In Memoriam: Scaria Zacharia z”l

Scaria Zacharia’s contribution to the research on Jewish Malayalam literature and folklore signified a turning point in the study of Kerala’s Jewish language and culture in the early 2000s. At the time, the study of Kerala's Jews was dominated by historians and anthropologists writing in English for academic audiences with little to no interest in the wider context of Kerala’s culture and society. Even the handful of scholars who did engage with the wider society and culture, in particular the late Shirley Isenberg and Barbara Johnson, found the language barrier to be insurmountable. The Jewish Malayalam songs they devotedly collected since the 1970s relied on the good will of non-experts to produce rudimentary translations, especially the late P. M. Jussay, an English literature scholar, and the late Ruby Daniel, a knowledgeable community member. However, none of the academics or community members involved could tackle the many textual, linguistic, and literary complexities that the study of these songs entailed. This state of affairs drastically changed once Scaria Zacharia stepped in.

Zacharia was an ambassador of the Malayalam language and Kerala’s literature and folklore, not only abroad, but even more so in his own native land, Kerala. His term as the head of the Department of Malayalam at Sree Sankaracharya Sanskrit University in Kalady (1997–2007) significantly developed...
Malayalam Studies as an interdisciplinary field, embracing all forms of Malayalam research, from linguistics and grammar to textual and archival studies, to folklore, media, and cultural studies. His contribution to the field is enormous; he authored and edited over thirty books and published twice as many articles and papers in Malayalam and in English. He unearthed lost treasures from the Tübingen University manuscript library, among them one of Kerala’s most valuable literary compositions, the Payyannūrpāṭṭu. The retrieval of this fifteenth-century ballad from the depth of the archives was celebrated by Malayalam scholars. M. Leelavathy, one of the leading literary historians in Kerala, described the discovery as the retrieval of the missing link in the evolution of Malayalam language and literature. Zacharia’s work in Tübingen culminated in a series of publications in Malayalam and for Malayali readership, which still feeds generations of Malayalam scholars in diverse fields beyond language and literature. His proficiency in Old Malayalam was gained in his years-long research on the 1599 Malayalam Synod of Diamper (Udayampērūr Sūnahadōs). But it was out of his love for his native language and country and its diverse sociocultural fabric that he took up the challenge of working on the Jewish Malayalam folksongs.

Zacharia’s contribution to the study of Jewish Malayalam was thus fueled by his love for the Malayalam language and literature. He did not distinguish between “high” and “low” cultural productions. In his numerous lectures and publications, Zacharia sought to bridge the disciplinary silos that segregate between the “classical” and the “folkloric” and among the manifold religious traditions that make Kerala’s society and culture so rich and diverse. His low-pitched, softly roaring voice was oozing with love for the language, even when he spoke in English. He was indifferent to the formal, pedantic language in which professors normally address their audience. From behind the high seminar podium, he would approach his audience with warm, intimate, colloquial Malayalam. When he started speaking, all the drowsy people in the audience would wake up; an electric wave of excitement would flash throughout the lecture hall in an instant. Eyes shining, smiles and giggles, his audience would respond with lively excitement. His charismatic lecture style travelled with him to Israel, where he enchanted Jewish Malayalam audiences in their remote villages, away from the elite centers of academia.

Zacharia loved his audience of elderly Malayali Jews and younger generations of less proficient speakers, and they dearly loved him in return. He would speak in Malayalam to the delight of all hearers, relishing the moments of reunion with Kerala’s lost Jewish community. The community in Israel cherished the Malayalam professor and organized special communal events and seminars all over the country whenever he would arrive in Israel. They fondly renamed
him as Zkharia, as if he were a fellow Jew. This loving scholar-community relationship brought into being the trilingual book *Kārkulali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous* (Ben-Zvi Institute 2005).\(^1\) Zacharia wanted to return the Jewish Malayalam song tradition back into the heart of the community, with its overwhelming majority residing in Israel. He resisted turning this tradition into a frozen museum piece, locked up in the academic ivory tower, inaccessible to those who do not master the English language. Therefore, the book has an introduction, texts, and notes in Malayalam starting from the left-hand side of the book, and an introduction, translations, and commentary in Hebrew starting from the right-hand side of the book. An essay by Barbara Johnson in English is placed in the middle to connect the two prominent languages of the community in the past and in the present.

The book epitomizes Zacharia’s idea of “hyphenated society” in relation to culture, literature, performance, and language, repeatedly explored in his analysis of the Jewish Malayalam folk songs. He argued that the literary and cultural heritage of the Jews of Kerala is the product of a hyphenated identity, which is both Jewish and Malayali, without compromising the full breadth and depth of either identity. He used to explain time and again that the hyphenated identity is like a nominal compound, where two words are joined by a hyphen to create a new concept without losing the independent meaning and form of each word. The first Jewish Malayalam song that he studied, ‘Lovely Parrot Song’ (*painkiliyute pāṭṭa*), inspired him to describe the Jewish Malayalam hyphenated culture as such. He would recite the line *pattu tatta ottukāṭiyen*, ‘ten parrots gathered’, to demonstrate its neat alliteration commonly used in Malayalam folksongs, and to point at its powerful suggestion of the Jewish concept of the quorum, the prerequisite of Jewish communal worship and life. His commentary on the Jewish Malayalam folk songs unravels many more such instances of Jewishness and Malayalamness compounded into the unique Jewish heritage of Kerala.

Zacharia’s idea of the “hyphenated society” connects to his broader vision of Malayalam and Kerala studies. The preservation and renovation of two dilapidated synagogues in Chendamangalam and Parur owes a lot to Zacharia’s efforts in raising awareness of the neglected Malabari Jewish heritage sites in Kerala and in galvanizing state resources and local scholarship in turning these two sites into Jewish heritage museums under the auspices of the Muziris Heritage Project. He succeeded in promoting the study of Kerala’s Jewish

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1 Zacharia & Gamliel, eds. and trans., *Kārkulali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous*. 
heritage in Kerala and by Kerala's scholars. In February 2006, the trilingual book *Kārkuḻali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous*, published in Jerusalem, was launched in Kerala with academics and community members invited to a special conference organized by Zacharia and his dedicated team of research scholars, *TAPASAM: An Association of Comparative Studies*. TAPASAM published the conference papers in a special issue dedicated to the comparative research of Kerala's Jews in January 2006 ahead of the book launch. In 2019, even as his health was fast deteriorating, he initiated a reprint of the book in Malayalam for the benefit of Malayalam readership, who could not access the Ben-Zvi Institute publication available only in Jerusalem, beyond the reach of readership in Kerala. Malayalam students and scholars in Kerala and abroad, myself included, are indebted to Zacharia in our work on under-researched traditions produced at the grassroots level of communities. Those of us who were fortunate enough to work closely with Zacharia were inspired by his unique approach to the literary cultures that shaped Kerala's hyphenated society, including the literary heritage in Jewish Malayalam. We already miss him a lot.

**Selected Publications of Scaria Zacharia on Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs**


For a recorded lecture of Scaria Zacharia speaking about Jewish Malayalam folk songs and their significance to Kerala's hyphenated culture, see minutes 35:04–55:22: https://loc.gov/item/2021688161.

A list of Scaria Zacharia’s selected publications can be found on his personal website: https://www.scariaz.info/bio.

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