

Jewish - A Dwindling Community in India

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What's in today's article?

- Why in News?
- History of the Jews in India
- The Jews of Kerala
- Why is Jewish Community Dwindling in India/ Kerala?

Why in News?

- India's Jewish community is projected to comprise 4,000–5,000 people now, down from 20,000–50,000 in the mid-1940s.

History of the Jews in India:

- **Origin:**

- It is thought that the first Indian Jews were originated from Israel, having settled on the Malabar coast after the Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel in the **9th century B.C.E.**
- This includes the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Bnei Menashe.
- **Under British imperial rule:** Indian Jews prospered enormously, achieving heights in population and wealth. The Jewish population in British India peaked at around 20,000 – 50,000 in the mid-1940s.
- **Jewish emigration from India:**
 - The rise of Indian nationalism that accompanied sovereignty made some Jews uncomfortable, as they identified more as British than Indian.
 - This, coupled with the creation of **the State of Israel in 1948**, saw many Jews leave India.
 - Despite such heavy Jewish emigration, Jews continued to play an active role in Indian life throughout the latter half of the 20th century.
- **Jewish community in India today:**
 - India is home to **3 historically distinct Jewish communities:** the Bene Israel (“Sons of Israel”), the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews, and is projected to comprise 4,000–5,000 people now.
 - Among these, almost all belong to the **Marathi-speaking Bene Israel community**, settled on the Konkan coast for hundreds of years.
 - However, the honour of being the **oldest** Jewish of India goes to one of **Kerala’s** two main Jewish communities (Malabar/ Cochin Jews).

The Jews of Kerala:

- **Malabar/ Cochin Jews:**
 - The oldest documentary evidence of this community (copper plates of the Cranganore’s Hindu ruler from circa 1,000 CE) lists various economic and ceremonial privileges that the Jews enjoyed in the region.
 - Following the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, Malabar Jews moved further south **from Cranganore to Cochin** (now Kochi) where the local king welcomed them.
- **Paradesi/ foreign Jews:**
 - They migrated to the Indian subcontinent in the 15th and 16th centuries from the **Iberian Peninsula** due to persecution by the Catholic rulers of Spain and Portugal.
 - **They settled on the Malabar coast** alongside pre-settled Jewish communities, as well as in Madras (now Chennai).
 - The Paradesi Jews of Cochin were **active in Kerala’s spice trade**, and those settled in Madras were involved in the **trade of Golconda diamonds** and other precious stones.
- **Cultural evolution of Jews of Kerala:**
 - The Paradesi Jews adopted Malayalam and many local customs and traditions.
 - However, they stopped marrying those from Kerala’s older Jewish community, and began to look down on them.
 - This effectively created two distinct Jewish communities in Kerala (Paradesi/ white Jews and the Malabar/ black Jews). Although this characterisation is largely inaccurate.
 - In Cochin, the **Koders** were among the most prominent Paradesi Jewish families.

Why is Jewish Community Dwindling in India/ Kerala?

- Unlike Jewish communities in Europe or West Asia, the ones in India seldom faced anti-Semitism or persecution.
 - However, there has been a **steady migration of Kerala** Jews to Israel since the 1950s. Only 14 Malabar Jews, and one Paradesi Jew are now left in Kerala.
 - The majority of Jews who emigrated from India made this decision based on the **influence of Zionism and a love for Israel**, rather than a disdain for India.
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Q.1. What do you mean by anti-Semitism?

Antisemitism is hostility to, prejudice towards, or discrimination against Jews. This sentiment is a form of racism, and a person who harbours it is called an antisemite.

Q.2. What is Zionism?

Zionism is an ethno-cultural nationalist movement that emerged in Europe in the late 19th century and aimed for the establishment of a Jewish state through the colonisation of a land outside of Europe.

Source: [Once thriving, now all but gone: a history of Kerala's Jewish communities | WJC](#)

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/jewish-a-dwindling-community-in-india/>

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