

LEGACY AND HERITAGE: JEWS AND SYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN KERALA SHARED HISTORY

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Abstract:

This study delves into the rich legacy and heritage shared by Jews and Syrian Christians in Kerala, illuminating the historical, cultural, and religious tapestry that has woven their existence together. The paper sheds light on the ways in which Jews and Syrian Christians in Kerala have influenced each other's traditions, practices, and social structures, contributing to the unique syncretism that characterizes their shared history. It delves into key historical events, such as periods of migration, religious interactions, and communal dynamics, to offer a nuanced understanding of their interconnected past. Moreover, this study seeks to highlight the enduring impact of this shared history on the present-day identities and relationships of both communities. By considering the challenges and opportunities of coexistence, it provides insights into the resilience and adaptability of these communities throughout their intertwined journey. It underscores the importance of preserving and celebrating the shared legacy and heritage of Jews and Syrian Christians as a testament to the harmonious intersections of cultures and faiths within this ancient city.

Key Words

Jews and Syrian Christians, Migration, Cairo, Judaism, Tarisappalli copper plates

Introduction

India is a land which celebrates unity in diversity. One can find numerous cultures, religions, languages here in India. This land emerged from an ancient civilization, united by a shared history, sustained by pluralist democracy. Kerala, which is famously known as 'God's own country' is a small replica of India's huge diversity. All major religions of the world can be found, living side by side in Kerala.

From the references of Muziris, the famous port of Kerala, in ancient traveler accounts, to becoming the key for Europeans to open the door to the mighty India, it can be understood that Kerala has always been the one who welcomed its guests with both hands. This reminds one of India's greatest gem of a value 'adithi devo bhava' which loosely translates to 'guest is god'. Thus, it is no wonder that one finds so much rich diversity here.

Jewish community and Syrian Christian community are two groups that are said to have settled in Kerala way back in the past. Arriving at Kerala as foreigners, they were also able to find the usual hospitality of Kerala which made them become one of them. There are many biblical legends behind their arrival on the shores of Kerala. These two communities have blended in so well that, we can find its influence on other religions as well as on the society. Yet, they have been successful to carve out a niche for themselves in Kerala society.

The influence of cultures of both Jewish and Syrian Christian communities can be seen in the Hindu culture, which is considered as the major religion of both Kerala as well as India. In turn, some aspects of Hindu culture can also be seen in the Jewish and Syrian Christian culture in the context of Kerala. A mutual give and take of culture without becoming a melting pot of cultures can be seen as the exquisite rare beauty of Kerala.

The relations between Judaism and Syrian Christianity with Hindu cultures have often overshadowed the parallels between Jews and Syrian Christians of Kerala. They are seemingly two independent religions yet one can find many striking parallels between Judaism and Syrian Christianity in the context of Kerala.

The parallelism is evident in their similar legends relating to biblical accounts; similar historical background, socio-cultural and traditional aspects of Jews of Kerala and Syrian Christians of Kerala. These parallels between Syrian Christians and Jews of Kerala are to be analyzed in this research. The often overlooked aspects between these two religions to be discussed in this research will hopefully aid in analyzing the relation between these communities with much more clarity.

Problems To Be Investigated

- To examine the historical background of both Jews and Syrian Christians of Kerala.
- To analyse the socio-cultural aspects of both communities.
- To explore the parallelism showcased by Jews and Syrian Christians of Kerala.

Objectives

- To learn more about the historical aspects relating to Jews and Syrian Christians of Kerala.
- To study about Jews and Syrian Christians in context of Kerala society.
- To understand these religions from a socio-cultural viewpoint.
- To analyse the symmetry between Jews and Syrian Christians.

Significance of the Study

This study 'Legacy and Heritage: Jews and Syrian Christians in Cairo's Shared History' helps us to understand the origin and development of Judaism and Christianity in Kerala, their historical and socio-cultural aspects, impact and contributions to the society and its relation with other major religions in Kerala. This study highlights the similarities showcased by Jews and Syrian Christians in the context of Kerala

Hypothesis

- There is considerable number of Jews and Syrian Christians in Kerala.
- There exists a parallelism between Kerala Jews and Syrian Christians with respect to their legend, tradition and customs, historical background, songs, architecture and attires.
- Syrian Christians and Kerala Jewish cultures have been influenced by Hindu culture to an extent.

Conclusion

Syrian Christians and Jews of Kerala are two communities that came from distant lands and became an integral part of Kerala along with other communities in Kerala like Hindus, Muslims and other minority communities. Throughout the history of both communities, cooperation and friendship between different communities is clearly visible. While analyzing the history of Syrian Christians, it can be observed that they have always held a high position in the society on par with the high castes in ancient Kerala society. They have been regarded as prominent traders of Kerala which is evident from the granting of Tirisappalli copper plates to Mar Sappir Iso. It shows the religious tolerance and cooperation of the local rulers towards the Syrian Christians.

Even though the Portuguese intervention to latinise the Syrian Christians resulted in the splitting of the community after Coonan Cross Oath, it did not shake the foundations of the Syrian Christians in Kerala. Today, in Kerala, Syrian Christians form a prominent community along with other communities.

Jewish history, when explored, helps in understanding their importance in Kerala society. In the past, Jews were one among the prominent trading communities in Kerala. In addition to providing asylum to Jewish refugees, Kerala provided to become a second homeland for such Jews. Though a closed community, yet they lived in harmony with other communities of Kerala.

India is known as the only country where Jews were never persecuted. Kerala, being part of India, holds this true. Even though Portuguese persecuted some Jews, rest of the Jewish history of Kerala is not blotted by any such violent incidents. In fact, they were treated with respect, trust and cooperation by the then rulers of Kerala.

The decision to leave India and go back to Israel after 1948 was a hard one for many Jews. A few never left their second homeland Kerala, where they were given asylum. Those Jews who chose to go, never really left the Kerala culture. In fact, Cochin community in Israel still retains its culture adopted from Kerala. Even though uprooted from Kerala, this place was still deeply rooted in their hearts and minds.

The Syrian Christians form a significant population in Kerala society. While the Jewish population in Kerala slowly dwindled. The reasons behind this rise of population of Syrian Christians is that they adopted many customs and practices of local communities and mingled well within the society. This ensured their survival and growth in Kerala. Whereas, the fall of Jewish population is mainly attributed to two reasons: one factor was the migration from to Israel. India and Kerala represented only their temporary place of refuge. They considered Israel as their promised land. The second one is the 'passive' role of Judaism opposed to the 'active' role of Christianity in Kerala society. Christianity was a missionary religion aimed at converting local populations, while Judaism in India has made no attempt to win over members of other religious to its faith. These factors have led to the numerical imbalance between Jews and Syrian Christians in Kerala.

Hindu culture have influenced both the Jewish as well as Syrian Christian communities in Kerala. Jews and Hindus shares some commonalties in their customs. However, Syrian Christians have been influenced by the Hindu community's culture to an extent by adapting certain customs and practices of Hindus. This aspect is often analysed by scholars.

It can be seen that Syrian Christians of Kerala show parallelism in certain aspects like tradition, privileges granted, customs, attires, cuisine, marriage etc. These aspects which are overlooked, when analysed properly truly showcases the similarities. Whether these similarities are due to close contact with each other, conversion or due to some other reason is unknown. According to a theory, St. Thomas had actually converted some Jews, who is said to have resided in Kerala at that time. When the reasoning that Brahmins had not yet arrived in Kerala till the 7th century A.D is read along with this theory, one may truly begin to think whether this theory is plausible

However, as no other concrete evidences are received till now, one can attribute their parallelism to the close contact between the two communities.

Exploration about the history and parallelism of Jews and Syrian Christians of Kerala aids in the exploration of the two prominent communities who carved their own niche in the history of Kerala.

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