INTRODUCTION

This is a study which examines the ethnicity of Gujaratis in the urban context of Kochi. The study begins with the assumption that the process of urbanization in India need not bring about complete assimilation of different ethnic groups, rather, different ethnic groups can coexist in the urban context peacefully.

Migration is a key process that makes significant contributions to the growth of urbanization. Though India’s population has been comparatively immobile, studies have shown that different ethnic groups coexist in urban areas as a result of migration. Often immigrants belonging to particular region, language, religion, tribe etc. tend to concentrate in special geographical areas in the city and make all efforts to maintain their cultural identity. (Gore 1970, Punaekar 1974, Mythili 1974, A. Singh 1976, D’souza 1977, Nair 1978, Lewandowski 1980, Narayan 1989). The earlier migrants help the new ones to settle down and provide all social support. In course of time they develop a whole array of institutions like schools, hospitals, clubs, associations etc. Thus the migrants try to maintain their own cultures, contributing to the phenomenon of cultural pluralism.

The city of Kochi in Kerala, one of the oldest cities on the West Coast, has experienced rich cultural variety due to migration. Its coastal and central location has given it the advantage of developing into an industrial and commercial centre. The city has many ethnic groups in it especially in Mattancherry–Fort Cochin area. Some of them are Marwaris, Konganis, and Gujaratis.
The present study proposes to understand the phenomenon of ethnicity in the city of Kochi in the context of the Gujaratis. Most of the studies have taken caste/tribe/religion as the basis of ethnicity. They reveal the fact that ethnicity persists in India and that its saliency depends on the context. The present study is relevant because it focuses on an ethnic group of linguistic and regional background, namely the Gujaratis, who have migrated to an urban setting in Kerala for trade purposes. Gujaratis migrated to Kerala some 900 years ago. But their migration in large scale started only during the beginning of the 19th Century and there is evidence to prove that many Gujaratis came to Kochi after 1775. At present the total population of Gujaratis is above 4000. They are prosperous traders and they preserve all their religious and social customs.

Though the Gujaratis have a history of about 200 years in Kochi, the prima facie evidence shows that they have maintained their ethnicity. They have their own community, schools, temples, and associations. Their dress, food habits, language, customs etc. are practically unaffected inspite of their prolonged stay in Kochi. So the present study further examines the methods of boundary maintenance of this ethnic group which has maintained its ethnicity inspite of their constant interaction with the larger host society, which is a relatively homogenised urban society.

What could be the reason for this apparent maintenance of ethnicity among the Gujaratis in Kochi? Is it because of the special features of Kochi city or is it the general concern of minority groups to maintain their identity? This research investigates into these aspects.
Demographically, Kerala society has a unique place compared to other states of India. It is one of the most progressive states with a high density of population and high literacy rate. Culturally, Kerala has absorbed many foreign elements into its fold. The Arabs, Jews, Chinese, Greeks and Romans have had long contacts with Kerala. Some of them have become immigrants, but all these immigrants were speedily absorbed into the Kerala community. Thus Kerala society is composed of a population which is relatively homogenised, with no remarkable linguistic or cultural diversity.

Unlike other states of India, Kerala society as a whole combines, in a rather indistinguishable measure, features both rural and urban. The majority of Kerala’s villages have a population of over 5000. If density of population were a criterion, there is little difference between towns and villages in Kerala. The division of Kerala into urban and rural area as per census does not have any relationship with density. There are villages and municipalities with population over twenty thousand, whereas there are towns with one thousand people. One striking peculiarity of Kerala is that the sharp lines which divide one village from another, and a village from a town, in the rest of the country, are almost non-existent here. The very concept of such boundaries seem alien to the spirit of Kerala. What one sees as one travels across the territory is, therefore, unending stretch of villages, and towns which give the appearance of an conurbation.

Kerala has made steady progress in urbanization. Modern means of communication such as road transport, telephone, radio, television etc are widely visible in all
villages. They have facilitated spacial mobility and close interaction between the rural people, with the result that there is no sharp line of demarcation between rural people and urban people. We can see people residing in urban areas still maintaining their rural mode of living with spacious bungalow type of housing, elaborate cooking and wider kinship relationships. In fact many of the Keralites still cherish a rural mentality like an urge for seeking their roots, and family relationships. But these special features of Kerala society in itself need not lead to ethnic diversity or pluralism. On the otherhand, pluralism is existing even in other highly urbanised societies where large scale assimilation has already taken place. So could this case of ethnic identity of Gujaratis be attributed to the general urge of a culturally distinct minority group for preserving their sense of identity? In this study the researcher probes into this aspect.