

**THE LAST JEWS OF KERALA:  
THE TWO THOUSAND YEAR  
HISTORY OF INDIA'S FORGOTTEN  
JEWISH COMMUNITY**

by *Edna Fernandes*  
*Skyhorse, 256 pages, \$24.95*

Reviewed by BEN FRUMIN

**A**FTER A TWO-DECADE drought, the 400-year-old synagogue in Jew Town is finally going to host a wedding. The Times of India reported in mid-December that on Dec. 28—the eighth and final night of Chanukah this year—Shelomo, a 28-year-old Indian Jew with an M.B.A., and Susan, a 25-year-old Jew from Mumbai, would wed. The couple, whose last names weren't given and who reportedly met on a social networking site, are the first Indian Jews to marry in the south Indian state of Kerala since 1987. While that may well be cause for celebration, the nuptials are news because of a simple, undeniable fact that Shelomo and Susan's wedding will not change: Jew Town is dying. What was once a thriving community of thousands of Jews who claimed lineage back to the Israel of the Old Testament is now wasting away, little more than a curious tourist destination comprised of a few dozen Indian Jews, the majority of whom are older than the modern state of India.

"This is the end of history for the Jews of Kerala," writes British Indian journalist Edna Fernandes in her informative if imperfect new book chronicling the death throes of this once flourishing diaspora, unsurprisingly titled *The Last Jews of Kerala*. "Sixty years after the formation of the state of Israel, 60 years after the birth of the Indian republic, the clock is ticking for India's oldest Jewish Diaspora, and it is one minute to midnight." For some Indian Jews,

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that over-the-top metaphor is too generous. "We're not a *dying* community," corrects Gamy Salem, one of Jew Town's few remaining Jewish residents, as he sips masala chai with Ms. Fernandes in his house on Synagogue Lane. "The joke is, we're *already* dead. See how the tourists stare at us, like animals in the zoo, like the living relics we've become. Buy your two-rupee ticket, come see the Jew show while it lasts. This is our ending after two thousand years."

Of course, there are still roughly 5,000 Indian Jews living in the world's largest democracy, most of them in and around Mumbai. It's really only the Jews of Kerala who are nearly finished. So what happened? As Ms. Fernandes writes, Kerala's Jews are "a people who vanquished the treacheries of history, fled Israel after the destruction of the beloved Second Temple and later escaped the horrors of the Inquisition in Europe to build a new life in India." After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, "Kerala was one of the natural safe havens that the Israelites turned to in their renewed banishment and persecution." Unlike other Diaspora communities, "the Jews of Kerala were a feted people, embraced by neighbors of all creeds" in India. They had "every advantage," and were not threatened "by anti-Semitism or war, nor pestilence or the vagaries of nature."

In Ms. Fernandes' telling, the Jews of Kerala were not humbled by outside forces or circumstances. Instead, they "embraced demise" through a "tragicomic feud" of discrimination. The line between feuding groups was, as is too often the case, a racial one, with two sects of Indian Jews of different ancestries—sadly labeled "the Blacks and Whites" because of the colors of their skin—arguing pointlessly over who arrived in India first and who ought to enjoy the claim's accompanying political and economic privilege, letting this debate breed resentment, hate and derision that resulted in a de facto apartheid among Kerala's

Jews. Nominally, the Whites won the argument—in spite of and not because of the evidence, Ms. Fernandes writes—and enjoyed a social ascendance largely denied to the Black Jews. Intermarriage remained a fierce taboo until just a few decades ago, even when it was desperately needed to prop up the dwindling numbers of the Jews of Kerala.

As much as Ms. Fernandes makes of the Jews' failure to allow marriage between Blacks and Whites, the exodus of many Indian Jews to Israel is perhaps just as responsible for the disappearance of Jews from Jew Town. For the Jews of Kerala, India was, in many ways, "meant to be no more than an interim homeland," and when the modern state of Israel was created in 1948—less than a year after India declared independence—many Indian Jews up and left. Many of *The Last Jews of Kerala's* best passages delve into the conflicted, emotional tearing of Indian Jews in Israel who don't feel at home even in their supposed homeland, ill-prepared for the reality that the home their people were exiled from thousands of years ago doesn't feel like home at all, not compared to the India they know and love. Ms. Fernandes subtly and skillfully questions the nature of religious and national identity, but in so doing potentially undermines a central premise of her book. Are the Jews of Kerala really a dying people if most of them have just moved back to Israel? When Ms. Fernandes asks "What is it like for a people whose end has come?" one wonders whether the more appropriate question is something like "Does the identity of a people change along with the ground beneath their feet and the flag flying above their heads?"

The premise that the Jews of Kerala are

dying is critical to Ms. Fernandes' rationale, and she does not hold back from reminding the reader just how fragile these poor Indian Jews are in their last days. Synagogue Lane "had become a place of repose for phantasmal shadows" and the Jews of Kerala "wandered through Jew Town like ghosts communing with the living," "the embodiment of an exhausted history," "no more than living museum pieces," "a people afflicted by some kind of collective malaise, a brooding fatalism born of the realization that they are the architects of their own downfall."

*The best passages delve into the conflicted tearing of Indian Jews in Israel who don't feel at home even in their "homeland."*

Ms. Fernandes also overdoes it with an optimistically simplified description of the tolerance that greets Jews in India, saying Kerala "remains a testament to India's religious co-ex-

istence, to its traditional ethos of tolerance, despite the periodic eruption of religious extremism that scars India's long history." Here, she writes, "Jews enjoyed a harmony that is rare in their history, living in peaceable accord with neighbors of every faith." This may well be true in some respects, but it also blurs many of the ugly complexities of religious pluralism in India and the too-high level of intolerance that is casually and generally accepted throughout much of the country. Further, one need look no farther back than the end of November to find an exceptional instance of religious violence against Jews in India, when six Jews, including a young American rabbi and his wife, were murdered in a shocking series of terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Nonetheless, *The Last Jews of Kerala* is a compelling read about an unlikely tribe's last days in an India once foreign, now home, but abandoned in favor of an Israel that "did not turn out to be the fabled paradise that held them spellbound in child-

hood, but a hostile landscape of loneliness and rejection.” For many of the Jews of Kerala, the answer to deep philosophical questions about religious and national identity seems clear: “India,” Ms. Fernandes writes, “for all its failings, remained home.”