



INTACH THRISSUR CHAPTER

INDIAN NATIONAL TRUST FOR ART AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

INTACH

On-Site Inspection of **The Jewish Cemetery & Synagogue at Mala**

12 April 2012

**and
Analysis**

Team Members:

Mr. K Abdul Azeez

Er. VRU Menon

Mr. K Venu

Mr. Prem Manasvi

Ar. Paul Varghese

THRISSUR



INTACH On-site Meeting

Date: 12/04/2012

Venue: **Jewish Cemetery and Synagogue, Mala.**

Members present:

Mr. K Abdul Azeez
Er. VRU Menon
Mr. K Venu
Mr. Prem Manasvi P
Ar. Paul Varghese

Agenda: **Inspection of Conditions at the Historic Jewish Cemetery and Synagogue at Mala.**

Introduction:

It was decided that on 12th April, some of the team members would undertake a trip to the Mala Jewish Cemetery, to observe and understand firsthand some of the problems being faced in the conservation efforts of the Cemetery.

The members set off slightly past 9:30 am from Thrissur. At Perumpillyserry Jn. the team stopped at Nalukkettu, former Allakkattu Mana, the current residence of Mr. Prem Manasvi, who also happens to be a member of the INTACH at Thrissur.

The team inspected the site of the complaint, where an ancient pond, currently in the property of Mr. Manasvi, is under threat 1) by the presence of trees planted closely to the pond and 2) by blocking a pre-existing excess water drainage to the nearby paddy field by a neighbour. This was seen as a conscious threat to the traditional pond and the annexed bath house, a fine example of Kerala's built heritage.



The team picked up Paul Varghese at Irinjalakuda around 10:30 am, and proceeded to the Mala site, arriving around 11:15 am.

The team met the members of the Mala Grama-Panchayath in their office, and were briefed by them on the intended conditions and proposals for the Jewish Cemetery. The members proceeded to the Jewish Cemetery to observe the conditions there.

The Jewish Cemetery is in the heart of the town near the Panchayath Office and the Bus-stand. It is roughly triangular or steep prismatic in shape bounded on the North and South (Mala- Annamannada Main Road) sides by roads, with the town residential and commercial buildings all around. The West side is very narrow, and serves as the main entrance with a gate and a signboard (which had fallen down). The East side currently has a recreational space and playgrounds and sporting activities were observed. There were only three tombs which were visible and above ground, with markings and writings in Hebrew at one side. There were official plaques and notices outside and inside the compound-wall and gate, which referred to the handing over, as well as to the funds provided, etc.

It was observed that the historic Jewish Cemetery was not in the condition which suited its historic nature, nor was it suitable to the nature of its intended use as a memorial for the dead.

Some of the observed conditions are noted below:

- 1) *It was lying open to encroachers or intruders. The front gate was open. The cemetery was being used as a public space, and for shortcuts.*
- 2) *The name-board had fallen.*
- 3) *Parts of the wall on the Northern side had fallen and had not been built up, or repaired.*
- 4) *There were cuts and breaks in the wall through which intruders or anti-social activities could be accessed.*
- 5) *There was garbage, empty bottles, plastic bags and similar strewn around.*
- 6) *Tied cows and goats were seen grazing within the walls.*
- 7) *Grass and trees had been cut, or burnt.*

Some of the photographs taken at the time will testify to this situation.



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After this, the team met the officials of the Grama-panchayath including Mr. Kishor Kumar G., and Mr. Dileep Paramesaran (vice-president). Later the members took the team to the Jewish Synagogue, which is situated towards the western direction.

The Synagogue is currently in a rehabilitated condition, which the members said was done at a cost of about Rs. Three Lakhs (Rs. 3,00,000). It has been refurbished, and the wooden members have been polished and finished. The main space currently has a stage-like level, which was said to be built when the synagogue was used as a temporary primary school at some point. One point which seemed to be neglected was the presence of pigeons, and its droppings were seen all over. It would be suggested that some manner of netting be installed, especially in the attic or loft, which will prevent the entry of pigeons to this area, from where it seemed to have free access. It was seen that the gap in the wall allowed easy access for the outsiders, which then made it possible for the Synagogue grounds to be used for dumping of refuse, garbage, etc. even though this was not a widespread problem.





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Subsequent to this, the team visited the local MLA Mr. Prathapan's Office to discuss the matters further. While the MLA himself was not in station, the team met Mr. Vakkachan Ambooken (Tel: 9349016035), who served as his spokesman /representative in updating the team on the intended use of the Cemetery site, and the proposal for converting it into a public park.

It was mentioned by Mr. Ambooken that the schemes were initiated by KITCO, (a semi- Kerala Govt. enterprise), and design proposals had been submitted by teams such as M/s. C_Earth of Kozhikode, etc. The proposals intended to build museum spaces, a public-toilet, a bus-shelter, etc. within this cemetery space. There was even a proposal to build a boating facility, etc. within the area. They said that they would preserve the three existing tombs in an upgraded condition with granite, etc. While this seemed to be too bizarre to be a conversion of a cemetery into a public park, etc. They also mentioned that funds in excess of Rs. one crore (Rs. 1,00,00,000) was being sanctioned for this proposed facility.

However, in view of the current situation, it was advised to the MLA Mr. Prathapan's Office team that this would not be the manner in which a monument would need to be handled, especially as per the norms laid down by institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The ASI norms would only allow walking paths, grass and landscaping, minimal lighting, etc. These norms, it seemed, was not known to the MLA's Office, etc. They also mentioned that they did not have the funds for the upkeep and repair of the destroyed walls and such.

After departing from the MLA's Office, the team met some of the residents of the area who were not in agreement with the proposals put forward by the local officials. They mentioned about the desecrations of the space, from the intended use, and how the current uses were in contradiction to the good faith with which the place and keys with the title deeds had been handed over to the Panchayath in the year 1955. The conditions as was seen currently were not in keeping with the intended agreement between the departing owners and the Panchayath to whom it had been entrusted. Primarily, it seemed that the current play-area, and especially the intended stadium to be built there had been an encroachment on the land handed over, and that the intent was to build a stadium was being planned.

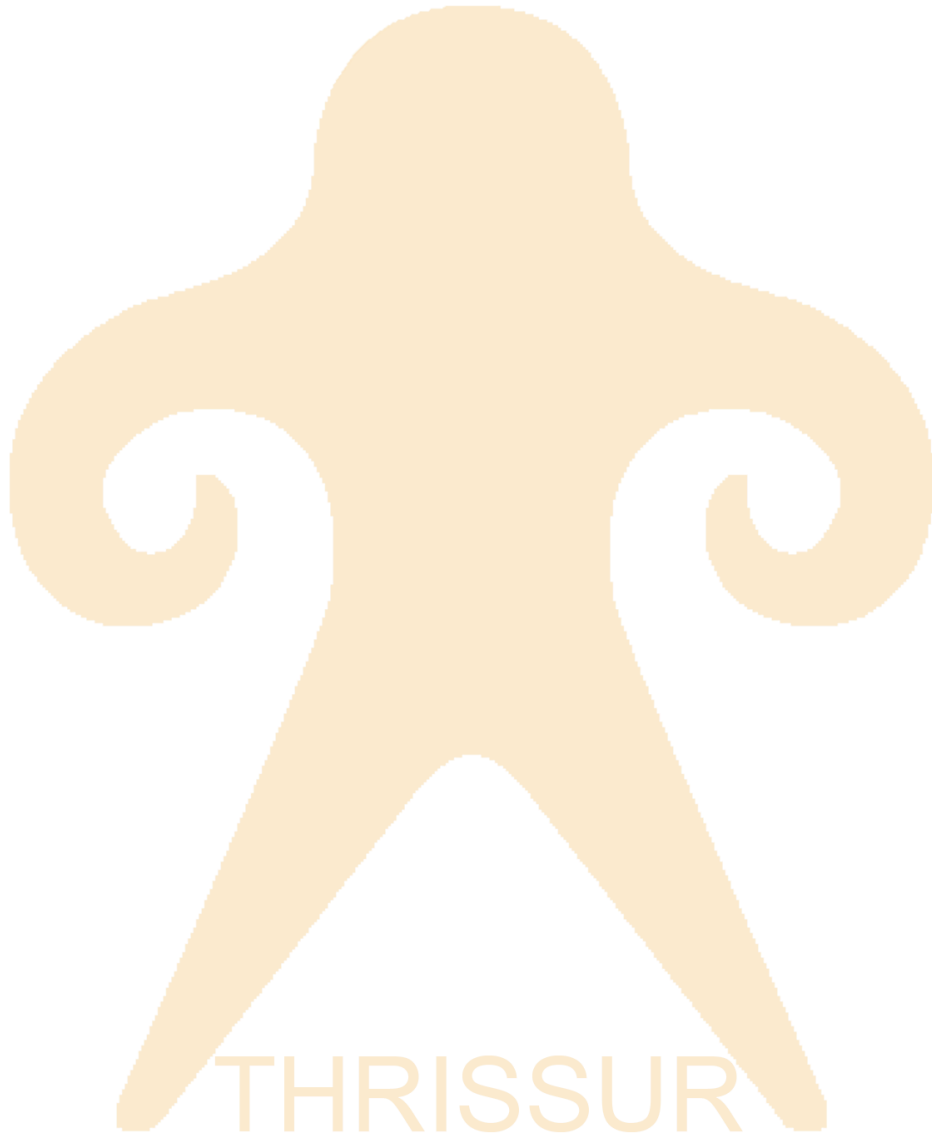


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The team returned after getting this first-hand observation of the situation at Mala.

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Post Survey Analysis:

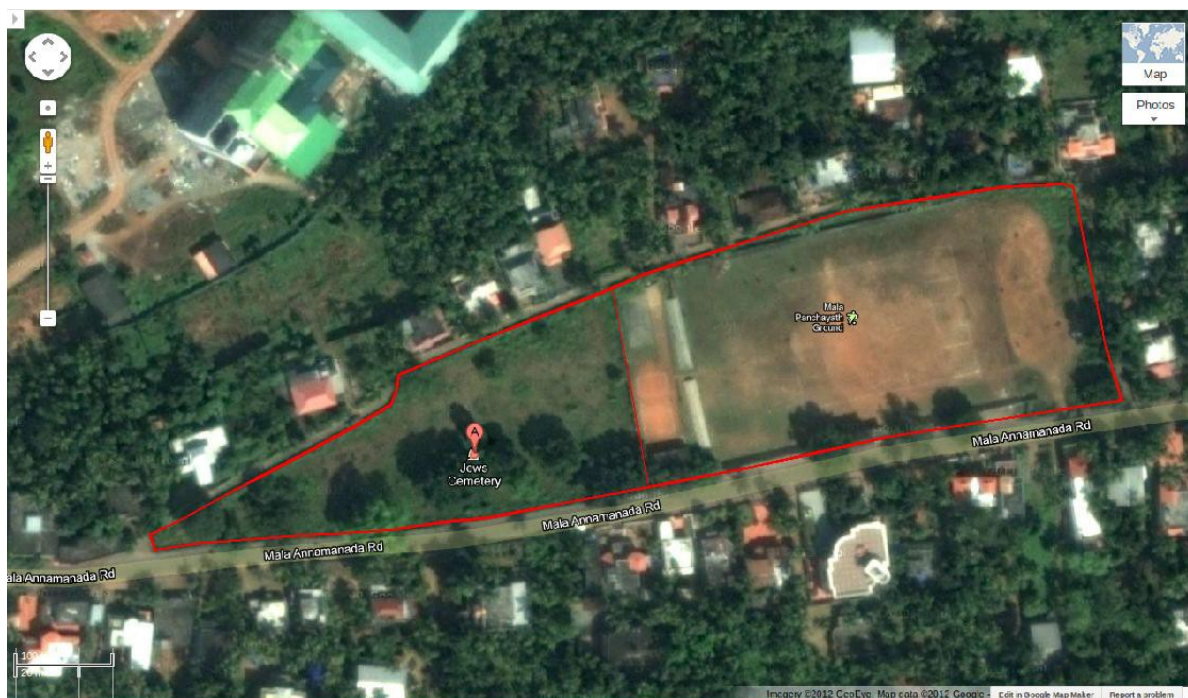
Subsequent to the return from the visual survey trip to Mala, the team began an analysis of the extant data available. A copy of the title deed executed in 1954-55 revealed that the extent of the original cemetery as handed over to the Panchayath was to the extent of about 4 acres, as mentioned in the deed. (Refer attached copy of extents in the deed document, pg. X)

The extent of the land available for the renovation, or expected to be renovated, as mentioned in the KITCO document (refer attached) is only to the extent of 1.5 acres (xx hectares).

An approximate survey was done by the team using a GoogleMap aerial survey map. From this survey done with an approximation, it was understood that the extent of approx. 1.5 acres (xx hectares) is as the current extent of the land, which has been expected to be used for the current cemetery. It would seem that there would be a sizable chunk of land that is lesser than that mentioned in the KITCO document.

Extending the approximate survey done from GoogleMaps, to also include the area mentioned as Playground in the Map comes to an area very close to 4.0 acres. This is very good for an approximation. This area turns out to be approx. 2.5 acres, the total of which would be the extend of the original 4.0 acres, as mentioned in the title document.

Additionally, the document indicates that the cemetery is surrounded by roads on all four sides (East, North, West, South) [ref. pg.]. This would be true only if the original Cemetery includes the current Playground, which GoogleMaps mentions as Mala Panchayat Ground.



This assumption is corroborated by the website (<http://www.mala.co.in/jewish-monument-mala-thrissur-kerala>), which states that Cemetery is in two parts, and for the second part, the Court has given an edict on the use of the playground, and to prevent further use on this area. Thus the Jewish community's representatives in Cochin/Ernakulam have got an edict that the *playground* is to be excluded from any further use.

Mala Jewish Cemetery

Marked as a Jewish cemetery with a clear sign over the entrance gate in English the site is protected by the local authority; a framed black sign inside the gate lists the three trustees of the cemetery, from Chennamangalam and Ernakulum, who deeded and handed over the cemetery to the Mala Panchayat on April 1, 1955.



The cemetery is in two sections of land; in the first, there were three tomb stones - two were in the first section of open field, one was partly hidden under a cashew tree. The second section - at least twice as large - lies beyond the first on higher ground that is separated from the first by a stone wall, has no graves or tombstones.

A court edict, brought about by petition from the Ernakulum Jewish community, has kept the town from using this spacious part of the cemetery area for a play field. The cemetery is located in a central residential area of Mala and is flanked on either side by attractive residences.

Source: <http://www.mala.co.in/jewish-monument-mala-thrissur-kerala> © 2012




This would also mean that the Compound Wall that is on the East side, and which has openings for the public to pass through was a later addition. Any existing wall was demolished, or allowed to crumble by neglect or a similar attitude. This would be against the agreement reached in the title deed, which says that the Panchayath would maintain and look after the compound wall, and see to its upkeep. The conditions as per the agreement have not been maintained, and that the attitude of the Panchayath has been of wilful negligence so far.



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Jewish cemetery in Mala remaining neglected



T C Sreemol
Express News Service
Last Updated : 27 Jun 2011 11:49:32 AM IST

THRISUR: The ancient Jewish cemetery in Mala is lying unattended for the last several years. The responsibility to conserve the cemetery rests with the Mala grama panchayat according to a deal signed between the panchayat and the land owners in 1955. Enakulathukaran Avarony, Pallivathukkal Eliacha and Chennamangalathukaran Eliabai, the three trustees of the cemetery, handed over the ownership of the land to Athapilly Joseph who represented the Mala grama panchayat on condition of protecting the cemetery. But he failed to keep his word. Earlier, the cemetery remained spread across four acres of land. But a portion of it has been converted into a stadium. Only three tombs are now visible in the graveyard, with one carrying a plaque with Hebrew letters on it.

The cemetery is a landmark of the Jewish history in Kerala. The stonewall constructed around the cemetery is gradually crashing down. The local people, who are unaware of the importance of this ancient historically important site, are using the ground for dumping waste. "There are limitations to the conservation measures being taken up by the panchayat. If it is brought under the Muziris Heritage Project, then there will not be any problem with the conservation measures," ward member Joshy Kanjuthara said. Kodungallur, once known as Muziris, used to have trade contacts with Rome, Greece, China and Persia. Muziris had a flourishing port. Cargo vessels used to drop anchor at the port.

The Muziris project is aiming at heritage conservation. All identified monuments were proposed to be preserved under the project by integrating them to the cultural tourism map of Kerala. The Jewish cemetery was caught in legal tangles as the Enakulam Jewish community had approached the court demanding adequate protection of the graveyard when the community found that the panchayat was not taking proper steps for its maintenance.

The cemetery issue had come up in the Kerala Assembly in 1996 when T M Jacob, the then Cultural Affairs Minister, replied to a submission by Lonappan Nambadan over the destruction of the stonewall around the graveyard.

Source: Express Buzz Report of 27-06-2011 (Indian Express)

References:

Source: <http://www.mala.co.in/jewish-monument-mala-thrissur-kerala> © 2012

T C Sreemol, **Jewish cemetery in Mala remaining neglected**, Express News Service
(<http://expressbuzz.com/search/jewish-cemetery-in-mala-remaining-neglected/288413.html>) Last Updated : 27 Jun 2011 11:49:32 AM IST



APPENDIX 1

<http://expressbuzz.com/search/jewish-cemetery-in-mala-remaining-neglected/288413.html>

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The cemetery issue had come up in the Kerala Assembly in 1996 when T M Jacob, the then Cultural Affairs Minister, replied to a submission by Lonappan Nambadan over the destruction of the stonewall around the graveyard.

The minister said the wall had suffered damage as it had been constructed long ago. But no renovation work was done.

In 1995, the Archeological Survey of India's Thiruvananthapuram branch deputy superintendent K K Ramamurthi had stressed the need for conserving the Jewish remnants in Mala. But there was no initiative on the part of the Archeological Survey of India to protect it. Mala is also home to a Synagogue and other historically important milestones in the history of Kerala.

There were around 40 Jewish families in Mala. But all of them left for Israel in 1948. The post office in Mala is functioning from a Jewish house. In ancient days, the people used the waterways for their journeys as there were not many roads.

Mala Kadavu, which was being used by the people, including businessmen, to come to Mala for trading and establishing their own institutions, had been used to transport goods such as pepper, coconut, arecanut, leather, teakwood, beetle leaves etc to Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Muziris. Boat service was available till 1958.

Mala is the abode of Muhammadiya Juma Masjid, a famous pilgrim centre, which was built in AD 640.

"Synagogue, cemetery, Muhammadiya Juma Masjid, Mala Kadavu and Mala Chal will be brought under the Muziris Heritage Project. We will discuss the issue at a Cabinet subcommittee meeting which will be convened soon," Kodungallur MLA T N Prathapan has said.



APPENDIX 2

<http://www.timescrest.com/society/tombstone-to-kitchen-slab-5882>



LEGACY LOOT

Tombstone to kitchen slab

Ashleshaa Khurana | July 23, 2011



For Jews, India has long been a safe haven. But now, their dead are at grave risk. Beautiful Semitic cemeteries across the country have been encroached upon, their cupolas turned into urinals, and the marble tops used as platforms.

For two millenia, they faced persecution everywhere but India was a safe haven. Indians embraced Jews and their culture. Jewish culture, in fact, carries a certain cool quotient. Indian celebrities sport Star of David tattoos, gourmets relish kosher cuisine and prime areas in metros such as Mumbai and Kolkata are named after Jewish icons such as Sassoon and Ezra. But when it comes to preserving Jewish cemeteries, India has set a bad example. Land sharks and vandals have encroached upon and shattered the sanctity of many a last resting place. And the few surviving Jews are now fighting to protect the desecration of the dead.

The graveyards of Bene Israeli, Baghdadi and Cochin Jews are spread across Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi and West Bengal. Some cemeteries have already disappeared while others are on the brink. "The cemeteries are in a terrible state of neglect. I know of one in Kerala that is now a football ground!" says Dr Shalva Weil, senior researcher at Research Institute for Innovation in Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

India's neglect of Jewish cemeteries is no better than Pakistan's. The community still remembers the valiant efforts of Rachel Joseph, often referred to as the last Jew standing in Karachi. A



descendent of the family of caretakers of Magen Shalom Synagogue in Karachi, Joseph waged a spirited court battle to get the compensation promised to her after the synagogue was demolished to make way for a shopping mall. Joseph continued her struggle till her death in 2006.

Back home in India, writer Esther David recalls how Joseph had a strong Indian connection. David located Joseph's family in Israel and Mumbai and wove the novel, *Book of Rachel*, around her. While researching for the book she discovered many old cemeteries and synagogues in Alibaug, which were being preserved by others like Joseph.

"Jewish graves have beautiful cupolas and marble gravestones with names of the dead written in Hebrew and English. In Ahmedabad, the old Jewish graveyard near Jubilee mills has some unusual graves shaped like an airplane for a pilot or a train for a railway guard. But such graveyards are often grossly neglected by the civic authorities, which do not see them as part of the city's heritage and history," says David.

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In the absence of any governmental intervention, citizens have taken the task of preserving these cemeteries upon themselves. "The Vadodara Israeli Kabrastan is being looked after by a collective of locals," says David. In 2004, the Israeli Kabrastan at Nizampura was saved by an awareness drive started by TOI and some prominent citizens who lent support.

A similar graveyard in Surat - Bene Israeli Kabristan - had no such luck. It has disappeared in the urban mess of the city. In February 2003, Dr Sara Manasseh from London visited the city and reported the plight of two Jewish cemeteries to the then municipal commissioner, GR Aloria. Manasseh's report stated how these burial sites of historical and archaeological importance were infested with wild boars and strewn with garbage. "There are no Jews left in Surat. In the absence of caretakers, the graves have disappeared too. The entire area was encroached upon by slum dwellers who converted marble tombstones into kitchen platforms," says Jolly Wellington, a Surat resident.

Gujarat is home to the second largest population of Jews in India. About 40 families reside in Ahmedabad and the others in smaller cities. The Magen Abraham Synagogue of Ahmedabad hosts all the traditional ceremonies, like Bar Mitzvah, marriage, circumcision and baby naming. Its honorary secretary, Menassah Solomon, says smaller towns such as Rajkot, Surendranagar and Palanpur do not have any Jewish population left to look after their dead. "We try to lend our support and have constantly appealed for government protection of these sites."

Surprisingly, an 18th century Baghdadi Jewish graveyard still survives in this port city. It falls under a private industrial estate owned by the Asarawallas, a business family. They chase away any visitors who try to enter the graveyard. But some miscreants still manage to enter the locked area at night, and litter it with plastic and used booze bottles. One of the graves inside is of Moseh Tobi, buried here in 1769. He was considered a noted elder. In his book, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad*, David Solomon Sassoon mentions him: "In the year 1769 Moses Tobi, who is styled ha-Nasi ha-Zaken [The Elder Prince] died in Surat".

The city, in fact, holds special significance for Baghdadi Jews. It was the first place they set foot on in India after migrating from Aleppo in Syria. Their descendents later migrated to other Indian cities, like Kolkata.

In Kolkata, too, the Jewish population is dwindling. Former ad-man Ian Zachariah, 67, observes, "The last few funerals I have attended did not have sufficient people to even form a minyan, which is a group of 10 adults required to perform any religious obligation. It is becoming difficult to preserve the cemetery. Now, some younger Jews from Kolkata, who are settled abroad, have shown interest in preserving these graves."



The graveyards in Maharashtra are no better. NRI Yonatan Kandalar was appalled when he visited his ancestral graveyard in Panvel last year. The graves on the site are used as shower cubicles and urinals by those who reside here. The homes here have legal water and electricity connections which prove that they have some degree of support from the local government. Panvel cemetery has graves from the 17th century and is under the wing of Beth-El Synagogue. "More than half the cemetery has been taken over by unauthorised occupants who've been living here for more than 30 years. The Jews of Panvel now find it very difficult to take action against them due to certain policies of the government," says Moses Jacob Korlekar, secretary of the synagogue.

Since most of these cemeteries are centuries old, it has become very difficult for the community to establish its actual area in the absence of concrete records. For instance, the Jewish Cemetery in Worli, Mumbai, was spread over 20, 000 yards as per the old land records. "But now hutments have taken over a large part of the area. Some of the land is being used as a garbage dump for surrounding buildings. We have approached the BMC to help," says Herzel Simon, honorary secretary of the Jewish Cemetery Trust.

Ezekiel Issac Malekar, priest and honorary secretary of the Judah Hyam Synagogue, Delhi, paints a grimmer picture. "Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Darjeeling and Ajmer also had Jewish cemeteries but the fate of these is now not known."

