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**The Aramaic Project – A short description**  
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The Christian Musicological Society of India launched the Aramaic Project in 2013 to honor, cherish, and preserve the unparalleled legacy of an ancient language and music tradition that are part of the history of India, and an intangible treasure in the world's cultural heritage. The Aramaic (Syriac) language in which Jesus and his disciples preached the Gospel reached South India in the early Christian era. Until the 1960s, the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala, who trace the origin of their faith to Thomas the Apostle, celebrated liturgy in this language. Since the vernacularization of the liturgy, the language and the melodies are on the path to extinction, especially in the Syro-Malabar Church (3.25 million members). The Syro-Malabar Church, which is one of the eight independent churches among the St. Thomas Christians (6 million out of about thirty million Christians in India), follow the Chaldean (East Syriac) liturgical tradition. The immediate goal of this project is to locate as many singers as possible in the Syro-Malabar Church, who were born in the 1950s or earlier, and record their memories of the language, melodies, and experiences in order to preserve them for posterity. This project is time-sensitive because of the advancing age of the resource persons. The sound and the memory of the language, and the rich and varied melodic repertory, will soon die with them. Preserving these aspects of this Semitic language is important not only for the history of Christianity in India, but also for the history of Christianity itself.

The vestiges of the Syriac chant repertoire in India fall under the category of “intangible cultural heritage,” as defined in Article 2 of the UNESCO convention held in Paris, in 2003 (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00022#part6>) that need to be safeguarded by all means.

The Syriac heritage of the St. Thomas Christians is an essential component of the colorful cultural fabric of India. The Aramaic Project will draw attention especially to the pre-sixteenth century history of India, and layers of cultural interactions that went into the formation of the unifying diversity that is India. It will also raise respect for India among the cultural leaders around the world as a country that continues to preserve a world heritage of humanity.

The current political upheavals in the Middle East, which is the geographical and cultural source of the Syriac heritage, are adversely affecting the preservation of these linguistic and musical treasures of humanity. For that reason, the Aramaic Project in India is an imperative.

#### **Motivating factors behind launching the Aramaic Project**

An urgent need to preserve the sound of an ancient language. A language is also a sonic entity. Over the centuries, the Syriac dialect of the Aramaic language has assumed a unique sound in the multi-lingual context of South India. That sound is valuable to the diachronic study of the

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language's history and the region's linguistic culture. Our generation shall not let the sound of this sacred language be lost forever because of negligence. Five hundred years from now, people should not look at the Syriac script as we look at the hieroglyphics and wonder how these words sounded in this part of the world.

Syriac chants belong to a music system. The Syriac chant repertory is not an at-random collection of melodies but is unique with a musical grammar and syntax in the form of poetic genres, prosodic features, melodic range, performance practices, and a unique manner of ornamentation of the ultimate vowel sound in a phrase or verse. Also, the rhythm in Syriac chants is linear (different from the cyclic rhythm in Indian classical music). The application of rhythm is in conjunction with the Syntactic and semantic structures of the verses. For these reasons, the Syriac chant repertory deserves attention as a *Sangeet Paddhati*, a music system, and should find a place in India's music textbooks.

Expansion of a received tradition in India. There were such luminaries as Fr. Chandy Kadavil (1588-1673; Perczel 2014: 30-49) in Kerala, who mastered the language well enough to write acrostic hymns in Syriac. Fr. Kadavil was famous among the clergy, and the Portuguese missionaries acknowledged his extraordinary capabilities and referred to him in their letters to Portugal as "Alexander the Indian." The Syriac clergy in Kerala were capable enough to build on the received tradition from West Asia.<sup>[1]</sup>

Christianity is an Eastern religion, and India is part of that Eastness. The opening verse in the Book of Esther is worthy of attention. "During the reign of Ahasuerus—this was the Ahasuerus who ruled over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia ..." (Esther 1:1). My friend, Prof. Zach Thundy thinks that the theology of the fourth gospel is of Indian origin (Thundy 2020 : 60-72), and he attributes the authorship of the Gospel to Thomas the Apostle of India (Thundy 2021:165-178). In any case, Christianity is an integral part of the cultural fabric of India, making the country a part of the geography of early Christianity. It adds to the greatness of the wonder that *is* India.

### Conclusions

The continuing presence of an ancient linguistic and its musical traditions far away from their origin's geographical locations is an unusual cultural phenomenon that calls for greater academic attention from scholars in multiple disciplines. The Syriac tradition reached Kerala in the early Christian era and flourished there until the middle of the twentieth century when the Syriac churches translated the liturgy into the vernacular. Almost half a century later, the Aramaic Project aimed to revive sound, sentiments, and melodies. So far, the Project is gaining momentum, especially among the younger generation of Syro Malabar Catholics.

The tolerant attitude and the multi-cultural milieu of India served the survival of the Syriac tradition in India. This West Asian tradition took its roots in India and established its own musical and linguistic identities. Thus, India is part of the geography of Early Christianity and Early Christian music.

We may use this forum to formulate an application to UNESCO to consider the Syriac tradition in India as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

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