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Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin

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> For over a quarter of a century the Indic world confirmed what since my birth was only a blurred feeling: the self-identity of Man is transcultural, and thus cannot have any single point of reference . . . Pluralism is not synonymous with tolerance of a variety of opinions. Pluralism amounts to the recognition of the unthinkable, the absurd, and up to a limit, intolerable . . . Reality does not need to be in itself transparent, intelligible.
>
> Raimundo Panikkar, 'Personal Statement'

Cochin or Kochi is one of the few cities in India where the precolonial traditions of cultural pluralism refuse to die. It is one of the largest natural harbours in India and has also become, during the last fifty years, a major centre of the Indian Navy. With the growing security consciousness in official India, it has recently become less accessible to non-Indians, particularly if they happen to be from one of the countries with which India's relationship is tense. Few mind that, for the city no longer means much to the outside world. To Indians, too, except probably for the more historically conscious Malayalis, Cochin is no longer the 'epitome of adventure' it was to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or a crucible of cultures, as it is to its former mayor, K. J. Sohan.[1] For most, it is now one of those regional cities not quite up to the standard of India's major metropolitan centres.

Yet, Cochin for its residents is the ultimate symbol of cultural diversity and religious and ethnic tolerance or, to use the expression recommended by Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva in place of secularism, hospitality (Prakash and Esteva 1998). The city still bears the imprint of its record, stretching across at least six

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[1] 'Celebrating Diversity in Cochin', *Culture and Identity Newsletter*, October 1997, 1(3), p. 1.

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centuries, as a place where China, Africa, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Europe met. In the city still live at least 14 communities – ranging from the Jews and the Eurasian Parangis to the Tamilians to the Saraswats. Some ethnic communities have blended with the locals and are no longer clearly identifiable, such as the Yemeni Arabs; some have moved away entirely, such as the Chinese; still others are about to do so, such as the Jews. Most of these communities are not even listed in the Indian census because they are identified with castes, and official India has been given up caste enumeration after 1935, lest the data are misused politically.[2]

Cochin has seen adventurers, invaders, and pirates. It has seen people seeking refuge from oppression and discrimination in other parts of the world. It has also seen occasional communal skirmishes among different communities, but for centuries it has not seen any bloodbath, not even a proper riot. This does not mean that there is no hostility among communities. Nor does it mean that communities do not have their own distinctive written and unwritten memories of past injustices and violence against them. The Syrian Christians remember the destruction of sacred books and documents by the Catholics, the Jews the harassment of their forefathers by the Portuguese. The Chinese are said to have been driven away by the Arabs; Tipu Sultan, some believe, attacked the Jews at Cranganore; and Konkanis talk about how they fled to Cochin from the inquisition at Goa.

Virtually every community has its 'history' of struggle and believes it to be the best, if not in the world, certainly in Cochin. Every community also has its own hierarchy of communities, in which it places the others, according to a remembered or mythic past. Each community sees some communities as good, others as bad. There are also, in many cases, apparently historicized memories of how other communities and one's own have fought in the past. Even these memories do not lead to impassioned hatred. The Jews and the Syrian Christians talk disdainfully about the Portuguese and their fanatic Catholicism, not about the Catholic communities that trace their origins to the Portuguese. The Konkanis talk of an attack on their temple by a king of Cochin, not of the hostility of any community. One comes to suspect that most memories of communal strife are props to a community's self-esteem and self-definition rather than stereotypes having murderous implications. Whether they can be used at some point to mobilize communities against each other remains an open question.[3]

[2] That does not prevent political parties of all hues from maintaining their own secret data bases on castes for electoral purposes. They are, however, not accessible to outsiders.

[3] Perhaps this is not unique to Cochin; it has only been patterned and institutionalized in a somewhat unique fashion there. Compare, for instance the autobiographical account of the well-known New York designer, Lobel 1998. Lobel is a Polish Jew who, along with her brother, was protected during the war years by her Polish Christian nanny who, at the same time, was anti-Semitic. In the Sri Lankan context, Michael Roberts has argued against the 'simplistic argument' that a cosmopolitanism or cultural diversity cannot coexist within chauvinism and xenophobia. See Roberts 2000. But it may be as simplistic to believe that cultural likes and dislikes and ethnocentrism automatically lead to xenophobic or rabid nationalist violence.

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There is little defensive search for purity in the communities of Cochin either. Probably because they have not sensed threats to their lifestyles and are culturally self-confident, they can borrow from each other with fewer inhibitions. Fort Cochin has mosques that are hundreds of years old and share the region's distinctive ancient style of Hindu temple architecture and sacred decorative designs; there are synagogues so unique that at least one has been dismantled and rebuilt by a Malabari Jewish community near Jerusalem. It has become a tourist attraction there.

During the last few centuries, Cochin seems to have thrived on the checks and counter-checks provided by its low-key communal loves and hates. Having stereotypes and disliking other communities, yet granting them a place in the sun and even the right to dislike and keep distance from one's own community, is obviously one of the building blocks of Cochin's version of cultural plurality. Hardboiled social scientists claim that three factors have contributed to Cochin's historic communal harmony. First, there has been trade, especially in spice, fishing, coir, and ship building. Trade has made communities inter-dependent on each other; none can do without the others. Second, there has been a common language. Almost everyone speaks Malayalam in Cochin – from the European-looking white Jew to the language-conscious Tamilian. Even the smattering of white, former colonial bureaucrats or business persons who have stayed back in Cochin know the language. Third, Cochin is located in a part of India that is highly literate, urbanized and secular. Many like to see its communal peace as a triumph of modernity over an atavistic past.

While these factors might have played an important role in Cochin's civic culture, none seems an adequate interpretation. For economic interdependence means that each community has specialized in certain enterprises or professions. They are, therefore, badly represented in other kinds of jobs and professions. As we know from the experiences of other parts of India, this by contemporary standards is no equality. Ideally, in a modern, fully individualized society, each community must be well represented in all sectors. Otherwise, dedicated ethnic chauvinists exploit the under-representation of a community in some sectors of the economy. Similar situations in other places have led to much bitterness and demands for affirmative action. Likewise, instances of communal violence between two groups that speak the same language but are divided by caste or religion abound in India. India's worst communal riots took place at Punjab and Bengal at the time of partitioning British India, between communities that were parts of the same culture and linguistic group. And education, industrialization and urbanization, combined with secularization, have often stoked communal strife, instead of containing it (Nandy 1998: 283–298). A huge majority of communal riots in India have taken place in large cities, despite three-fourths of Indians living in villages. The fear of losing one's faith can be a destructive force in a secularizing world; it can hand over entire communities to venomous identity politics.

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One will have to search elsewhere for the sources of Cochin's tradition of alternative cosmopolitanism and cultural pluralism. This paper represents such a search and should be read more as the diary of a personal, cultural–psychological journey rather than as professional ethnography. The search is not grounded in history. It rejects history as a guide to the 'living past' of Cochin. The only kind of history considered relevant here is the clinician's idea of case history, where the past is configured as an immediate, felt reality – indeed as a part of the psychodynamics of health and ill-health. In this instance, I have focussed mainly on the perceived sources of health in the remembered or fantasized past. There must be other pasts of Cochin, but I leave it to others to excavate them. For me, an exhaustive, fully objective pathological report usually comes in the form of a post-mortem, not diagnosis or prognosis.

I

Cochin is a city in Kerala (see Fig. 1 p. 300), a state in the southwest corner of India. It is one of the three cities on the Malabar Coast – the other two being Calicut and Mangalore – traditionally known as the places where West Asia, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia and China meet. In the self-definition of its citizens, Cochin's territoriality has two dimensions, one land based, the other determined by the traditional sea routes converging at the city. As we were to find out, to many Cochinis, the city is only apparently located in one corner of India in a small state. To them, it is at the centre of the Indian Ocean, presiding over the memories of these sea routes and a once-flourishing spice trade. To these Cochinis, West Asia, parts of East Africa and Southeast Asia often seem, defying their own nationalist sentiments, psychologically closer than Delhi.

Cochin is not a large city by Indian standards, though it is the largest in Kerala. The population, according to the 1991 census, is a little over 1.14 million. *The District Gazetteer* says that nearly 95 per cent of the residents are literate. Literacy is higher among women than among men.[4] Cochin City is in the Ernakulum district, one of the smallest in India (with a population of roughly 30 million). This leads to some confusion, for Ernakulum city is now, for all practical purposes, a part of Cochin city, which itself was, until 50 years ago, a part of a princely state, also called Cochin.[5]

Though the traditional spice trade survives, Cochin's economy now depends heavily on the coir industry and the shipyard. But, as will gradually become evident from this story, the spice trade – and the myths and fantasies surrounding it – define the city. Cochin without the spice trade is no Cochin. One of the characters in a Salman Rushdie novel, progeny of a family of spice traders, turns the link into a grander if comic vision:

[4] Bhat (ed.) 1997: 727–41. Recent reports say that the entire district is now 100 per cent literate.

[5] Actually, each informant seems to have his or her own view of geographical Cochin, perhaps because the Cochin of imagination transcends cartography and official boundaries.

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> the pepper, if you please; for if it had not been for peppercorns, then what is ending now in East and West might never have begun . . . we were 'not so much sub-continent as sub-condiment', as my distinguished mother had it. 'From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight-clear,' she'd say. 'They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart. (Rushdie 1995)

Cochin lies in a particularly green part of India, though industries and urban growth have begun to take their toll. Despite its high population density, most visitors to the city are struck not so much by its civic structures and narrow, crowded streets as by the omnipresence of water and greenery. Particularly, the quiet waterways and rich tropical lushness temper the sudden ferocity of heat and humidity that one faces when emerging from a plane. The small, humble airport, unable to cope with the new international stature given to it by the Malayali propensity to globetrot, complements that impression. It is built on the sparsely populated, thickly green Wellington Island, which the British artificially created during the high noon of the raj. The island strengthens the image of a large city that magically retains the touch of a tropical village.

There are various explanations of the name Cochin. Some say it is a derivative of the Kochi, the name of a river nearby the city. Others claim that Chinese settlers gave the city its name. Others have other theories. It is possible that the name has meant different things at different points of time; it certainly means different things to different communities in the city. Even the geography of Cochin seems to change with the person one is talking with. Some mean the Cochin state when they talk of Cochin; others the present city, including Ernakulum; still others mean mainly Mattancherry or the area around Fort Cochin.

The official past of Cochin is well known and does not need repeating here. It is part of the history of the Malabar coast that in the pre-colonial and early colonial period played a central role in the world of the Indian ocean, with its criss-crossing sea routes connecting cultures, histories and geographies.[6] The erstwhile princely state of Cochin was a small state of about 1,400 square miles, with a population of around 25 million. Cochin's royal house, Perampadappu Swarupam, had its original capital at Vanneri. It moved to Mahodayapur in Cranganore in the late thirteenth century, after an attack by the Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut. Cochin became the capital of the Cochin State in 1405. Others say that Cochin became important only after the Portuguese came to India; the Portuguese saga in Cochin began when Vasco da Gama landed near Calicut in 1498. The Cochin kings were friendly towards the new immigrants, who gradually turned Cochin from a fishing town into an important commercial centre. The Portuguese were also enthusiastic builders. They built forts, churches and European style houses in the city. When the Dutch won control of Cochin from the Portuguese in 1663, they also turned out to be eager

[6] For a proper history of that part of the story, see Subrahmanyam 1997.

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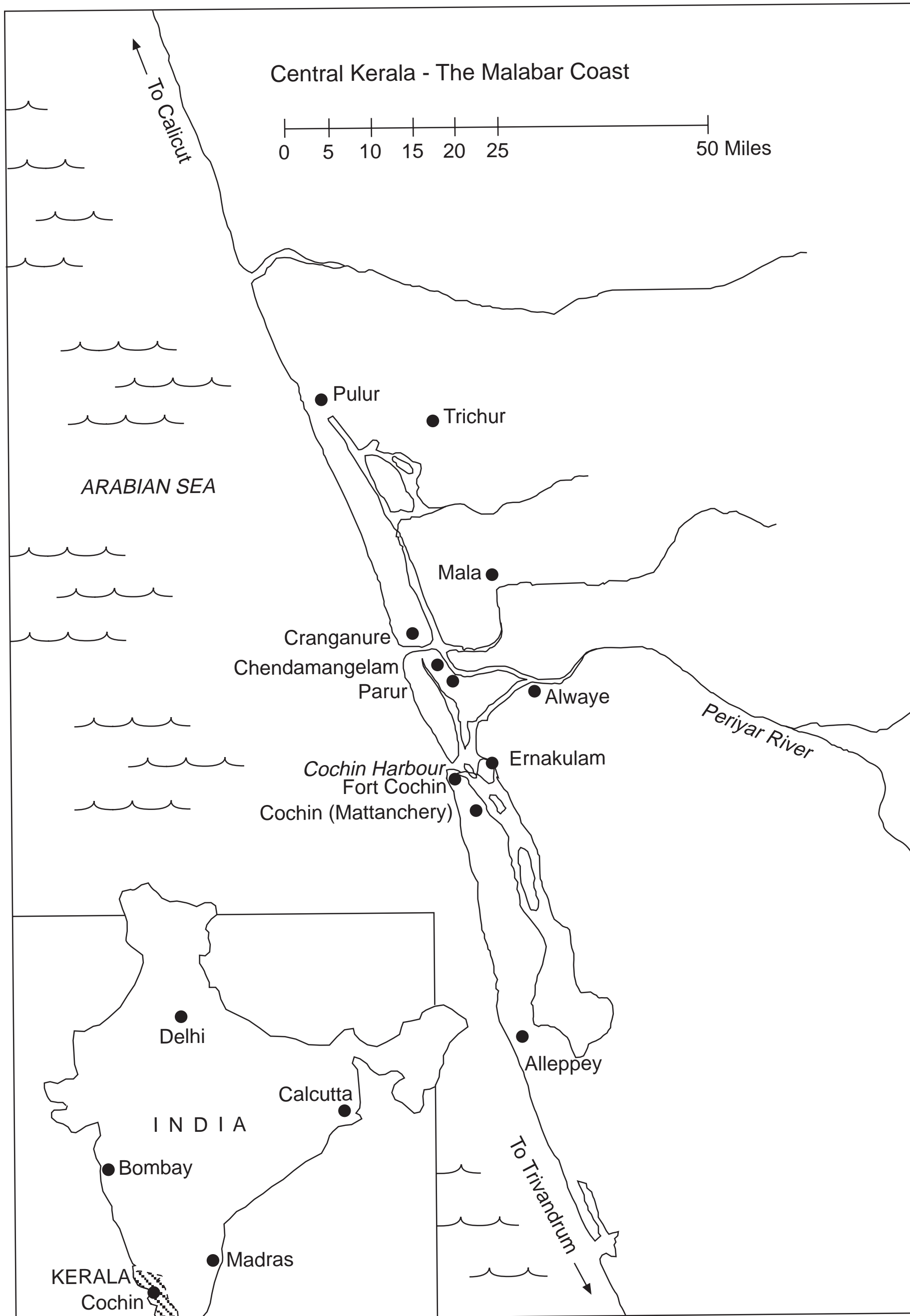

Figure 1 Cochin, Ernakulum and Cranganore

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builders. Fort Cochin still has a large number of houses that are Dutch in style and are clearly identifiable from other buildings. Despite the proliferation of standardized, tasteless structures, often built by newly rich Malayalis with West Asian connections, these parts of Cochin still remain distinctive and identifiable. In 1795, the British wrested control of the city from the Dutch, but they did not interfere much with either the indigenous lifestyle or the Dutch political order.

Though historical Cochin is remembered mainly as a centre of the spice trade by many, it was also known for its ship-building facilities, which the Portuguese turned into an important trade. Some say that ship building around Cochin began as early as the Sangham period, at Cranganore. The Dutch further developed these facilities. In independent India, too, Cochin continues to be a major shipyard Bernard 1995: 39–57). Only the Indian Navy now dominates the facilities. The Jews of Cochin played an important role in ship building during the Dutch period (1663–1795).

Official history, however, is not the last word in Cochin. There are shared memories, partly mythical, of Chinese fishermen and seafarers who inhabited Cochin till the fourteenth century. The Arabs reportedly defeated the Chinese and settled down in the city. These memories also claim that Cochin was cosmopolitan and international even before the Portuguese came. Many residents know that early European accounts talk of Cochin being a small fishing village next to the river Kochi (in Malayalam small place), but many of them also know that the Sanskrit *Kerala Mahatmyam* already called it Balapuri, a small town. While admitting that early travellers did not mention Cochin in their chronicles, some Cochinis point out that Ma-Huan, a Chinese Muslim was the first to mention the city in AD 1409. That was before Cochin became a 'proper' port. These memories are kept alive by popular 'histories' of Cochin, which sometimes confirm the memories, sometimes not, but always stoke a reactive return to unofficial memories.[7]

Particularly important in this context is Cochin's remembered historical geography, which includes elements crucial to its psychogeography. For instance, we are told that 'oceanic convulsions' in the fourteenth century turned Cochin into a safe natural harbour and threw up the Vypin Island. Previously a small river near Cochin opened into the sea; the floods of AD 1341 created Cochin, as we know it today. That creation shapes Cochin's self-definition even today.

[7] We met at the office of historian K. A. Kareem, the Secretary of the Kerala History Association, two local Christians, both highly educated professionals: Dr A. Noble, a retired government scientist, and Colonel K. I. Thomas, formerly of the Indian army. They were researching the historical roots of their family. They claimed that they had learnt from their elders that, when Tipu Sultan attacked the Jewish Kingdom at Cranganore and began a massacre, 10,000 Jews ran away and converted to Christianity. Our newly found acquaintances claimed they were the descendants of two such converted families. Kareem, a polite leftist, patiently explained to them that historical records showed that no such incident had taken place. The visitors did not look particularly happy but appeared convinced by these words of reason. Later, when we interviewed them at their homes, they were back to their original version of the story. One of them hinted that Kareem might have denied the story because he was a closet fundamentalist.

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People do not look at Cochin as an eternal city, in the way they look at Varanasi, Jerusalem, Delhi or Rome. However, memories do push the beginning of the history of Cochin as far back as possible, into an almost mythic past. In that past a series of immigrant communities play an important part – as refugees fleeing from oppression, from natural calamities and from war and brought they to Cochin their distinctive skills in business, craft or art. These refugees – *abhayarthis,* as the Konkani-speaking Cochinis call them – have played an important role in Cochin's wellbeing and there are memories of local kings even quarrelling among themselves for the privilege of having them as subjects. Perhaps these memories give certain strength, resilience, and legitimacy to Cochin's pre-modern culture, increasingly under threat from the quick urban growth taking place in the city. Its residents like to see Cochin as a place where the new has never defeated the old and is, in fact, parasitic on the old.

The two wings of mythic Cochin

However, shared public memories are not the whole story. There are also tacit memories, constituting an identifiable, communicable 'unconsciousness'.[8] It took me many months to find out that beneath the social reality called Cochin there was also another Cochin, the mythic Cochin. That other Cochin is not openly recognized in Cochin's public life or its public reflection. Thanks to long exposure to the mechanical, State-centric, positivist cultures of Leninism and Nehruvian socialism, to many sectors of the Kerala society, the mythic Cochin means only a false, unreal Cochin – a collection of superstitions, stereotypes, and surviving symbols of a lost 'golden' age. The mythic Cochin is the opposite of the historical Cochin; it is what Cochin is not.

Only gradually does one realize that the mythic Cochin is at least as important as the historic Cochin if one wants to grasp the city's culture today. In many respects, the former is the heart of Cochin, for Cochin's traditional cosmopolitanism lives to the extent that the mythic Cochin lives. The city's political culture is organized around that city of the mind. The day that phantom city dies, one suspects, Cochin will also die and become like any other small South Asian city, trying desperately to become a standard metropolis.

It is, however, not easy to identify the components of mythic Cochin. Many of them are probably inaccessible to outsiders, particularly if they do not speak any Malayalam. It is also not always possible to separate the private or tacit from the

[8] Elsewhere, I have called this a secret self, to distinguish it from the standard, Freudian unconscious. The presumption is that the secrecy is imposed, in this instance by categories associated with dominance, but is also partly internalized. As a result, the socialized self learns to keep double ledgers, one for public or official consumption, the other for private moments or for transmission as unofficial memories or creation of contraband histories. This paper suggests that not merely individuals but even communities, too, sometimes have their secret selves. See Nandy 1995a: 81–144; 1995b: 53–80.

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mythic or the unconscious. I have already mentioned how the co-ordinates of geographical Cochin are not merely land based but, perhaps in more important ways, also defined by the traditional sea routes to Cochin. One suspects that the latter is mainly tacit knowledge, part of the everyday wisdom of the Cochinis, though never entirely acknowledged as such in school texts. But that does not make it a form of disowned aspect of the self. The first component of the disowned Cochin of the mind, though, is easy to identify. Cochin is a direct progeny and heir to the mythic epicentre of the Kerala society – Cranganore. Cranganore had to die – as a harbour, a habitat and the cultural capital of Kerala and Malabar – for Cochin to be created in 1341. People talk about the 'oceanic convulsions' that silted up and made unusable the Cranganore port and created the Vypin Island and the natural harbour at Cochin as if the convulsions were the birth pangs of a unique city. The disaster that killed the former was the same one that created Cochin. The city not only has two histories, one realistic and the other fantastic, it also lives with two geographies; even physically, the city's past is part of a larger map of the mind.

Cranganore seems to have many names. It is also known as Kodungalloor. In earlier times it was also known as Muziris and in Tamil as Muchiri. It is not merely a sleepy city to the north of Cochin that once had a glorious past; Cranganore is the mythic capital of mythic Kerala and mythic Malabar. In the minds of many, it is still the first city of Kerala. The Malayali public consciousness and self-definition inextricably centre on that lost city. Unless you are talking to historians, everything began at Cranganore. Even the famous spice trade – mainly involving cardamom, cinnamon, ginger and the black gold, pepper – began at Cranganore. Some Cochinis make it a point to remember that, as early as in the first century, Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) had grumbled about the drain on the wealth of the Roman empire due to heavy of purchase of a 'useless' commodity like pepper from Muziris. Others point out that in AD 403, Alaric the Goth lifted his siege of Rome, reportedly in exchange for 3,000 pounds of pepper purchased from where else but Muziris.

Most communities link their remembered pasts to Cranganore. The Jews trace their origin to the city; so do some communities of Muslims, who talk of the city as one of the early bastions of Islam. Even some of the most sacred texts of Tamilian Hinduism, especially Shaiva Siddhanta, are supposed to have been written at Cranganore. Christians, too, seem eager to point out that St Thomas landed at Cranganore in AD 52. No popular history is complete unless you have somehow related it to something that has happened some time in Cranganore. Though some members of Cochin's erstwhile royal family speak of the consolidation of the Cochin Kingdom as a slow and laborious process that lasted decades, in popular genealogy, the dynasty emerged in a fully formed fashion at Mahodayapur at Cranganore.

So did, we are told, the city's religious and ethnic tolerance. Cranganore remains the ultimate symbol of Cochin's ecumenism. Balagopalakrishna Menon, a successful lawyer who has been close to the Cochin royalty for more than five decades, only endorses the widely shared image of the mythic capital of Kerala and Malabar when

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he talks of the Cheraman Masjid at Cranganore. He claims that it is the world's only mosque that faces east, because it was a temple that was allowed to be converted into a mosque by Cheraman Peruman, the legendary king of Kerala, a contemporary of Adi Shankara in the eighth century.

Why do all journeys begin from Cranganore? What is the magic of the city? One part of the answer is that Cranganore was a thriving port until 'natural calamities' – in some stories a flood, in others an earthquake – destroyed it. Others talk of 'the mysterious Malabar mud-banks' that moved inshore to clog the mouth of the river Periyar to end the long career of Muziris as a port that the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Chinese, Romans and Arabs frequented. In Cochini imagination, Cochin is the rebirth of that dead, ancient, cultural 'capital' of Kerala and, unless one knows about Cranganore, one cannot be expected to fathom its reincarnated version. Cranganore is the clue to Cochin's *Karmic* past.

The Jewish synagogue at Fort Cochin, for instance, has a panel of paintings that depicts the Jewish journey through time at Cochin. It too begins at Cranganore. Only, for some unknown reason, the Jews call the city Shingly. It tells how the Jews not only saved themselves from a flood and an invasion, but also how its Jewish king escaped to safety in Cochin, according to one respondent, by swimming with his Torah and the wife on his back and his people on his side. It is impossible to tell the Jewish story of Cochin without the Jewish construction of Cranganore and the small Jewish principality that once existed there.

The 'memories' of Cranganore are often bittersweet. Even among the Jews, the story of a unique Jewish kingdom is bordered by the myth of how Cranganore's first 800 Jewish settlers, under the leadership of a rather formidable widow called Kadambath-Achi, were doing rather well till the king's son fell in love with her daughter. As Ruby Daniel tells the story, the widow refused to marry her daughter to a gentile prince who, pining for the daughter, fell ill. The angry king ordered the Jews out of his kingdom and they ran away. The widow and her daughter stayed back to grind their jewellery and precious stones into powder, throw them into a pool, and commit suicide by swallowing diamonds. The pool is still called Jutha Kulam (Jewish pool) and the hill nearby Jutha Kunna (Jewish hill). 'People living there still say they sometimes find tiny pieces of gold in the sand of that pool (Daniel and Johnson 1995: 8–9). The memories of the Jews at Cranganore also survive in Malayali songs and stories. More 'realistic' are the stories about being expelled from Cranganore by the Portuguese and the Moors, which scattered the Jewish communities to places such as Mala, Chendamangalam, and Parur (ibid).

The story of the dead city of Cranganore, now surviving as an inconsequential district town with a magical past and serving as the underside of the story of the living city of Cochin, is incomplete without the story of the Cochin kings. The memories of its kings constitute the other pivot of mythic Cochin. After long lectures on feudalism, caste domination, and the oppressive ways of religious life, informants begin to

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speak, diffidently and defensively, about the Cochin kings as the source of most things that are adorable in Cochin's culture. The kings were the ones who helped communities to settle down in Cochin, ensured their security, and gave them a sense of participation in civic life. Though dynastic rule ended 50 years ago and royal privileges were abolished, the Maharajas of Cochin continue to preside over the minds of the Cochinis. This is a different kind of rule; most people do not even know the names of the members of the erstwhile royal family, but the family's contributions to the culture of the city remain alive in the minds of people, the same way as do those of Cranganore.

A recently published encyclopaedia blandly states that the pre-Portuguese history of Cochin and the origins of Cochin's royal family are unknown Kashy 1994). This is not the impression one gets in the city. The residents seem to believe that the full history of the city and the royal dynasty is known. For the spaces left by the gaps in data and memory have been occupied over the years by collective fantasies and mythography. One member of the royal family, Rameshan Thampuran, is working on a genealogy. According to it, the Cochin dynasty owes its origins to the last king of the Chera empire, Rama Varma Kulasekhara, who divided his empire among his and his sister's children and among other relatives. He then embraced Islam and, reportedly, went away to Mecca. (Family lawyer Menon, while admitting that the story of conversion to Islam is by far the most popular one, points out that it has to contend with another story about Rama Varma's conversion to Buddhism. Indeed, there is a third version of the story in which Rama Varma dies a Hindu by taking *samadhi* at Trikaryuor.) The Cochin dynasty began with the grandson of Rama Varma's sister. While the Travancore kings, descendants of Rama Varma's sons, enjoyed more political salience, the Cochin kings were always more significant spiritually. This was mainly because they, though Kshatriyas, managed to represent both temporal and spiritual authority, captured in the expression *koviladhikarikal* (temple authorities). Thus, when they gave rights and privileges to various trading and professional communities or considered certain communities – such as the Syrian Christians – as their favourites, it had a special meaning. Their promises carried weight.

All this does not mean that there are is no ambivalence towards the dynasty outside modern, ideologically tinged Cochinis. Even those who speak highly of dynasty sometimes have their favourite villains. The Konkanis speak of the 'notorious' Sakthan Thampuran, a king who killed many Konkanis and attacked and plundered the community's main temple, Thirumala Deva at Cochin. The priests along with a large part of the community, as a result, fled to Aleppy, under the Raja of Travancore and stayed there for 60 years, despite Sakthan Thampuran's efforts to get them back through and agreement with the Raja. However, there are often built-in checks on shared memories against such painful pasts. The Konkanis themselves speak of how after 60 years, another Cochin king suffered from rheumatism and astrologers told him that his suffering was due to the displeasure of Thirumala Deva,

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whose devotees had been ill-treated by his ancestor. The king had to spend much energy and effort to bring back the icon and the temple to Cochin along with the community.[9]

II

Conversations with people belonging to the different communities in Cochin help one to enter the city's mind in another way. These conversations are not the full story but, I hope, they will give a flavour of the attitudes, beliefs and passions that animate Cochin's public culture. Two caveats, at this point. First, I must warn the reader that the contradictions or inconsistencies in dates, figures and events in the following pages have been deliberately retained as parts of the narratives with which the people of Cochin live. Second, for the moment I have chosen the witnesses arbitrarily, only to flesh out the arguments already made. We hope to return to a more detailed study of the cultural–psychological principles of Cochin's ecumenism later.

It is not easy to construct the story of Cochin by talking to its inhabitants. For the past of Cochin has been aggressively historicized during the last 50 years. Like Gujarat and West Bengal, Kerala has undergone a middle-class revolution in recent years. Not only do cities now dominate the landscape of the state, differences between the village and the city are no longer sharp. Both have been heavily infiltrated by text-book-based, politically correct, stereotypes, inspired by some rather crude, tropicalized versions of left-Hegelian European thought of the 1930s. It has become difficult to get private narratives reflecting much privacy or personal feelings.

At first, all witnesses seem brainwashed to believe in the right values and Cochin's cosmopolitanism seems to be a triumph of secularism, rationalism, high literacy, the rudiments of a welfare state, Indian nationalism, urbanity, and egalitarianism. To trust these witnesses, these values seem to have entered Cochini society in the early medieval period, if not earlier, uncannily before they were formally launched as parts of the Enlightenment project in South Asia, under the auspices of a series of colonial regimes. All Cochinis at the beginning seem to speak the same language, cite the same examples, and seem equally proud of Cochin's multiculturalism and 'perfect' communal harmony. As the ideological strands associated with culture of the Indian state exercise lesser control over the life stories and memories of the interviewees, a slightly different set of categories take over. And one finds with some surprise that most Cochinis have a partly shared, quasi-private theory of what makes Cochin tick. Only gradually do they come out with personal experiences and family histories that are no ordinary histories but emotionally laden constructions of the city's past, transmitted over generations. They are first offered

9 S. Sreekala, Interview with Purushothama Mallayya on the Kokanis in Cochin, 1999.

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hesitantly, almost as skeletons in the family cupboard. Only after a while do some interviewees acknowledge them up as unofficial narratives, with which they 'partially agree'. In these narratives, other communities and, even, parts of one's own community emerge as scheming villains, conquerors, victims, traitors, friends, enemies and protectors. There are moving stories of how one's own community survived and grew through its ingenuity, courage, cunning, and sometimes with the help of other communities. Cutting across ideological lines, however, the city itself always emerges as the hero.

The first family of Cochin

The concept of 'feudalism', when mechanically imported and indiscriminately applied to pre-colonial structures and experiences in South Asia, often hides more than it reveals. In its decontextualized forms, it can even sometimes begin to underscore a self-serving, blinkered analyses of structures of authority that are unfamiliar and outside the range of one's own culture. Examined closely, these 'feudal' authorities often turn out to have enjoyed lesser privileges and standards of living than those enjoyed by their fire-eating critics adorning the academe, the press, and policy-making bodies which pass casual summary judgements on entire ways of life and eras of history.

Thus, the Dutch Palace at Mattanchery in Cochin, the former residence of the Cochin kings and a favourite of tourists, looks more like an enormous, pretentious home of a village landlord. A successful business person in contemporary India would not like to be caught dead in it. It exudes less opulence and comfort than even the homes of many who write fiery prose on the evils of feudalism. The royal temple adjacent to the palace, too, is a modest affair. Cochinis, however, are proud of both, for the Cochin kings are remembered with much reverence and fondness by their now-liberated subjects.[10]

The royal dynasty or Perumpadappu Swarupam is predictably Kshatriya. But they brought to their style of governance a touch of Brahminic austerity and self-denial. (As we shall see, some of their former subjects believe them to be Brahmins.) Indeed, almost all the members of the family I contacted referred to themselves as 'poor kings,' known for their piety and scholarship.

[10] Years ago, freedom fighter and alternative historian Dharampal told me of a letter from a viceroy he discovered in the India Office Library in London. In it, the viceroy complained that the Maharana of Udaipur, the doyen of Rajput principalities, did not know how to live in kingly dignity; nor did the British in India know how to treat their friends and allies. The viceroy grumbled that the Maharana received a monthly stipend of only Rs. 3000 from his own treasury. Of this, about half was spent on commensal lunches; every day hundreds of ordinary peasants came and ate with the Maharana. The viceroy recommended that the stipend be increased to Rs. 3000 per day. This was duly done. At first, nothing changed; only the number of peasants at lunch increased. However, in another generation and half, interdining had stopped and the dynasty had begun to show many of the 'classical' signs of feudal decadence including flamboyant, mindless consumption and wastage.

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There are, it is said, 800 to 900 members of the royal family in Cochin itself; 716 members share the family estate. Though traditionally matrilineal, the family has acquired a touch of primogeniture in recent decades. Its religious identity, too, has undergone subtle changes. Like most ruling Kshatriya families, it is technically Shaivaite; the family deity at Pazhayannur, Trichur, is an incarnation of the goddess Bhagawati. The temple, said to be an *Arjuna pratisthan* (that is, established by Arjuna, the hero of Mahabharata), is at some distance from Cochin. Previously, blood sacrifices used to be offered at the temple. Now, as a symbol of those days, cocks are flown from the temple. At some time, however, the Cochin kings have acquired the looks of a Vaishnava family. The deity in the family temple at Tripunithura, the Sri Purnathrayeesa, is Vishnu.

Kerala Varma Thampuran, one of the four members of the family with whom we talked, is a cousin of the last king of Cochin, Pareekshit Varma.[11] The king was a scholar in Sanskrit and English; his cousin is an unassuming journalist and a former captain of the first batch of Cochin State Forces. Raised in the 1940s as the Nair Brigade, it was later integrated into the Indian army. The Brigade's name was changed in 1945 when the then Maharaja, another Kerala Verma – so named because of his willingness to relinquish his throne to help the cause of India's unity or *aikya* – allowed other castes to join it. Kerala Verma has seen action in World War II. He also was on garrison duty at Mhow, Rajasthan, where he looked after Italian prisoners of war. Afterwards, he managed for a while his brother-in-law's large rubber plantation. He could not manage it well, he admits, and it had to be sold.

Kerala Varma is now 78, but does not appear so. He is slim, erect and projects self-assurance. With his white moustache, touch of army manners, *vesti* and plastic sandals, he looks more like a retired petty army officer than an erstwhile prince. Actually, he identifies himself as a journalist. He is friendly and helpful and, after talking with me at some length, took me to meet some other members of his family nearby. For some reason, he seems to be the obvious choice as a spokesperson for the family. A number of persons suggested that we meet him.

At present Kerala Varma stays at a house that belongs to his daughter; she and her husband are in West Asia, working on an oilrig. It is a modest house at the fringe of the family estate in Tripunithura, which might have been once a separate town but is now a suburb of Cochin. The estate, studded by a large number of separate houses belonging to the different members of the family, constitutes an updated, ancestral, dynastic township. The Sri Purnathrayeesa temple dominates it. Kerala Varma himself has married into the Travancore royal family; his wife, an impressive self-

[11] In the Cochin dynasty, the first three sons usually have the following names: Rama Varma, Kerala Varma, and Ravi Varma, though there are odd exceptions. The king who gave up his kingdom to join the Indian Union was named Aikya Kerala Varma because of his commitment to Indian unity; another king had come to be known posthumously as Madras Thampuran; he had died in Madras.

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confident woman, prepared and served us tea. I also met a couple of other members of the family. The house, the dress of the householders, the furniture and the crockery, indeed everything about the family, could not but look to someone from metropolitan India terribly middle class.

Our interviewee's colourful past, though, belies his appearance. A leftist and a modernist, Kerala Varma has fought elections with the support of Communist party of India. He also was the architect of the late V. K. Krishna Menon's victory in an election to Parliament in the 1950s. (Menon, Jawaharlal Nehru's controversial friend and confidant, contested for Trivandrum; he used to preside over India's foreign office.) 'I am a communist,' Kerala Varma blandly declares. He, however, hastens to correct the 'general impression' that his entire family are communists. There are other shades of political opinion in the family; some are supporters of the Indian National Congress, others supported the Gandhian freedom movement before independence.

It soon becomes obvious that Kerala Varma tries hard to see the world through his ideology, and the strain shows. Like some others in his family, he is obviously ambivalent towards his origins and one can detect a touch of defensiveness in him towards his family. To him, time is basically an evolutionary unfolding of hierarchical, more liberal social practices. He remembers his childhood mainly as days of unmitigated conservatism when he and his brothers used to go to school on horseback, sit separately from other children, often surrounded by bodyguards. In sum, he almost grudges the fact that he was brought up as a prince. (In practice that means that, after the fourth grade, he was in a special school. But the school evidently was special in more than one sense. It even had a Hebrew teacher though there were only three or four Jewish boys in the school.) The Cochin royalty, he also adds, was more conservative than the Travancore one. The family had at first opposed the entry of the lower castes into the palace temple. Only in 1950 did the Sri Purnathrayeesa temple allow the entry of low castes. This was despite the fact that, in the family, the males customarily married Shudras or low castes and the women Namboodiri Brahmins. (The family never marries within itself, because it traces its origins to two sisters.)

Gradually, as we continue talking, Kerala Varma becomes less self-aware and begins to talk more freely. He is unhappy that E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the communist politician and a former chief minister of Kerala, has called Aikya Kerala Varma a counterfeit coin and a hypocrite. He feels vindicated by the admiration that another communist chief minister, C. Achyuta Menon, used to have for the king. Kerala Varma now warms up to the subject and begins to talk about his family's ecumenism with a touch of pride. He points out that though people usually notice the synagogue close to the Dutch palace, there is also a mosque there. He also claims that ecumenism has coloured even the personal lives of some of his ancestors and relatives. The first Hindu-Christian marriage in the family took place around 1990. And one member of family married a lowly Puleya at around the same time. He

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mentions the case of a relative, Gopalika, who was trained as an Arabic teacher. When she, a Brahmin, was appointed in a Muslim school in Malapuram, there was strong opposition; she was made to resign. However, there was even greater opposition to that injustice and she was given her job back in 1987, during the Left Front rule. Islam comes back to the royal family in insidious ways.

In political matters, Kerala Varma says, the Cochin kings were liberal. Responsible government was introduced in Cochin state in 1932, before such reforms were introduced in any other princely state of Kerala. Even a minister for harijan and rural welfare was appointed at around that time. In 1946, a year before Independence, King Aikya Kerala Verma signed the instrument of accession to the Indian Union. He did so at a time when some states, including Travancore, were toying with the idea of declaring independence. Indeed, he was the first ruler to join the Union and one of the only three to do so voluntarily. (The other two were the Maharajahs of Mysore and Baroda.) All that he wanted in exchange was an almanac. The king was 'the author of a cultural revolution in India', Kerala Varma grandly declares, now more confident of himself. He forgets what he has told me earlier about his family's conservatism about temple entry and claims that the family ensured the entry of the low castes into temples in 1936.

The Cochin kings might have looked reasonably autonomous during their 600 years of reign, but in practice their lifestyles and choices were framed by a cultural and psychological triad that included the kings of Travancore and the Zamorins, the kings of Calicut. As we have seen, according to popular belief, they all came from the same family and there were much social interaction and inter-marriage among them. But there was also competition, jealousy, and attempts to be distinctive. These attempts shaped politics and social policies, and ensured the emergence of three different styles of governance in the region. To judge by the comments of some of the members of the royal family whom we met, the Cochin Maharajas were the simplest and, perhaps, the most naïve among the three. According to these informants, the Travancore kings were rich, powerful and shrewd – some of them were warrior-kings – and the Zamorins were aggressive, overly ambitious, and perhaps slightly inferior socially. (We were told more than once that the Zamorins, though Kshatriyas, did not wear sacred threads and were not allowed to marry the women of the Cochin family.) One suspects that while the Cochin kings did not dare to take on the Travancore family and felt inferior to them in the princely pecking order, they considered themselves superior to the Zamorins. This was not acceptable to the Zamorins. To put it another way, the Cochin family considers Travancore family to be its real counterplayer, not the Zamorins. Yet, in practice, while the Zamorins and the Cochin kings competed and fought for generations; the Travancore kings were too powerful to be bothered with either.

There are, however, dissenting voices. According to one family friend of the Cochin kings, the Zamorins were the ones who courageously resisted the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. The Travancore and Cochin kings compromised at every

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step. The self-image of the Cochin dynasty is that of a humble, folk people, given to piety, simplicity and poverty. Even while granting their right to that self-image, it is obvious that this friend would have liked them to have shown more aggressive resistance to the colonial powers.

Though Kerala Varma has married into the Travancore royalty, his loyalties are clear. He claims that the people were made to respect the Travancore kings, whereas the Cochin kings were respected spontaneously. One suspects that, like most members of his family, Kerala Varma, too, carries a certain ambivalence towards the Travancore family who sometimes were, according to him, tyrannical.

Venkitangu Jairaman supplies some of the missing notes to Kerala Varma's story. Jairaman is an art critic, writer and a journalist. He is 54 and has been writing in the *Indian Express* for years. Slim, bespectacled, with closely cropped greying hair, white shirt, sandalwood mark on forehead and *vesti*, he look likes any other upper-caste Malayali. 'My father belonged to the royal family; I do not,' he said, probably hinting at the matrilinear traditions in his family. He has mostly been an independent writer, but has worked in a press for a while. He writes mainly on classical Karnataki music, theatre, and paintings. He chose to meet me at a hotel, perhaps to spare me the problem of locating his house in the crowded centre of the city.

Like many others, Jairaman starts by saying that Cochin is a loveable city. It has retained a touch of its 'semi-urban', 'semi-pastoral' past and can be habit-forming; 'those who come to the city do not go back'. As a result, the older residents of Cochin are becoming a minority. Other cities are not like that, Jairaman insists. Trichur, another cultural centre of Kerala nearby, is meant for Trichuris; Cochin is for everyone. Jairaman traces this openness to Cochin's erstwhile monarchs. They were 'pious and Spartan'. They 'never amassed wealth' and were 'perfectly secular'. For these qualities, they were 'considered foolish by others'. Yet, these qualities explain why they have survived the demise of the princely order. They can live within their means because their needs are few. Their emphasis on education has also helped. The entire family, including the women, are well educated. Today, all royal women are employed and they are almost all college graduates. No royal family in India enjoys this advantage.

The family, because it was born from two sisters, was previously strictly exogamous. Now endogamy is not unknown to it. 'The texture of the family', too, has changed. There is much more intimacy within the family, Jairaman believes. In this respect, too, the family is different from the Travancore royalty. According to Jairaman, the looser family ties in the latter case are a legacy of Martanda Varma, the warrior-king of Travancore.

Jairaman moves on to an aspect of Cochin rarely talked about: its contribution to the arts, especially music. He points out that T. N. Krishnan, N. Rajan, L. Subrahmanyam – they are all from Cochin. The city has produced a large number of musicians and artists, less due to royal patronage than to royal openness to the new

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and the strange. Unlike other Indian princes, the Cochin kings never directly patronized music, nor did they produce anyone like Swathi Thirunnal, the king of Travancore who renounced everything to write devotional lyrics and compose music himself. But the Cochin kings had that crucial ecumenical attitude – 'anything that came up, they allowed'. Cochin flourished culturally as a result. The family can even take credit for innovating the game of one-day cricket some 50 years before it was formally launched in world cricket.

Because the kings were liberal, Jairaman says, the people were also liberal. Cochin's 'soil has not been a fertile place for fundamentalism or communal riots'. This liberalism of the kings came from their piety. Foreigners were often 'at first taken aback by the simplicity and piety of the kings'. It is said that once, on the occasion of an eight-day ritual feast at the family temple, someone found out that systematic theft of foodstuff was taking place and complained to the Maharaja. The Maharaja took it calmly; he said that it was a good way for the consecrated food, *prasadam*, to reach a larger circle of people. Sadly, others interpreted such piety and tolerance as weakness. V. P. Menon swooned when the Cochin Maharajah only asked for an almanac and a hand-fan in return for joining the Indian Union and giving up his royal privileges and rights.[12]

The same attitude of openness informed other areas of political action. When some members of the family turned anti-British in colonial days, no one interfered; it was seen as of their personal ethics. Once, during World War I, one king even had to abdicate because of his differences with the British. 'They were not supine or invertebrate, despite their piety,' Jairaman says. Probably this is his reaction to the feeling that exists even close to the family that, while the Zamorins courageously fought the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, the Cochin's kings, like their counterparts in Travancore, 'adjusted' to the changing realities.

The Jewish Diaspora

There are two main Jewish communities in Cochin: the white Jews and the black or Malabari Jews. The latter are also known as Myuchasims. 'black' and 'white' are terms the Cochinis and the communities themselves use; there is no defensiveness associated with them. In recent decades, however, subtle changes have crept into these self-definitions. As the Jews themselves have become a major symbol of Cochin's multiculturalism, the two main Jewish communities have simultaneously come closer and moved further away. Of the two communities, the black Jews claim to have a hoarier past, but the white Jews are the more conspicuous presence. That,

[12] The belief is widespread that invaders often took advantage of the naïve tolerance of the Cochin kings. According to Noble, the scientist researching the Jewish roots of his family, the Portuguese took full advantage of the religious tolerance of the ruling family to introduce religious chauvinism in Cochin. They destroyed the churches and sacred objects of Syrian Christians and harassed the Jews.

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too, is a source of a minor tension now; some black Jews feel that the white Jews are separating themselves from others, which they never did in the past.[13]

Even before the founding of a proper Jewish settlement and, later, a Jewish kingdom in Cranganore, Jewish oral traditions claim, the Jews were in Malabar, in and around Cochin. Since the time of King Solomon, some of them say, they traded in gold, ivory, sandalwood, peacock feathers, and, of course, spices. This old connection is said to have encouraged the settlement of Jews after the destruction of the second temple and, in another wave, around 1000 AD. This was when full rights were given to them to settle in the area.

There might have been once a third community, the Meshuhrarim, literally 'freed slaves'. About it, much less is known, though a charming autobiography gives clues to their lifestyle.[14] We have not met anyone who admits being a Mushuhrarim; all of them might have by now migrated to Israel. In any case, it is a controversial category; some deny that such a community existed at all. We also heard of a few Baghdadi Jews, who were at Cochin once, but they were individuals and families brought to the city mainly by work. Most of them migrated to Britain soon after independence. However, the most famous Baghdadi Jewish family in India, the Sassoons, established a more enduring connection with the city; one of the Sassoons married into Fort Cochin's most illustrious Jewish family, the Koders.

According to Samuel Halegua, the acknowledged leader of the community, at the moment there are about 20 families of white Jews left in Fort Cochin and 34 families of black Jews in Ernakulam. He says that in Cochin region, there are eight synagogues, two of them in Ernakulam. The Paradesi synagogue at Fort Cochin is the most famous of them. It is the oldest synagogue in the British Commonwealth.

We first met Samuel Halegua when he made a presentation at a meeting of community leaders at Cochin. He was introduced there as a leader of the city's Jewish community. He made an excellent and, in many ways, moving presentation on the history, experiences, and concerns of the Cochin Jews.

Later on, we met him, his wife Queenie and a few others from his community, including Joseph Halegua, the sexton of the synagogue. Samuel Halegua is 66, but looks much younger. He is self-confident and articulate. Like some others in his community, he has the looks of a Southern European, but unlike some others cannot pass off as a North Indian. Though he does not say so, he began as mainly a leader of white Jews of Cochin who, according to some, came to India as late as in the thirteenth century. With the dwindling population of Jews, he has almost automatically become the main spokesperson of the city's Jews. While talking to us, he shifts between the white Jews, all Cochin Jews (including the Malabari Jews) and Indian Jews and the dates he mentions do not often sound right. However, as far as the

[13] Some accounts suggest that the tension between the two Jewish communities was a gift of colonialism and the politics of colour. See, for example, Daniel and Johnson 1995.

[14] Ibid.

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Jewish history of India is concerned, he talks on behalf of all Jews and traces the origin of Judaism in India through its quasi-mythical history of two thousand years.

Samuel Halegua and Queenie stay in a large, modest but enchanting, two-storied house on Jew Street, Fort Cochin. They are cousins and when they fell in love and married, their marriage was seen as a continuation of the long tradition of intermarriage between the Haleguas and the Koders, two of the most important families of Fort Cochin. The Halegua family has never had much to do with Cochin's famous spice trade; they have been mainly gentlemen-farmers. They still own some agricultural land, where they grow rice and coconuts. Some of his ancestors could, however, be called merchant-princes. Samuel Halegua's grandfather brought electricity to Cochin and also pioneered a highly profitable ferry service for the city. It gave employment to a number of Jews and the Jews usually travelled free on the ferries. The Cochin royalty valued the Haleguas; one in the family was given the title of Mudaliar (though the Levys produced the first Mudaliar among the Jews of Cochin). Evidently, the community did not put much emphasis on formal education, particularly for the women. Samuel's grandfather was the first to matriculate in the community, his aunt the first woman to matriculate and graduate. Jewish society tends to be patriarchal, he adds almost apologetically.

Samuel and Queenie might have been brought up in an extended family-like environment, but now they have to live by themselves in a large house. Their children have migrated to Israel. However, they continue to come to Cochin every year, not merely to meet their parents, but also to participate in various community festivals. The house the Haleguas live in is roughly 250 to 300 years old. It is on a narrow street, with a few well-stocked antique shops and a couple of small, attractive bookstores. The houses on the street are joined together by common walls. They all once belonged to Jews, but many have now been sold. Jew street once had three synagogues, but only one, the Paradesi Synagogue, is still in use. It was constructed, Halegua tells us, in 1334.

Though well maintained, Halegua's home is not museumized. This is surprising, given his popularity among the scholars of Jewish history and anthropologists. There are a few artefacts that reflect the traditions of the house and the family, but they are not obtrusive. It looks very much the home of an easy, well-to-do, middle-class family in Kerala, with its usual touch of austerity and Edwardian charm. The language of Cochin Jews is Malayalam, and Halegua talks to his wife and the visitors who interrupt us in Malayalam. He calls it his mother tongue. (It is a bit of a shock to some visitors to Cochin when they first hear two whites talking among themselves in Malayalam.) However, Halegua speaks to us in fluent English.

Halegua himself seems well entrenched in Cochin. He has grown up in the Jew street and, as he once said in an interview to the British Broadcasting Corporation, it was like being brought up in a joint family. He starts by reminding me that different Jewish communities in India came at different times and, to that extent, their experiences and bonding with India are different. For instance, the Baghdadi Jews

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first came to India in the late eighteenth century, whereas the Bene Israelis have a history stretching into myths, folklore, and memories transmitted over generations. The various Jewish communities also differ in socio-economic and cultural status. Halegua's own community is well placed economically; they are a part of Cochin's élite.

When discussing the 2,000-year old history of the Jews in Cochin, Halegua mentions the even older connection between ancient Israel and India. The Talmud, written nearly 2,000 years ago, mentions pepper from India as free from ritual pollution. There are also similarities between old Tamil and Hebrew; certain words in the two languages are close to each other. He implies that even these ancient links centred round Cochin. (He probably means Cranganore but then, to him too, Cochin is only a reincarnation of Cranganore.) He, however, acknowledges that most white Jews probably came to India from Spain as late as in the seventeenth century, via the Ottoman empire which had welcomed them after their expulsion from Spain in the late fifteenth century. The earliest available data on the white Jews of Cochin belongs to the seventeenth century.[15] The Bene Israelis, on the other hand, though probably an older community, are less well off. Culturally, too, they have no liturgy of their own, whereas the Cochin Jews, especially the white Jews, have it. The latter also have maintained closer links with Hebrew. Over the centuries, some of them have written poems and songs in Hebrew. Halegua's own grandfather wrote songs in Hebrew.

Halegua is proudly Jewish. Like many Cochin Jews, and unlike most Bene Israelis I have met, he carries a slight ambivalence towards Christianity. Christ was born a Jew, and he lived and died a Jew, he says, but persecution and discrimination against Jews has been typical of Christian Europe. In Islamic countries they have been treated better. Though large parts of his family have settled in Israel, Halegua also maintains a certain distance from present-day problems of the Israeli State. He is committed to Israel, but not blindly. He certainly does not sound like an Israeli nationalist. The distance may be due to the Israeli attitude towards the Arabs. He likes the Arabs because of their excellent past record of the treatment of the Jews.

Halegua is also a trifle distant from the conventional interpretations of the Jewish holocaust. He has read much on the subject and, naturally, feels strongly about the genocide. But he has self-consciously tried not to be bitter. He finds it difficult to hate a 'whole nation' for the crimes of a regime and system. Apparently, in this respect, geographical distance and the Indian experiences have played a role. While the ideas of religious and ethnic hostility and violence have a place in his world, the industrialization of homicide – the cattle trains and chimneys of the holocaust – remain alien to him. For that mater, he even found the 1984 riots against the Sikhs at Delhi 'unbelievable'.

[15] The Halegua family itself came to India from Spain via Alleppo and, hence, they have always maintained their links with the Yemeni and Aden Jews.

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Halegua is a proud Malabari and Indian, too. 'I never wanted to live anywhere else,' he has more than once said. This is not merely nationalism; he is deeply attached to the Malabari, particularly Cochini Jewish traditions. His self-definition is that of a custodian of these traditions. They include everything from the distinctive liturgy and marriage rites of the region to the Jewish versions of pancake called pastelle and hot chicken curry. They also seem to include his interest in cricket in football-crazy Kerala. He strongly disagrees with Hanna Arendt, whom he identifies as an 'American sociologist'. According to him, Arendt has argued that persecution and discrimination have ensured the survival of Jewish culture. 'Arendt is wrong', Halegua says. 'We have not been persecuted or discriminated against, yet we have retained our identity.'[16] He agrees with the news item published in a journal given to us by a resident of Cochin:

> The only safe haven in the history of the Jewish Diaspora is disappearing . . . India has been uniquely free from anti-Semitism . . . According to oral history, Jews arrived in Shingly, Cochin, in the year of 72 (Common Era), shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. In the fourth century the Maharaja of Cochin granted them royal rights for 'as long as the world and the moon exist'.[17]

In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain, a few years after that from Portugal. But the Ottoman Empire welcomed them. The Halegua family came from Spain to Alleppo to India. It has always maintained close links with the Yemeni and Aden Jews. The Portuguese rule in Cochin, however, was a tough time for the Jews (1505–1663 AD). 'We have known religious intolerance only from the Portuguese,' Halegua says; the inquisition in India was crueller than that in Portugal. The Dutch rule, between 1664–1773 AD, was slightly better. The synagogue was constructed in 1334 AD. Halegua sometimes leads the prayers there. The synagogue remains the centre of community life in Cochin. (The Cochin kings used to visit the synagogues, often carrying gifts, another Jewish informant tells us; prayers were said for them there.)

For Halegua, the major problem of the Indian Jews is 'numbers'. Between 1950 and 1960 more than 1,000 Jews left for Israel. That was the major exodus that took place. Between 1700 and 1800 Jews were left behind. Those who have migrated return

[16] He does not know that, living with the culture of Israeli politics, partly organized around competitive histories of discrimination, sections of the Cochin Jews in Israel seem to have developed a sense of loss for not having a 'proper' history of oppression. At least a few of them have invented a less peaceful history of the community at Cochin. Some expatriate Malabari Jews there spoke of harassment and discrimination against the Jews at Cochin. To the dismay of the anthropologist known for work on Indian Jews, who had taken me to meet the group, one of them talked with some relish about how St Thomas in the First century brought anti-Semitism to Kerala and precipitated a first-class conflict between the 'Jacobites' and the 'Catholics'.

[17] *Rotunda* 16 (1), December 1991. See also *Two Thousand Years of Freedom and Honor: The Cochin Jews of India,* Director: Johanna Spector (212), 666.9461. Halegua says that the Jews were given their rights in the Fourth century and the engraved copper plates, which formalized these rights, were given to them in the Fifth century. Others claim that the plates were actually given to the Cochin Jews in the Tenth century.

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on and off to Cochin, mainly at festival times. All of them have 'strong attachments' to India, Halegua claims. There are between 4,000 to 5,000 Indian Jews in Israel.

This last remark of Halegua acquired certain poignancy on our last day at Cochin, when we were invited by his mother-in-law, Mrs Koder, to an evening get-together at the beginning of Sabbath. She is the oldest member of the community in the city. Her husband is dead and her children and most other relatives have migrated to Israel. She stays alone at a palatial house stretching over two blocks with a retinue of about 20. When we joined her in the evening, there were a few others there, who seemed to represent Cochin's past more than its present. Most of the visitors were in their 70s and 80s. Among them were a retired British business executive, a successful elderly Indian businessperson, an English journalist who permanently stays in the city, and a retired government servant. Most of them seemed to be regulars at Mrs Koder's place. Mrs Koder, hard of hearing, presided over the get-together in regal style – talking loudly, deciding who would come and sit next to her, or have the privilege of speaking to her. It was a charming, but exceedingly sad evening. The entire atmosphere seemed to anticipate the moment of death of a proud, self-confident culture, dying perhaps for no other reason than the passage of time. The servants staying in the ground floor of Mrs Koder's house were probably waiting for her to die, so that they could occupy the elegant house. The costly, antique furniture and other artefacts in the house seemed to be waiting to be vandalized. The visitors who came to the party seemed to know that time was against them. As I talked to them, I could almost see that they were all haunted by the thought that it could well be the last such evening there. Even their gaiety seemed to be of the forced kind often associated with a particularly painful farewell.

The Malabari Jews, also known as the black Jews are a shadowy presence for many scholars and historians who have studied the culture and history of the Cochin Jews. According to some accounts, fiercely disputed by others, the black Jews are freed slaves who were converted to Judaism and given a synagogue.[18] In the recent decades, the white Jews have dominated the public imagination of the Cochin Jew. Self-confident and articulate, most white Jews also speak excellent English. The black Jews, on the other hand, give the impression of being ordinary, middle- and low-brow Cochinis. Yet, for that very reason, they have an especial place in the city's culture. The white Jews are a part of Cochin's elite; the black Jews are the more accessible, everyday version. However, there has grown a slight resentment among the black Jews towards the White. Not so much because of the latter's wealth, influence and social salience, but because of the feeling that, during the last 50 years or so, the white Jews have tried to distinguish themselves from the Malabari Jews and have become more strictly endogamous. (This came out even in some of my

[18] *The Cochin Synagogue: 400th Anniversary Souvenir* (Cochin: 1968); see also Daniel and Johnson 1995.

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conversations with the expatriate Malabari Jews near Jerusalem. They complained that only in recent times have the white Jews claimed cultural distinctiveness and laid stress on their greater acquaintance with Jewish culture and rituals.) The complaint, however, has its other side. Samuel Halegua claims that the white Jews tend to be endogamous not because of colour prejudice, but because they are protective about their litergy. They find Yemeni Jews fully acceptable, even though they are darker than the Malabaris.

Eliavoo Abraham may not be old, but he looks elderly. Soft spoken, exceedingly polite in the way people in Indian public life often are, he gives the impression of being nondescript not by default but by choice. His son, Sam, has an automobile garage in Ernakulam, which also sells luxury cars. It is located in Ernakulam's Jew street. Like the other Jew street in Fort Cochin, this one too is identified with a proud community that shows no sign of defensiveness. It is a community that has felt protected against most of the humiliating experiences of the Jewish Diaspora. We met Eliavoo and Sam Abraham at the garage for the first time. Hospitable and friendly, they invited us to their home for a chat.

During the first visit we found out that Eliavoo himself had moved to Kiriyathyovel, Israel, 25 years ago, in 1973. His other son lives there. Sam stays at Ernakulam and looks after the garage. Eliavoo now comes every year to Cochin to visit his family and is also active in community affairs in the city. The Abrahams are a reasonably well-to-do family that has had a long interest in Jewish culture. Eliavoo's uncle was a Hebrew teacher. His father, however, had less exalted interests; he supplied vegetables to the Maharaja's palace for 29 years. In appreciation of his services, the Maharaja gave him a gold chain.

Eliavoo's grandfather died in 1940. He had been instrumental in laying the foundation stone of a grand synagogue the same year. Eliavoo was then very young. He does not remember his grandfather, but remembers the days when both the synagogues of the black Jews were active. They are now closed. His grandfather used to tell him that the Abraham family had stayed in Cochin for 600 years, but Eliavoo himself had not taken much interest in the history of his family and never asked his grandfather about the history of the Cochin Jews. Eliavoo now seems to regret that lapse.

Eliavoo remembers his childhood with a touch of nostalgia. He studied in Maharaja's school, with the princes and princesses of Cochin, even though he himself came from a modest background. He married in 1950. Like him, his wife was also born on Jew street. The 1980s were a bad decade for him. His father died in 1980, mother and wife in 1984. That past pulls him to Ernakulam's Jew street every year and he has to repeatedly affirm that he was very happy in India. He had been a successful Class-I PWD contractor for 17 years – from 1954 to 1971. Though he claims that he is also happy in Israel, he seems to feel that his job in India gave him more prestige and dignity.

In Israel, he first worked in a post office. Now, he is an accountant in an

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ambulance service, a semi-governmental job. He had many difficulties there at the beginning, because he had to take care of everyone who migrated to Israel from his family. He also had to spend two years to learn Hebrew in a government language centre. His parents, sister and brother-in-law, who joined him in Israel, did not learn any Hebrew. Eliavoo also had to work as a watchman for a while. Now, he is better off, but there is something in his tone that suggests that, like many first generation immigrants, he is ambivalent towards his adopted country.

That ambivalence has many sources, the most important of them being the Israeli youth culture. Like the sexton of Cochin's main synagogue, Eliavoo is uncomfortable with that culture, which he sees as amoral and decadent. He distinguishes himself sharply and sometimes aggressively from the many Israelis who come to India as tourists. He does not believe that they are genuinely interested in India or Indian culture. They come to Goa mainly to smoke hashish, he claims. Of the 300 odd Cochini Jews who come to Cochin from Israel every year, he estimates that roughly 40 per cent are interested in Cochin's Jewish traditions; 60 per cent are not.

Yet, he is pretty certain that the remaining Jewish families in Cochin will also move to Israel. (According to him, there are about 11 black Jewish families left in greater Cochin.) This is because of the problem of marriage. In Cochin, there are just not enough marriageable boys and girls among the Jews. Also, the heavy migration that took place earlier has taken its toll. Now they have to make an effort to assemble the minimum ten persons required for prayers. For his prayers, Eliavoo joins the white Jews at the synagogue at Fort Cochin, where Samuel Halegua serves as the priest. The synagogues of the Malabari Jews remain closed.

As we talk and Eliavoo relaxes, his ambivalence towards Israel becomes clearer. He starts by saying that the Jews had some problems in India, such as the ones faced by the children attending school in the family. They could not observe many of the rites and rituals of Sabbath. They had to go school on Saturdays, and that was hard on the community.[19] Also, the better schools in greater Cochin were Christian missionary schools; the members of the community constantly feared that their children would be taught the principles of Christianity or inducted into the Christian worldview and would loose respect for their own faith. (As with many others of his community, Eliavoo Abraham's image of the local Christians is split. He remembers the amicable relationship of the Jewish communities had with the Christians, but also remembers the Portuguese violence against the Jews as a defining moment in the life of the community.)

Yet, now that he is in Israel, he says, he constantly remembers Cochin when in Israel, and Israel when in Cochin.[20] As he says this, Eliavoo warms up to the subject,

[19] There is obviously a difference in the self-confidence of the Haleguas and the Abrahams. Samuel Halegua speaks of a cousin who joined the Indian Navy and was finding it difficult to go through the usual drill on Sabbath. When the cousin complained to Samuel's father-in-law, the latter directly wrote to the prime minister. The rules were quickly changed.

[20] Eliavoo is probably not an isolated case or individual whim. I remember Ichak Nehamia, a

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and is no longer that defensive or protective towards Israel. He says, 'we always tell our grandchildren that Cochin is the best place in the world, if you want to live peacefully'. Suddenly he blurts out 'I regret I went to Israel.' He adds that even people with money in India cannot go and buy a shop or a house in Israel. 'Israel is not an easy country.' But then, when they migrated, many Malabari Jews were poor; some 80 per cent of them, he estimates, 'lived below the poverty line'. That was why they emigrated. Many of them are millionaires today.

It now transpires that in India Eliavoo took an active part in politics. He remembers those days with much nostalgia and gives the feeling that he regrets going to Israel mainly because he does not feel efficacious in that society. (He also perhaps feels humiliated by the inglorious low-skilled jobs he had to do in Israel after his stint in Cochin's local politics.) Moreover, he and his family had 'very close relations' with all other communities in Cochin, particularly with the Brahmins and the Nairs among the Hindus and the Muslims. This had helped him in his political career. The Muslims lived near the Jew street and, right within the Jew street, there was a Muslim house. Malabari Jews, he adds, are usually close to Muslims. Even in Israel they feel close to Moroccan and Yemeni Jews. They are 'like the Malabari Jews even in colour and orthodoxy'. One comes to suspect that he feels close to them also because of their similarities with the Muslim neighbours he knew at Cochin. A touch of sadness creeps into his voice as he distinguishes himself from other Israelis and he says, 'Israeli Jews and Muslims quarrel every day.' He proudly adds that some Israeli political leaders publicly say that Israelis should learn from Indian Jews how to live with Muslims. Eliavoo also grudges, though not explicitly, the compulsory military service in Israel.[21]

Malabari Jewish immigrant at Moshav Nevatim near Jerusalem, telling me on behalf of his community, 'We like to live as if we were in Kerala.' Indeed, Nehamia and his friends made a point to serve us typical Malayali food and claim that the Malayali food the Cochin Jews prepared in Israel was better than what one could get at Cochin.

[21] Evidently, despite his long stay at Israel, Abraham has not picked up the anti-Muslim rhetoric that occasionally intrudes into Daniel's account. While herself giving examples of the good relations between Jews and Muslims at Cochin (Daniel and Johnson 1995: 7, 97, 100–1, 145, 181) and even having an index entry on the subject, she at one place generalizes: 'The Muslims and Christians as well as the Jews have stamped the Hindus as idolaters. But if you want to know what is humanitarianism you must go to them. You must look at a group of Jews who lived under the regime of these Hindu rajas for the last two thousand years without knowing discrimination. The Hindu rulers protected them when they came under attack by the Portuguese and Muslim rulers. In his petition to Oliver Cromwell before 1655 for the resettlement of Jews in England – from where they were driven away in 1290 – Manasseh Ben Israel pleaded and gave the example of the tolerance enjoyed by the Jews of Cochin under the Hindu regime. The Jews of Cochin should be grateful to those Hindu rajas and the people of Cochin for their very existence as Jews in their country forever and ever' (Daniel and Johnson 1995: 123). As with many Malabaris, Daniel's favourite villain of history is Tipu Sahib (1751–1799). She tells the story of how a Jewish friend of Tipu's father, Hyder Ali, pleaded for Tipu's life when Hyder Ali had drawn his sword to kill his son for some act of cruelty. Hyder Ali gave in to his friend, but also warned him that his death will be in the hands of Tipu, and so it happened. Ibid., p. 127.

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Three generations of the Abraham Family stays in a beautiful house in the suburbs of Cochin. Sam, the son who runs the garage, is 48 years old. He, too, emigrated to Israel, but came back after 13 years to Cochin in 1985, because 'it was a quite place'. The move also probably had something to do with his war experiences. He had fought in the Yam Kippur war in 1973 and the Lebanon war in 1984. Sam's wife, who served us tea and shortcakes, is indistinguishable from an upper caste, Hindu woman, with her elegant sari, *bindi* on the forehead, and easy Malayalam. Sam's son Anil Abraham – Sam had another son who had died some years ago in an accident – is even more aggressively a Cochini. Self-confident and articulate, he says he wants to go to Israel to see things for himself. He knows his grandfather wishes him to go and settle down there, but he is clear that his trip will be only an exploratory one. From his stray comments, it appears that he is also toying with the idea of running his father's business at Ernakulam. Sam, too, perhaps apprehensive about his surviving son being drafted by the Israeli army, seems to agree with his son rather than with his father.

The Abrahams are finding out the hard way what Basil Elias, a Jewish urologist at the General Hospital, Ernaculum, articulates openly. Elias tells us that he is attracted to Cochin because it is a city of immigrants. 'Nobody here actually belongs to this place. It is built by immigrants.' Obviously, he looks at his community as one of those that have built Cochin over the centuries. Cochin belongs to the Jews as much as it belongs to the others. Elias' grand father left for Israel in 1954 and he himself visited Israel in 1985. He now expects his children to go first to Israel and find out things for themselves. He himself is ambivalent towards the idea of immigration.

Other Cochinis see the future as less open. Many of those we met seem prepared for the loss of the city's Jewish community. But they are not reconciled to the idea. Some years ago in BBC's radio programme, 'The Last Jews of Cochin', the secretary of the city's spice traders' association compared the departure of the Jews with a daughter's marriage. One knows 'she may be doing well, but there is a sense of loss'.

Two 'immigrants' speak

Cochin introduces itself to you in unexpected ways. I remember the first afternoon of my first visit to the city for this study. We were having lunch at a seaside restaurant. Two persons, one with a vermilion mark on his forehead came and sat at a nearby table. They immediately ordered rum and coca-cola. My associate, an anthropologist, guessed they were BJP functionaries and predicted that they would order beef preparations. They did. After lunch, we joined them uninvited at their table and had a chat. They were exceedingly friendly and told us that they were organising a BJP rally that evening. They were fortifying themselves for the job and were perfectly frank about what they were eating and drinking. They had to be strong, they claimed, as if mimicking BJP's critics who accuse the party of being pathologically masculinity-seeking.

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Communalism has reached Cochin but failed to make any deep inroads into it. Hindu nationalist pamphlets in Malayalam, directed against the Christians and Muslims, are occasionally published from Cochin and distributed in some other cities of Kerala. But I am told that they are not easily available in Cochin itself. This has something to do with the warp and woof of Hindu-Muslim relations in the city, particularly the social perceptions they held of each other. Ostensibly, neither sees the other or itself as a monolithic community. Nor do the others see them as such. Despite the entry of modern categories and attempts to delegitimize older categories like caste, most Cochinis with whom we talked continue to see generic terms such as Hindus, Muslims, and Christians as representing confederations of live, identifiable communities. Even many who claim to have risen above the traditional divisions of castes and sects slip into the use of these divisions when off-guard. As a result, there is no minority complex in the majority community, as one finds in large parts of North India. The Hindus are a majority and the Muslims and Christians are minorities only theoretically. Two of the persons who told us the story of Cochin were Hasan Nasar and Muhammad Iqbal.

Hasan Nasar is a Malayali novelist in his late fifties. His grandfather migrated from Southern Yemen to Cochin. Their tribal surname was ba-Nasir. Nasar knows the names of seven generations of his ancestors. His grandfather made him learn the names. He, however, has not taught his own children any family genealogy: 'I want to mingle', he says. He adds that, over the generations, his family has lost some of its older characteristics. Previously there was a surfeit of Arabic words in the Malayalam his family spoke. That is no longer the case. He does not say so directly, but his experience of working in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia has something to do with the erosion of interest in his Yemeni roots. He is still proud of his origins, but not of 'those people', probably meaning the Arabs whom he came to meet at Riyadh. His discomfort with Riyadh has something to do with the lifestyle and consumption patterns in that city. Presumably, he did not like them. That sojourn has made him more proud of being a Cochini and strengthened his sense of belonging to the Cochini Muslim community.

Nasar proudly says, 'nowhere in the world will you find a community like this. Walk one kilometre and you will find more than one language and religion.' He quickly enters into a comparison between the cosmopolitan cultures of Dubai and Cochin. He does not like the former. 'Dubai has taken too much from the West; they spend their holidays in Europe.' On the other hand, Cochin has retained something of its self. It is still, Nasar feels, a city of communities and, despite many recent changes, the city itself also remains a community. There are not many instances of separate living or ghettos at Cochin; most of the localities are mixed. Yet, the differences are not ironed out. 'If you go even ten kilometres away from Cochin, they speak perfect Malayalam, whereas there are so many dialects in the city. They add richness to its culture.'

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In Cochin there is a custom, also found elsewhere in India, of people speaking one language at home, another at work, and still another for creative self-expression. Nasar proudly mentions Kunal Jussawala, a Gujarati journalist who has become a well-known writer in Malayalam.

Of course, there are intercommunal distances in the city. Nasar gives the example of Kutchi Memons who do not allow the use of their cemetery to even other Muslims. But these distances are more than compensated for by Cochin's tradition of mutuality. Even in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Nasar says, India was known for its tolerance; so was Cochin. Indeed, he claims that the Spanish and Portuguese Jews tempted Vasco da Gama with money and other incentives to find a sea route to India. For the Iberian Jews, da Gama's fateful trip to India in 1498 was a means of accessing Cochin's legendary ecumenism and generosity.

At this point of time Mohammed Iqbal, a journalist and a writer, intervenes. He is approximately 60 and is a Kutcchi Qazi, whose forefathers migrated from Kutch in northwest Gujarat. He speaks Kutcchi, too. From his tone, it seems that he feels that Nasar has not been fair and assertive enough about the culture and the traditions of Cochin. (Iqbal, I suspect, thinks me to be a journalist, probably on a mission to dig out instances of Hindu-Muslim conflicts at the city. We are meeting soon after the Bharatiya Janata Party Government has come to power and the party's Hindu chauvinism is a much-debated subject in the newspapers. He seems to assume that I want to join the debate in my columns.)

Iqbal points out that not only in Cochin but in the whole of Kerala there has flourished a 'rich heritage of hospitality, since the time of King Solomon'. He has read somewhere that King Solomon's palace was adorned with teak wood and ivory. He is convinced that the wood and ivory came from Kerala. He claims that even a community of slaves from Mozambique played a role in the history of Cochin, not as slaves but, strangely enough, as a cultural symbol. The practice of *Kappirri Muthappan* (kafir grandfather) involved, what could be called, slave worship among low-caste Hindus, as a system symbolically analogous to that of *Yaksha* in Eastern India, for the protection of hidden wealth of a person or a family.

Apart from these transcontinental connections, the city itself is, according to Iqbal, a remarkable testimony to communal coexistence. Apart from the communities usually mentioned, there are the Swetamber and Digamber Jains with their own functioning temples, Parsis, Sindhis, Dawoodi Vorahs, Maharashtrians, Konkanis (who have separate temples for Brahmins and Vaishyas, and even a special temple for Konkani goldsmiths), Bengalis, Kudumbis, Telugus, Tulus, two sects of Tamil Brahmins, of whom Palghat Iyers are particularly conspicuous. He proudly adds that Cochin is a mosaic of communities. (I have heard Cochinis speak of their diversity on a number of occasions. All Indian metropolitan cities have hundreds of communities; in none of them have I found people as proudly speaking of their diversity and the 'different histories' of their people, as if diversity itself was a value and, by itself, constituted the first marker of the uniqueness of a city.)

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Mattancherry, at one time, Iqbal says, was settled by a large number of Muslims. They are still there but, proportionately speaking, their numbers have dwindled. They also celebrate Deepawali like the Hindus. 'My father was a pious man. He used to take me for the Deepawali celebrations.' Every community has examples of how it went out of its way to acknowledge or interact with other communities. He gives example of the *Coonan Kurish* (Bent Cross) oath that the Christians took to defend the Cochin kingdom against European powers (see below). There were nine synagogues at Cochin at one time. As opposed to this, 'see, what is happening in Northern India'. North India seems to haunt Iqbal. 'There is no threat to the culture of Cochin', he at one point confidently says, and then quickly adds, 'but we are concerned when we see the national scene.'

Iqbal, too, believes that the Cochin Maharajas had much to do with Cochin's ecumenism. They were, he seems to suggest, Brahmins, but not purists. Ten days before Onam they used to have a festival called Athachamayam. Technically, it was a Hindu festival and it involved a large procession. Invariably, the Naina Muslims were in the front row of the procession. Even low-caste Hindus, Iqbal adds, had a place in the procession.

The unique feature of the city, according to Iqbal, is that nobody has 'abandoned' his or her cultural background and yet everyone can appreciate other cultures. Even 'the advent of faiths like Christianity and Islam have been perfectly peaceful' in the city. The Arabs have maintained connections with Malabar since pre-Islamic days, one of the first groups to carry the message of Islam outside the Arabic tribes came to Cochin. It was led by Malik Ibu Deenar al Habeeb, a direct disciple of the prophet. The Arabs earlier lived in a settlement in southern Cochin. The Chinese, too, lived in peace in a settlement at Fort Cochin and they built some pagodas there. Ma Huan was a Chinese Muslim. When a ship in 1963 hit the Malabar coast, some evidences of this settlement accidentally became available.

Cochin's ecumenism, Iqbal claims, extends to humbler domains of life. Though they are exposed to Karnataki music, Cochinis can appreciate Ravi Shankar, Pankaj Mallik, and ghazals. He also talks of the Pottey Ramayana of the Konkanis and the way it has influenced other communities. Indeed, Iqbal believes that Cochin's diversity has also allowed the influence and the customs of some communities to act as forms of cultural criticism of other communities. Thus, many of the 'regressive elements' in the culture of the Saraswats, such as the Devadasi system, have broken down under the influence of Christianity and the social status of the Saraswat women has improved.

III

This is not, I remind the reader, the full story of Cochin. It is an exploratory peep into its strange charms. The scraps of conversations I have strung together here are parts of a much larger narrative and I have not told the story of the communities that may provide a glimpse of, what both communalized and secular India would

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call, Hindu Cochin. A few things, however, are relatively clear, even from this incomplete story.

Seemingly, Cochin does not offer any unique theory of communal amity or religious tolerance. It is multicultural not by design, but by being itself. As we have seen, the city does not ooze with brotherly love either. Its easy communal amity includes communal distances and hostilities, too. But these distances and hostilities, because they operate within a widely shared psychological universe, have some in-built checks against mass violence and nihilistic rage. Cochin, all said, is a community where distances and hostilities, like closeness and friendship, have specific, culturally defined meanings. Like an annual Ramlila that cannot to without its demonic anti-hero, Ravana, in Cochin one has to relive one's self-definition as much through one's enemies as through one's friends. For within Cochin's psychological universe, one needs one's enemies to define oneself and one is aware every moment that one is incomplete without them. This need to have enemies, to spite psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan, never acquires a passionate, homicidal edge (Volkan 1988). There is certain optimality about Cochin's loves and hates.

The beehive-like organization of communities endorses this optimality. The communities in Cochin do not swim together in a steamy melting pot. Indeed, their lifestyles, while being intertwined, are also partly autonomous of each other. These sectors of autonomy, which can be called community affairs, subsume under them 'legitimate' differences in religion, caste, and sect. These differences in the city have not lost their meanings, value, and sense of continuity with the past, either in the communities or their neighbours. As a result, after a point, despite ideological pretences, nobody seems particularly disrespectful towards or defensive of them. The communities can afford to take the moderate hostilities of others because their self-esteem has not been badly damaged. Such hostilities do not constitute, what the psychoanalysts call, a narcissistic wound.

'The future', Jim Hicks has recently reaffirmed while reviewing Bruno Latour and Ivan Illich, 'may ultimately be found in our premodern past.' Perhaps because in the high noon of modernity, that past, uncontaminated by modernity, allows a freer space for imagining a future less shackled by the present. Indeed, along with Mangalore and Calicut, Cochin is a window to a once-flourishing and now-forgotten alternative – probably threatened – culture of cosmopolitanism. That culture, I may have said at the beginning, refuses to die. However, I am more aware now that the refusal may end up guaranteeing an ugly, slow, painful death. In our times, the dice seems to be loaded against cultures dependent on the survival of communities and community ties. Cochin is constantly bombarded by ideologies that have little respect for the city's distinctive style of dialogue of cultures; it is subject to steam-rolling development and a style of random urbanization that has become the hallmark Asian and Latin American economic growth. The only saving grace may be that Cochin is still terribly habit-forming. It seems to socialize one very quickly to its algorithm of life, which is probably a way of subtly inducting one into the city's

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community-based normative frame. As sections of its Jewish population are finding out, just when you begin to feel you have washed Cochin out of your system, the city begins to haunt you likely a friendly, persistent ghost.

Is that too shifting and fragile a base on which to build upon? The question troubles one because, as we have frequently seen in this century, when proximity sours, it releases strange demons. The Hutus and the Tutsis, the Bosnian Muslims and the Serbs – and in South Asia itself, the Punjabi Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in the 1940s, and the Sinhalas and the Sri Lankan Tamils now – they are all witnesses to the pathology of nearness rather than that of distance (Nandy 2000). Neighbourliness, Don Miller has recently reminded us, always carries a load of ambiguity; neighbours themselves are – or can turn into – strangers (Miller 1999). Some sections of Cochin anxiously wait to hear the verdict of contemporary India on its version of neighbourliness.

One final word on the nature of this enterprise. In contemporary critical theory, criticism has been mostly unidirectional. The idea of systematic, durable, cumulative social knowledge in such theory has come to mean knowledge that demystifies manifest social realities hiding less palatable truths (realpolitik, class relations or psychosexuality, for example). In the mainstream global culture of knowledge, it is seen as an act of intellectual courage to unmask the manifest, to unravel the hidden, the tacit, or the latent in their full ugliness – in turn seen as closer to truth for that very reason. During the last 100 years, new certitudes have been built on such demystification. From Nietzsche to Marx to Freud, it has been the same story.

For a long while, this model has served the social sciences well. It has deepened the awareness of economic and political power and psychological and cultural defences that have hidden subtler forms of violence and dominance, which previously seemed natural or legitimate. However, with the knowledge industry gradually domesticating critical theory into a new domain of expertise, the theory's one-way style of demystification has not merely become a new source of certitude, but also a new means of legitimizing the forced obsolescence for those marginalized by the world system. This study of Cochin once again suggests that the challenge is to redefine, what Philip Rieff calls, the analytic attitude and to exercise a new scepticism in the case of the defeated cultures in the tropics. This scepticism may involve challenging a series of ideas – among them progress, rationality, development, and modern science – that at one time the victors of the world might have feared but have now come to adore. Critical theory will not be maimed if it borrows something from the idea of unending criticism or criticism of criticism implicit in Buddhist dialectics in general and Nagarjuna in particular. In such criticism the apparently trivial and the unsightly can also be demystified to reveal a truth that signposts alternative ways of organizing a humane society.

The story of Cochin also suggests that multiculturalism need not be merely a political or social arrangement, nor even be a principle of citizenship that tolerates or

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celebrates disparate lifestyles. Multiculturalism may sometimes imply a culturally embedded identity in which the others are telescoped into the self as inalienable parts of the self. In that case, they survive not merely as fragments of a negative identity, but also as temptations, possibilities, and rejected selves. Such internalization is not unknown to psychoanalytic psychology though there is in it, in this instance, a larger cultural dimension. The internalization is not of significant individualized others, it is also of culturally significant collective others.[22] This perhaps means that the communities in Chochin do not usually need any painful rite of exorcism, because the spirits that populate theie inner world are not strangers. They are more like friendly ghosts who occasionally become unfriendly enough to haunt one.

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[22] This is a process vaguely parallel to the one Sudhir Kakar describes in folk therapeutic contexts in Kakar 1993.

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