

Design Resource

## Indo Jewish Embroidery - Ernakulam, Kerala

Jewish Embroidery Making

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral, Divyadarshan C. S. and

Lija M. G.

NID Campus, Bengaluru

Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/indo-jewish-embroidery-ernakulam-kerala>



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## Introduction

When you go to Ernakulam in Kerala of India and if you are in search of the old antique items there are lot of items that will take you, in knowing some of the traditions that was followed in Kerala. Mattancherry is one of the place which can be reached either by the road way or by the ferry way, but travelling by the ferry would help in observing the traditional buildings and settlements the different kinds of people following different way of lifestyle that had settled down. As water way and by walk was the oldest way of transport of this place as most of the area are islands and people connected with each other by these routes.

In Mattancherry, anybody would not miss to visit the Jew town, Jew Street which long ago had the settlements of the Portugal, Dutch Jews. After many years they had lost contacts with other Jews and started to learn English and the local Malayalam language. But strictly teaching the Hebrew language and tradition that they follow to the younger generation without mixing with other cultures. Therefore more familiarly known as the Cochin Jews, because of this unique culture that even today that they follow, the people of Jew town directed us to one of them the old Sarah Cohen Aunty called by everybody in this place. As she would be doing the prayers/ customs as per the timing that they follow, as they even today follow their tradition handed over to them by their parents.

The old buildings of the Jew Street reflects about a particular sect of people who had settled here. Today there are only seven families with ten members remaining here as others have travelled back to Israel. Some left back due to their old age, ill health and didn't want to travel back leaving the place and people with whom they had spent their younger days. But even today they follow their tradition very strictly.

As Sarah Aunty was busy in her prayers and didn't allow us, it was another young person who was with Aunty and Cohen Uncle from his childhood who gave the brief introduction about this tradition and the embroidery that is specially done here in this place which tells of the tradition that was followed by ages.

Embroidery is one of the craft where the required portions are opened up and allowed to do the visual techniques by the special needle and coloured threads. Mostly the Jewish lamp of seven candles called menorah, pomegranate flower, pomegranate fruit, grape, wine are some of the patterns that are mostly made through the embroidery. It is said that the designs are taken from the influence of the day today activities which they use for prayer and offerings. Also letters of the Hebrew language that they use are mostly taken from the Torah (scroll of incipits read publicly with a tune in presence of the congregation of Cochin Jews) and the prayers.

Embroidery is done on the frames (slate frames) with the selected fabrics of organdy, cross stitch etc. These are done with very fine stitch as in some cases the back and the front look alike with as they are done by a person seated in the position with the movement of the hands with needle and embroidery threads with full concentration from the bottom to top and top to the bottom portions.

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Embroidery work of a floral design depicting a rose bud.

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Display of crochet design work on handkerchief.



Craftswomen embroidering a design on an organdy fabric fixed in a small wooden frame.



Jewish skull caps embroidered with glittering embellishments put for display.

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Jewish embroidery work made on organdy fabric depicting Jewish's sacred lamp.

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Caps made of raw silk and other fabrics embroidered with shining threads with glittering embellishments.



Display of few embroidery works with the combination of Indo Jewish designs.

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<http://www.dsource.in/resource/indo-jewish-embroidery-ernakulam-kerala/tools-and-raw-materials>

## Tools and Raw Materials

Following are the tools and raw materials required to make the Indo Jewish Embroidery.

- **Embroidery Frame (slate frames):** It is generally used by the Cochin Jews of Mattancherry for embroidery purpose.
- **Screws:** It is used to fix through the holes for holding firmly on the frames.
- **Embroidery Stand:** It is used to support the Embroidery frames firmly.
- **Fabric Materials:** Generally fabric such as organdy, cross stitch and cotton are preferred.
- **Sewing Needle:** It is used to stitch the edges of the selected material for embroidery.
- **Embroidery Needle:** It is used for stitching the embroidery threads as per the design.
- **Embroidery Thread:** Different coloured threads of various colors are preferred in doing this embroidery.
- **Sewing Thread:** It is used to stitch the ends of the materials to frames for holding it firmly.
- **Pencil/ Pen:** It is used to draw the design on the fabric.
- **Scissors:** It is used to cut the extra threads.



Selected fabric for the embroidery.



Finest thin needle used for the embroidery stitches.

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Wooden slate frame is used while there is a minute embroidery work to be done.



Cotton embroidery thread is used to do the embroidery work.



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Wooden embroidery stretching frame is used to hold the fabric firmly on which embroidery will be made.

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## Making Process

The stands of the frames are placed on the floor firmly on the levelled ground and then the frames are placed on the stands for support. Fabrics of generally organdy, cross stitch, cotton material are generally preferred for doing this Embroidery. The required length are cut as per the sizes and stitched at the edges with the sewing threads to be held firmly by tying it to the corners. As the fabric is tied it is then placed in a manner such a way that the required portions to be worked are opened and spread as per the given directions of the fabric to be embroidered.

If the designs are new, the designs are drawn on the fabric and then filled by the cross stitch, petit point, shadow work and stem work as per the choose of the craftsmen who feels comfortable in filling the colour threads with stitches as per the choices. The fabric chosen are generally the plain and mostly the transparent materials that this embroidery can be done easily.

If the designs are to be repeated a number of times then the stamp of the same is made and lightly stamped on the portions with ink to be embroidered. Only the hand reached portions are stretched, rest are rolled, needle with embroidery threads are stitched with the usage of both the hands in the top and the bottom portions of the fabric spread. The extra threads are cut with the scissors to remove the protruding portions on the fabric. After the required portions are embroidered the fabric is cut to the required sizes and the edges of the fabric are given hem stitch generally with the hemp yarn as the final work.

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1. Stands of the frames are placed firmly on the levelled ground of the floor for support.
2. The frames are placed to the stands.
3. Generally fabrics of organdy, cross stitch and cotton material are preferred for this Embroidery.
4. Fabrics selected as per the required length are stitched at the edges with the sewing threads to be tied firmly to the corners of the frames.
5. Usually only the hand reached portions of the fabric are only stretched and the embroidery is done with both the hands of the craftsmen on the top and bottom portions of the fabric as per the drawn new designs.
6. For the repeated designs the stamp of the same is done and imprinted on the fabric.
7. To the stretched portions of the fabric generally the cross stitch, petit point, shadow work and stem work are done with the embroidery threads as per the choose of the craftsmen.
8. The protruding threads are cut from the embroidered portions to give a better look of the design.
9. The edges of the fabric are given the hem stitch with hemp yarn as the outline to the embroidery work.

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A wooden frame stands are placed on levelled ground.



Assembling frame for the embroidery.



A wooden bar, passing through the hole to form a rectangular frame.

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Screwing through the hole on the frame.

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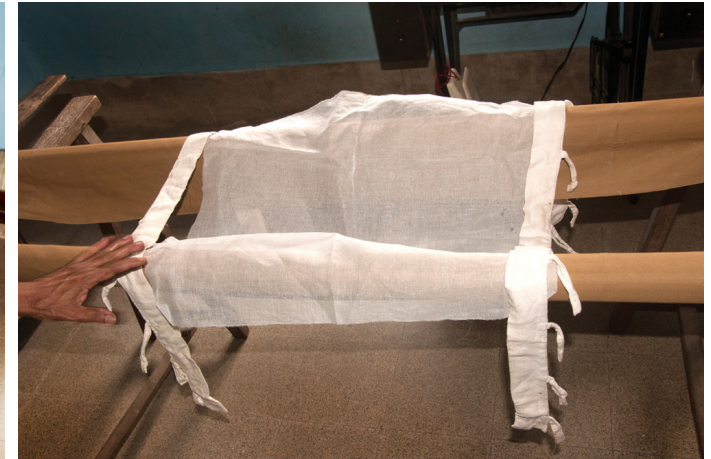
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Assembled wooden frame placed on frame stands.



Selected fabric has been placed on the frame.



Fixing a fabric strongly inside a rectangular frame.



Spreading a cloth in a lengthwise.

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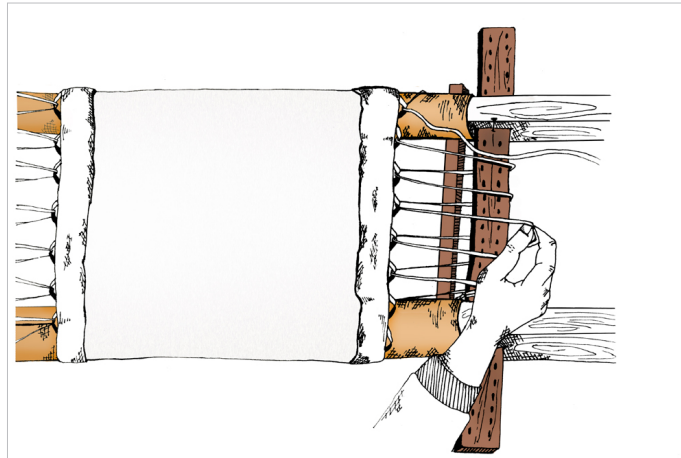
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Pinning the fabric to the frame with the help of small pins.



Stitching the edges of the selected fabric with the help of needle and thread.



Tying the threads to the frame to pull the fabric tight on the frame.



Making a small hole to trace design on the cloth by drawing a design on tracing sheet.

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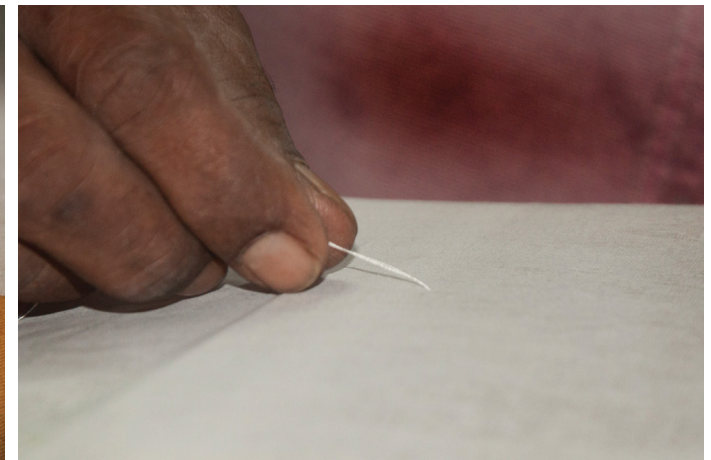
Tracing a design by applying a color with the help of sponge or small piece of cloth.



Piercing a needle on the selected fabric.



Again piercing it back from the down to start with the embroidery.



Pulling up the needle to make a stitch.

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Embroidery continues along with the traced design on fabric.



Finished product of Indo Jewish Embroidery.

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## Products

On the streets of the Jew town, especially the street that leads to the Paradeshi Synagogue is the place where the old Sarah Aunty told by everybody is. In this street, the embroidery is done by the Jewish lamps and the Hebrew letters of prayer on the fabric in a unique manner.

It is specially done on the selected fabrics with the unique way of moving of the needles by hand on both sides. There are variety of products that are made by the craftsmen in Mattancherry such as the Handkerchiefs, Table runner, Table cloths, Traditional Kippas, Pillow covers etc.

The smallest size are generally the handkerchiefs done by the craftsmen are of 20 cms with cost of INR 300 and Table runner of about INR1300. Table cloth of 3mts and 70 cm width to whatever required length are made as per the request given to the craftsmen in Mattancherry. Who are generally called as the Cocha's and Aache's of Mattancherry.



Embroidery of Jewish lamp made with different color embroidery thread.

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Crochet work depicting floral design.



Jewish cap stitched with zig zac embroidered pattern fabric.



Floral theme embroidered fabric Jewish cap.

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Table cloth made from organdy cloth embroidered with floral design.



Mango themed embroidered fabric cap.



Embroidery depicting dancers made of cross stitch pattern.

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Peacock design made using cross stitch embroidery pattern.

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## Video



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