

A revival of Jewish heritage on the Indian tourism trail

Reconstruction of the beautiful Parur synagogue is proceeding at a dizzying pace, and underlines the special ties Jews enjoyed with other faiths in south India.

By SHALVA WEIL JULY 16, 2010 16:35



Parur synagogue 311
(photo credit: Jay A. Waronker, artist)

For years, visitors to the Parur synagogue in south India would be led into the gatehouse with a rusty key borrowed from a Christian neighbor. They would make their way across a dim, empty entrance hall, flanked by rooms including one which used to function as a Hebrew class, and they would then tread warily on a path with a garden full of snakes on either side leading to the synagogue.

On the wall facing them on the side of the inner synagogue building, the visitors would distinguish a large plaque with Hebrew writing engraved in stone in 1616 by one David Ya'acov Castiel Mudaliar. Inside the two-story building, dusty chandeliers and wooden rosettes on the ceiling would testify to the astonishing beauty of the Parur synagogue.

In the center of the sanctuary stood a round podium with a holy book still open on the cantor's stand. Visitors could then go up a special spiral staircase leading from the sanctuary to the abandoned women's gallery, where the Torah was read in front of the women and the portion of the law reached the ears of the men downstairs. The women themselves entered the gallery by a special staircase from behind, but this was long ago destroyed.

Last month, the government of Kerala, India's southernmost state, armed with a matching grant from the central government, started the reconstruction of the Parur synagogue that used to be frequented by Cochin Jews before they came on aliya, largely in the 1950s. The last of the community immigrated in the 1970s, leaving behind a mere handful of people, and the synagogue has remained in disuse since then. Today, fewer than 40 Cochin Jews remain on the Malabar coast.

The conservation is progressing at such a pace that the chief architect in charge of the project, Benny Kuriakose, believes it will be completed by the autumn. This governmental and federal project could be a beacon for other countries, which pay lip-service to the preservation of Jewish heritage.

"I was very excited to hear that the Kerala government is renovating the Parur synagogue and restoring it to the glory of its past," said Tirza Lavi, a native of Parur, and a today a curator of the Heritage Center for Cochin Jews at Nevatim, south of Beersheba. "We hope that Parur will be a showcase to the younger generation, displaying our communities' rich and interesting history. I am sure that Cochin Jews in Israel will be glad to take part in the project and share their knowledge and memories."

INDIA'S JEWS, though a minuscule minority (numbering only 28,000 at their peak in 1948), were loyal citizens and contributed to the development of India in all walks of life. India is fully aware of the special relationship with Israel and the love of that country by thousands of young Israelis, who go on the almost mandatory India trip after the army, and are often joined there by their parents.

The reconstruction of the Parur synagogue celebrates the extraordinary relationship the Jews enjoyed with members of other religions in India, including Muslims, Christians and Hindus in the south. Despite a brief period under the Portuguese, the Jews of India never suffered anti-Semitism.

The reconstruction of the Parur synagogue is only a small cog in the wheel of a huge project called the Muziris Heritage Project, which includes archeological excavations and the reconstruction of other historical monuments in the area, such as temples, churches and mosques. The idea is to create a tourism trail from the ancient port of Muziris, today known as tourist destination in the world.

The seeds of the monumental project were planted only a few years ago. The beautiful Paradesi synagogue in Jew Town, Cochin, constructed in 1568, has been a well-known tourist site ever since Indira Gandhi attended its quatercentenary celebrations in 1968 and the Indian government issued a special commemorative stamp on the occasion. In more recent history, however, the Kerala government agreed to undertake the renovation of another abandoned Cochin Jewish synagogue belonging to the Malabari Jews in the village of Chendamangalam, near Cochin. In February 2006, the synagogue was reopened with an exhibition on the Cochin Jews, and the synagogue has become a popular tourist destination.

"The Chendamangalam Synagogue Museum opening in 2006 gave me the courage, hope and joy that the restoration of others of Kerala's synagogues may be possible during my lifetime and indeed, shaping the legacy of my community is my passion," Galia Hacco, who grew up in Chendamangalam, said.

"Communicating this legacy in India to Indians is the purpose of this involvement."

In the same year, the Cultural Department of the Kerala government embarked upon an ambitious heritage- preservation-cum-tourism project in the area known as Muziris, embracing both Chendamangalam and Parur. Muziris was a thriving port in the first century BCE that used to have trade contacts with Rome, Greece, China and the Middle East. Cargo vessels from West Asia, the Mediterranean and East Africa used to drop anchor at the port. St. Thomas, the apostle, is believed to have set foot in Kerala through Muziris. It is here that India's first church, Mar Thoma Church, and first mosque, Cheraman Juma Masjid, are located.

The development project, which is already well on its way, will include the establishment of a maritime museum, a historic museum on Indian independence from the British and museums dealing with Syrian Christian, Islamic and Jewish heritage.

In Cochin Jewish tradition, the port of Muziris, which is known as Kodungallor today and was called Cranganore in the past, is legendary, and was the site where many Jews lived until a tsunami caused a fatal flood in the middle of the 14th century. All the surviving Jews and the other inhabitants moved over to Chendamangalam, Cochin and other centers. Jewish songs in the local Malayalam language still recall the incident.

Archeological excavations at the site of Pattanam, near Muziris, now in their fourth consecutive season, have unearthed definite evidence of the port of Muziris, mentioned by the Romans, as well as in local Tamil texts. Sundeep Abraham, an independent Christian researcher from the Cnanite (Knanya) community, which migrated from Edessa to Muziris in the mid fourth century CE, said: "The Muziris Heritage Project will document the rich heritage of the ancient port city of Cranganore. One can witness the causes for the rise and fall of this once prosperous capital of ancient Kerala as it showcases the heritage of the ancient era beginning with the Muziris archeological site at Pattanam up to modern-era social reformers, who worked to emancipate the struggling underprivileged societies which bore the brunt of the ancient caste system of Kerala society."

THE DISCOVERY of the ancient port of Muziris within one kilometer of the Parur synagogue has caused increased interest in Kerala among scholars, who are speculating about the connection between the commercial port and the ancient settlement of the Jews in the area.

Dr. P.J. Cherian, a researcher and director of the Pattanam archeological research since 2007, is optimistic of finding some material evidence of Jewish or Middle Eastern trading links. "One of the interesting finds of the last season," he said, "was the turquoise glazed pottery of West Asian origin in the pre-Roman layers. We are awaiting its analytical report and hope it will be of help in tracing the early Jewish links with the Malabar Coast."

The present synagogue was erected in the 17th century, but probably stands on an older structure dating to the 12th century. "As with other Cochin synagogues, the synagogue is made up of not one building but a collection of parts forming a distinct compound," explains Jay Waronker, who teaches architecture at the Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia, and is writing a thesis about Cochin synagogue architecture. "Parur is notable for having the greatest number of connected and consecutive pieces which have survived fully intact, albeit rotting and crumbling. Unique to this synagogue is the way its parts are formally arranged and linked in a highly axial and ceremonial fashion. This same organization is also seen in some Hindu temples of Kerala and at later churches in the region."

Benny Kuriakose, the Chennai architect directing the reconstruction of the Parur synagogue and other historical monuments, has made every attempt to conserve the former synagogue structure, and goes to great pains to try to reconstruct features that disappeared long ago. A case in point is the disintegrated stairway that once was connected to the second entrance, where the two square storerooms are located and adjacent to the breezeway that led up to the women's gallery.

He is turning to members of the community to aid him to sketch it as it once was in order to produce an authentic reconstruction. Another example is the entry door of the gatehouse, where the original ground floor had wooden shuttered windows, but today there are only rolling shutters covering the windows. The newly reconstructed ark will be a work of art. The previous one, which was beautifully gilded and painted in Kerala Jewish tradition, was taken to the Israel Museum in the 1990s.

Marian Sofaer, the project director of the exhibition on the Cochin Jews, which was introduced in the renovated Chendamangalam synagogue in 2006, summed it up: "The Kerala synagogues create an opportunity to present Jewish life and culture to Indians in the context of their own history and culture, to add to the diversity of the eco-tourism circuits in the Muziris Heritage Project and to remind us of the safe haven that India has provided to Jews during the 2,000 years of Jewish life in India."

The writer, a Hebrew University researcher, is a specialist on Indian Jewry. She co-curated the exhibition on Cochin Jews in the synagogue of Chendamangalam.