journey they share with their visitors. When they do this, their whole scope of operation broadens and they can become genuinely inclusive once again (Spalding, 2002. p25).

### **Museology: Age of meaning and for public value**

Humans cannot be understood merely as 'isolated being' and must be considered within the social contexts in which they commonly recall and recount their memories. Memories require a social framework to which they can attach themselves and from which they may be retrieved. This framework exists in the individual as a matrix of influences deriving from the various groups to which the individual belongs. Therefore, as the individual moves from one group to another, the memories he or she recalls change as well. Synagogue is a spiritual, cultural and communal center of traditional Judaism and for Jews. The remodelled synagogue as museum should be understood with the memories of Jewish community and individual Jews. More layers have to be interpreted and the terminology should be unified on this work, for example, whether the museum documentation will take 'space or place', 'sacred or holy', 'bimah' or 'tebah' etc...are concerned.

The Jewish culture is that the totality of wisdom, practices, folkways and so forth- the content of all our texts, songs, poems, artwork, stories and axioms- that constitutes what we choose to remember and record or write of Jewish experience. Jews left Cochin and the synagogues remained a nostalgic yearning for Jewish folkways that once sustained us as a people apart. Jewish ethnicity is what we think Jews have done, and what we may continue to do, but with no transcendent purpose. The combination of practice and theory is an idea that explains transformation and then proves successful in bringing it about. Meaning comes about when our horizon of understanding meets the text's horizon of reasonable elasticity.

Understanding Jewish heritage and their spiritual memory which attached to the space or place is the primary role of new museum work. After this conceptual interpretation of Jewish wisdom and folkways by understanding, the hermeneutics and museum interpretation should be designed to communicate as well as to improve the public values. Interpretation is the process of constructing meaning; the making of meaning, the construction of understanding is reached through the process of interpretation. In the museum, interpretation is done for you or to you, however, in hermeneutics; you are the interpreter for yourself.

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Building alliance among different but concerned group or institution should be work together from program (what we do) to idea (why we do it); from pragmatic (what works) to theology (what counts); from regulative rules (tinkering with the surface) to constitutive rules (building a deep foundation); from additive change (program change that reacts to the newest perceived need) to transformative change (structural change that responds to the deepest theological considerations)

### **Doing synagogue differently**

It is a conscious theologizing of synagogue life. The Jewish Museum should encourage thinking about synagogue life through a different lens, with the understanding and new interpretation. Synagogue is thus 're-thought' as a place where people meet not just do business, but to break bread, study, pray and share the joys and sorrows and meaning of life together. This transformative change envisions that everything the synagogue does its related to a higher purpose, creating a community in which people can find a connection with the sacred, a sense of life's purpose and meaning and a place to connect with God and others who are on the same journey.

The Jewish Heritage Museum without Jews in Cochin has still many tasks to be done with Jewish communities like music-making. Music-making is sometimes depicted as a triangle consisting of composer, performer, and listener. It is a triangle in constant motion, with each side responding to one another. The interplay might go something like this: the composer interprets herself, the performer interprets the composer, and the listener interprets the performer and revolving the circle again. As this clumsy illustration suggests; synagogue, museum, and visitors interpret museum and heritage, there is no single type of triangle or order of interaction that works for all scenarios.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>. Muziris Heritage Project: Government of Kerala with History, Archaeology and Tourism Department promoted the project since 2004 see the details

<http://www.keralatourism.org/muziris>

<sup>2</sup>. The four museums under the Muziris Heritage Project

- The historical museum at the Palium Dutch Museum
- The ancient life style museum at the Palium Nalukettu
- The Jewish migration historical museum at the Parur Jewish synagogue
- The Keralite Jewish Heritage museum at Chendamangalam synagogue

<sup>3</sup>. The five Jewish communities in India

- Bene Israel: mainly settled in Maharashtra
- Baghdadi Jews: Mumbai and Calcutta
- Cochin Jews: Cochin, Kerala
- Bene Menashe: north-eastern states and border with Myanmar
- Bene Ephraim: Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

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  11. Parur synagogue to be restored in *The Hindu* (daily Newspaper in India; March 16, 2010)