



Puthen paana: A Musical Study
Joseph J. Palackal
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PREFACE

The music of Puthen pana is an important part of the memories of my childhood. I grew up listening to Puthen pana at home and Syriac liturgical music in our parish church in Kerala, South India. At that time it did not occur to me that the two musical styles were related or that one day I would study them. Today, the practice of singing Puthen pana and Syriac liturgical music are on the decline. A few melodies of Syriac chants are still sung in Kerala, but Puthen pana is hardly ever performed. The average age of people who can sing Puthen pana is steadily on the increase, and there has been no attempt to record their performances. This study aims to preserve the Puthen pana tradition and to create a new interest in Christian music of India.

Many people contributed to this study. I am grateful to the informants from the Kerala communities in New York and India, who found time to sing for me and answer my questions. I am specially thankful to Dr. Barbara Hampton who has been my guide and mentor all through my academic pursuits in the United States. Dr. Hampton's insightful comments and queries helped in clarifying many issues related to this study. I thank Dr. Meena Alexander for reading this manuscript and for her valuable suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr. Joseph Aquilina for his support and encouragement and to Dr. Irene Zaderenko for her assistance. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all the professors who taught me at Hunter College and the Graduate Center.



INTRODUCTION

Puthen pana (new song) is a case in point for cultural communication at multiple levels. Its author, John Ernest Hanxleden (1681-1732), popularly known as Arnos Pathiri, was a German Jesuit missionary. He went to Kerala in the south- west coast of India, learned Sanskrit and Malayalam,¹ and used these languages to write many books, religious as well as secular. Among his works, Puthen pana, which narrates Biblical events, became the most popular.

Pana tradition, a capella singing² of devotional songs at home and at temple precincts, has been prevalent among the Hindus. As an attempt to indigenize the Christian faith, Hanxleden modeled Puthen pana after the already-popular Jnanappana (Song of Divine Wisdom) of Poonthanam Namboodiri. Poonthanam was a highly honored Hindu mystic poet of Kerala who lived in the sixteenth century. Like Poonthanam, Hanxleden used the Malayalam language to write his poem. At the time of Hanxleden, Malayalam was the language of the common people, while Sanskrit was the language of the elite and learned

¹ Malayalam belongs to the South-Indian branch of the Dravidian family of languages and is the official language of the present state of Kerala. Malayalam struck out on its own by 10th century. Today it is spoken by 35 million people, according to the Manorama Yearbook (1994:464-465).

² The verb more commonly used in Malayalam for singing pana is pana vayikkuka which literally means "to read pana," regardless of the application of pitch and rhythm usually associated with the act of singing. The verb patuka (to sing) is used less frequently with reference to pana.

classes. Even though the Christians enjoyed high social standing, the learning of Sanskrit was the exclusive privilege of the Brahmin sects and, therefore, not accessible to them.

Hanxleden employed Dravidian meters, which are different from Sanskrit meters. Dravidian meters are commonly used in both Hindu religious and secular poetry and can be sung in several ways. For Puthen pana performance, Christians adapted the music style of Chaldeo-Syrian liturgy from the Syrian churches in Kerala. The result was a unique style of singing Puthen pana and new ways of singing the Dravidian meters.

Today, the practice of singing Puthen pana is declining. So far, there has been no attempt to systematically document the melodies in the form of audio-visual recordings or music transcriptions.³ Arnold Bake (1889-1963) made extensive audio field recordings of the performance genres of South India, mainly Kerala, in 1938. Although he recorded many Christian genres, he did not record Puthen pana.⁴ Probably Bake was not in Kerala during the liturgical season of Lent or did not have an opportunity to attend a Christian wake, the two most common occasions on which Puthen pana is sung in the present century.

³ From a recent communication from India, I understand that Christ Hall, a Jesuit institution at Kozhikode, Kerala, is planning to make an audio recording of Puthenpana.

⁴ I listened to a copy of these recordings preserved at the Center for Ethnomusicology at the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, in October, 1988. In 1984 Nazir Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin did field work in South India and videotaped the performance genres documented by Bake in 1938-39 for a longitudinal and comparative study, which did not include Puthen pana.



As a literary work, Puthen pana has gained much scholarly attention in the past (P.J. Thomas [1935] 1989; Nair 1974; Ulakamthara 1982; Thermadham 1983; Manavalan 1990). However, its musical aspects have virtually been unexplored. Generally, Indian Christian music has received very little attention from scholars either in India or abroad.⁵

According to traditional belief, Christianity was preached in India in the very first century. Historical evidence indicates the presence of Christian liturgy in Kerala from the fourth century. Yet, there has been no attempt to write a history of Christian music in India. The present study attempts to fill some of these gaps by reconstructing the history of Christian music and placing Puthen pana in that general framework. The study also aims at understanding and explaining the musical aspects of Puthen pana within its social and historical context and examining those factors that played a key role in the process of communication within and between cultures.

A survey of research on Indian music shows that the focus of studies in the last three decades has been the "High" classical traditions: North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Karnatak) music with special emphasis on the North Indian tradition.⁶ Local styles have

⁵ It may be noted that "Christian music" is not mentioned at all in an otherwise extensive entry on Indian music in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (Sadie 1980:vol.IX, 69-166).

⁶ See RILM Abstracts (1967-1989); Music Index (1971-1990); Journal of the Indian Musicological Society (1970-1994); Daniel M. Neuman (1990); Bonnie C. Wade (1979).



received comparatively much less attention. Puthen pana is a local form from South India. Yet, it is a product of cross-cultural communication at a larger level and sheds light on the processes of formation of important musical traditions in the country.

Map of India, showing the places mentioned in this study.

CHAPTER I

CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

The history of Christianity in India, until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, is mainly the history of Christianity in a relatively small geographical area of South India: Kerala on the western coast, and Tamil Nadu on the eastern coast.⁷ According to traditional belief, Christianity was preached in India by St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ. The earliest documentary source for his mission in India is the Acts of Judas Thomas, which was written in Syriac, probably in Edessa, in ca. A.D. 200. It describes the journey of the Apostle to India and his activities there.⁸ Much of its narrative is

⁷ For a discussion of Christian communities in other parts of India before the 16th century, see Bernard of St. Thomas (1992:35-37, 250-251) and Mathias Mundadan (1989:108, 130-134).

⁸ The Syriac text of the Acts of Judas Thomas was first edited by William Wright (1871) in two volumes; vol.I the Syriac text, vol.II the English translation by the editor.



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