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# Vayalar Ramavarma, Yusafali Kechery, and the Syriac Connection: *Meeting of the Sacred & the Secular*

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Dr. AMEL ANTONY

*In this short essay, Dr. Amel Antony draws attention to an interesting phenomenon in Kerala where non-Christian lyricists for Malayalam movies feel comfortable in combining Syriac and Malayalam words in the same lyrics. What is more interesting is that Syriac words are inflected according to the rules of Malayalam grammar and syntax. It is the aftereffect of centuries of presence of both languages in Kerala and the mutual respect and communal harmony that existed between the speakers of both languages. Dr. Amel cites examples from two famous poet-lyricists who gained wide popularity in Kerala. We hope Dr. Amel's essay will interest scholars in the fields of linguistics and evolution of language cultures. We appreciate Dr. Amel's interest in and enthusiastic support for the Aramaic Project.*

*✍️ Dr. Joseph J. Palackal, CMI.*



## *Meeting of the Sacred & the Secular*

The Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara Churches are part of the 23 Eastern Catholic Churches, in communion with Rome. The Syro in both the cases stand for Syriac, which is the original liturgical language for both these churches. For the Syro Malabar Church, however, it is East Syriac, while Syro Malankara Church traces its roots to West Syriac. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Jacobite Syrian Church, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Malabar Independent Syrian Church (Thozhiyur Church) also have West Syriac connection as denoted by the word Syrian in their names.

The Assyrian Church of the East (not in communion with the Pope) is the other Church in Kerala with East Syriac as its liturgical language. Suffice to say that the majority of Kerala Christians have a Syriac legacy, either East or West.

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic and the family of Semitic languages include Hebrew, Arabic and Phoenecian in addition to Aramaic. Due to Maritime trade relations with Persia and Arabia, Aramaic had found its way to Southern India by the last century before the Christian era. The bonds got strengthened with the arrival of Jewish community for whom Aramaic was the lingua franca, though Hebrew remained the language of liturgy. It is believed that St Thomas, the disciple of Jesus arrived in 52 AD at Maliankara (near present day Kodungallur, Kerala, India) and preached to the Aramaic speaking Jewish community, and later on to the natives.



The Indian Church started receiving Bishops from the Persian Church at least from the third century onwards. The Syrian immigration of fourth and ninth Centuries added on to this pre-Eminence of Syriac as the language of Liturgy.

The Indian Church and the Persian Church shared the patrimony of St. Thomas and Syriac as the liturgical language. It is noteworthy that Malayalam emerged as a distinct language by 9-10 century AD. Hence Syriac in Indian Church predates Malayalam, paving the way for a smooth assimilation of Syriac words into Malayalam. There was also a prevalent method of writing Malayalam using East Syriac script (with addition of several modified characters) called *Karshon*. In the setting of Kerala, Syriac is a living and continuous tradition of more than 20 centuries, though in the present times it is restricted to liturgy.

The Syro Malabar church partially switched over to Malayalam as the liturgical language, instead of East Syriac from the year 1962. However, the transition was a slow process and many priests continued to recite certain hymns and prayers in East Syriac. As for the faithful, their daily prayers had a profusion of Syriac words and pure Malayalam prayers came into vogue by the early nineteen seventies.

Despite the transition to Malayalam, certain Syriac words have been retained and are part of common parlance, having gained acceptance as Malayalam words. Some of the examples are '*Qurbana* (Offering, Holy mass), '*Mamodisa*' (Baptism), '*Bawa*' (The Father) '*Ruha*' (Spirit), '*Qudasa*' (holy, Sacrament) '*Mar*' (Literal meaning is Lord, commonly used to address Bishops), '*Amen*' (let it be).



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There are several Christian devotional songs specifically composed for Malayalam films, and they've all been the works of mostly non-Christians. The usage of Syriac words in such songs is a rarity and this article would want to highlight two compositions written at a gap of 16 years, in 1971 by Vayalar Ramavarma, and in 1997 by Yusafali Kechery.



### **Vayalar Ramavarma** (1928 – 1975)

Also known as 'Vayalar' (after the place of his birth in Alapuzha district of Kerala) is one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed lyricists, who penned almost 1300 songs for about 250 films. Like the other lyricists of the period, Vayalar was an established Malayalam poet as well. In fact, his lyrics were poetry at its best and known for the usage of pure Malayalam sans the Sanskrit decorations. The lyrics of Vayalar set to tune by the music maestro G. Devarajan and sung by K. J. Yesudas led to many Evergreen melodies in Malayalam movies.



**G. DEVARAJAN**  
(1927 – 2006)

The Vayalar–Devarajan duo has done several Christian devotionals of which the most popular are 'Nithya Vishudhayam Kanya Mariyamae' (Ever Holy Virgin Mary), 'Vishudhanaya Sebasthianosae' (Oh St. Sebastian) and 'Bawakkum Puthranum Parishudha Ruhaykkum Sthuthiyaayirikatte' (Glory be to the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit forever).



The latter song stands out for the use of the words *Bawa*' (Father) and '*Ruha*'(Spirit). This song was composed for the movie '*Makanae Ninakku wendi*' (1971) .

Syro Malabar Church had gone for partial vernacularization of the liturgy from 1962 and the process was completed with the revision in 1968, removing the optional Syriac prayers as well.

However for the Syriac Christians of that era, the minor Doxology (irrespective of East / West difference) was '*Bawakkum Puthranum Parishudha Ruhaykkum Sthuthiyayirikattae*'( Praise be to the Father , the Son, and the Holy Spirit). The prayer books had already come out with '*Pithawinum Puthranum Parishudhatmavinum Sthuthi*'(verbatim Malayalam translation).

Vayalar, however, retained the minor Doxology with the two Syriac words for two reasons: It was still in common usage and also he felt that translating would take away the shine and sheen of the composition.

In fact, the setting of the song in the movie is that of a family evening prayer, with two ladies leading the prayers along with two boys. The wall to which they face (traditionally, the wall on the Eastern side) is adorned by the framed images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Jesus the Good shepherd, and Jesus at Gethsemane. In the middle of the wall is a Cross amidst lit candles.



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An atheist and communist sympathizer, Vayalar penned down a soul-searching prayer with intonations from the Scriptures.

‘Protect us, O Lord of Mercy. Do extend your hand and take away these chalices filled with tears . O Lord above, be with us. Reduce our sorrows as we pray to you with choked throats’.

The request for taking away the Chalices filled with tears is a clear reference to the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. One is moved to piety and an intense spirituality on listening to this song, and Devarajan the music composer, has made sure that the music reflects the ethos of this prayer.

<https://youtu.be/gYtKOaNYIIs> <https://youtu.be/ACStz2iQbLY>



### **Yusufali Kechery** (1934 – 2015)

Yusufali was a noted lyricist and accomplished poet, in addition to being a Film Director and Producer as well. He went on to bag several Malayalam literary awards, along with being judged the best lyricist on three occasions for the Kerala State film awards.

His crowning glory was the National award for the best lyrics – a Sanskrit composition for the Malayalam Movie, Mazha in 2000. Despite a firm grounding in Sanskrit and prowess to the extent of writing in Sanskrit, Yousafali Kechery was known to pen lines in Malayalam with simple, endearing words.



The Christian devotional song ‘ Wathil thurakku Nee Kalame ‘(Open your door ‘O’ time , Behold the personification of Love, Lord Jesus who prayed for us even while writhing on the cross) is from the Movie ‘Five Star Hospital’(1997).



**BOMBAY RAVI**

(1926 – 2012)

The songs were set to tune by Bombay Ravi. Like Vayalar, Yousafali also had paired with Devarajan to produce some evergreen hits . However, Yousafali shared a special chemistry with Bombay Ravi and the songs of ‘Five star Hospital’ remain popular even after 25 years. ‘Wathil Thurakku Nee Kalame’ continues to be a favourite hymn

for many a church choir. The movie portrays the evil traits and unethical practices of Corporate Hospitals , through the story of the protagonist who is a young singer.

The setting of the song ‘ Wathil Thurakku’ is a Catholic Parish Church where the protagonist as a child sings this as an entrance hymn for the Holy Mass, while the faithful keep coming into the Church. The Parish Priest listens keenly to this rendition and gets impressed with the talent of the boy. He then later persuades the foster father of the boy to enroll this prodigy for regular training and mentoring under a music teacher.

The last stanza of the song goes like this ‘At the time of death, as my body goes weak, be at my side. Take my life into your hallowed arms and let me be merged in Holy Spirit’. The year was 1997 and Kechery, the town where Yousafali lived had mainly Syro Malabar Churches, which had completely given up on ‘Ruha d’qudsha’ as the original term for Holy Spirit.



So this throws up three possibilities:- (1) Yousafali recalled this term from his acquaintances in childhood days (before 1962, when the Holy Mass was in Syriac) (2) at the time of writing this lyrics he had contacts with the faithful of the Assyrian Church of The East who continue to use *Ruha d'Qudsha* in both liturgy and family prayers (3) A Syro Malabarean contemporary of his, was still using *Ruha d'Qudsha* in minor Doxology.

<https://youtu.be/XikuF34UjRM>

### **Conclusion:**

At a time when the prospects of Syriac are on the wane, (notwithstanding the recent efforts for revival) it's interesting and at the same time fascinating that two non-Christians, Vayalar, a Hindu Atheist, and Yusufali, a Muslim, went ahead with the usage of Syriac words in Malayalam lyrics. For them Syriac was not a dead language, and the Syriac words blended smoothly with the rest of the Malayalam text. '*Ruha d'Qudsha*' denotes 'Spirit of Holiness' (Holy Spirit) in common parlance. The word '*Ruh*' means breath and '*d'Qudsha*' of Holiness. Here, Syriac scores over Latin and Greek in giving a higher connotation of Breath of Holiness or truly the Breath of Alaha (God). The philosopher in Yusufali is right, when he seeks the breath of life from Alaha to merge with the breath of Holiness at the time of death. For those who are working for the revival of Syriac, these two devotional songs are a source of constant inspiration and a signboard for the way ahead.

### **Acknowledgement:**

This article is inspired by the Denha Endowment Lecture by Palackal Yawsep Kathanar at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram in 2018. See Aramaic Project-255 <https://youtu.be/0L6eBemzTgU>





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Dr. Amel Antony, Senior Consultant & HOD of Lisie Institute of Radiology Research & Imaging Sciences, Kochi, India; did his undergraduate studies at St. John's Medical College, Bengaluru and Post-Graduation in Radio Diagnosis from NHL Medical College, Ahmedabad. Cleared the Diplomate of National Board Examinations in Radio Diagnosis as well.

History has always been a passion and especially Church History has remained so fascinating and interesting for him. Being a proud Syro Malabarean, it is natural that the East Syriac legacy and heritage remains close to his heart.

He believes, revival and promotion of Syriac language is an essential and unifying factor for Syro Malabar Church, that is spread across continents, languages and cultures!

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