

SECTION V  
ZIONIST SONGS  
INTRODUCTION

Viewed as a whole, the Malayalam Jewish songs corpus displays the comfortable pride that Kerala Jews felt for their South Indian home, balanced by occasional expressions of hope for a return to Zion or Jerusalem, seen as the land of their ancestors. Until quite recently in their long history, the songs envisioned that return as a divine phenomenon to be prayed for, along with the coming of the Messiah. As these messianic hopes pervade the Hebrew liturgical and paraliturgical songs that Kerala Jews knew very well, it is not surprising that they expressed the same theme in Malayalam devotional songs based on those Hebrew songs (e.g. songs 64 and 66), in blessing songs for special occasions (songs 18–22), and in some of the biblical songs (e.g. songs 42, 50). Even a “synagogue song” celebrating the Paradesi Palli (song 9) concludes by first welcoming a parrot who has come to see the splendid building in Kochi, and then immediately addressing God with a plea to take the Jews (led by the prophet Eliyahu and the Messiah) to settle in Jerusalem.

However, Jews in Kerala also knew that the “Land of Israel” was a very real place where Jews were still living. They received occasional visits from Jewish travelers, including religious emissaries who came to India to teach or collect funds for institutions in “the Holy Land.” At the end of the nineteenth century, the messianic hopes of Kerala Jews took on a very different form, as they became aware of the new political Zionist movement in Europe, calling for the establishment of a modern Jewish state in Palestine. In 1901 a prominent Kochi Jew wrote a letter to its founder, Theodore Herzl, expressing support for the movement. By 1903 Kerala Jews had founded a Zionist association of their own (Fischel 1971, 57–63).

The first two songs in section V carry over the messianic theme of an age-old longing for the biblical holy land, but now that longing is combined with specifically expressed hopes for the creation of a modern Jewish nation-state. These two songs demonstrate awareness of international developments after World War I, with the end of Ottoman Turkish rule in the Middle East, the establishment of a “British Mandate” to rule in Palestine, and the growth of a worldwide Zionist movement. In general, Kerala Jewish women as well as men were well-informed about the larger world, so it is not surprising to find these songs in their notebooks beside songs of prayer and

biblical stories. As discussed in the introduction to this book, they were part of the highly literate culture of Kerala—a part of India that traditionally encouraged education for girls as well as boys, and where newspapers were being published in both Malayalam and English as early as 1860 (Jeffrey 2010). Born in 1912, Ruby Daniel remembered her mother reading the daily English newspaper and translating the news aloud to women and children in her Kochi neighborhood (Daniel and Johnson 1995, 79). In addition, some of the wealthier Jewish families received Hebrew periodicals from overseas.

Song 70, “Our Country,” celebrates the history-making events and prominent Jewish personalities of 1917–1921, including the growth of the international Zionist Organization (*Siyon Sangham*). Song 71 was clearly influenced by a nineteenth-century Hebrew poem composed in Europe and set to music—*Tikvatenu* (“Our Hope”), which later evolved into the song *Hatikvah*, the anthem of the Zionist movement and eventually the national anthem of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Song 72 may also have been inspired by *Hatikvah*, along with an English-language composition in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

The remaining seven Malayalam Zionist songs were composed in Kerala in the early 1950s, after Indian independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and the creation of the independent nation of Israel in 1948. This was the period of decision-making and preparation for actual immigration (*aliyah*) to Israel by the great majority of Kerala Jews, encouraged by visiting representatives of the new Israeli government. A few Kerala families left for Israel in 1948–49; a few hundred teenagers went on a special program called “Youth Aliyah” in 1952–54; and between 1953–1955, nearly all the rest (about 2,000 people) departed Kerala for Israel (Kushner 1973, 23).

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<sup>1</sup> See Seroussi 2015 for a comprehensive study of *Hatikvah*, with attention to its many adaptations and its spread throughout the Jewish world.

<sup>2</sup> Sometime in the 1930s, a young man in the Kochi Paradesi community, Cecil (Naphtali) Koder (1910–1939), composed an English song that begins:

It is our sincere ambition to be freed from foreign domination.

Palestine is our inspiration, to build our home, a Jewish nation.

Chorus:

For God is always on our side; He is our sincere guide.

Then why should we fear, when we have Him near

In days of darkness and sorrow? (Katz and Goldberg 1993, 250)

In recent years at Paradesi gatherings in Israel, Koder’s song has occasionally been sung to the tune of *Hatikvah*.

Devoid of messianic themes, the last seven songs celebrate the practical reality of the new Jewish nation and the fervent hope to go there. Most of these songs were preserved by the late Rivka Yehoshua from Parur, who lived in Moshav Aviezer. Having written down the lyrics in her notebook much earlier, she sang some of them for researchers to record in 1981 and 1995. Then she taught them to her old friend Galia Hacco, who taught them to others for recording at the National Sound Archives in 2002, and for later performances by the Nirit Singers.

Rivka Yehoshua and other interviewees in Israel recalled that some of these newer songs were composed by young Jewish men in Kerala for performance by young women during yearly community celebrations of Israeli Independence Day. The Israeli Declaration of Independence was proclaimed on May 14, 1948—the fifth day of the Hebrew month of Iyar—less than a year after the August 15, 1947 Indian Declaration of Independence, which had been celebrated throughout India with enthusiastic flag-raising ceremonies. Now the Kerala Jews had two Independence Days to celebrate each year, the Israeli and the Indian ones. It is interesting to note that several of the Malayalam Zionist songs (74, 75, and 78) incorporate rhetoric and/or melodies from the all-India rebellion against British rule in colonial India, as well as the Zionist struggle against the British in Mandate Palestine.

It is also notable that many of the 1950s Zionist songs were set to popular tunes from Indian cinema and drama songs of the period (songs 74–77, 79). These tunes still evoke considerable nostalgia among Kochini elders living in Israel who remember enjoying the popular songs when they were Kerala teenagers in the 1950s.

Altogether the Malayalam songs of aliyah provide an important contrast to a group of aliyah songs that were collected in Israel from singers who had recently immigrated from Yemen and Iraq (Shiloah 1970). Some of those songs looked back on the persecution that their composers and singers had suffered in their former homelands and compared their aliyah to the miraculous biblical escape and exodus from slavery in Egypt. In contrast, the Malayalam songs were composed while the community was still in Kerala, in eager anticipation of aliyah, but with no complaints of mistreatment by their non-Jewish Indian neighbors.