

Memories of a Cochin Jewish Woman

by
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In this article I want to describe the lives of many Indian women in my generation, not just myself. I was born in Jew Town, Cochin, at a time when the ancient and the modern ways of life met and of course there was a clash. Sometimes I wish I was born 50 years earlier or 50 years later. But it happened in December 1912. Times were beginning to change and we were in the middle. If I had been born 50 years earlier I would not have had these things to think about. The earlier generations took life as it came. Nowadays some women seem to have a better situation. But we were in the middle and that was very difficult. Women didn't talk about their lives then, they just kept quiet. If I explain what has happened to me, it may give an idea of other women who were born at that time.

People in Cochin seemed to think that women were created to suffer in silence. Not only in Cochin, in the whole of India. In an Indian poem written thousands of years ago, I read about the qualities of an ideal woman. To quote a few: "She should have the wisdom of a minister. She should be a slave in her work. In beauty she should be like a fairy. In bed she should be like a prostitute. She should be a perfect mother. In patience she should be like the earth." If women are like this, then why should they be controlled by men? I know the suffering of women is not only in India. I have read and seen pictures about women in other countries, how they



Ruby Daniel in 1950 (passport photo)

suffer. Everywhere these things happen.

It should be noted that this was not true for all women in India. The Nayars of Kerala and some other castes had the family system called a *tarwad* and a marriage system called *marimukathayam*, in which a husband has no rights in the house. That is for the women. If children are born they belong to the mother and her family. So these women won't suffer at the hands of men. When the Nayars got educated in my generation, they felt that this custom was a sort of shame or disgrace and they began to take up the practice of marriage. But I think that their old custom was good for the women.

If you study the Jewish tradition, it seems that women were intended to have more control. When the first woman Hava

(Eve) was created, God did not have the idea of her being controlled by man. Perhaps He had that idea, but it turned out that Hava controlled Adam. When he was given the forbidden fruit he ate at her hands without a question, but then accused her to God, saying, "The woman you gave me as a companion gave it to me and I ate." Sara, the wife of Father Abraham, asked him to drive away his mistress Hagar and the son, and without a question he obeyed her. Their daughter-in-law Rebecca told her brother she was going with the stranger Eleazar who went to fetch her for his master. The two daughters of Lot who thought after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that all the people of the world were destroyed and they were the only women left, had to save the world, so they begot children from their father. When Barak, one of the judges of Israel, had to go for war, he requested Debora the prophetess to go with him because he did not have the guts to go alone. There were other women like Miriam and Hanna who were prophetesses and Yayel was the one who killed the commander-in-chief Sisera.

Then what happened? The women reduced themselves to be controlled by men and their in-laws. Well! Now I am writing only of the Jewish women of Cochin. In most cases they were not taught much except prayers and then their families got them married away to anyone who was willing to marry them. I

knew of girls who used to cry and beat their breasts because they did not want to marry the man their parents chose. But it did not help. The parents arranged the marriage and perhaps there would be a grand wedding. But then the bride had to go to the house of her husband's parents, with other married brothers and unmarried in-laws. There she had to live till the end, through thick and thin. Some men were drunkards, some were very poor, some men enjoyed beating their wives. Still the woman had to give birth and rear the children even under the worst conditions.

The parents wanted to get rid of the daughters soon after they came of age. They were afraid they might do something so their reputation as well as their family's reputation will be at stake. If a family's reputation was damaged, it would affect all the childrens' chances for marriage. One friend of mine could not marry in the Jewish community, because of someone's error.

Of course not all the women in the Jewish community had problems with their marriages. There were lucky women who got married to good men and their lives were happy. With all the poverty and illness in our family, my grandmother and my mother loved their husbands.

Memories of my Early Years in Cochin

On the island of Cochin there is a street called Jew Town because only Jews lived there. Jews had lived in Kerala for 2,000 years, until most of us left to emigrate to Israel beginning in the 1950s. There were three synagogues in Jew Town, one at each end and one in the middle, for three separate Jewish communities. The *Paradesis* (the Malayalam word for foreigners) were Jews who escaped the persecution of Spain and

Portugal and found asylum in that remote corner of India, among the Jews who had settled in Malabar nearly 2,000 years before them. These earlier Jews built two synagogues in Jew Town Cochin, called Kadavumbagam and Tekkumbagam (as well as five synagogues in other places). The *Paradesis* joined a few of the rich Kerala Jews and others from Syria and Turkistan and other places, and they stayed in Cochin as a separate community. They were known as the "White Jews" because they were fair-skinned. The Jews who came earlier to Malabar had lost their colour after hundreds of years of settlement and hard work in a very hot country and of course by some mix with the natives.



End of Synagogue Lane in Cochin showing bell tower of Paradesi Synagogue

The houses in Jew Town are built on both sides of a narrow road as a block. There used to be only two or three openings to get in and out of this town. At the northern end is the Palace of the Maharaja with the Hindu Temple. Next to the temple wall is the *Paradesi* synagogue, and Jew Town reaches from there to the Kadavumbagam synagogue at the southern end of the street, near the small house where I lived with my family.

I was the first daughter born to my mother. After my birth she had five babies, but only one brother and one sister lived. When I was small we were all living together with my parents, my grandfather and grandmother and my father's unmarried sister, Aunt Seema. My grandfather worked as an agent for a rich Jewish family and as the *shochet* who slaughtered meat according to the Jewish law. My father worked at the boat jetty, collecting tickets for the Ferry and Transport Company. We didn't have much money, but grandfather always told his wife, "On the Sabbath and festivals, you must make everything in the house. My children should not feel that we are poor." We didn't feel that. We always had nice things for Passover and all the festivals.

My mother regretted that she could not continue her education past the sixth grade, and she was determined that I should have the opportunity. The men in my family did not think it was so important to educate a daughter, but my mother insisted. When I was six years old I began to study in the government school for girls in Jew Town. When I finished that school my mother wanted to send me to school in Ernakulam, or to the mixed school in Cochin. But grandfather put his foot down. No sending far away and certainly not to the mixed school.

Grandfather was a very stubborn man. But my mother was more stubborn than her father. So she put both her feet down. She said that she would do whatever she wanted with her daughter and not spoil her life as her father did to her. My father was ill in bed with typhoid fever at the time. Mother had no money. So she mortgaged her gold chain and with that money took me on the steamboat to Ernakulam and registered me in the St. Theresa's convent school there.

Most of the children at St. Theresa's were Christian and Hindu. I was the first Jewish girl to go there, but they didn't have any prejudice against anyone. The nuns were just teaching and they liked the children who were learning well. At the end of lower secondary school I got the first prize for my class. I still have that medal today. After that I went on to complete higher secondary school. My grandfather, who had been opposed from the start, was so happy that he gave me a gold chain with a pendant when I finished high school. It was just when I completed high school in 1931 that St. Theresa's College was opened, and I was a member of the first university class to study there.

But by that time we were having a lot of trouble at home. My father became ill and grandfather was quite old and not in good health. My brother was a young boy studying in school and my mother was expecting another child. Then my father became so ill that he couldn't go to his work at the Ferry and Transport. The director of that company was one of the wealthiest men in the Jewish community. He said, "The daughter is staying at home, let her do the work." He told the others, "I consider her as my own daughter. Nothing will happen to



Ruby (centre) with co-workers in Cochin, 1950.

her." Otherwise people were afraid for me, seeing a young girl selling and collecting tickets at the boat jetty. Father was put into the hospital in Ernakulam, and Mother was taking care of him there when she began to get pains for the birth of their last child, my sister Rahel. Father and grandfather died within two months of each other and were buried one beside the other.

I was thrown into an ocean without knowing how to swim or wade. I still don't know how to swim. Then I did not know how to talk to people, request or even to beg. Thank God I did not have to beg.

Marriage Not an Option

I was at an age when most young women in India would have been married for at least a few years. To tell you the

truth I was not personally interested in getting married. My young cousins and their friends used to talk about men and marriage and all these things, but I never had girls of my own age as friends to talk with. I didn't know much about sex, but the idea did not appeal to me. Also there were no appropriate men in Cochin who could make me change my mind.

There were many women among the *Paradesi* Jews who remained single. The white Jews would not marry outside their own group. Also some of the rich white Jewish families would not even marry from the poorer families of white Jews. In my mother's generation there were 72 men and women in the *Paradesi* community who remained single, largely because of all these restrictions. Think how large the community would have been if they had married! Many of the single *Paradesi* men went to Bombay and other places looking for work. The unmarried women had to stay at home. They were given a small amount of money

from the synagogue, just enough to eat. I can remember they used to knit caps for Muslim gentlemen, then do some embroidery, kerchiefs, and that is the way they made clothes and other things. They were good looking women too.

Many families were ruined by their daughters' marriage celebrations. People thought it a shame if they could not celebrate a marriage as their neighbours did. Those who had a big house might mortgage half of it and before they could redeem it came the second daughter's marriage. Then they sold it and were in debt for the third one. Many women had to wait to get married because of this financial problem. Some of my relations married non-Jews, including two women who were medical doctors. Several of my aunts and cousins married Jews from



With colleagues in Cochin, Ruby is seated third

Bombay or Rangoon, but when I saw the difficult lives they led in those places, I was not at all interested.

Into the Government Service

The women of our family were the first in the Jewish community to get out and work. It was necessity and despair that drove them to find work. Grandfather had said, "We don't want to be supported by our daughters. Stay at home." But he was 70 years old when these orders were given, and he did not have a penny in his name for us to inherit. He did not think who was going to support us. His only son went to Burma. Before grandfather died he saw three of his daughters and myself working and supporting themselves and their families. My Aunt Rebecca worked as a municipal midwife, Aunt Sippora worked in the Tata Oil Mills, Aunt Dolly was a teacher, and I started off working in the place of my father in the Ferry and Transport. But soon my health deteriorated so that I could not go on working there. I would get a catch in my side and have difficulty breathing. No one in the family was employed. Finally mother decided that

she would go and take my place, so she began working in the job which my father had for so many years, selling and collecting tickets at the boat jetty. She was a very stubborn and strong-hearted woman. At first it was difficult for her, but she got used to it. Every day she came in contact with thousands of people and they respected her. She started work when she was about 45 and worked for 15 years, till the company was taken over by the government.

My choice was the government service. In Kerala one must enter before 24 in order to get a pension at 50. So we had to get in, even only for a month, to replace someone who took leave. We would run from pillar to post wherever there was a vacancy, then get thrown out till finding a permanent place. One couldn't pick and choose. There is a percentage of positions for each caste, with only 1 percent chance for Jews and Anglo Indians together in the government service. I worked first as a teacher, then in the judicial department, the registration department, police department, medical department, and the

military department during the war and diverted to the civil court near my house, till I ended up in the Kibbutz in Israel peeling potatoes in the kitchen.

Anyway government service had advantages for a woman in my position. The pay was low (my mother earned more in the Ferry and Transport), but the salaries were the same for men and women, if it was the same position. Promotions were all according to the number of years of service, and you could get a pension if you worked 25 years. There were quite a few young women like myself working as teachers and lower clerks. Their families just hoped they could pass the matriculation and get work to bring some food into the house. I heard one man saying, "Only when the daughters of the house went to work, we got something to eat in the house." The sons would spend their earnings on their own pleasures, not to help the family. We came from families that hadn't got the money to send their daughters to university. For higher positions you must have higher education. If I had stayed on in India,

after years and years I might have been able to be a head clerk. That would be as high as I could go without a B.A.

Though Kerala is a small and a poor country, at least I had a good job. In other places women didn't have as much chance for work. In Bombay and other cities, they would be happy with a job like mine. I learned about the situation there when my cousins invited me to visit them in Bombay. I found my relatives there living in crowded conditions, with wives and children and they were lucky if they had two rooms.

My cousin was working in the mills. They had a White Jew also working there as head of the department. When my uncle took me to see the mills, he took me to him. And he thought I was trying to find a husband or something. That's how it happens. I had another relative whose uncle was looking for a wife and he wants a Cochin wife. The man from the mill told my uncle, "She's a good-looking girl, why doesn't he marry her?" And my uncle replied, "She didn't come here looking for a man to marry. She is working in the High Court in our country!" My relatives were so proud. They had never seen a Cochin woman working like that. The women in Bombay went to work in the mills, just cleaning the cotton mill or work like that, like a sweeper's job. Compared to them I had a good situation.

In the Indian Navy

During World War II they started recruiting women into the armed services in India, and I decided that I wanted to join. At that time I was working in the High Court, but those who left the government service to join the army were assured of their place of work when they came back. The people in Jew Town were afraid that girls would get spoiled if they joined the services, but my mother didn't object. I was grown up, 30 years old, and she knew I wouldn't listen to her, so she kept quiet. My Aunt Seema didn't want it, she was so fond of me, but what could she do? Also they knew I would get better pay there.

So finally at the beginning of 1944 I joined the Women's Royal Indian Navy (WRIN). I worked in the CB office, where they kept many different books, all in code. There were girls who decoded messages in the Port Security Office (PSO), and every day the codes were changed. Then when we got the messages we had to correct all the codes in all these books. Tomorrow's message would be in a different code, so there was always plenty of work. When the officers used to come from the warships and take the various books, we had to give them the correct books and take their signatures. When I first got there everything was in a big jumble, because all the papers had been put in one place for such a long time, without being filed properly. So I had to arrange and file all the papers. That was my first responsibility, to straighten everything out. The officer was very pleased. He was a Punjabi Muslim, and he used to be nice to all of us in the office. After one or two months I was promoted to the rank of petty officer, equal to a sergeant.

When I left the WRIN after the war I was given a permanent job as clerk with a promotion, and I began working in the sub court of Cochin, just five minutes away from my home. The six years I worked there was the best period of my career in the civil service. I enjoyed working in the Cochin court, and after my time in the army I used to talk and be more forward, compared to the other women. I sat there in my office wearing a sari and sometimes a little lipstick (which nobody used then in Cochin). Anybody who passes by, they think I am somebody. They say "Salaam Missy, Salaam Missy." On one side is the registrar's office, on another side the magistrate's court, and on this side is our court. I am sitting by the window and a thousand people are passing by. They see me all the time sitting there. From the outside I was something, but on the inside, nobody knows the story.

With the passing of time things had become more comfortable at home. With

mother and myself both working, we had repaired the house, and my brother started to work in the Tata Oil Company. But I was always unhappy in the house. Though they tried to make me comfortable according to their way, it was not what I wanted. From the age of eight or nine I had wanted to get out of the house, only there was nowhere to go and no cash to set us in life. I had visited my relations in Bombay and I knew that their standard was not for me.

Farewell to Cochin

I was torn between two worlds. All the time the idea to leave the house lurked in me. My father had died, leaving the family "on my shoulders" as he said, and I still felt the responsibility as a burden on my heart. No one enquired how I lived or if I was hungry. I denied myself many things. I won't request, I won't complain. It was below my dignity. People say I am a proud woman. Maybe they are right. If I think there is a place where I won't get the respect due to me I won't go to such a place. My grandmother used to say "Royal birth and fortune of the broom", something like that, meaning our behaviour and character were like privileged people, but we had no money or luck. I think I should have seen a psychiatrist, but such a thing was not very popular then. Now I am using this paper to talk.

Anyway I came to the limit of my patience. Enough. I wanted to get out of the whole setup. Maybe I was foolish. I did not try to make friends in the town. Among the Jews, in my opinion then, there were not many who came up to my standard. With the exception of my friend Seema, girls from the other Jewish communities did not study. They got married young and had children and we had no interests in common. The other girls I liked were the ones I had studied with, the daughters of rich people, fair and good looking, who I think ignored me when they were in the limelight. If I went out for a walk with them, the people would make a lot of them while I waited like a dog. So I stopped going out even



Kibbutz Neot Mordecai in 1950.

to the beach for a walk. Their parents said I am haughty and too proud even to accompany their daughters. The real reason I did not tell anybody except now. In my generation I was different. I wanted to be respected.

As I was waiting for an opportunity to extricate myself from all my problems, there came the founding of the state of Israel. In 1951 I emigrated to Israel and I have lived ever since in Kibbutz Neot Mordecai in Upper Galilee.

Thinking about my last days in Cochin, I am duty bound to record examples of the friendliness of the people of Malabar. When my sister and I had trouble getting our passports, the police commissioner, who was a Muslim, went out of his way to be helpful. The people I was working with in the sub court were very sorry that I was leaving. They had a farewell party for me and a group photo was taken. Now I have this photo hanging on the wall of my apartment in the Kibbutz.

When I began to write down all these stories from the past, my first intention

was to show how good the people were in Malabar, how they welcomed the Jews and treated them well for 2,000 years. I did not think I would write very much about my own life. But then I thought I want to write about the situation of women in my generation, about their sufferings and all. I can't bring it out unless I write about myself and what happened to me. It is important for people today to know about what happened to me. It is important for people today to know about what happened before they were born. To know about the lives of ordinary women, people who were not known in this world. Wild flowers who bloom in the forest. Nobody sees them and they fade.

In An Israeli Kibbutz

I came to Kibbutz Neot Mordecai in 1951. It is situated in Upper Galilee near the Lebanon and Syrian borders. This side of Israel has more greenery and more water than the south, but it was a young Kibbutz of five years when we arrived. There was no grass even.

On a Kibbutz you live together, you

eat together, you work together. Everything is equal. All the money is pooled and you are given according to your wants. If I have any money I can't keep it in my name, it has to be given to the Kibbutz. Even people who get reparation money from Germany, have to give it to the Kibbutz. It is all given for some common use for everybody. There are a lot of expenses: lighting, water, sanitation, food, construction and repairs, all must come from the pool. Everybody is equal. If you have four children, your children will be fed, and if I have no children, I feed your children. Many of the people coming to Israel at that time had no choice. They came from Europe after all the troubles and they worked very hard.

Coming from Cochin, we did not eat meat for a few years because it was not *kosher*. Neot Mordecai is not a religious Kibbutz. Once in a while somebody shot a pig, or a donkey died by accident or an old horse was shot and brought to the kitchen. Anyway Indians won't eat such food. Even the few times when there was

chicken we didn't eat because the kitchen was not *kosher*. There was nothing else to replace it. So instead of meat we were given white cheese. And of course there was no rice.

Unexpected Discrimination

Before coming here I knew all about the conditions of Israel. I did not expect anything much different, but what I did not expect was the behaviour of the people. Most of the members were from Europe. There were a few boys and girls from Cochin here, so I thought we could get on. But we did not get good treatment. They thought we had come from some jungle.

The worst thing for the girls from Cochin was the public bathroom where all the women bathed naked. One girl did not take off her underwear. So a woman pulled it off her. Our own mothers had not seen our body after we came of age. You go to a doctor here, the first thing he said was "Take off your clothes." Damn him! Which doctor had ever asked us that? In case one had to be examined in India the nurse covered the body with a cloth and the doctor then came to examine the part that needed to be examined.

The Cochin people would talk among themselves, saying, "This is not a place for us. We can't mix with others, because others don't want to mix with us. The culture is completely different. Why stay and work and slog for them? For what?" Well they bided their time and when it was certain there will be *aliya* (immigration) of their relations, all of the boys joined the army. When their relations finally arrived from India, all of them left and went to *moshavim*, which are

villages where they could have their own houses and earn money and work more independently. There they led their own life and prospered as agriculturists, government servants and military men. Now there are several *moshavim* with large populations from Cochin, such as Mesillat Zion and Taoz near Jerusalem, Nevatim in the south, and Kfar Yuval in the north. Kfar Yuval is the only one nearby, just a few miles from our Kibbutz. There are scarcely any Cochin Jews in the Kibbutzim now.

After some time at Neot Mordecai, my sister and I were left alone there. I had a great problem. Most of my relatives and most of the *Paradesi* community had stayed behind in Jew Town Cochin, and I was not used to the life of those Cochin Jews from Ernakulam and other places. I scarcely knew any of them

before I came to Israel and sometimes I could not agree with their behaviour. At first some of them came to the Kibbutz to inquire if I wanted to marry somebody. As if I was looking for a man! I didn't even know these people, and I didn't know what they wanted from me. If you feel like marrying or if you want a man, it's different. But I am so independent minded. I said, "I'll stay here." I did not want to go with them to a *moshav*, and where else could I go? I was a single woman without any profession. Where could I find work? If I go to a city, I have no relatives to live with. I am tired from all the worries, and I don't want to be a rich woman. I just want to spend my life quietly, not bother about anything. In a Kibbutz you can live like an ordinary person.

I was 38 or 39 years old when I came, and they will not take you in a Kibbutz after 40. If I go to some other Kibbutz I have got to stay a year before they decide to take me, and then I'll be over age, going from pillar to post. All the Kibbutzim are the same. Whatever I suffer, I've got a house, I've got food. What else do I want? So I decided to stay. It did not make a difference to me whether it was the Indians or Europeans I stayed with. There will be the same problems. My own people were left behind in Jew Town.

After all the other Cochin people left, the Kibbutz members said to me, "You can work in the kitchen and whatever you want to make for yourself you can also make it." So that was good for me. Eventually I started eating a bit of chicken, and we could get rice and other kinds of food. I worked in the kitchen for 10 years. We were all women working there, and



Ruby Daniel in Israel

some of us became friendly with each other. After some time most of that group came to work in the *machsan* (laundry storeroom), folding clothes or mending or ironing. From that day, 26 years ago, I am working there. After retirement age we do not have to work, but I volunteer in the mornings.

Sometimes I used to do guard duty at night, looking after the children. It was only for one week at a time, once in every three or four months, and there would be two of us women watching together in the children's house. What I liked about it was early in the morning when all the children awoke. The babies start twittering at the same time with the birds outside, about 5.30 at dawn. Then the little bigger children start talking to one another in their own language. When you go out, if it is springtime, you feel the lovely smell of blossoming flowers with the cool and clean breeze.

My sister got married to a Kibbutz member, and when her first child Shula was born I went crazy after Shula and forgot all other troubles and disappointments. I was with her all the time. I used to stand near her bed and just look at her, I loved her so much. She lived first in the baby house, then the toddler house, then with the older children according to age. Everyone finishes work at 3 p.m. and has a rest, then at 5 p.m. the parents will go and pick up their children to take them to their own house until it is time for bed. I would go and pick up Shula before Rahel came to take her. Her mother would say, "Where is my child?" I used to carry her all the time. Children like to be carried in the hand, not in the carriage. Rahel also has two sons, Ari and Daniel, and both of them are fond of me too.

When I arrived in Israel the country was a desert. People were arriving from different parts of the world with their own culture and language. At first it was very difficult to adjust with one another. We the pampered Jews from India could not understand the behaviour of those who



Ruby at a family gathering in Israel

had suffered so much in their homeland. Some had nightmares which kept sleep at bay or made them wake up screaming. Some who escaped from Babi Yar, and from the concentration camps with numbers tattooed on their arms—I am not going to judge these people whatever they do. We were the only people who came from a country where we did not have to look back when we are on the road.

After many years the rest of the *Paradesi* community came to Israel from

Jew Town, including my relations. They are living in many places, working in offices and banks and some of them as doctors. All are spread out and there is no more communal life like we enjoyed in Cochin. At that time we thought it a nuisance living together too long, but now we miss it. We try to find any excuse to flock together. For a holiday or a child's birthday or a wedding or *bar mitzvah*, all the people of this community wherever they are join together.

Somehow we find a place for everybody to sleep one or two nights. On the bed or the floor or a couch does not make any difference, we just spread quilts or blankets on the floor and sleep one next to the other. Sometimes it reminds me of the Victoria Terminus railway station in Bombay. Once my cousin from England came to visit and asked me if the walls of my house were made of elastic!

Some people write that the Cochin community of Jews is dying. They don't realize that a root from that tree is shooting up in Israel and starting to blossom. As long as we keep up some of our traditions, I hope that this community will never die. □

