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## In Memoriam, Scaria Zacharia



(15 May 1947–18 October 2022)<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Photo used with permission from [www.scariaz.info](http://www.scariaz.info).

1 productions. In his numerous lectures and publications, Zacharia sought to bridge the disciplinary  
2 silos that segregate between the “classical” and the “folkloric” and among the manifold religious  
3 traditions that make Kerala’s society and culture so rich and diverse. His low-pitched, softly  
4 roaring voice was oozing with love for the language, even when he spoke in English. He was  
5 indifferent to the formal, pedantic language in which professors normally address their audience.  
6 From behind the high seminar podium, he would approach his audience with warm, intimate,  
7 colloquial Malayalam. When he started speaking, all the drowsy people in the audience would  
8 wake up; an electric wave of excitement would flash throughout the lecture hall in an instant. Eyes  
9 shining, smiles and giggles, his audience would respond with lively excitement. His charismatic  
10 lecture style travelled with him to Israel, where he enchanted Jewish Malayalam audiences in their  
11 remote villages, away from the elite centers of academia.

12 Zacharia loved his audience of elderly Malayali Jews and younger generations of less  
13 proficient speakers, and they dearly loved him in return. He would speak in Malayalam to the  
14 delight of all hearers, relishing the moments of reunion with Kerala’s lost Jewish community. The  
15 community in Israel cherished the Malayalam professor and organized special communal events  
16 and seminars all over the country whenever he would arrive in Israel. They fondly renamed him  
17 as Zkharia, as if he were a fellow Jew. This loving scholar-community relationship brought into  
18 being the trilingual book *Kārkuḷali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous* (Ben-Zvi Institute 2005).<sup>2</sup> Zacharia wanted  
19 to return the Jewish Malayalam song tradition back into the heart of the community, with its  
20 overwhelming majority residing in Israel. He resisted turning this tradition into a frozen museum  
21 piece, locked up in the academic ivory tower, inaccessible to those who do not master the English  
22 language. Therefore, the book has an introduction, texts, and notes in Malayalam starting from the  
23 left-hand side of the book, and an introduction, translations, and commentary in Hebrew starting  
24 from the right-hand side of the book. An essay by Barbara Johnson in English is placed in the  
25 middle to connect the two prominent languages of the community in the past and in the present.

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

40 Zacharia’s idea of the “hyphenated society” connects to his broader vision of Malayalam  
41 and Kerala studies. The preservation and renovation of two dilapidated synagogues in  
42 Chendamangalam and Parur owes a lot to Zacharia’s efforts in raising awareness of the neglected  
43 Malabari Jewish heritage sites in Kerala and in galvanizing state resources and local scholarship  
44 in turning these two sites into Jewish heritage museums under the auspices of the Muziris  
45 Heritage Project. He succeeded in promoting the study of Kerala’s Jewish heritage in Kerala and  
46 by Kerala’s scholars. In February 2006, the trilingual book *Kārkuḷali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous*, published  
47 in Jerusalem, was launched in Kerala with academics and community members invited to a special  
48 conference organized by Zacharia and his dedicated team of research scholars, *TAPASAM: An*  
49 *Association of Comparative Studies*. TAPASAM issued the conference papers in a special issue  
50 dedicated to the comparative research of Kerala’s Jews in January 2006 ahead of the book launch.  
51 In 2019, even as his health was fast deteriorating, he initiated a reprint of the book in Malayalam  
52 for the benefit of Malayalam readership, who could not access the Ben-Zvi Institute publication

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60 <sup>2</sup> Zacharia & Gamliel, eds. and trans., *Kārkuḷali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous*.

1 available only in Jerusalem, beyond the reach of readership in Kerala. Malayalam students and  
2 scholars in Kerala and abroad, myself included, are indebted to Zacharia in our work on under-  
3 researched traditions produced at the grassroots level of communities. Those of us who were  
4 fortunate enough to work closely with Zacharia were exposed to his unique approach to the  
5 literary cultures that shaped Kerala's hyphenated society, including the literary heritage in Jewish  
6 Malayalam. We already miss him a lot.

### 7 8 9 **Selected Publications of Scaria Zacharia on Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs**

10  
11 Johnson, Barbara C., ed. 2004. *Oh, Lovely Parrot! Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala*. Trans. Scaria  
12 Zacharia and Barbara C. Johnson. Jerusalem: Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew  
13 University of Jerusalem.

14 Zacharia, Scaria. n.d. "Jewish Malayalam." Jewish Language Website, ed. Sarah Bunin Benor. Los  
15 Angeles: Jewish Language Project. <https://www.jewishlanguages.org/jewish-malayalam>.

16 Zacharia, Scaria. 2003. "Possibilities of Understanding Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs." *The Journal*  
17 *of Indo-Judaic Studies* 6:29–47.

18 Zacharia, Scaria. 2005. "Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs." *International Journal of Dravidian*  
19 *Linguistics* 34.2: 209–223.

20 Zacharia, Scaria & Ophira Gamliel, eds. and trans. 2005. *Kārkulali-Yefefiya-Gorgeous: Jewish*  
21 *Women's Songs in Malayalam with Hebrew Translations and an Epilogue by Barbara C.*  
22 *Johnson*. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (in Hebrew and  
23 Malayalam).

24 Zacharia, Scaria, ed. 2006. *TAPASAM: A Quarterly Journal for Kerala Studies in Malayalam—*  
25 *English*. Special Issue: The Jewish Heritage of Kerala. 1.3: 437–710.  
26 <http://www.tapasam.com/new-journal/>.

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

33 A list of Scaria Zacharia's selected publications can be found on his personal website:  
34 <https://www.scariaz.info/bio>.

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