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## THE SURVIVAL STORY OF THE SOUND, SENTIMENTS, AND MELODIES OF THE ARAMAIC CHANTS IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

The generation that lived through the transition of liturgy from Syriac (Aramaic) to the vernacular in the 1960s in the Syro Malabar Church in Kerala, India, continues to own an extensive memory base of sounds, melodies, and meanings of the Syriac chants. These chants were once significant markers of the identity of the St. Thomas Christians, also known as Nazranis or Syrian (Syriac) Christians. While many of the chant texts are available in books and manuscripts, the melodies and their specific sonorities, which were mostly transmitted orally, are gradually fading from the memories of the transitional generation. This generation is the last link to the legacy of a centuries-old tradition. The Aramaic Project, launched by the Christian Musicological Society of India in 2012, is a belated and time-sensitive attempt to document the melodies and memories and pass them on to the younger generation. Although the youngsters seem to be enthusiastic, it is unclear at this point if they will own these experiences and pass them on to the next generation. Even if it is only partially successful, the Project may lead to the preservation of at least some aspects of this endangered world heritage. The current political upheavals in the Middle East, which is the primary religious and cultural source of the Syriac heritage, are adversely affecting the survival of these linguistic and musical treasures of humanity. Hence the urgency of the Aramaic Project in India.

### DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to the Saintly Palackal Thoma Malpan (1780-1841), my collateral ancestor. He was a great teacher of the Aramaic Language, founder of the first seminary of the St. Thomas Christians, and co-founder of the first religious congregation for men in India, to which I belong, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. It is a great honor to write about the language that Thoma Malpan cherished dearly.

### ARAMAIC CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH INDIA

For almost one thousand years, the biggest export item from India was religion. That religion was not Hinduism; it was Buddhism (Sen, 2005: xii). Soon after Emperor Ashoka (d. 232 BCE) embraced Buddhism, he became its most prominent promoter, sending missionaries to many different parts of the world. More importantly, Emperor Asoka laid down rules for respectful dialogue among the followers of different religious traditions. So, by the time Christianity came on the scene, India had already prepared a mindset that could welcome diverse ideas and philosophies. It is in this context that we talk about the movement of Christianity from West Asia to South India.

Christianity probably came to South India before the preaching of Jesus became a religion. The St. Thomas Christians in India believe that Christian faith came to Kerala, on the southwest coast of India, through St. Thomas, the apostle. The region was known to West Asia through the spice trade; it is possible that the Apostle joined one of the trade ships. In any case, the St. Thomas Christians received the gospel message from the Apostle, who made the most robust profession



of his faith in just two words in the Aramaic Language: “Mār wālāh” (“my Lord and my God”). Those words were an exuberant outburst when Jesus appeared, especially to pacify Thomas the Apostle (Jn 20:28). While the other disciples were doubtful, Apostle Thomas acclaimed the human Jesus as both man and God; more than three centuries later, the Council of Nicaea (325) reaffirmed that faith in many more words.

This apostolic faith flourished in South India in a multicultural milieu. In due course, the Indian Syrian Christians also began celebrating their faith in poetry in the Syriac language. Let us discuss a couplet that expresses profound Christology. This couplet is from the Liturgy of the Hours. It is the eighteenth couplet from a long chant, *Brīk hannānā* (“Blessed is the merciful”), which is part of the night prayers in the Advent and Christmas seasons. When it comes to this particular couplet, the liturgical book prescribes it be sung thrice. At some point in history, the St. Thomas Christians began to treat this couplet as a separate chant, singing it three times, in three ascending pitch registers.

Sagdīnan mār lālāhūsākh  
Walnāšūākh d’lāpūlāga<sup>1</sup>.

“We worship you, O Lord, [without doubt] in your divinity,  
And your humanity [which are indivisible]”.

Let me point out that *d’lāpūlāga* means “without a doubt” or “without division.” There is a smart word-play on the word *pūlāga* that resolves several Christological controversies. Christian thinkers spent much ink and more mental energy to arrive at a consensus on how the humanity and divinity in Christ comingled. As a consequence of the controversies, Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, suffered and died in exile. Much later, the Portuguese missionaries condemned the St. Thomas Christians in India as Nestorians. Meanwhile, St. Thomas Christians continue to sing the correct theological hymn and worship Jesus as both man and God in the verses cited above, which the Portuguese missionaries interpreted as heretical or Nestorian.

There is yet another song that dissolves the cloud of Nestorianism that has been hanging over the St. Thomas Christians ever since the Portuguese encountered them at the dawn of the sixteenth century.

Bar maryam, bar maryam  
Bar alāhā, d’yeldas maryam.<sup>2</sup>

“Son of Mary, son of Mary  
The son of God, to whom Mary gave birth”.

That is, Mary was, indeed, “*Theotokos*” or “Bearer of God” because the son that Mary brought forth was also the son of God. There was no confusion in their minds. Also, they kept on singing the couplet as a response to the rest of the strophes in the poem. The rest of the stanzas enumerated the works that the son of Mary did: “Son of Mary promised the Paraclete,” “Son of Mary sanctified the waters of Jordan, by receiving baptism,” and so on. That Son of Mary is the Son of God. Interestingly, the song gave a semantic shift, from pejorative to prestigious, to the phrase, “Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary...?” (Mark 6:3). Thus, the St. Thomas Christians celebrated faith and doctrines through chants.

<sup>1</sup> See full text of this chant in P. Bedjan, *Breviarium juxta Ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*, (Rome, 2002), 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> See full text of the song in J. Vellian, *Purathanapptukal* [Ancient Songs] (Kottayam, 2002), 235-236



At this stage, I would like to draw attention to the Malayalam translation of the Syriac word “*haimānūthā*,” which often appears in English translation as “faith.” The Christians in Kerala translated it into Malayalam, as “*wiṣwāsam*.” “*Ṣwāsam*” means “breath.” *Wiṣwāsam*” stands for “*wiṣiṣtamāya ṣwāsam*” meaning “auspicious breath.” Faith, to them, is not pure intellectual assent; it is not something that you discuss, argue about, and then arrive at a conclusion; rather, it is their very life-breath or way of life. That idea of breath connects to another word in Aramaic, “*ruh*”/ “*ruha*,” which is translated awkwardly into English as “Spirit.” “*Ruha d’Qudeša*” is the very breath of God or the Holy Ghost. So, *wiṣwāsam* is intrinsically connected to the very life-breath of God. This is the way the Syriac/Syrian Christians in India celebrated their faith.

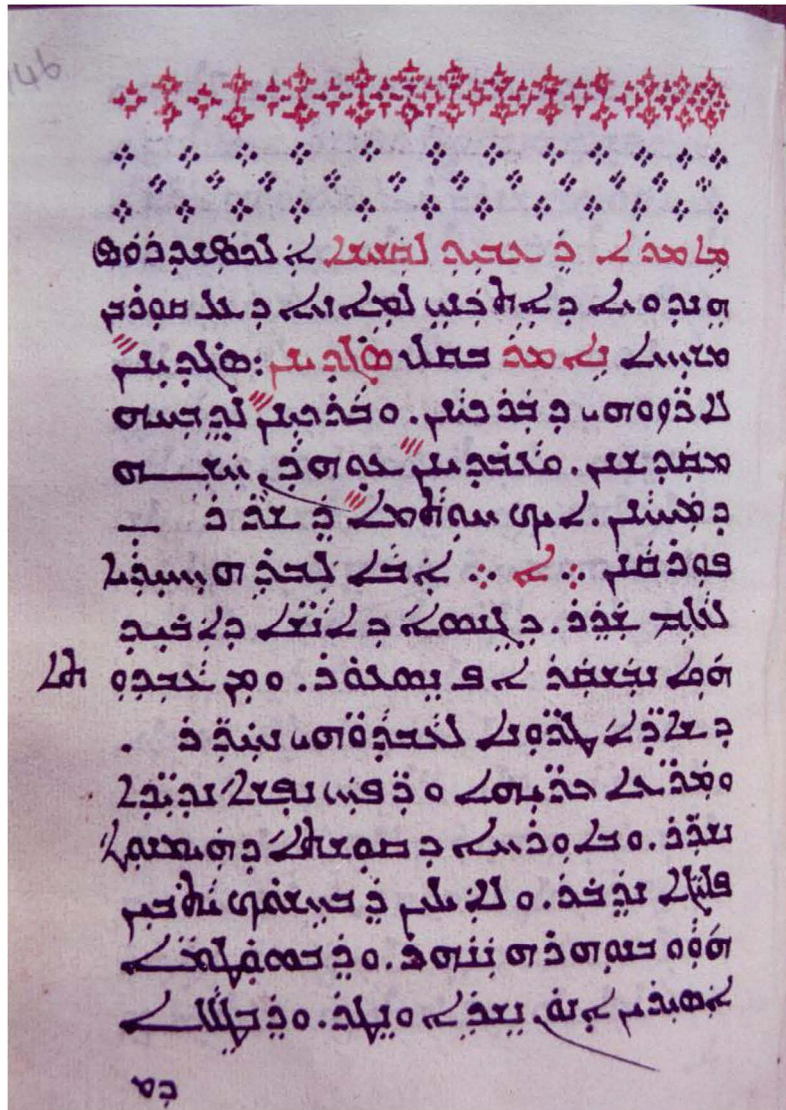
#### CONFLICT AND COMPROMISE

Every typical love story in Hindi movies has a villain. In the romance between the East-Syrian Church of India and the Western colonial Latin Church, the villain came from Portugal. The colonial missionaries befriended the St. Thomas Christians, who conducted their worship services in the Syriac language. The missionaries found the liturgy and several other cultural practices unorthodox or simply not in conformity with their idea of the Catholic Church of the West. Therefore, they tried to change the liturgy from Syriac to Latin. However, St. Thomas Christians vehemently objected. They argued with the missionaries, saying that they had been following the “way of Thomas,” while the missionaries followed “the way of Peter.” The local Christians wanted to retain their affinity with Syriac, which they considered to be “the language of the Lord.” The colonial missionaries, however, persisted and eventually succeeded in introducing several Latin-rite rituals into the Syriac liturgy. They translated Latin-chant texts into Syriac.

Meanwhile, times have changed both in the Western Church and Eastern Churches. In the 1960s, the St. Thomas Catholics, now known as the Syro Malabar Church, did something that the Portuguese missionaries could not have imagined. The Syro Malabar Church wanted to be more Indian than Syrian and decided to translate the liturgy into Malayalam, the local language of Kerala. Thus, the generation that grew up in the 1960s did not have the opportunity to go through the Syriac experience. At present, the Syriac language of the Syrian Christians is moribund.

#### THE ARAMAIC PROJECT

It is in this context that the idea of the Aramaic Project emerged. I grew up in the Syriac tradition. So, when it came to the choice of topic for my doctoral dissertation at the City University of New York, I chose the “Syriac Chants Traditions in South India” (Palackal, 2005). During that time, I also worked on an audio CD, “Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India” (Palackal, 2002). I realized that if we did not make concerted efforts to resuscitate it, this unique chant tradition could die out, leaving few audio traces for the coming generations. The primary goal of the Aramaic project is to preserve memories and melodies in the Syriac traditions in India. An extensive audio/video library is taking shape on the internet, under the auspices of the Christian Musicological Society of India (see [www.aramaicproject.com](http://www.aramaicproject.com)).



A page from the Syriac manuscript (Mannanam, Syr.63), showing the acrostic hymn by Alexander the Indian (1588-c.1673). Photo courtesy: Fr. Antony Vallvanthara, CMI (1942-2008).

During the last eight years, the focus of the Aramaic Project has been on the chant repertory in the East-Syriac (Chaldean) tradition of the Syro Malabar Church. There are four different categories of chants in this repertory. First, the chants from the liturgy of the Hours: the search for the earliest melodic patterns of Syriac chants may lead us to this category of chants. Most of these melodies are syllabic (one note for each syllable) in nature. Although authorship of some of the chant texts is available, we do not know the names of the composers of the melodies. Most of the chants in this category have a limited melodic range (see examples in the Aramaic Project-12, 13, & 14<sup>3</sup>).

The second category consists of chants that local composers created in Kerala. At the dawn of the seventeenth century, there were priests among the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala who knew

<sup>3</sup> For listed performances, see <<http://www.aramaicproject.com/resources/references-and-manuscripts>>, accessed 02.03.20.



the Syriac language so well as to write acrostic hymns. Fr. Chandy Kadavil (1588-c.1673) is one such priest. Fr. Kadavil's knowledge of the Syriac language was well known both within and outside India. The Portuguese missionaries in Kerala made appreciative mention of Fr. Chandy Kadavil in their letters to their superiors at home. Those missionaries gave a nickname to Fr. Kadavil: "Alexander the Indian." A manuscript at the archive of St. Joseph's Monastery at Mannanam, Kerala (Mannanam Syr. 63), includes one of his acrostic hymns. The title indicates that the poem should be sung to the tune of Sagdīnan Mār (We Worship You, O Lord; mentioned earlier). Also, the melody, as well as the performance practice of singing Sagdīnan Mār three times in three ascending pitch registers, seem to be unique to the St. Thomas Christians. We have a handful of other chants that are of local origin. For example, the Syriac choir at St. John Nepomucene Church at Konthuruthy, Kerala, sings a Syriac chant in honor of their patron saint. Someone in the region may have composed the lyrics and melody for this chant (see Aramaic Project-51M). Also, the text and melody of B'eda d'yawman ("On this Festival Day") may be of Kerala origin (see Aramaic Project-26).

The Syriac translations of Latin chants belong to the third category. These chants are the results of the cultural communications between the Syriac and Latin liturgical and musical traditions, starting from the sixteenth century. The Portuguese missionaries persuaded the St Thomas Christians to accept some of the Latin-rite rituals and practices, the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the Novena to the Blessed Virgin Mary being the most popular. With the assistance of people who knew both Latin and Syriac, the missionaries translated the Latin-chant texts into Syriac. The local musicians composed new melodies for the Syriac versions. The result of that process was the emergence of a new branch of the Syriac music repertory in Kerala that is exclusively the patrimony of the Syro Malabar Catholics. The chants in this category are performed with instrumental accompaniment.

The chants for the solemn celebration of Qurbana belong to the fourth category. The Qurbana consists of elaborate melismatic melodies interspersed with prayers (*slōtha*) in a recitative style. Overall, the entire Qurbana flows as one musical cantata. The solemn Qurbana is sung with instrumental accompaniment. The most commonly used instruments are the violin, harmonium, triangle, and bass drum. It is probable that the Portuguese missionaries introduced those instruments to the Syro Malabar Catholics. The melodies are syncretic, drawing influences from such varied sources as Gregorian chants and Indian music (See examples in Aramaic Project-27, 62, 70, 199, 155, 156, & 157).

#### RECLAIMING SYRIAC CHANTS TO REAFFIRM IDENTITY: AN AMERICAN STORY

The Aramaic Project and the YouTube videos of Syriac chants have promoted a conversation on the Syriac heritage of India across international borders. For example, a new chapter is evolving in the history of East-Syriac chants among the expatriate Syro Malabar communities in North America. The idea of a bilingual (English/Syriac) Qurbana is gaining traction, especially among the Syro Malabar youth. Currently, several Syro Malabar communities in America sing the Resurrection Hymn (Lāku Mārā) and the Trisagion (Qandišā Alāhā) in Syriac. Ironically, the younger generation is more at home with singing Syriac chants. They do not seem to have the mental inhibition and emotional apathy that their parents have toward Syriac chants. The youngsters see this as a way of connecting with the history of their forefathers and as a way to reclaim their identity. The church choirs are making extensive use of the resources available on the website of the Aramaic Project. By singing Syriac chants, the Syro Malabar youth may alter the linguistic sound map of North America and also contribute to preserving an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. It is possible that in the distant future, the sound of East Syriac may fade



from the memories of the Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala and survive among the expatriate communities in America.

#### CONCLUSION

I hope that this paper and the videos that are available on the web site of the Aramaic Project help the viewers to re-imagine India as a country that continues to preserve the sounds, memories, melodies, and thought processes overlaying and underpinning the ancient Aramaic language. Such an imagination could be in direct contrast to the current trend among the Hindutva-obsessed leaders of the BJP, the ruling party in India, who have an extremely narrow perspective of India as a caste-controlled Hindu nation. Over the centuries, India has proved itself to be a land of coexistence. Classical India is like the river in Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 1922): everything that flows onto its shores becomes Indian. The nation of India has always welcomed the religions, sciences, and philosophies of all immigrant cultures and peoples with open arms. Indeed, "Let noble thoughts come from anywhere" (*Rg Veda* 1:89:1) could serve as the cultural basis for the preservation of the Aramaic tradition in India. Our goal is to make a historical intervention to preserve the Aramaic heritage and pass it on to the next generation and the generation after. *Jai Hind and Šlāmā amakhōn!*

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