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Between Commerce and Community: The World of Ezekiel Rahabi

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Abstract

Ezekiel Rahabi, a prominent Jewish merchant of eighteenth-century Cochin, played a pivotal role in shaping the economic and political landscape of Malabar. As both a trader and an intermediary between European colonial powers and local rulers, he embodied the intersection of commerce and diplomacy. This paper examines his contributions, analyzing his role within the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and his impact on Cochin's Jewish community. It further explores how Rahabi leveraged trade networks to consolidate power while preserving his community's cultural and religious identity. This study adopts both primary and secondary sources and primary sources are basically archival documents. Secondary sources include printed materials on maritime trade of Cochin Jewish community.

Keywords: Ezekiel Rahabi, Dutch East India Company, Jewish Merchants, Early Modern Trade, Cochin Jews

INTRODUCTION :

The Jewish presence in colonial South India's maritime trade can be traced to longstanding Jewish communities, most notably in the port city of Cochin (Kochi). Known as the Cochin Jews, these communities were instrumental in facilitating commerce linking India, the Middle East, and Europe. Their extensive commercial connections with Jewish merchants worldwide enabled the efficient exchange of spices, textiles, and precious stones. Operating within the broader Indian Ocean trade network, Jewish traders in South India served as intermediaries between local producers and foreign merchants, ensuring a consistent supply of goods to markets in the Ottoman Empire, the Dutch Republic, and other European territories. Following the arrival of European colonial powers—first the Portuguese and subsequently the Dutch—the Cochin Jews adeptly adapted to shifting political and economic circumstances, securing trade privileges that sustained their mercantile enterprises.

Among the most distinguished Jewish traders of colonial South India was Ezekiel Rahabi, a Cochin merchant who prospered in the eighteenth century under Dutch patronage. Rahabi was pivotal in the pepper and spice trade, conducting business directly with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and leveraging his extensive networks to ensure the steady export of goods. His commercial acumen and diplomatic abilities rendered him indispensable to the regional economy, as he negotiated trade terms and resolved disputes on behalf of both Jewish and local Indian merchants. Beyond commerce, Rahabi contributed significantly to the Jewish community, including efforts to preserve their religious and cultural heritage in Cochin. His influence transcended trade: he was instrumental in the construction of synagogues and in maintaining robust Jewish ties with communities across the Indian Ocean, thereby consolidating the legacy of Jewish involvement in maritime commerce in colonial South India.

The eighteenth century witnessed profound transformations in Indian Ocean trade, shaped by European colonial ambitions and indigenous mercantile strategies. Within this dynamic milieu, Ezekiel Rahabi emerged as a central figure in Cochin's commercial and political environment. As a *Joodsche Koopman* (Jewish Merchant) for the Dutch East India Company (VOC), Rahabi functioned simultaneously as an economic agent and a cultural bridge connecting the Jewish community, European traders, and local rulers.

Cochin, a critical port in the Malabar region, had long constituted a melting pot of cultures and trade networks. As a center of the spice trade, it attracted merchants from across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The Jewish community of Cochin, whose roots are believed to extend back over a millennium, played an integral role in its commercial activities. By the seventeenth century, Cochin had become a contested space among the Portuguese, the Dutch, and local rulers, each seeking to control its lucrative spice trade. The Dutch expelled the Portuguese in 1663 and, in their pursuit of stability, relied upon trusted intermediaries such as Ezekiel Rahabi to manage commerce and local relations.

Rahabi's success derived not merely from economic acumen but also from his capacity to navigate the volatile power structures of the era. His extensive knowledge of trade, politics, and cultural diplomacy rendered him indispensable to both the VOC and his Jewish community. His role extended beyond commerce: he actively shaped Dutch policies in Cochin, mediated conflicts between colonial and local authorities, and facilitated connections with global Jewish networks. This paper seeks to contextualize Rahabi's influence by analyzing his commercial engagements, political maneuvering, and his role in sustaining Cochin's Jewish heritage. It further explores how his legacy fits within the broader historiography of Indian Ocean trade and Jewish diaspora studies.

The personality and activities of Ezekiel Rahabi suffice to demonstrate the role of Jews during the Dutch period. Among the Jewish merchants of Cochin who rose to prominence in eighteenth-century Dutch Cochin, none attained greater influence, prestige, wealth, or reputation, and none made a more enduring contribution to the economic and diplomatic arena of South India—or to his own community—than Ezekiel Rahabi. His ancestors hailed from Aleppo, and his family concentrated primarily on trade and commerce. Within a short span, Rahabi established his own imprint in the realm of trade and commerce. By 1726, the Dutch had appointed him "principal merchant" or *Joodsche Koopman*. Some scholars suggest that the term *Joodsche Koopman* is an alternative form of *Juda Mudaliar*, such that *Koopman* represents a corrupted form of *Moopan*, meaning "chief." This interpretation, however, appears untenable, since both terms were used during the same period by different individuals, and the title of "principal merchant" became extinct with Rahabi's immediate descendants. The term *Joodsche Koopman* must therefore be understood as an honor conferred upon Ezekiel Rahabi in recognition of his contributions to trade and commerce.

The purchase of pepper from native agriculturists required skillful diplomatic navigation, patient bargaining, and polite firmness with the rulers of pepper-producing territories. Such transactions had to be conducted in a manner that ensured neither the Company nor the producer incurred losses. Ezekiel Rahabi conducted almost all trade transactions of the Dutch East India Company as well as those of the Cochin ruler. He became the merchant-diplomat of Kerala in the service of the Dutch East India Company and, for nearly half a century, was the central figure in all its economic and diplomatic activities, acting as the "minister of native affairs" in economic as well as political matters on behalf of the Company. Rahabi's trade encompassed a variety of products, including cotton, shawls, candied sugar, rice, sandalwood, indigo, nutmeg, lumber, teak wood, and tobacco. He owned numerous ships during this period, which were employed for the commercial and military purposes of both European and native rulers. He also conducted trade with English merchants; the Tellicherry consultations frequently reference dealings with Ezekiel Rahabi. Owing to his diplomatic skill, both Europeans and native rulers dispatched him as a negotiator to other kingdoms. His diplomatic assignments, in the form of missions and personal audiences with the King of Travancore, Marthanda Varma, in 1734–1742, and with the Zamorin of Calicut in 1751, figure most prominently. All other communities in Cochin also accepted him. He acted as a mediator in resolving numerous local disputes. He assisted the Syrian Christians in bringing a new Bishop from Basra, Babylonia, in 1747, and also advanced a considerable sum of money. Thus, for approximately fifty years, he was the central figure in all facets of life in Cochin, and none of his descendants attained the heights he achieved. Another important individual who played a significant political role was Sargun. He was not in the service of the Dutch East India Company but engaged in commerce as a private individual. As a wealthy shipowner, he enjoyed personal relations not only with Dutch officials and local rulers but also with notables of Calicut and Mysore.

Rahabi's appointment as a *Joodsche Koopman* placed him at the center of the VOC's operations in Cochin. His duties extended beyond mere trade: he was responsible for procuring and supplying spices, maintaining financial accounts, and ensuring stable relations with indigenous rulers. Through his extensive trade networks, he facilitated the VOC's commercial monopoly while securing economic advantages for the Jewish community. Moreover, Rahabi's position enabled him to serve as an economic mediator, ensuring that Jewish merchants were not marginalized by Dutch trade policies. His ability to balance European interests with the autonomy of Cochin's Jewish traders demonstrates his diplomatic skill.

Rahabi's rise to prominence must be understood within the broader framework of colonial mercantile policies. The Dutch, unlike their Portuguese predecessors, were more inclined to engage local merchant communities in their commercial enterprises. Rahabi's ability to balance multiple allegiances—maintaining VOC interests while negotiating with local rulers—enabled him to sustain his influential position. One of his most significant contributions was his role in negotiating trade terms

with Travancore's rulers(Document No.III, Ernakulam Regional Archives). His commercial acumen allowed him to secure favorable conditions for the Dutch while ensuring that his own trading interests remained uncompromised. Travancore's growing power under Maharaja Marthanda Varma created new challenges for both the Dutch and the merchant communities of Cochin. Rahabi acted as a key negotiator in trade discussions, helping to maintain a balance of power that prevented conflict from disrupting commerce. Furthermore, his deep understanding of local customs and governance enabled him to serve as a mediator in conflicts between the VOC and indigenous powers. His knowledge of Indian legal and social systems was instrumental in resolving disputes without jeopardizing Dutch trade dominance.

Rahabi's influence was not confined to trade. His position granted him access to the corridors of power, allowing him to advocate for his community. The Jews of Cochin, though a minority, enjoyed a degree of autonomy, largely owing to Rahabi's efforts in maintaining diplomatic relations with both colonial and local authorities. Beyond his economic and political engagements, Rahabi played a crucial role in the religious and cultural life of Cochin's Jewish community. His patronage extended to the preservation of Jewish religious texts, the maintenance of synagogues, and the facilitation of interactions between Cochin's Jewish population and Jewish communities abroad. One of the most significant episodes in this regard was Rahabi's correspondence with Jewish scholars in Europe and the Middle East. He facilitated the printing of Hebrew texts, ensuring that Cochin's Jewish community remained connected to broader Jewish intellectual traditions. His efforts in preserving Jewish customs and religious life underscore the ways in which commerce and cultural identity were intertwined in colonial Cochin.

Rahabi's influence extended beyond the Jewish community, as he was actively involved in funding charitable projects for Cochin's general population. His philanthropy reinforced his status as a respected leader, demonstrating the broader social impact of his wealth and influence. The maritime trade of Cochin was a cornerstone of its historical and economic significance, with its strategic location establishing it as a vital hub in the Indian Ocean trade network. The city flourished as a center for the export of spices, particularly pepper, which was highly sought after in European and Middle Eastern markets. Various communities, including Arabs, Chinese, and later European colonial powers, engaged in trade there, but the Jewish community played a unique role in sustaining commercial activities. The Cochin Jews, with their deep-rooted mercantile traditions and global connections, acted as intermediaries in trade, linking South India to far-reaching markets. Their presence in Cochin was not merely economic but also cultural, as they established synagogues, preserved religious traditions, and contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the port city.

Among the Jewish traders, Ezekiel Rahabi emerged as one of the most influential figures, solidifying Jewish prominence in Cochin's maritime commerce during the eighteenth century. His extensive trade dealings with the Dutch East India Company and local merchants helped maintain Cochin's reputation as a thriving trade center. Beyond his commercial success, Rahabi also played a significant role in preserving Jewish heritage, ensuring that the Jewish community in Cochin continued to flourish despite external challenges. His legacy reflects the broader impact of Jewish traders in shaping Cochin's maritime history, bridging economic, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges between India and the world. Today, while the Jewish population in Cochin has dwindled, their historical contributions to trade and cultural heritage remain an integral part of the city's rich past.

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