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TIJS Grant Report
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Research Trip to India

My research trip to India was a fantastic success and a very useful addition to my main research in Morocco. The grant funded travel within India during which I was able to speak to Muslim keepers of Jewish cemeteries, which was my initial goal. Despite friendly initial contacts before I traveled, these interviews were relatively short, the interviewees were quite taciturn and we mostly covered the same ground as prior interviews with other scholars. The unexpected fruitfulness of my research came from talking with merchants around Jewish sites in the southern city of Kochi/Cochin. Muslim and Hindu shopkeepers self-consciously used proximity and nostalgic connections to Jewish historical sites to entice customers to enter shops and sell Judaica with dubious origin and authenticity.

As I approached the relatively well-marked intersection of "Jew Town Road," "Jew Street" and "Synagogue Road" in the Mattancherry neighborhood in Kochi, signs of the Jewish history of the area were difficult to ignore. Most shops were festooned with Stars of David, but other South Asia religious symbols (swastikas, for instance) were noticeably absent. The shops were called "Albert's, Sarah's Meriem's..." and had signs advertising "Jewish Special Items." Upon entering many of these stores, it was clear that there was no Judaica for sale, but just standard woven items, jewelry and statues of various Hindu gods that were for sale in other shops across the city. The few stores that did have menorahs (there were no hanukiyahs that I saw) or mezuzot admitted quickly to my questioning that the items were recent creations of scrap metal rather than authentic, historic artefacts from the Jewish community. The shopkeepers with whom I spoke were mostly Muslim, but there were a few Hindus and one Christian proprietor as well.

Several interesting conversations came out of this strange shopping situation. Many of the shopkeepers told me that they used the Jewish connections of the relatively small area (I would say less than one hectare) to lure tourists into the shop, and once they have entered, the relatively unimportant fact that they do not actually have Judaica for sale is quickly forgotten. Indeed, even a paid parking lot is prominently advertised as "Synagogue Parking," despite being quite far from the synagogue, in fact in the opposite direction on a one-way road. Similarly, there are signs posted that warn shoppers not to give into pressure to shop outside of "Jew Town," because even though prices may be cheaper outside the area, the crafts are more traditional within and the shopping is better. There is a connotation in this small area of the peninsula that Jewish connections stand for quality and an affiliation with Jews or Judaism is a sought-after brand, even for those not selling anything particularly Jewish.

I was curious to know who was buying from the merchants who actually sold "Judaica." Answers, again, were relatively easy to come by. I was told that the largest purchasers were Indian and Chinese evangelical Christians. This specificity surprised me and I wanted to know more. These new Christian communities, it was explained to me, have purposefully cut themselves off from established, mostly Catholic, Assyrian or other Orthodox churches, including their material culture of rosary beads, images of Jesus with the sacred heart and saintly paraphernalia. It was further explained to me that at the same time, evangelical Christian, like most other religious groups in South and East Asia, have some sort of household shrine. The evangelical's shrines have a Bible that may or may not be read and some candles. Without other Christian material to fill up the shrine, however, they frequently add Judaica that is seen to be more "original" and "authentic" than the shrine material of the more traditional churches. Ironically, that the menorahs and mezuzot are fairly obvious facsimiles and accordingly are not original or authentic does not seem to bother the Christian clients who seem more concerned with what the object represents than the individual object's actual history. Faked menorahs are seen by this community as more authentic than actual rosary beads. This represents a new avenue of research

possibility for me, and raises questions of compromised, but sufficient authenticity; interreligious cooperation; cultic and shrine construction; and religious material culture across religions and countries.

In addition to interviews, I was also able to find printed resources about the Kerala Jewish community. In a local bookstore, I found three volumes on Indian Jewish communities, including a collection of bibliographies of previous research of Jews in India. This represented another surprising addition to the research that I came to conduct.

My research trip was not an unalloyed success. Following a tip from an informant, and also one of the articles in the bibliography of Indian Jews that I purchased, I extended my time in India to include a research stop in Amritsar, a city far to the north. I was told that there was an important Jewish community who worshiped close to the Sikh golden temple (Sri Harmandir Sahib). My guide knew that there had been some Jews in the area, but after taking me around the city and consulting with his friends, convinced me that there was not a Jewish site around.

This short detour notwithstanding, the TIJS funded research was phenomenally helpful in providing another opportunity for me to study how Jewish history is used and adopted by non-Jews.