

Further Studies in The Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin

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Background and Objectives

This paper is a sequel to my study on the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin, included in *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, published more than a quarter of a century ago.¹ Not much work has been done about these copper plates in recent years by myself or other scholars in Kerala to the best of my knowledge. However, the political and social context of the copper plates in Kerala in the eleventh century has been clarified and discussed elaborately in my doctoral dissertation on the Cera Perumals of Kerala and other occasional papers.²

My earlier paper on the subject was prepared with the idea of correcting misunderstandings about the date and meaning of the copper plates. It was my endeavor to bring out all evidence regarding the date of their issue by undertaking a survey of the findings in research by Indian scholars such as T. A. Gopinatha Rao, K. V. Subrahmania Ayyar, K. V. Ramanatha Ayyar, and Professor Elamkulam, and to add to that an account of the little bit of my own work that confirms the results of others and provides new insights. In this connection, I had suggested that the background of the ongoing Cera-Cola conflict throws fresh light on the motivation behind the grant of titles and privileges to Joseph Rabban, the foreign merchant prince, by Bhaskara Ravi Varman, king of Kerala.³ This grant, issued at the capital, was approved by the war council of six feudatories of the king and the Commander of the Eastern forces.⁴

In the present study, some other related questions are taken up for discussion. We may probe further into the mechanism of sea trade and settlement in Kerala by following the clues found in the text of the plates' inscriptions and other inscriptions to highlight the various aspects of the process of integration that resulted in the Jews' continuation as part of the native society in Kerala.

Language, Names and Laws

The language itself makes it evident that these Jews were not newcomers to the land in the period of the Cera (Kerala) kingdom over the destiny of which Bhaskara Ravi Varman presided. Nor were the Jews of Muyirikkode mere birds of prey and passage.

The language of the grant is the same as that of the other inscriptions on copper and stone made by the king. For example, the number of the regnal year has been split into two, according to the practice of the Cera inscriptions. Some-

times they break up the regnal years into two or three, but only rarely do they mention it as a single unit — a practice for which it is not easy to find a rationale. Perhaps there was a superstition that if the years are mentioned straight away, it is detrimental to the life of the person concerned. The pattern of the breakup is quite arbitrary, but very often it is expressed as 'two plus the other' as in the present case.

The donee's name is written as *Issuppu Irappan* in a Malayalamized fashion. Perhaps they were familiar with the form Yusuf Rabban or Ouseph Rabban rather than the Anglicized form of Joseph Rabban which we use today.⁵ In Vattezhuttu script, there was no *fa* or *pha* so that *pa* was written, and the gemination of *pa* at the end is typical of the Malayalam practice. Similarly, there is no sign for *ba* so the *pa* is written here also. For instance, Bhaskaran is written in the same record as *Pakkaran*. Similarly the vowel "i" is prefixed to the other part of the name *Rappan* to make it *Irappan*, since it is the general practice in Tamil-Malayalam to start a word with a vowel instead of a consonant, even when it is a personal name.⁶ For instance, Ravi in Bhaskara Ravi is written as *Iravi* in the same record. All Hindu Sanskrit names are Malayalamized and the same liberty is taken with this Hebrew name. Apart from convenience, this may indicate that the officials and scribes had familiarity with Hebrew names. The early practice in the beginning of the ninth century shows that a Hindu Sanskrit name like Rajasekhara was written in the original form using *Grantha* script, but subsequently it becomes *Irayiran*.⁷ Similarly, all Sanskrit names are transformed and written in the local style.

If the Jews had not been well versed in the local language, they would have taken the trouble to obtain and preserve a Hebrew or Syrian translation of the charter for their own reference. The fact that they were satisfied with the original itself shows that they had a fairly good knowledge of the language.

These circumstances do not permit us to assert that the Jews came to the Malabar Coast as early as the first century in the wake of the Jewish diaspora of that period, but they certainly prove that they were present in the midst of the local people for at least several generations if not centuries.⁸

I am intrigued by one of the clauses of the Jewish charter that states that the grant shall endure as long as the world, the moon, and the sun, and that the *Ancuvannam* rights shall be enjoyed by the sons, nephews, and nephews who married the daughters of Joseph Rabban. This would suggest that the Jews were free to adopt the *marumakkattayam* or matrilineal system, popular in Kerala.⁹ Was this just a routine formulaic sentence lifted from the usual grants, or did it carry a special meaning here? This question cannot be answered with the present level of our knowledge or our ignorance about the details of inheritance laws followed by the Jews at the time.

Aristocratic Privileges

This will take us back to the hypothesis that the king's pleasure with Rabban was linked to the threat of the Cola invasion, an ever present danger dating from 974 A.D. when Raja Raja came to occupy the Cola throne.¹⁰ The Jews who engaged in sea trade must have possessed a number of ships equipped with sailors and also warriors to defend the ships against the pirates. This was important for the Cera king since it was known that their Cola opponents possessed a powerful fleet that was deployed effectively and successfully in their moves against Sri Lanka and parts of South East Asia.¹¹ They had already launched the fleet with devastating effect at Kandalur Salai near Vizhinjam in the early years of Raja Raja's rule.¹² In the event of a naval conflict, the ships and warriors of Joseph Rabban could be of crucial significance. Therefore the Cera king must have decided to make sure of their loyalty and readiness to help by binding them to his kingdom through the gift of titles and privileges. The long domicile of the Jews in the country and their close rapport with the rulers and people might have been responsible for generating confidence on both sides.

A Cola invasion against Kerala occurred in 998-99 AD, immediately before the grant of this charter.¹³ Therefore it is quite possible that the Jewish leader had already rendered military assistance to the Cera king on the occasion of this war, and this award was made in the form of a reward for services rendered. The contents of the document show that it was something more than a mere trade charter given to a guild captain who met the king and offered some presents in the routine fashion. There were the usual tax exemptions and trade privileges, but much more. By bestowing the seventy-two aristocratic privileges, the king and his feudatories were admitting this foreigner with a different ethnicity and religious culture into the ranks of the native aristocracy at the highest level.¹⁴ This must be reckoned as the final phase of integration for this exotic group of adventurers. At the same time, the permission to continue their Jewish faith and practices also must be assumed, since we find them retaining their identity in every respect even in the twentieth century.

The Jews also seem to have enjoyed the patronage of the local kings long after the Perumals of Kerala disappeared from the political arena. The Jews became the loyal subjects of the successor states, even fighting against the foreign European forces when the occasion arose. When the Portuguese captured the port city of Kodungallur in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese massacred Jewish settlers who obviously supported the Hindu king.¹⁵ Those who survived left the ruined city with an oath never again to spend another night there. They seem to have taken refuge in a number of scattered settlements such as Mattanchery in Cochin and Mala, Paravur, and others in the Cochin state. The Raja of Cochin gave protection to these victims of Portuguese imperialism in the new harbor city along with other refugees like the Saraswat Brahmins from Goa in Konkan. The

Jews established their small town in Mattanchery, and built a synagogue in the traditional style. They also preserved the casket containing the famous copper plates there.¹⁶

In the sixteenth century, the advent of the Spanish Jews, of fair complexion and European manners, known as the White Jews, transformed the character of the settlement completely.¹⁷ This event introduced a new element of rivalry between the old settlers and the newcomers. Both the Black Jews and the White Jews had been claiming to be the true inheritors of the old Jewish culture. The White Jews gained authority and recognition on account of their wealth and European connections. They argued that they were the offspring of the marriage between the old settlers and the new European immigrants, while the Black Jews were the illegitimate children of the old settlers coming from the ranks of servants and slaves, and as such were not entitled to inherit their cultural legacy. According to this version, they were not Jews in the full sense. On the other hand, the Black Jews believe that they are the true descendants of the old settlers and the custodians of their culture.

They claim that the brownish tinge in their complexion is the result of centuries of exposure to the Indian climate. They accuse the White Jews of having fraudulently appropriated the old tradition and the synagogue. This problem cannot be settled unless we get fresh documents or new scientific, genetic data.

Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam

Historically speaking, there is another problem of some significance. The term *Ancuvannam* is referred to in the text as a gift from the ruler to Joseph Rabban.¹⁸ This has been the subject of a controversy. Some early scholars conceived *Ancuvannam* as a Malayalam compound word (*Ancu* meaning five and *Vannam* or *Varnam* meaning caste) denoting a group of five types of skilled workers. These were *Asari* (carpenter), *Musari* (bronze smith), *Tattan* (goldsmith), *Kollan* (blacksmith) and *Kallasari* (stone mason), all of whom were set apart for the service of the Jewish corporation. The use of the word *ainkammalar* (five types of *Karmakaras*, that is *Kammalas*, or skilled workers) to denote the retainers of the chief, in the case a later inscription gave credibility to this interpretation.¹⁹

However, the appearance of the variants of the term *Ancuvannam* in other inscriptions compels us to revise this opinion. In several medieval inscriptions from the West Coast of India, the term *Anjuman* or *Hanjamana* is used to denote a trade guild.²⁰ This is now understood by scholars as a Hebrew/Persian/Arabic word for group or guild in West Asia. Therefore, it is more appropriate to assume that the term *Ancuvannam* is used in this context to denote the trade guild of the Jewish merchants under the leadership of Joseph Rabban.

This conclusion leads us to another interesting situation. The term

Ancuvannam is mentioned earlier in another Cera copper plate. In a parallel situation, Ayyan Adikal, Governor of Venad, bestowed titles and privileges of an almost similar nature on Mar Sapir Iso, the founder of the Church of Tarsa, at Kollam, the headquarters of the district. The inscription known as the Syrian Copper Plates or Tarsappalli is dated in the fifth regnal year of the Cera Perumal Sthanu Ravi, corresponding to 849 AD.²¹ We have to state here for the information of those who are not familiar with the history of Kerala that much of the history of the Cera or Kerala kingdom that existed from 800 AD to 1124 AD has been recovered by this time with dates of successive rulers and important events and details of economic, social, and cultural life. Kollam, an important harbor city of the kingdom, next in importance only to Kodungallur, was the capital city. Sthanu Ravi Kulasekhara was the second known king of this dynasty, the first being Rama Rajasekhara.²²

The legendary Christian leader Mar Sapir Iso — who also received seventy-two aristocratic privileges — figures in Syrian Christian chronicles of an uncertain date.²³ When the church was founded on land donated by the ruler, some arrangements were made regarding the protection and maintenance of the service personnel, such as agricultural laborers, carpenters, toddy tappers, and other skilled workers.²⁴ The *Arunorruvar* — the Six Hundred militiamen attached to the Governor — and the Ancuvannam and *Manikkiramam* were jointly entrusted with the judicial, commercial, and revenue administration of the city and were also ordered to look after the church of Tarsa.²⁵

Previously, I summarized the prescription in this regard found in the Syrian copper plates:²⁶

The Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam shall enjoy all these privileges and act according to the copper plates as long as the sun and moon endure. If they have any grievance they are authorized to redress the grievance even by obstructing the payment of duty and the weighing fee. The Ancuvannam and Manikkiramam who took up the tenancy of the Nagaram with libation of water shall themselves enquire into offenses committed by their people. That which is jointly done by these two heads alone shall be valid.

These words testify not only to the implicit faith that the rulers bestowed on the two foreign guilds, but also to the loyalty and sense of unity that they represented.

Interestingly, the Syrian Christians and Jews of Kollam were chosen for special treatment at a time when the kingdom was threatened by a Pandyan invasion, and the Pandyans had snatched control of Vizhinjam in the South from the Ceras.²⁷

It would appear that the establishment of the new Nagaram in Kollam was undertaken to attract the Western sea traders away from the old harbor of Vizhinjam that had fallen into the hands of the enemy.²⁸

The Friendship of the Jews and Syrian Christians

Scholars have advanced different views regarding the nature of the group called *Manigramam* or *Manikkiramam*.²⁹ According to some, the term *Manigramam* was a compound Sanskrit word meaning the *gramam* or village of *mani*, that is, diamond. In that case, it could refer to a guild of diamond merchants. However, it is not easy to answer the questions that arise out of this assumption. Were there so many diamond merchants as to have the branches of their guild in several places including obscure villages? Why is it that the diamond merchant's guild is found mostly in places where you have old Christian churches and settlements? How did it happen that the Syrian merchants traded primarily in diamonds, while the most lucrative trading commodities in Kerala were pepper, spices, and perfumes? In view of these problems, a few scholars have suggested another derivation for *Manigramam*, that it was the guild belonging to a group of heretics among the Syrian Christians known as *Manicheans*, who were probably the most influential lot among the Syrian merchants who came to Kerala. This is as speculative as the previous answer, and the debate remains inconclusive.

In spite of the ambiguity of the meaning of the term *Manigramam*, one thing is clear, that it was a guild of Syrian Christian traders who had several settlements in different parts of South India. The argument that the *Manigramam* and the *Ancuvannam* were guilds of Syrian Christians and Jews respectively is further strengthened, at least in the case of Kerala, by the fact that they both figure in their charters. The list of witnesses whose signatures are attached to the Syrian Christian plates add more concrete evidence.³⁰ There are ten names of Christians written in *Pahlavi* script bearing witness to Syriac influence, eleven names of Muslims written in Arabic (*Kufic*) script, and four names of Jews written in Hebrew script at the end of the plates. The first set of ten might belong to the *Manigramam* who were the immediate beneficiaries of the grant, and the last set of four might represent the *Ancuvannam* guild, while the Arabs might be the associates of one or the other, or just another group of merchants present at the ceremony.

This conclusion brings us face to face with another fact — that the Syrian Christians and Jews who were at loggerheads in Europe were not exhibiting any hostility toward each other on the shores of Kerala. Moreover, they co-operated with each other in the service of the native rulers and people, and received their appreciation and confidence in an equal measure. The chief of a Jewish guild was to be the member of a trust to which was assigned the duty of ensuring the proper

maintenance of a Christian church in India!

This picture of religious harmony also is confirmed by other sources. The *Mushakavamsa Kavya*, a historical *mahakavya* composed by Atula in the court of the Mushaka king Srikanta of North Malabar during the early part of the eleventh century, speaks of the foundation of the city of Marahi or Madayi and Valabhappattana.³¹ The poet says that merchants from different far off islands congregated with their ships there. They all mingled in friendship and harmony.³² This would naturally include the Syrian Christians, the Muslims, and the Jews, too. There is a live tradition to the effect that Madayi had a Jewish settlement in medieval times.

While the court poet can attribute this achievement to the dynasty of his patron, the historian is bound to search for reasons and causes to explain the general trend of religious tolerance and active friendship among normally hostile religious communities found in the history of Kerala. The book, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, was the product of such an enquiry. The geographical location of Kerala in the path of the monsoon, the role of the Western Ghats in obstructing the monsoon and ensuring plenty of rains and plenty of river water in Kerala, the natural monopoly that the land enjoyed in pepper and spices for which there was great demand in Europe, and more, have been pointed out as factors that were conducive to the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance and friendship.³³ Kerala was largely dependant on sea trade for its prosperity and therefore charity began at the market place.³⁴ The kings and chieftains of Kerala developed the habit of looking toward the West for the signs of prosperity, and welcomed those trading groups who brought the most commerce, irrespective of their caste and creed and language.³⁵

The Political Factor: Weak State

This chain of arguments has been able to stand the test of time for a quarter of a century without serious challenge. However, apart from the climate and market conditions that almost dictated their own social climate, a political factor also promoted policies leading to the integration of communities, although in a symbiotic manner without producing a synthesis, in spite of their exotic creeds and practices. This political factor may be identified as the inherent weakness of the state throughout history, until the modern period, and can be described as a byproduct of all the circumstances noticed above.³⁶

This had not been clearly recognized previously. Even in my doctoral dissertation, the Cera Perumals of Kerala were treated almost as regular monarchs, like their Cola and Pandya counterparts. There are sufficient indications to suggest that the polity in Kerala was different from that of other regions in India. The special traits of the polity, like a permanent Brahmin council of ministers, the absence of a big home territory, army, and administrative staff under the *perumal*

or sovereign, the omission of dynastic *prasasti* in the royal copper plates, the relative independence of the district governors in conferring titles alienating property, and so on, had been recognized.

The Brahmin oligarchy was designated as the power behind monarchy, and the polity was called an oligarchy in disguise, but even then the natural inference about the inherent weakness of the state was not stated in so many words. The weakness of the political authority gave freedom to all economic forces. Even those in the orthodox Brahmin priesthood, who were bent on making the Perumal offer *prayaschita* for offending them, were not interested in preventing other creeds from taking root in Kerala.

Perhaps the Perumal, and the *Naduvazhis* under him, did not consider these alien religions as potential threats to their own belief system or social balance. The foreign merchants were sea traders and their interests were confined to the sea, except that they needed a foothold on the land for storing their merchandise and procuring other commodities for sale. The political masters and trade agents in the countryside who brought commodities to the harbor must have made large profits from the continuous trade. Moreover, the rigid, caste-oriented structure of society must have made any chance of the foreigners' penetrating into the countryside unnecessary and untenable.

The Jews were not interested in conversion, and even the Christians might have tried to convert only the low castes and outcastes whom the orthodox Hindus were inclined to treat as being outside the pale of humanity, and therefore of no consequence. Therefore the economic interests of the ruling class had a free and uninhibited role. For a pretty long period of five or six centuries until the advent of the Portuguese, who were armed with cannons, the foreigners were largely confined to harbor towns in Kerala. Thus the over-dependence of the native rulers on revenue from sea trade and the inherent weakness of the state on account of natural causes made them swallow their pride and prejudice in welcoming and promoting the Jews, Syrian Christians, Arab Muslims, and modern European adventurers from West Asia and Europe.

NOTES

1. M.G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), See: Historiographical Study, pp. 23-30; Notes and References, pp. 51-53; Malayalam transliteration and English translation of the text and certain Jesuit folk songs, pp. 79-85.

2. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, (Calicut: University of Calicut, 1996),

See: relevant sections of Chronology, pp. 28-30; on Cola Invasions, pp. 53-55 and on Monarchy, pp. 86-87.

3. Joseph Rabban was the chief of the Jewish settlement in *Kodungallur*, the capital of the Cera kingdom (800 AD-1124 AD). This fort city was now called Mahodayapuram and located in the ancient harbor site of *Muciri* (*Muziris* of the Greeks) mentioned as *Muyirikkode* in the copper plates.

4. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 82.

5. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 79, lines 6, 16.

6. Even today Christian Biblical names are used in the Malayalam form. Jacob is Chakkappa; Joseph is Ousepp; Mary becomes Mariya in Kerala.

7. Vazhappalli Copper Plates of Rajasekhara, 12th year. *Perumals*, pp. 24-25; The Jewish tradition traces their settlement back to the first century after the Christian Era. *Perumals*, p. 161. See Achutha Menon, *Cochin State Manual*, (Cochin, 1911), pp. 129-30; *Annual Report of Archaeological Department*, (Cochin, 1927-28), p.13. The author has no means of checking the correctness of the information.

8. K.P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, 1924, Vol. I. p. 298, (Delhi: Asian Educational Services), Vol. II., pp. 504-06.

9. Jewish Copper Plates, lines 15-20. The matrilineal system of inheritance was already found in the Cera period among Nayars, and probably among the rulers. *Perumals*, pp. 82-85.

10. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas*, (Madras: Madras University, 1935), p.169; See also: *Perumals*, pp. 28-30.

11. *Colas*, pp. 169, 200, 223, 248-49; Narayanan, "Kantalur Salai-New light on Aryan Expansion in South India," *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 1970; and *Perumals*, p. 53.

12. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. I, No.146; *Travancore Archaeological Series*, Vol. II, pp. 1-6; Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom*, (Madras: Swati Publications, 1929), pp. 57, 94, 110. *Colas*, pp. 170, 313, 459; *Perumals*, p. 53.

13. *Colas*, pp. 169, 170, 173; *Perumals*, pp. 53-55.

14. *Perumals*, pp. 158-160.

15. *History of Kerala*, Vol. II, p. 518; Sardar K.M. Panikkar, *History of Kerala*, (Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu: Annamalai University: 1959), pp. 57-58.

16. *History of Kerala*, Vol. I, p. 196; Vol. II, pp. 444, 519.

17. *Commemoration Volume*, The Cochin Synagogue 400th Anniversary Celebrations, (Cochin, 1968); *History of Kerala*, Vol. II, pp. 523-31.

18. *Cultural Symbiosis*, Jewish Copper Plates, lines 6-7, 15-16.

19. *Perumals*, pp. 155-158.

20. *Perumals*, pp. 155-158.

21. *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 31-37, 54-59, 86-94.

22. *Perumals*, pp. 24-26.

23. *Cultural Symbiosis*, Syrian Copper Plates, No. 2, lines 38-45.⁹
24. *Cultural Symbiosis*, Syrian Copper Plates, No. 1, lines 6-24.
25. *Cultural Symbiosis*, lines 14-20.
26. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 37.
27. *Pandyan Kingdom*, pp. 57, 94, 110; *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 30-32.
28. *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 31-33.
29. For different views and arguments about the nature of *Ancuvannam* and *Manigramam*, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XVIII. No. 90. pp. 59-73; *Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy*, 1926-27, Vol. II, p. 93; *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. XXV, III. pp. 269-80; *Pandyan Kingdom*, p. 179; T.V. Mahalingam, *South Indian Polity*, pp. 382-84.
30. Text of the Plates running into 53 lines is followed by 18 lines of Pahlavi script, 10 lines of Arabic (Kufic) script, and 3 lines of Hebrew script – all of them used for signature. See *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 56-57, 91.
31. *M.V.K. Sargam* 14, *Slokam* 66.
32. The different creeds co-existed in peace like wild beasts in the vicinity of holy hermitage”, *Kritaspadah kanana satwajatayah/ Tapobhritam siddhimatam ivasrame/ Jagatpratititi viruddhavrittayah/ sahakhila yatra vasanti devatah*” *Sargam* 12, *Slokam* 112, *T.A.S.* II.1.
33. *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. 1-8.
34. *Cultural Symbiosis*, p. 5.
35. Narayanan, 'Gods and Ancestors in Development' (A Study of Kerala), M.A. Oommen, ed., *Kerala's Development Experience I*, (New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 1999), pp. 9-10.
36. *Kerala's Development*; *Cultural Symbiosis*, pp. vii-xii.