



**Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage**  
**INTACH Thrissur Chapter**

**'State of Built Heritage of Thrissur'**  
**STATUS AND THREATS**

- ▷ **Thrissur And It's Traditional Landscape As A Unique Temple Town**
- ▷ **The Jewish Legacy Of Mala As A History Of Communal Peace And Religious Freedom**
- ▷ **A Traditional Pond In Private Ownership And The Issues Of Preservation**

**Heritage Report 2015**



January 2015

## 'STATE OF BUILT HERITAGE OF THRISSUR' REPORT

### STATUS AND THREATS

Article 51A of the Indian Constitution, incorporated with the Forty Second Constitution Amendment Act, 1976, mandates as fundamental duty of every citizen of India (f) to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture; (g) to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures;

#### A) HERITAGE @ RISK in Thrissur, the 'cultural capital' of Kerala State The Disappearing Traditional Landscape Of A Temple Town

#### B) BUILT HERITAGE @ RISK in Thrissur District The Jewish Legacy of Mala

- (a) The Mala Jewish Synagogue
- (b) The Mala Jewish Cemetery

#### C) HERITAGE @ RISK in private hands

Preservation of a 200-years Old Pond [kollam] and the Adjacent Bath House [kollapura] - A tale about insufficient legal protection and the apathy of authorities.

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### A) HERITAGE @ RISK in Thrissur, the 'cultural capital' of Kerala State The Disappearing Traditional Landscape Of a Temple Town

Photo documentation: <http://thrissurnext.intach-thrissur.org>



Photo 1: Scene from the historic bazaar area

[http://intach-thrissur.org/assets/listing/25300\\_141116280.jpg](http://intach-thrissur.org/assets/listing/25300_141116280.jpg)

Photo: Prem Manasvi

#### [historical reference]

Thrissur widely known as the cultural capital of Kerala is a well planned temple town, the only of its kind, in the centre of Kerala state. The temple town as a cultural entity has been evolved through the influence of different religious and cultural traditions like Buddhism, Jainism, Brahmanism and various European civilisations throughout its history. The history and development of the town is interlinked with the Cheras of the Sangam age, Kulasekharas, Perumpadappu Swarupam, Zamorins of Calicut, Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and the European powers. In all the stages of its historical evolution, the place had its own significant role to play in the development of the region.

The proximity to Vanchikulam Port and the Godowns and markets built by Sakthan Thampuran paved way for the development of Thrissur as a commercial and economic centre.

The urban structure of Thrissur is intrinsically related to its commercial, socio-economic and cultural activities.

#### [specific features]

Like every other temple town, Thrissur has a high degree of concentration of natural, built and intangible heritage components, functioning together as a single urban spatial entity, like river beds, open spaces, community tanks, sub shrines, traditional institutions, traditional and vernacular housing stocks, ceremonial routes, rituals, festivals, customs and practices. The temple town and the surrounding landscape have been planned in harmony with the existing geography, the kol wetlands collecting the drained water and the drainage system of Thrissur still being intact so that despite heavy monsoon rains the town remains well drained and maintained.



A large number of heritage components still exists in the historic core, helping to read the history preserved in its different layers.

The traditional housing stock being the most dynamic component within a temple centred settlement fosters a sense of beauty and supports the identity and character of the place.

Most of the buildings are two storied with an attic space. Two architectural typologies namely the “shop house” typology and the “godown” typology are noticed in the commercial buildings of Thrissur.

Domestic Architectural style of Kerala with colonial influence - especially of the Dutch is observed in these structures.

Shops have elongated plans with street fronts serving as the main source of light and uninterrupted building line. A 3m wide bay formed by the shops with common walls gives a vertical rhythm of the street. There exists a strong sense of enclosure and scale in the streets. The noteworthy part of it is the high potential offered by these shop houses for reuse. Many of them with the strong old walls prove to be structurally sound and stable. Most of the upper floors which remain unused possess larger potential for adaptive reuse.

The diverse community living and working here, their varying housing stock, life style and activities gives each and every street its own identity and character. The traditional “Appam street” (Erinjeri Angadi) where the time honoured cuisine of Thrissur is been sold is an excellent example. The verandas of these traditional houses where the Appam is prepared and sold, interacts with and gradually blurs the boundaries between the private sit out and the public street.

Brahmin Madhoms at Pazhaya Nadakkavu are unique structures and centre of Sanskrit learning.

The ancient Vedic preaching centres like Brahmaswom Madhom, an architectural marvel adds on to the intangible living heritage of the temple town as also being a centre of learning and with the decline of Buddhism, Jainism and the revival of Hinduism an important centre of Sanskrit learning.

Adi Sankaracharya is believed to have taught Advaita here.

Sankaracharya's disciples Hastamalaka, Thotaka, Padmapada and Sudhachara established four Madhoms, namely the Vadakke Madhom, the Naduvil Madhom, the Idayil Madhom and the Thekke Madhom respectively which still continues the tradition of Vedic chanting, thus adding on to the significance of Thrissur's tangible and intangible heritage.

#### **[status / threats]**

As a result of incompatible, thoughtless developmental initiatives, the temple related economy which existed in the past has already gradually vanished.

The huge ‘Tharavads’, monuments to Kerala's architectural traditions, have been mostly given way to high rise modern commercial complexes and apartments, but very few of them still exists.

Many of the heritage components are facing neglect and conditions of disrepair.

Unscientific development activities and large scale destruction of traditional built fabric has hampered the natural context in which the functional components of the town are laid out and threaten to shatter a well planned urban ensemble in its entirety.

As a result, the increase of traffic that has been thus invited is only insufficiently manageable on streets not designed for modern traffic, attracting further short sighted development decisions.

The existing balance in water system is also effected and may finally end up in drying of many water sources, traditionally strategically located in water catchments of the town, thus wiping out a significant heritage resource.

**The recommendation in the City Development Plan 2013 to demolish buildings in the market area in the name of being old and ‘unsafe’ is shocking. A plan that identifies those heritage buildings is not made public and the demolishing of heritage structures has happened lately without prior notice to the public.**

The Nayarangadi- Ariyangadi stretch which is the historic bazaar and one of the oldest streets of Thrissur with its unique architecture, significance of once being the pride and back bone of the economy of Thrissur and strong associative value with Sakthan Thampuran is something that demands attention for conservation and not for destruction.

#### **[need of the hour]**

To understand and delineate the actual extent of the temple town is the need of the hour. Quantifying the built heritage and identifying the tangible and intangible resources on the basis of its historic significance, historic integrity and historic context, based on background research and field work and involving experts as well as the common people is an important urgent step in this context.

INTACH Thrissur chapter has initiated recently such a process by organising a listing workshop involving conservation architects, enthusiasts and architecture students in order to evaluate the quantity of heritage components.

The listing of Thrissur's built heritage has to become a primary concern and will help to delineate the actual extent of the temple complex and the historic core of the temple town.

All stakeholders of heritage preservation should be included as part of decision making and implementation of conservation interventions.



Solutions for regeneration in the case of Angadis (market places) should follow a participatory approach, making the common people a part of the conservation scheme, giving them a sense of ownership and pride of their heritage and generating income.

Conservation initiatives have to be optimally integrated into the existing developmental frame work as a part of mainstreaming the issues related to it.

Article 51A (f) and (g) of Indian Constitution that mandates every citizen to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture, and to protect and improve the natural environment should be the platform for an awareness drive to highlight the importance of heritage preservation and sustainable development based on it.

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## **B) BUILT HERITAGE @ RISK in Thrissur District**

### **The Jewish Legacy Of Mala**

#### **(a) The Mala Jewish Synagogue**

#### **(b) The Mala Jewish Cemetery**

*Photo documentation: <http://mala.intach-thrissur.org>*

### **Preservation of the Jewish Legacy of Mala, Kerala, South India**

*[special note]*

**The legacy of the Mala Jews is a legacy of communal harmony and religious freedom, a unique and invaluable asset for the city, the state, the country, the whole of human mankind. To preserve such a legacy by all means and to promote this legacy in times that witness ethnic conflicts and acts of violence in the name of religion, should be a welcome opportunity to promote most valuable identity building cultural assets as inspiration for the present and the future. legacy of the Mala communal harmony and religious freedom**

*[historical background]*

Mala is a former significant Jewish settlement, situated in the southern part of Thrissur district, Kerala State, South India. There are references in various historical and literary works about the Jewish presence in Mala as early as 1000 AD.

The Jews, traders by tradition, came and settled in the heart of Mala town from Kodungallur (historical name 'Muziris'), the ancient port city, situated only ten kilometres away.

The Jewish settlement in Kodungallur is believed to have started in the first century AD as part of the Jewish Diaspora building up as a consequence of the Roman invasion of Jerusalem, the Jewish capital.

It is said that in the beginning of 1950s there were about 40 Jewish families in Mala, maintaining close contact with the Jewish communities in the nearby places such as Kodungallur, North Parur, Chendamangalam and Ernakulam and harmonious relationship with the local people; the elders of the present day Mala still cherish their fond memories of their Jewish friends.

The Jewish community of Mala migrated to Israel between 1948 and 1955 in a process known as 'Aliya', the returning to their 'promised land' after the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. Before the last Jews left, their cemetery and synagogue, significant remains of their settlement, were given into custody to the Mala Panchayat by an agreement explicitly aimed to preserve the heritage site and monuments and protecting the Jewish sentiments and beliefs connected with it.

The agreement was signed by the then Panchayat President and the trustees of the Jewish community and registered in the Sub-registrar Office, Mala, on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1955.

*[location]*

The Synagogue is located in the centre of the Mala town and the cemetery barely 500 meters away from the Synagogue.

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#### **(a) Mala Jewish Synagogue**

**Location:** Mala, Thrissur District, Kerala state

Survey Nr. 575 of Vadama village, Mala Panchayath, 23 cents (ares)

*[historical reference]*

The exact date of construction of the synagogue is not known.

One of the Jewish folksongs mentions that the land and wood for the construction of Mala Synagogue were given by the ruler of Kodungallur at the time of Joseph Rabban, a prominent Jewish merchant chief to whom the famous 'Copper Plate grants' were conferred in 1000 AD.





Photo 2 The Mala Jewish Synagogue | December 2013

Photo: Prem Manasvi

[http://mala.intach-thrissur.org/assets/synagogue/25300\\_131218\\_054.jpg](http://mala.intach-thrissur.org/assets/synagogue/25300_131218_054.jpg)

The synagogue has been rebuilt several times. The present one was rebuilt in 1909 (Karkatakam [കർക്കടകം] 18, 1084<sup>1</sup>) -- as evidenced from an inscription inside the synagogue building.

*[location and specific features]*

The synagogue, located at the intersection of two bustling small-commercial streets with a compound wall on three sides, and set now behind a row of shops, up a narrow unkempt alley. Three traditional upper windows looking out from the main sanctuary. An outside balcony on the second level looks out on the intersecting streets below. Exterior steps lead to what was the women's gallery, two stories up, looking down on the courtyard well. The typical Kerala synagogue has an azara or

anteroom and a double height prayer hall. The synagogue's tebah, heckal and furnishings and fittings are removed or lost -- though the replicas can be easily installed.

**[status / threats]**

The synagogue was given into the custody of the Mala Panchayath on the basis of an agreement between the trustees of the Jewish Synagogue and the Grama Panchayath, registered on 04.01.1955 in the Sub Registrar Office Mala under the terms that the synagogue cannot be alienated in any way other than perpetuating the memory of the Mala Synagogue, that this should be announced and notified by a permanent and indelible inscription in a conspicuous part of the building and that the Mala Panchayath shall meet the necessary expenses for its preservation in good repair.

The present status of the Jewish synagogue is one of on-going neglect of this important historical monument in the course of time. There are leakages in its roofing, cracks on its walls and damages to the ceilings. That there is no wall on the easter side of the premises of the synagogue has invited encroachment and misuse.

Not carrying out the annual maintenance of the synagogue is in clear violation of the foresaid agreement.

*[comment]*

The synagogue building needs urgent renovation for which the expertise of conservation architects and competent authorities should be thought.

The preservation of the Mala Jewish Legacy should be put under the purview of a competent authority (Archaeological Department of State Government or Central Government)

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**(b) Mala Jewish Cemetery**

**Location:** Mala, Thrissur District, Kerala state

Survey Nr. 709 of Vadama village, Mala Panchayath, 4 acres (1,62 hectares)

*[historical reference]*

More than two thousand Jewish forefathers have been buried in the Mala cemetery on a conventional estimate.

The Jewish cemetery in Mala is also a living symbol of the religious amity of the land where a minority foreign community who came here as refugees was given protection and patronage by other communities.

*[location and specific features]*

The **Mala Jewish cemetery**, is situated about 500 meters east of the Mala synagogue by the side of a state PWD road.

**It faces the threat of extinction.**

<sup>1</sup> The inscription relates to the Malayalam calendar





Photo 3: Sketch of the 4 acres (1,62 ha) cemetery in the heart of Mala town  
[http://mala.intach-thrissur.org/assets/cemetery/25300\\_mala\\_cemetery\\_sketch.jpg](http://mala.intach-thrissur.org/assets/cemetery/25300_mala_cemetery_sketch.jpg)

cemetery and 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.

#### [status / threats]

The agreement between the trustees of the Jewish Synagogue and the Grama Panchayath, registered on 04.01.1955 in the Sub Registrar Office Mala, is very specific about the terms and conditions of handing over the Jewish cemetery with an area of 4 acres (1,62 hectares) in Survey Nr. 709 of Vadama village in Mala Panchayath.



Photo 4: Gate and entrance of the Mala Jewish Cemetery | April 2012 Photo: Prem Manasvi  
[http://mala.intach-thrissur.org/assets/cemetery/25300\\_120412\\_0071.jpg](http://mala.intach-thrissur.org/assets/cemetery/25300_120412_0071.jpg)

digging, unearthing and excavation had to be done, blatantly violating the conditions laid down in the foresaid agreement of 1955.

A park has been proposed for the western section of the Jewish cemetery.

The work has been stopped by the court.

The cemetery with a compound wall on all sides and a gate at the front side, covering an area of 4 acres (1.62 hectares), is one of the oldest and the largest Jewish cemeteries in India.

In a first major violation of the 1955 agreement, the Mala Panchayath has constructed a stone wall in 2005 across the cemetery to divide it into two sections; three of the remaining tomb stones are in the eastern section of an open field, one partly hidden under a cashew tree. The second section without remaining visible remnants of tombs in the course of time left lies beyond the first on higher ground.

At the entrance gate a black framed sign board marks the site in English and Malayalam as a Jewish

While the agreement is aimed to preserve the Jewish cemetery as a heritage site, it explicitly prohibits digging, unearthing and excavation on the cemetery land to ensure the respecting of the Jewish belief. According to this belief the souls of deceased persons visit their buried bodies frequently; the deceased bodies should therefore remain intact in their graves. Otherwise the souls cannot visit their bodies - something that every Jew wants to avoid as they further believe in the resurrection of the virtuous at the time of the arrival of the messiah on the final day of 'Judgment'.

The government of Kerala has decided to build a stadium within the eastern section of the cemetery and started the construction work for which





[comment]

The Mala Jewish Cemetery faces the threat of extinction

A popular movement has started to champion the cause of preservation of Jewish cemetery under 'Paithruka Samrakshana Samithi [heritage protection council] Mala' with the support and co-operation of several organization including the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH).

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### C) HERITAGE @ RISK in private hands

#### Preservation Of A 200-Years Old Pond ['kollam'] & The Adjacent Bath House ['kollapura']

#### The 20 years old struggle to preserve the heritage site - A tale about insufficient legal protection and the apathy of authorities

Photo documentation: <http://pond.mykerala.net>

#### Preservation of a traditional pond and the adjoining bath house in private property

Location: Cherpu, Thrissur District, Kerala state  
Survey Nr. 247/I of Chevoor village, Thrissur taluk



Photo 5: The bath house [kollapura] after renovation | July 2004

Photo 5/6: Prem Manasvi

[http://pond.mykerala.net/images/25300\\_40702009.jpg](http://pond.mykerala.net/images/25300_40702009.jpg)

[historical reference]

The historical site and structures are about 200 years old and an example of Kerala's remaining built heritage legacy.

[location and specific features]

The traditional pond and the adjoining bath house are part of the former Alakkattu Mana, an about 200 years old traditional Brahmin house in typical nalukketu style located within a spacious property. The pond and the bath house are located at the northern part of the property, itself developed as a heritage garden.

The pond measures 14,5 to 14,5 metres. An underground drainage channel of 14,5 metres built of laterite stones and integrated into the foundation of the pond connects it with the next paddy field in survey number 248.

[status / threats]

After a partition of the property in survey Nr. 247/1, the pond is now on the northern, western, eastern and part of the southern side surrounded by the property of a neighbour. The underground drainage channel is now also located within the property of the neighbour.

The pond and bath house had been carefully renovated; the pond is now surrounded by a brick wall, built on the laterite foundation of the pond.



Photo 6: The pond [kollam] , now with densely planted trees around it | June 2013  
[http://pond.mykerala.net/images/25300\\_130620232.jpg](http://pond.mykerala.net/images/25300_130620232.jpg)

The heritage site and structure is under threat by mala fide acts and omissions of a neighbour (systematically planting trees at a distance of about 1 foot from the pond, not cutting branches, blocking the drainage channel that leads excess water into the next paddy field, resulting in the repeated immersion of the inner veranda of the bath house during monsoon).

The water of the pond is highly contaminated by falling seeds, fruits and leaves to an unmanageable level as a result of those actions and omissions.

*[comment]*

The 20 years old struggle to preserve and conserve the traditional pond and the adjoining

bath house as fast disappearing remains of Kerala's built heritage has since 2008 become a court case also.

While it is a tale of a neighbour who does not apply to the wisdom of social responsibility, it is also a tale of apathy of local authorities, of a cumbersome legal machinery and of the well connectedness of the neighbour, whose mala fide acts and omissions are neither discouraged nor reproached.

The lack of a comprehensive legal framework for protecting cultural heritage in keeping in mind Article 51A of the Indian constitution, adds to the difficulties.

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**Notes:**

*The report has been made with inputs from Anjali Cheriyaath [Part A]<sup>2</sup>, Prof. Karmachandran [Part B]<sup>3</sup> and Prem Manasvi P. [Part C]<sup>4</sup>*

**Further Resources:**

- Listing of Thrissur's Built Heritage - A Sample Workshop by INTACH Thrissur Chapter, Thrissur Next, November 2014
- Kol Wetlands, Thrissur Next, November 2014
- Birds of Kole Wetlands Thrissur, A Case Report, Thrissur Next, November 2014
- Reflections on Thrissur, Thrissur Next, November 2014

**Web Resources:**

- [thrissurnext.intach-thrissur.org](http://thrissurnext.intach-thrissur.org)
- [mala.intach-thrissur.org](http://mala.intach-thrissur.org)
- <http://www.facebook.com/pages/MALA-Jewish-Monuments/647758395332488>
- [pond.mykerala.net](http://pond.mykerala.net)

<sup>2</sup> Anjali Cheriyaath, Built Heritage of Thrissur, Unpublished Summary for INTACH Thrissur Chapter, January 2015

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Karmachandran, The Jewish Monuments under Threat of Extinction, Unpublished paper, December 2014

<sup>4</sup> Prem Manasvi P., Pond Issue – Documentation of a 20-years old struggle to preserve and conserve a 200 years old traditional pond and the adjacent bath house, 254 pages, December 2014, unpublished - excerpt: [http://pond.mykerala.net/pond\\_issue\\_excerpt\\_2015.pdf](http://pond.mykerala.net/pond_issue_excerpt_2015.pdf)