Fieldwork Report

Joseph Patalakal

Wednesday Oct. 18, 1995

I went with Fr. Johnson Uyghappilly and Mr. Kunjikrishnan, lecturer in History Dept., U.C. College, Alwaye, to Manjaly near Parur to meet Mr. Namia.

- We arrived at Nancia's house on the bank of the backwaters at 4.15 p.m.
- Mr. Nancia was not at home. His wife Ruby Nancia welcomed us. We asked her a few questions.

The Jews in Parur and Ernakulam are known as Askânadin, and the Jews in Cochin (Mattancherry) are known as Sepharadim (from the Hebrew word Sepher meaning "book"). The Mattancherry Jews are also called "Paradesi" (foreign) Jews.

Ruby said that the Jews in Parur and Ernakulam are the descendants of Israeli:men who came to India and married local Tamil women. There were similarities in the style of dressing of Tamil Jewish women and Tamil women. Ruby showed two sarees kept as samples that were worn by her mother.
- I said I would go again to take a photo of Ruby wearing traditional Jewish dress.

- Namia (for Nehemia) and Ruby were married at the synagogue in Parur. They have three children: Nisha (15 yr.), Neethu (12), Neemai (11).

- Nisha's naming ceremony is over. Neethu's and Neemai's naming ceremony is yet to be done.

Address: K. A. Namia, Niranya Garden, Manali, Mannam P.O., Parur 683520
Phone: 4441178 (Parur)

- "Thali keth" is part of the wedding ceremony. It is done by the bridegroom's sister.

- The shape of Thali is David's star. This has been the practice since the establishment of the Jewish state.

- A day before wedding the bride has to go through a ceremonial bath in a river. This is called "ghosa." The ritual is performed.

- Marriages between Jews of Parur and Eranakulam, Jews of Mattancherry generally do not marry outside.
There was no singing in Malayalam at this wedding.

The synagogue in Coimbatore is not functioning, nor the one in Kollam. Both are taken over by the Archaeological department of the state.

There was service in Parum Synagogue until last year. Now, there are not enough people to complete the quorum (i.e. ten male members).

Many Jews in these areas want to beebet and settled down there some are planning to leave!

In Mattancherry, there were two more synagogues: Chethikovil Synagogue in 1948 and also there were two: on 22/3/1590 and 22/3/1593.

Namian Aunt, Mrs. Sarah Elias may be able to sing a few songs. She is in Ernakulam: Elia Chambers, on the side of Sarita-Sarita Theatre.

One lady from Belgium's, a professional photographer, is now studying the Jews of Kerala. Her address:

Suzan Fuchs + James Cunningham
3/F 730 Bishop Garden
Fort Cochin, 682001
Today the total no. of Jews in Parvur are 8.

Parvur: 5, 2, 1, 4, 5, 3, 2

and 3 (5+5+8+5 = 23).

Latest marriage in their community was in 1992. Namia's sister's son married a Marri girl. It was an inter-caste marriage.

She was converted into Jewish religion.

The wedding was done in Namia's house. The reason for the choice of location is 23rd of May. Gomor. Gomo.

Wedding was according to Hebrew rule.

Ceremony was conducted by Abraham Abraham. He lives six months in Brakulam and six months in Israel.

The wedding was over a solemn celebration and the sense that there was no singing by women. Formerly, on the day of the wedding, used to last for one or two weeks. Women used to sing songs. Nowadays there is no woman who can sing these songs.

In 1990 Ruby's brother Joseph married a Christian girl, Lisy. She was converted to Judaism and was given the name Judith.

The video of this wedding is available.
- We left Nammia's beautiful home at 6:30 p.m.
- From Marjiby, we went to Purur to meet Nammia's brother-in-law. At 8 p.m., Manahem, Pallivattukkal House, Thittazhatu Parambu, Kairthalam, P.O., Purur.

Address

- The family greeted us well. Manahem's wife (Miriam, 50). They have a son (Saphir) and a daughter.
- Interview with Manahem was recorded (audio): Cassette no...
- We saw Manahem's wedding photograph. The gown that was worn by him at the time of wedding is kept in fact. We have to take a photo of that during next visit.
- Manahem sang a few Hebrew prayer chants (not recorded) for the occasion for marriage, Sabbath, evening, etc.
- Prayer is called rosh (200) (more than 200) Muslim (Happily) in Kerala, too, use the same word. So, too, Church commentaries.
circumcision is referred to as "מְלֹא יָמִים" (ov. 7:11), and in ov. 7:13 it is said to be "מְלֹא יָמִים". The writer of this note may be referring to the verse "וְהָיָה בְּמֶה בְּמַעֲלָה מַעֲלָה חֲרֵיחָה לָבֶן הָאָמְרָה מְלֹא יָמִים" (Gen. 32:31).

I took a photo of Miriam and Manahem, and another photo of the "thali" (David's star) separately worn by Miriam.

While leaving the house, Manahem said that we should go there again on Friday evening so that Miriam can make special Jewish preparations that are eaten on Sabbath days. She learned those recipes from her mother and she still cooks them for Sabbath days. We were delighted to go back and participate in a Jewish meal made in Kerala!

Obs: 1) Manahem reads Hebrew. There are Hebrew prayer books at home. He said he didn't understand the meaning of all the words.
2) Manahem's brother is in Israel.
3) Some books with Malayalam Jewish songs were given to Dr. Rajan Jowitt-Kall by his family.
Jews of Kerala (both Sephardim and Ashkenazim)

share similar traditions with the Hindus.

Tali-kettu is an important part of wedding celebrations. Tali is in the form of David's star.

Tali, a pendant made of gold, is worn with a golden chain called kamarband (from it munuk). The only functioning synagogue in now in Mattancherry. Both Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jews worship here.

There are two kinds of Jews: Sephardim. So White Jews and Ashkenazim, whose physical characteristics are similar to the local people.

There are only 17 Sephardim White Jews left. The rest have migrated to Israel. They do not marry outside their community.

Two kinds: synagogue music and secular music.

Semi-religious songs:

Cross cultural influences in the music of Jews, Yemenite, Ashkenazi, Hindu, and Vedic chant.

Middle Eastern music

{| Sylabic Style | as Congregational Rhythm |
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Intercultural