

The Jews of Kerala and the Wheels of Indian Ocean Commerce, 800-1800 C.E.

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The Jewish traders, who were involved in different degrees and at different levels in the circulation of commodities between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, formed an important mercantile group in most of the maritime exchange centers of medieval Kerala. Bolstering their economic positions by well-established family bonds and matrimonial links, these Jewish traders of Kerala got linked with the larger Semitic networks that were distributed all along the western space of the Indian Ocean, by being suppliers of spices in return for Mediterranean wares. Their resource-mobilizing ability was largely banked upon by the local rulers to meet their emergency situations and war expenses, which processes led to the evolution of a strong rapport between the local rulers and the Jewish mercantile groups of Kerala during the medieval period. Under insecure and dangerous politico-economic conditions, particularly when they were harassed by the Portuguese, the Jews of Kerala managed to survive and conduct their business by keeping themselves acceptable to the local rulers and power structures and by supplying domestic and foreign merchandise required for meeting the diverse needs of the state.

Though the Jewish community was distributed all along the coast of Kerala, their principal settlements were in Madai, Pantalayani Kollam, Palayur, Pulloot, Cranganore (Shingly), Mala, Chennamangalam, Parur, Cochin, and Quilon (Kurakkeni Kollam). With the mass flow of Jews from Kerala to Israel in the mid-twentieth century, the memories of their past started vanishing, and the empty Jewish synagogue structures of Chennamangalam, Mala, Parur, and Cochin, the *Juthakulam* (pond of the Jews) of Madai and a few oral accounts obtained from different maritime trade centers of Kerala have turned out to be the only outwardly visible and audible remnants of the past of the Jewish merchants who once had played a very decisive role in the economic and political life of Kerala.

The central purpose of this article is to see how far the formation of the Jewish community of Kerala was conditioned by the exchange mechanisms of the Indian Ocean. This is done, on the one hand, by locating them in the politico-economic conditions of Kerala within which they operated and, on the other hand, by analyzing the macrolevel long-term developments in the Indian Ocean that acted as medium for their trading activities.

Long Distance Trade and the Formation of a Jewish Merchant Group in Quilon

Though the Jewish presence in Malabar is sometimes traced back to a remote past,¹ different Semitic mercantile settlements along its coast seem to have appeared only after the ninth century following the commencement of long-distance trade and the consequent entry of large number of Jews principally from Fatimid Egypt and in a less degree from Abbassid Persia.² The principal destination for the Jews involved in long-distance trade was Quilon, which was known differently as Kurakkeni Kollam in Malayalam,³ Koulam Mali⁴ in Geniza papers,⁵ and in Arabic sources,⁶ as well Gu-lin (in the Song Period), Ju-lan (in the Yuan period) in Chinese documents.⁷ In fact the Jewish fascination for Quilon began with its evolution as a major port in the Indian Ocean following the opening of a new international trade-route linking Abbassid Persia (750-1258 C.E.) and T'ang China (618-907 C.E.). The long-distance trade emanating from al-Basrah or Muscat or Sohar in Oman in the Persian Gulf and

terminating in Canton in China had Koulam Mali (Quilon) as a halting center.⁸ On the west coast of India, it was in Quilon that the Arab *dhow*s spent an average of two weeks exchanging commodities, as they waited for a favorable monsoon for their journey across the Bay of Bengal to China.⁹ The increasing concentration of wares in Quilon from Abbassid Persia and T'ang China augmented its range of exchange activities. It was against this backdrop that the Jews from Fatimid Egypt began to visit Quilon, where they must have also had wider commercial interactions with the Jews coming from Abbassid Baghdad.

The network through which the Jews used to take commodities from Quilon to the Mediterranean ports ran through Aden, al-Qus, Fustat/Cairo, and Alexandria.¹⁰ Through this route, a wide variety of commodities including pepper, ginger, brazil wood, and cardamom were taken by them from the ports of Kerala from as early as the ninth century onward, as is testified by the Jewish letters of Cairo Geniza.¹¹ Among them pepper formed the greatest single commodity exported from Kerala during this period.¹²

With the increasing involvement of the Jews in the trading activities of Quilon, they organized themselves into a merchant guild or organization called *Anjuvannam*¹³ for the purpose of safeguarding their commercial interests and facilitating the processes of procurement and distribution of commodities. The first reference to *Anjuvannam* in Quilon is in the *Tharisapally* copper plate given to Mar Sapor in 849 C.E. by Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal, where it is mentioned that *Anjuvannam*, *Manigramam*, and *Arunnoottuvar* were entrusted with the right to protect and safeguard the church of Tharisa set up by Mar Sapor and the various privileges granted to it.¹⁴ M.G.S. Narayanan holds the view that *Anjuvannam*, mentioned in this copper plate, was a Jewish merchant guild.¹⁵ *Tharisapally* copper plate further states that *Anjuvannam*, along with *Manigramam*, was conferred with the power of *Karalar* (care-taker) of the city of Quilon.¹⁶ The Jewish linkage with Quilon during this period is further attested to by the presence of a Hebrew signature by one of the witnesses in the *Tharisapally* copper plate. It is further suggestive of the fact that Jews were active in the commerce of Quilon as early as 849 so as to be invited as witness.¹⁷

Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal, a feudatory of the Chera ruler Sthanu Ravi Varma, favored the Jews as well as the immigrant Christian merchant groups by conferring commercial privileges on them (particularly the Christians) with a view to attracting more foreign merchants to Quilon and thereby more overseas commerce and trade surplus. This was with a view toward strengthening the hands of the Chera ruler and his feudatories by way of customs duties for the purpose of meeting the diverse challenges raised by the Pandyas and the Cholas in the south.¹⁸ This was a period when the Chera-Pandya conflict was intense in the south, following which the Pandyas had invaded the Ay-Vel country and captured the ruler along with his relatives and treasures. Though the Chera army had moved into the south to recapture the lost territory, the Ay territory with its old headquarters in Vizhinjam, was retained within the Pandyan sphere of influence. The Cheras could regain only the Vel country with its headquarters at Quilon (Kurakkeni Kollam).¹⁹ It was against the backdrop of this political development that the Chera ruler and his feudatory made conscious efforts to entice different foreign merchant groups including the Jews to Quilon.

Meanwhile, some of the Jewish traders operating from Fatimid Egypt, but in collaboration with the Jews of Kerala, had by this time developed extensive commercial networks linking the west coast of India and the eastern Mediterranean. We find Mahruz b. Jacob, who was a ship-owning Jewish merchant (*nakhoda*),

conducting trade with the ports of Konkan, Malabar, and Egypt.²⁰ In his letter of c.1145 C.E., Mahruz b. Jacob refers to Kanbayat (Cambay), Broach, Thana, Mangalore, Malibarath (Koulam Mali), Kayakannur (Lower Kannur) as the important centers of Jewish trade on the western seaboard.²¹ Quilon (Koulam Mali) continued to be a principal destination for the Jewish merchants, traveling from Aden to Munaybar (Malabar or Kerala), via Sindabur (Chandrapura in Goa) and selling storax and coral collected from Mediterranean ports, as is mentioned by the Jewish merchant Allan b. Hassun (1116-1117 C.E.).²² Benjamin of Tudela (c.1170 C.E.) in his *Itinerary* refers to the Jewish traders through whose medium the wheels of Quilon's commerce were made to turn toward the ports of Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Levant, from where commodities were further taken to Venice.²³

Thus Quilon acting as a junctional point of different commodity streams served as the principal habitat for the Jews in the early centuries of the medieval period. The immense trading opportunities thrown open by the intersection of international trade routes at this port made Quilon to be the most coveted and frequented Jewish exchange center in the Indian Ocean. The Jewish presence and their trade in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Quilon is also attested to by Marco Polo²⁴ and John of Monte Corvino.²⁵ The al-Karimi merchants from Mamluk Egypt, who came to Kerala from the fourteenth century onward, preferred not to operate from Quilon but from the ports of northern Kerala (such as Calicut and Cannanore), because of the predominant presence of the Jewish and St. Thomas Christian traders in the port of Quilon in southern Kerala.²⁶

The Cheras and Their Dependence on Jewish Merchant Capital

The Cheras ruler had their headquarters at Mahodayapuram, which was also known as differently as Makotai or Shingly²⁷ or Muyirikode during the medieval period and corresponds to the present-day Cranganore. There was a significant Jewish colony in Cranganore, whose members were often known as the Jews of Shingly or Muyirikode. They played a significant role in the political and commercial developments of the Chera kingdom in its formative phase.

The early centuries of the medieval period witnessed incessant wars among the Chera, Chola, and Pandya rulers over the question of controlling areas yielding sizeable wealth, particularly maritime exchange centers that were capable of generating trade surplus. Jews scattered along the coast of Kerala formed an important mercantile element in the Chera kingdom, which was enthusiastically competing with the Cholas in controlling the maritime trade emanating from southern India. While the Cholas attempted to monopolize the trading activities of Southeast Asia by controlling the exchange centers of Ceylon, Coromandel coast, and the Sailendras, the Chera rulers and their feudatories made increasing use of the Jewish merchant guild of *Anjuvannam* and the Christian merchant guild of *Manigramam* for controlling the commercial affairs of the west coast of India, particularly of Kerala and for the movement of commodities to the ports of Persian Gulf and Red Sea.²⁸

Against the background of incessant conflicts between the Cheras and the Cholas, the Jewish traders came forward to strengthen the hands of the Chera ruler by donating men and materials liberally to him, which in turn made them closer to the ruler and the various power-exercising institutions of the region. The help from the Jews came immediately after the defeat of Chera naval power at Vizhinjam and the loss of Quilon to the forces of Raja Raja Chola (985-1014). In the war council that was convened in 1000 C.E., Joseph Rabban the head of the Jewish merchant guild of *Anjuvannam* of Muyirikode (Cranganore) placed at the disposal of the Chera

ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varman his ships, men, and materials for the conduct of the war with the Cholas. An enormous amount of Jewish mercantile wealth seems to have been mobilized by Joseph Rabban for meeting the expenses incurred by the Chera ruler in the war.²⁹

Besides supporting the Chera ruler who had been the patron of their trading activities in Kerala, the Jewish merchants seem to have had another reason to finance the wars against the Cholas. The Cholas, who were trying to control the trade of Southeast Asia, actually wanted to link the maritime trade of south India with the expanding markets of China through their Southeast Asian networks, while the Cheras by way of the political support and patronage extended to the merchant guilds of *Anjuvannam* and *Manigramam*, tried to link the maritime commerce of Kerala with the ports of west Asia, whose channels of commodity movement finally merged at different levels into the Jewish trade networks operating in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Against this background it was necessary for the Jewish traders that the Chera ruler should come out victorious in the war for the purpose of ensuring regular flow of commodities through their Diasporic channels in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

The liberal donation of mercantile wealth by Joseph Rabban and his Jewish colleagues to the Cheras appears to have been highly decisive in determining the course of the war. Immediately after the war, we find the Chera ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varma (962-1020) conferring seventy-two privileges and prerogatives of aristocracy on Joseph Rabban in about 1000 C.E.³⁰ The conferring of privileges upon the leading Semitic traders is to be seen as a strategy used by the ruler to ensure the mercantile support of the Jewish merchants operating from different parts of Kerala for the purpose of mobilizing resources for his future political ventures.³¹ On the other hand, it also turned out to be a mechanism and device that gave upward mobility in the social ladder for the Jewish traders scattered in the kingdom of the Cheras. The perception that these privileges were extended to the entire Jewish community ushered in a feeling of self-pride and social elevation among this mercantile group, which in fact helped to integrate the different Jewish traders who came to Kerala at different times and spread across a vast area. This copper plate containing the details of the privileges conferred upon them was in fact used by the Jews of several generations and centuries as a device to construct their elevated position in the changing social space and to maintain it intact.

Corresponding to these commercial developments and following the royal support of the Cheras, we find Jewish traders spreading along the coast of Kerala and getting linked with the Jewish settlements of Cambay, Broach, Thana, and Mangalore, where Abraham Yiju had a bronze factory.³² Probably it must have been during this time that the Jews started expanding to Fandarayna (Pantalayani Kollam near Koyilandy) and Madai (in north Kerala) for the purpose of conducting commerce. In the Jewish letter of 1139 C.E. we find Jews conducting trade in Fandarayna (Pantalayani Kollam) with the cooperation of Sheikh Abu 'l-Hasan b. Ja'far and using the ship of Patanaswamikal. Khalaf b. Isaac b. Bundar, the writer of this letter, states he had taken in the vessel to Bab al-Mandeb about one and a quarter and an eight *bahar* of pepper from Pantalayani Kollam in Kerala.³³ The memories of Jewish contacts in Madai are still preserved in the form of an oral tradition woven around *juthakulam* (pond of the Jews), from where the Jews used to draw water.³⁴

Through marriage bonds and commercial partnerships, the diverse Jewish mercantile settlements seem to have managed to mobilize greater resources and widen their networks enabling them to face the pressures as well as challenges of

larger market systems and maintain a remarkable amount of continuity against the backdrop of adverse politico-economic conditions. However with the arrival of more Jewish traders from west Asia and Mediterranean world from the ninth century onward, there eventually appeared seeds of differentiation within this community into Black Jews (or the earliest Jewish settlers in Malabar) and White Jews (or the *Paradesi* Jews who reached Malabar following the Arab commercial expansion of the ninth century).³⁵ Nevertheless the Jews of Malabar (Black Jews) having deep roots in spice-growing hinterland and production centers as well as good political links with the native rulers of Malabar formed the principal suppliers of commodities for the west Asian Jews (White Jews) who were scattered along the west coast of India and engaged in the overseas trade.³⁶

Making use of the political support that they enjoyed under the Cheras of Kerala, the Jews used to procure a great amount of commodities including pepper for further transshipment to the Mediterranean world through the Diasporic networks. Thus we find that in 1023 C.E. about 140 pounds of pepper were being taken through this route by one single merchant.³⁷ A Jewish trader conducting trade with Kerala, Fatimid Egypt, Broach, and Mangalore mentions in 1145 C.E. about 16 large *bahars* of pepper being collected for the purpose of trade to be carried out with the help of his commercial partners.³⁸ In fact pepper and ginger, which are the commodities typical of Kerala, formed the major items that circulated through the Jewish networks.³⁹ The price of pepper also fluctuated very much during this period, which in fact indicates the index of the profit of the Jewish trade. In the middle of the eleventh century the price of pepper (per sack) in Cairo was 135 *dinars*.⁴⁰ More or less during the same period the price of pepper in Maghreb was 130 *dinars*.⁴¹ The price of pepper per 100 pounds in Almeria in 1138 was 27-25 *mithqals*.⁴² However the price of pepper in Kerala was considerably cheap. Thus in 1097 C.E. Joseph Lebdi purchased fifty sacks of pepper from Kerala at a price of 5 *dinars* per sack.⁴³ It shows that the amount of profit accruing from the trade in pepper was enormously high, even after deducting the cost of risk factors and transportation expenses. However the profit from the spice trade did not remain the same; the unexpected dwindling in the prices at the final destinations took away a major chunk of the profit in many cases. Thus in 1198 C.E., a sack of pepper was sold at Aden only for 52 *dinars*, which later went down to 45 *dinars*.⁴⁴ Even in the early thirteenth century the sale price of pepper per load was 46 *dinars*.⁴⁵ In spite of the fluctuations in the price of pepper, it formed one of the major cargoes that the Jews procured from Kerala during this period.

Fragmentation of the Central Authority and the Distribution of the Jewish Mercantile Settlements in Kerala

Following the fragmentation of the central authority of the Cheras (the Kulasekharas) of Mahodayapuram in 1206, there appeared a wide variety of political structures and power exercising units in various parts of Kerala with different organizational forms and nomenclatures like *svarūpams*, *nātuvājis*, *dēsavājis*, *kaimals*, *karthas*, etc.⁴⁶ Many of these small rulers and local chieftains competitively tried to keep the major maritime centers of exchange under their control, with a view to bagging a share from maritime trade for their political assertions. Some of these chieftains even started moving from inland agrarian regions to the centers of sea-borne trade located along the coast and began to attract traders to their ports for strengthening them politically with the gains from trade. The most important among them was the chief of the Nediyrappu

Svarupam, who transferred his royal residence from the inland pocket of Nediyrappu in Ernadu (Malappuram District) to the maritime trade center of Calicut, which he captured from the ruler of Polanadu, evidently with an eye on the profit from trade.⁴⁷ This chief eventually came to be known as Zamorin (the Lord of the Ocean), whose shifting of headquarters to Calicut coincided with the intensification of its maritime trade, which had by this time been carried out principally by the Arab Al-Karimi merchants linked with the Mamluk Egypt. The Al-Karimi traders started increasingly coming to Kerala and particularly to the ports of Calicut, Cannanore and other minor exchange centers of north Kerala with a decisive change and twist in the international trade route caused by the Mongol attack of the Baghdad Caliphate in 1258. Consequent to the fall of Baghdad, the international trade emanating from the Persian Gulf and terminating in China got blocked; and Quilon, which depended heavily upon this trade route for sustaining its commerce and political activities, declined. Meanwhile, the Mamluks of Egypt who defeated the Mongols at Ain Jalut in 1260, used this crisis as an opportunity to develop another international trade route keeping Cairo as their basis and the Al-Karimi merchants as the commercial intermediaries.⁴⁸

Following this development there was an increasing concentration of Al-Karimi merchants in Calicut and other ports of north Kerala, while the Jewish traders from the port of Quilon and from Cranganore started moving to the newly emerging nuclei of power structures and petty kingdoms that appeared in different parts of Kerala. Meanwhile, most of these Jewish merchants preferred to settle down near the royal residences of the local rulers interacting as commercial intermediaries between the spice producing centers in the hinterland and the chain of ports along the coast. The presence of the Jewish traders in Calicut in such a remote past is attested to by the vibrant oral traditions about the *juthakulam* (pond of the Jews) of the town of Calicut, where it seems to have appeared in the midst of the Jewish settlement during this period. Many of the Jews did settle down along the banks of the rivers through which goods were then carried from the production centers to the various maritime centers of exchange. Thus we find Jewish settlements emerging along the banks of the river Chalakudy and the river Periyar. The Jews involved in the movement of commodities through the river of Chalakudy were concentrated around Mala, where they later accumulated enough resources to erect a synagogue (1597). Meanwhile the Jewish traders engaged in the trade between the spice-producing hinterland and the maritime centers of exchange through the different channels of the river Periyar started settling down increasingly in Pulloot, Parur, and Chennamangalam located along this river-bed. Consequently, the size of the Jewish settlements in these places started swelling, which later provided a sufficient demographic base for the erection of the synagogues at Chennamangalam (1612) and Parur. The synagogues of Chennamangalam, Parur, and Mala (near Irinjalakuda) survive even today as reminders of the Jewish economic activities in the region.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the chief of the Perumpadappu *svarupam*, who had his seat in the inland agrarian center of Vanneri also moved to the maritime exchange center of Cochin, which emerged in 1341 following the geographical changes caused by the great flood in Periyar.⁵⁰ While one branch of this river silted up the harbor of Cranganore with floodwaters, the other branch of it opened up a water passage from lagoon into the sea bringing into existence the harbor of Cochin (*Kochu Azhi* or small estuary).⁵¹ There was a very strong tradition among the *Paradesi* Jews that in 1345 a synagogue, which later came to be called the Kochangadi synagogue, was built in

Cochin.⁵² If there are elements of truth in this tradition, then it is suggestive of the fact that the *Paradesi* Jews must have migrated from Cranganore and other parts of Kerala to Cochin immediately after the emergence of Cochin in 1341. The king of Cochin is said to have helped these migrant Jews to set up a marketplace, which eventually came to be known as Kochangadi (small bazaar) because of its being small when compared to the extensive market of Cranganore and the synagogue that they built here eventually came to be referred as the Kochangadi synagogue.⁵³ By 1400 C.E., Cochin had become an important trade center in Malabar attracting merchants from China as well as west Asia and its commercial vibrancy invited the attention of Cheng Ho vessels (1405-1433) sent by the Ming ruler.⁵⁴ In 1409 Ma Huan noticed the active presence of Muhammedans (linked with west Asian trade), Chetties (associated with the coastal trade of Coromandel and Canara), and Kolings (Kelings or Klings linked with Southeast Asian commerce) in Cochin.⁵⁵ It is quite evident that a sizeable number of Jews also reached Cochin in the second half of the fifteenth century. Visscher says that the process of migration of white Jews from Cranganore to Cochin began in 1471. Initially these Jews settled down for a period of fifty years in a place called *Sinhora Savode* (*Senhora Soude*, a place-name later given by the Portuguese and presently known as Saudi) about half a league (almost two kilometers) away from Cochin. It was only by 1521-1523 that these white Jews finally shifted their residence completely from *Sinhora Savode* to Cochin.⁵⁶

However, a considerable number of black Jews seem to have reached Cochin from Cranganore and other parts of Kerala by the latter part of the fifteenth century,⁵⁷ where the king of Cochin, who was eagerly looking for enterprising commercial partners to develop his port, took these Jewish merchants under his special patronage, a privilege that the Jews enjoyed all through the years to come. It seems that it was for the use of these Jews that the Thekkumbhagam synagogue was built in 1489 in Cochin.⁵⁸

The Portuguese Commercial Expansion and the Initial Response of the Jews of Kerala

When Vasco da Gama came to India in 1498 he happened to meet a Jew in Anjedive, linked with the Jewish settlement of Cochin. Vasco da Gama converted him to Christianity and gave him the name "Gaspar da Gama." It is to be especially remembered that Vasco da Gama played a very significant role in the initial phase of Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean. It was with the help of Gaspar da Gama that Pedro Alvarez Cabral reached Cochin in 1500, when Pedro Alvarez Cabral was chased by the forces of the Zamorin following the Portuguese bombardment of the city of Calicut. Later when Vasco da Gama came to India for the second time in 1502, Gaspar accompanied the captain as his trusted lieutenant. Eventually when attempts were made to localize the Portuguese power in Cochin during the viceroyalty of Dom Francisco de Almeida, the latter was assisted by Gaspar da Gama during the period between 1505 and 1509, when he acted as secretary to the viceroy looking after particularly matters related to commerce and translation.⁵⁹

In fact, as early as 1496, anti-Jewish moves began in Portugal when all the Jews were asked either to leave the kingdom or convert to Christianity (and the Jews thus converted were called *Cristãos novos* or New Christians). The crown even took all the Jewish children below fourteen years of age to educate them in the Christian faith.⁶⁰ However, in Kerala, especially in the initial phase of Portuguese expansion, when the very existence of the Lusitanian rule depended very much upon indigenous cooperation, the native Jews were allowed to operate as intermediaries for the Portuguese commerce. This was mainly because of the realization of the Portuguese

that their Indo-European trade could be effectively and successfully conducted only with the support and help of the indigenous merchant groups, who were traditionally involved in intra-Asian trade. Initially the Jews of Cochin were regular suppliers of spices for the Lisbon-bound vessels of the Portuguese. Some of them even went to Cambay to buy textiles, which they exchanged in the spice-producing hinterland of Kerala in return for pepper.⁶¹ The pepper thus collected was, in turn, sold to the Portuguese factory in Cochin from where it was taken to Portugal in the vessels of *Carreira da India*. With the discovery of the Cape route and intensification of commerce with the Atlantic ports, the Jews of Cochin got more commercial opportunities to engage in the trade of the region, which improved their financial position, as well.⁶² The Jews, just like other indigenous merchants, had better and more extensive networks for procuring commodities from their sources and also for their distribution. Moreover they had better navigational expertise to travel through the different zones of the maritime space of the Indian Ocean carrying the goods and making them available for the Portuguese vessels but without incurring risks to the Portuguese themselves. In the first two decades of the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese were increasingly relying upon the indigenous traders for the purpose of procuring commodities of trade, the Jews seem to have enjoyed a great amount of freedom.

The relatively free atmosphere in Cochin attracted the Jews of Castile (Spain) to migrate to Kerala when there was a massive expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1512.⁶³ The immense opportunities thrown open for free commerce in this city made them choose Cochin. It is interesting to note that the arrival of these foreign merchant groups took place on the eve of a mass exodus of *Paradesi* Muslim merchants including the Al-Karimis from Calicut in 1513 following the Portuguese treaty with the new Zamorin.⁶⁴ We do not have historical evidence to show whether the Castilian Jews made use of the commercial vacuum created by the exodus of *Paradesi* Muslims from Kerala for developing their own commercial networks. However the famous Castiel family, which played vital role in the politico-economic history of Cochin during the period from 1570 to 1670 and which even raised serious threats to the Portuguese hegemony in Malabar, was one of the segments of these migrants from Spain, which seem to have made considerable gains in the changed situation.⁶⁵ The silent period of their family history from 1512 to 1570, which roughly coincides with the period when private trade networks were evolving in Portuguese India, seems to have been a formative phase for their commercial ventures when they accumulated sizeable wealth and social standing through their participation in the private trade of the Portuguese.

By the 1520s the Portuguese *casados*⁶⁶ increasingly began to resort to private trade, which was facilitated by their collaboration with the indigenous mercantile partners including Jews. However, the Muslim traders, who had been the allies of the Portuguese during the first two decades of the sixteenth century, were antagonized by the highhandedness of the Portuguese and their attack as well as confiscation of the vessels of the Marakkar Muslims under the pretext of checking the *cartaz*.⁶⁷ Eventually the estranged Marakkar Muslim traders shifted their base of operation from Cochin to Calicut and started fighting for the Zamorin, with whose help they started developing corsair activities as an alternative form of trade.⁶⁸ In the changed situation, in 1524 the Zamorin and his Muslim allies attacked the pro-Cochin and pro-Portuguese king of Cranganore. In this attack the principal target of the Muslim forces of Calicut were the Jews and the St. Thomas Christians of Cranganore,⁶⁹ probably in order to paralyze and frighten these mercantile communities for being commercial partners for the Portuguese. In the Muslim attack of Cranganore in 1524

many Jews and St. Thomas Christians were killed. However, a good many Jews fled from Cranganore under the leadership of Joseph Azar to Cochin,⁷⁰ where the Perumpadappu king wholeheartedly took the newcomers under his patronage.

The Jews established their settlement in the native part of the city of Cochin (Cochin *de cima*), which now is called Mattancherry. They had no access to the European part of the city of Cochin, which had the Portuguese settlement and was known as Cochin *de baixo* (currently known as Fort Cochin). In 1527, Dom John III of Portugal raised that part of Cochin, which had the Portuguese settlements, to the status of a city with privileges on par with those of Evora in Portugal. The new urban unit came also to be known as the city of Santa Cruz of Cochin.⁷¹ The Jews living in the native city of Cochin were in an advantageous position: while keeping good rapport with the king of Cochin and other native rulers in the inland and thus ensuring easy access to the spice production centers of Kerala, they took sizeable profit out of the urban and commercial changes taking place in Portuguese town of Cochin. With their base in Mattancherry, these Jews were involved both in the official and clandestine trade of the Portuguese, following which the commercial condition of the Jews started prospering considerably in the initial three decades of the sixteenth century. With the help of *Paradesi* Jews from Spain, who had better mercantile capital and international trade links, the Jews of native Cochin and Cranganore developed alternative routes running parallel to the Portuguese trading channels and touching the Diasporas scattered all over the Euro-Asian space.⁷²

Meanwhile the Manueline tolerance gave way to the rigorous socioreligious policies of Dom John III, as a result of which the Inquisition was established in Portugal to enforce anti-Semitic measures and to bring New Christians (*Cristãos novos* or the new converts from Judaism to Christianity) to the genuine and orthodox Christian faith. Concomitantly the recurring pestilence, famine, and economic crisis, which became acute in 1530-1531 and took away the lives of many, were interpreted as God's wrath on Portugal for tolerating the Jews. People in Lisbon entered into clashes and fights with the Jews accusing the latter for the cause of frequent pestilences.⁷³ Against this background many New Christians, who feared imminent danger in the mother country, started fleeing from 1533 onward to Cochin,⁷⁴ which was then considered to be a relatively liberal urban unit in Portuguese India.

The diverse commercial opportunities offered by the city of Cochin enabled the Jews and the New Christians to come out as an important mercantile group of this city, as is evidenced by Dinis de Azevedo in 1540 in his letter to King Dom John III.⁷⁵ They developed an intra-Asian network to send commodities to the ports of Bengal, Ceylon, Malacca, and to the ports of west Asia and Ottoman Egypt.⁷⁶ Jacome de Olivares, a New Christian who came from Setubal (Portugal) put up commercial center in *Rua Direita* in Portuguese Cochin and began to sell pitch and porcelain as well as *pau-da China*.⁷⁷ Manuel Rodrigues, another New Christian of the city, established a business house near this street to sell silk, clothes, carpets, and other commodities.⁷⁸ Leonor Caldeira, a woman from this group, also developed her commercial establishments by this principal street of Cochin. She was assisted in her business by her daughter Clara and a black slave.⁷⁹ Simão Nunes, the son of Leonor Caldeira following the family tradition of trade established a commercial center near the same *Rua Direita* for trading in corals, camphor, and other items.⁸⁰ He testified before the inquisitorial court of Lisbon that a Jew of native Cochin called Moises Real, who was referred to as "the greatest known merchant of India," had two business centers in Portuguese Cochin: one in *Rua Direita* and the other in the *Casa do Vigario*.⁸¹

However, the shops of the New Christians in the Portuguese city of Cochin were fed by the goods and commodities supplied by the Jews of Mattancherry. Isaac do Cairo, who was an important Jewish merchant of Mattancherry and who had commercial links with west Asia used to supply commodities to the New Christian traders of Portuguese Cochin.⁸² By the 1540s, Luis Rodrigues, a New Christian trader is seen making frequent visits to the city of native Cochin "where lived the great merchants of the land." During these visits he used to sell there commodities that he had taken from Bengal, Ceylon, and Malacca and to collect wares for his next expedition.⁸³ He also used to take weapons and artillery to the Jewish traders of native Cochin, who in turn sold them to the native kings and chieftains of the adjacent lands.⁸⁴ Isaac the Red and other Jews residing in the native city began to frequent the shop of Jacome de Olivares in the Portuguese city of Cochin to take merchandise, which he had brought from Malacca. At the same time he had shops in Mattancherry and in Portuguese Cochin, which enabled him to conduct intercity trade effectively.⁸⁵ Leonor Caldeira, who started business establishments in Portuguese Cochin, had a warehouse in Mattancherry for storing rice. She used to go to the Jewish settlement frequently in connection with her business and to collect money for the goods she had sold.⁸⁶

The memories of the common religious and ritualistic past cemented the commercial partnership between the New Christians and the Jews of Cochin. Some Jewish traders of the native city of Cochin, such as Isaac do Cairo, used to bring commodities from west Asia and supply them to the New Christian traders of Portuguese Cochin.⁸⁷ Along with the commercial partnership, the Jewish traders of the native city of Cochin created an atmosphere whereby the New Christians could easily plunge into the old Semitic faith without being noticed by the Portuguese authorities for a considerable period of time.⁸⁸ Indeed the revival of Judaism gave acceptability and legitimacy to the New Christians in the wider Jewish world with which the Jewish colony of Cochin was commercially linked. With the wealth accruing from Asian trade and the supportive links with the Jews of native Cochin, the New Christians started despising Christianity, which they had been forced to embrace in Portugal and returned to the practice of Jewish religious ritual practices. As later accused in the inquisitorial proceedings of Lisbon, the New Christian trader of Portuguese Cochin, Jacome de Olivares used to go to the house of the Jew Isaac do Cairo in Mattancherry to participate in the ceremonies of Purim. There he joined hands with other Jews in stoning the crucifix in a contemptuous manner. He also donated funds liberally for the construction of the Kaduvumbhagam synagogue, which was erected during the period between 1539 and 1550.⁸⁹

Some other New Christians, such as Diogo Soares, maintained the food code of the Jews rigorously and refused to eat the flesh of the pig; he also observed Saturday Sabbath celebrations, for which he was later tried in the inquisitorial court for having deviated from the faith.⁹⁰ There were a few New Christians who were showing disrespect to the articles of Christian faith and pronouncing blasphemous words against the Christian celebration of the Eucharist in their attempts to return to their old Jewish religion.⁹¹

All these were in fact attempts to revive their traditional Jewish religion against the backdrop of the liberalism that they experienced in Cochin. However, these Judaizing practices of the New Christians and their attempts return to their traditional religion did not go unnoticed for a long time by the Portuguese. The matter came to the attention of the Lusitanians on April 30, 1557 (the feast day of *Corpus Christi* or Eucharist), when blasphemous and provocative words were scribbled on the stand on which the Blessed Sacrament was placed in the church of

Santa Cruz in Cochin. This writing was signed by the words "the tribes of Israel."⁹² It was followed by a similar writing found in the offertory box of the church of the Dominican monastery of Cochin.⁹³

The matter was taken very seriously and the suspicion naturally fell on the New Christians, following which all the *Cristãos novos* of the city were imprisoned in 1557.⁹⁴ In the same year an inquisitorial court was set up in Cochin (almost three years before the establishment of the Inquisition in Goa in 1560), which was presided over by Pe. Pedro Gonçalves, the vicar of Cochin at the beginning and later by bishop Dom Jorge Temudo.⁹⁵ All the New Christians, about twenty in number, whose genuineness of faith and belief were questioned in one way or another, were arrested and tried in the inquisitorial court of Cochin. Among them figured Jacome de Olivares, Manuel and Maria Rodrigues, Luis Rodrigues, Leonor Caldeira, her son Simão Nunes and her daughter Clara Caldeira, etc.,⁹⁶ who were actively involved in the trade of Cochin. After having tried them in Cochin, they were taken to Goa for further interrogations, from where they were later taken to the Inquisition of Lisbon. There "auto-da-fé" was carried out in the *Praça da Ribeira* in Lisbon, and the accused were punished according to the gravity of their offenses. All of them, except one, were sent to prison and for various penitential obligations, which lasted in some cases for four years. The only one who was exempted from the punishment was Leonor Caldeira, the oldest among the group.⁹⁷ The economic result of this inquisitional process was that all the New Christians lost their wealth (which was confiscated by the Portuguese at the beginning and what remained with them was spent for the cost of their trials), most of which up to this point had played a vital role in making the wheels of Cochin commerce turn smoothly. It seems that the commercial jealousy of the private Portuguese traders against the New Christian traders, who were thriving in the Asian trade, was instrumental in leveling accusations of heresy against them, which in turn intensified the inquisitorial proceedings against the New Christians. Its repercussions were immediately reflected in the city's economic life. Diogo Alvares Teles, the captain of Cochin, accused the inquisitors of trying to empty the city of its inhabitants under the pretext of inquiry against the New Christians.⁹⁸

However, the Portuguese could not interfere in the economic and social life of the Jews of Mattancherry in the way they wished, as the king of Cochin took the latter under his patronage and protection. Because of the decisive roles that the Jews played in the political and commercial life of the kingdom of Cochin, the local ruler, Perumpadappu king, allowed them to settle down closer to his residence, facilitating the evolution of a multicultural native city (Mattancherry) as separate and distinct from the monocultural European city (Portuguese city of Cochin). This process gradually gave shape to a protective mechanism from which the Jewish traders received necessary immunities from being attacked by their European commercial competitors. As we have already seen, the king of Cochin had already taken under his patronage the Castilian Jews expelled from Spain in 1512⁹⁹ and the Jewish traders from Cranganore following the Muslim attacks in 1524.¹⁰⁰ During the period between 1565 and 1566 many Jews migrated from Cranganore to Mattancherry, where they were given land in 1566 by the king of Cochin adjacent to his royal palace.¹⁰¹ On this land a synagogue (which later came to be called *Paradesi* synagogue) was erected in 1568 through the efforts of Samuel Castile, David Belila, Efraim Sala, and Joseph Levi.¹⁰² This eventually became the nuclei for the principal Jewish settlement in Cochin. The protective interventions of the king of Cochin not only saved the Jews from the wrath of the Portuguese, but also provided space for their survival as a trading community.

Liberalization of Indo-European Trade and Jewish Cooperation

The severe and rigorous anti-Semitic steps taken by the Portuguese by the middle of the sixteenth century did not last long, particularly against the backdrop of mounting economic pressure on the Portuguese crown with regard to the conduct of Indo-European commerce. With the intensification of economic pressure, King Sebastian of Portugal stepped down in 1570 from being the merchant monarch liberalizing Indo-European commerce and handing over the spice trade to private contractors (1570-1598). After the initial ventures by the Germans and the Italians, the New Christian merchants of Portugal came forward to take up the contract trade of pepper from 1592 to 1598.¹⁰³ The fact that this syndicate, which took up the contract to take spices from India to Lisbon, consisted mainly of the New Christians like Pero Rodrigues de Lisboa, Fernão Ximenes, João Monteiro, Henrique Dias, Andre Ximenes, Heitor Mendes de Brito, Luis Gomes Furtado, and Jorge Rodrigues Solis,¹⁰⁴ shows how accommodative and tolerant the Portuguese authorities had become on matters related to commerce. As per the terms and conditions of the contract, the syndicate had the right to send their own trade agents to Cochin and Goa, a clause that gave the New Christians of Portugal to send members of their community to India for the purpose of procuring cargo for this trade.¹⁰⁵

This economic atmosphere enabled many Jews and New Christians to reach Portuguese India as collection agents or trade agents of the New Christian traders of Portugal. Duarte Solis (1561-1630) was one of these New Christians who came in this way to Cochin in 1586.¹⁰⁶ In 1596 when Chryztoph Pawlowski from Poland visited Cochin, he could see many New Christian merchants trading in the city of Santa Cruz.¹⁰⁷ Along with the New Christians many Jews were also involved actively in the commerce of Cochin. Jan Huyghen van Linschoten noticed by the middle of the 1580s that there were many rich Jewish merchants in Cochin, some of whom could even converse very well in the Spanish language. He also mentions that they had magnificent houses built of stones.¹⁰⁸ The Jewish mercantile community made use of the liberal trading atmosphere of Cochin, which was ushered in by the cessation of crown trade and also by the setting up of a parallel commercial network by the New Christians for resuming their commerce, which was earlier interrupted by the inquisitorial proceedings. Later, even after the cessation of Indo-European commerce by the New Christians following the resumption of crown trade in 1598, Jews continued to play a significant role in the economic activities of Cochin. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, François Pyrard de Laval saw many rich Jewish merchants in Cochin.¹⁰⁹ The Castilian Jews, who came to Cochin in the second decade of the sixteenth century, made maximum use of the favorable commercial developments that appeared during this liberal phase of Indo-European trade. Concomitantly, the leadership of the Jewish community of Cochin was assigned to the highly resourceful Castiel family during the period commencing from the 1570s onward, after which Samuel Castiel eventually emerged as *mudaliar*.¹¹⁰

Forging of New Economic Ties and Social Spacing

The beginning of the seventeenth century witnessed a phase in which the Jews of Cochin started diversifying their economic roles by forging ties with new partners and collaborators. In this process, the *Paradesi* or foreign Jews, because of their ability to mobilize greater resources and the political clout that they enjoyed, began to emerge as the leaders of the community following which they carved out a position in the social ladder corresponding to their economic position. The king of Cochin played a vital role in this transformation process, not only by providing