

A History of the Parur Synagogue

Trial by fire, inquisition and neglect

Photo Credit: Jay A. Waronker and V. Issac Sam

Parur Synagogue exterior

Feature

by Jay Waronker & Shalva Weil

Many people have heard of the Jews of Cochin (today Kochi) in southwestern India, but far fewer know that there were in fact other small Jewish communities over the centuries in this same region of the country, each revolving around a synagogue. Eight such buildings, all located in the central part of the State of Kerala, survive in some form today. The most famous of these synagogues is the Paradesi synagogue in Jew Town, Cochin, with its beautiful blue tiles imported from China. In 1968, Indira Gandhi attended its quarter-centenary celebrations and the Indian government issued a special commemorative stamp on the occasion. Today, there are only nine Paradesi Jews left in Jew Town, and a Chabad Rabbi conducts the services, pulling in Israeli backpackers and American and other Jewish tourists to make up the minyan.

In the 1990's, the interior of another synagogue located just down the street from the Paradesi Synagogue was brought to the Israel Museum and is a great attraction in the newly reopened museum. In February 2006, an abandoned synagogue which had in the past served the Kerala Jews in the verdant village of Chennamangalam was re-opened as a tourist site with an exhibition on the local Jews. It was initiated by the two authors of this article, coordinated by Marian Sofaer, and funded by the Koret Foundation.

In 2010, the Kerala government decided to fund a new project to restore the next of Kerala Jews' abandoned synagogues in the town of Parur, also called Vadakkan Paravoor, located north of Kochi. This synagogue, set on Jew Street, Parur, near the town center, represents the most complete



Photo Credit: Jay A. Waronker and V. Issac Sam

Synagogue interior view

and elaborate example of a Jewish house of prayer from the Kerala region incorporating many local influences of design, as well as longstanding Jewish building traditions. Once there was a vibrant Jewish community here, but today, all the Jews from Parur (with the exception of one or two) live in Israel or elsewhere. The careful restoration of the Parur synagogue is almost complete.

It is commonly thought that the Parur synagogue was built as early as 1164 C.E. The original building fell into disrepair, and another structure was erected on the same site in 1616. A stone slab with Hebrew text on an exterior wall within the synagogue compound testifies to this. It is believed that the ner tamid (everlasting light) once hanging in the 1164 synagogue was moved to the seventeenth century building. According to this legend, the Jews of Parur were so rich and proud that they offered incense at a public

altar. For this act of hubris, since their behavior seemed to recall a religious ceremony reserved only to the Temple, the Parur synagogue congregation was stricken with the plague. Their twelfth century synagogue fell into disuse, and the ner tamid was hung out on the street as a sign of contrition, where it was seen nearly two hundred years later by an English observer.

David Yaacov Castiel, the fourth mudaliyar (leader) of the Kerala Jews, was responsible for rebuilding the Parur synagogue in 1616. According to a local Jewish song written by a Jewish poet to honor the synagogue, a fire damaged the building around 1662, and it was refurbished. This blaze could have been set by the Portuguese colonizers since they had laid claim to Kerala and also burned the Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi about the same time. The Kerala Jews never suffered from anti-Semitism at the hands of their Indian neighbors, but

the Portuguese colonizers even tried to institute the Inquisition.

For more 120 years, the renovated synagogue served the needs of the congregation until a Muslim tyrant, Tipu Sultan (1750-1799) from Mysore, and his armies invaded Kerala in 1783. Tipu Sultan was responsible for the destruction of thousands of non-Muslim religious buildings, which included Hindu and Jain temples, Christian edifices and churches, and synagogues. He also tortured and forced the conversion of followers outside his faith, or had them killed. It is likely that during this period that the Parur synagogue was attacked again.

Writing about the Kerala Jews, the Church of England missionary Rev. Thomas Dawson, stationed in Kochi from 1817, visited Parur and other synagogues in the area. His observations, accounted by W. S. Hunt, seem to confirm that even after the passing of more than a quarter of a century the synagogue had not been repaired. By 1790, the Third Anglo-Mysore War marked the doom of Tipu Sultan as he ceded the kingdom of Malabar to the British by 1792. Since this formidable menace to the Jews of Parur had been wiped out, and even though the British were tolerant to Kerala's Jews, it may seem odd that it took so long to rebuild the synagogue. Considering that historians have written about the prosperity and local acceptance of the Parur Jewish community, the logic would be that they would have had the means to restore the synagogue to its former glory. Yet during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Parur Jewish community had declined in numbers and became less prosperous.

Dawson's particularly bleak account asserts that they had undergone years of hardship and health issues, and that



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they were facing discrimination. These factors could explain why the rebuilding of a proper synagogue took so long. Based on Rev. Dawson's fieldwork, most of the structure as it stands today, with the possible exception of the gatehouse, could therefore date no earlier than the second decade of the nineteenth century.

When Parur's extant synagogue was realized on the same site as the previous building, it was constructed in the centuries-old Kerala tradition using locally quarried laterite stone blocks that were veneered in chunam, a polished lime. The thick walls, normally whitewashed, were punctured by large wooden doors and windows. Despite any memory of Portuguese aggression against the Jews, the Parur synagogue incorporated Portuguese colonial detail, such as swirling rope patterns, circular attic vents, wooden railings and struts, and revealed bands of trim on its wall surfaces. With its locally cut and crafted wood roof framing exposed at its deep eaves in response to the annual monsoons, clay roof tiles covering its pitched surfaces, and carved wood ends, the Parur synagogue is an archetypical example of the Kerala style.

As with other Kerala synagogues, the Parur synagogue is made up of not one building but a collection of parts forming a distinct compound, including enclosed spaces, covered yet unenclosed rooms, outdoor walled areas, and courtyard zones. Among all Kerala synagogues, Parur is notable for having the greatest number of connected and consecutive pieces which have survived fully intact, albeit rotting and crumbling in recent decades until the current restoration effort.

Unique to the synagogue at Parur is the way its parts are formally linked in highly axial, extended, and ceremonial



fashion. Of Kerala's surviving synagogue buildings, the one in Parur has the longest procession from the gatehouse to the innermost Ark. A similar organization can also be seen in some Hindu temples of Kerala and at other religious buildings in the region, including Syrian Christian and Catholic churches and mosques. As a local building type, there is little doubt that synagogue architecture was influenced by local architecture of buildings belonging to other religions, as well as sharing common liturgical and spatial elements with synagogues the world over.

So when can one view the newly renovated Parur synagogue? Benny Kuriakose, the conservation architect appointed by the Kerala government to direct the work, stated this week that the estimated date of opening is April 2012, although it could be postponed to next autumn. He said: "There is about 15% work left...

the new special officer who took charge in November 2011 has started looking at things seriously." The actual inauguration will take place at a later date but feelers have been put out by the government, to India's Prime Minister, Dr. Man Mohan Singh in the hopes that he will attend the ceremony. ♯

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All photographs have been supplied by Jay A. Waronker and V. Issac Sam.