

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The primary goal of this project is to document Judeo-Malayalam, a language on the verge of extinction, spoken by a small and aging Jewish community in the Indian state of Kerala. The members of the community are known as Cochin Jews, after the city of Kochi where they reside. At present the Cochin Jewish community consists of only about 40 members. Nine elderly individuals still use Judeo-Malayalam as their primary language, and reside in close proximity to one another, around the city's only functioning synagogue. There are approximately 30 other Cochin Jews who use Judeo-Malayalam but who are fully immersed in the standard Malayalam spoken by the wider community in the city. In the 1940's Kochi had about 2500 Cochin Jews; after 1948 most of them emigrated to Israel, where their language has been significantly influenced by Hebrew. There are only a dozen remaining Cochin Jews in Israel.

Judeo-Malayalam is in urgent need of documentation. In 2009, a project to record the language and customs of the Cochin Jews in Israel started at the Ben Zvi Institute in Jerusalem. The project currently has approximately 85 recorded interviews with Cochin Jewish immigrants in Israel; no interviews will be conducted with the remaining Judeo-Malayalam residents of Kochi. Our project will complement, and cooperate with the Ben Zvi documentation project. To this end, we will conduct fieldwork in Kochi to collect samples of spoken Judeo-Malayalam. We will interview native speakers of the language in individual and communal settings, record their speech, transcribe it, annotate it, and translate it into English. The created digital archive of sound and text will be made publically available on an established archive such as the Linguistic Data Consortium provided by UPenn or the Talkbank coordinated by Brian McWhinney.

A secondary goal of the project is to begin the formal linguistic study of Judeo-Malayalam. Judeo-Malayalam is a Dravidian language which has preserved archaic features of Malayalam and has borrowed from Hebrew. Its phonology, morphology and syntax have not been systematically studied. Previous work with the community of Cochin Jews has concentrated almost exclusively on socio-cultural issues. In the context of transcribing and annotating the recorded speech samples, we will examine Judeo-Malayalam for aspects of its grammar that are of theoretical interest, and we will study them on their own and in comparison with the grammar of standard Malayalam.

**Intellectual Merit:** The Dravidian languages are relatively underrepresented in formal linguistic analyses. By describing and studying the grammar of Judeo-Malayalam, the present project will contribute to a more comprehensive coverage of this language family and will enrich the empirical foundations of linguistics more generally. A comparative investigation with standard Malayalam will also be valuable for linguistic theory, as closely related languages provide the best testing ground for proposals about the structure of possible grammars. The comparative study will also reveal some of the historical changes that modern Malayalam has undergone. In sum, if successful the project will contribute to the areas of Dravidian linguistics, historical linguistics and general linguistic theory. Additionally, the archive will allow future work in sociolinguistics, language contact, bilingualism, and anthropology.

**Broader Impact:** The archive will preserve a record of the language and the culture of the community of Cochin Jews. It will allow the future study of Judeo-Malayalam and of the socio-linguistic and cultural context of the life of the Cochin Jews. In addition to serving linguists, the archive will be of more general interest to scholars of Jewish Studies, South Asian Studies, ethnography, folklore, religion studies and history, as well as more broadly to individuals and organizations interested in these areas.