

Abha, Why Have You Forsaken Me

[Matthew 27:46]

The exact words Christ last uttered on the cross are no longer extant. But in the true Biblical spirit that what has been lost can be found, a Malayali priest based in New York is on a quest to rediscover the beautiful songs in Aramaic (the language which Jesus actually spoke) that Syrian Christian families in Kerala have chanted for centuries



Pic: Jijon Sikhera

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Father Joseph J Palackal is on a musical mission, recording Christian chants sung since around 2,000 years ago in south India and which are on the verge of becoming extinct. Not long ago, the rain-washed prayer halls of Syro-Malabar churches, situated along the Kerala coast, used to resonate with soulful Syriac chants till they were almost wiped out by new missionaries and vernacularisation of Christianity.

These pre-Arabic chants — a dialect of Aramaic — form a rare collection of musical chants, the closest one can get to music in the era that the New Testament largely talks about.

Palackal, an internationally-renowned musicologist whose research works have been documented by Harvard University Library, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and British Library, has undertaken the arduous task of recording Syriac hymns, many of which were an integral part of the Syro-Malabar liturgy, but now remains only in the memory of a few older generation Syrian Christians.

"It is a work in progress, a challenge that I have been passionately undertaking for the last 10 years," says the 65-year-old New York-based musician. The Syriac chants have been passed on from generation to generation, through word of mouth, sung by Syrian Christian families, perhaps without comprehending the deeper spiritual significance and poetry in the lyrics.

"Syriac, like Sanskrit, is another beautiful classical language, which is at once both prose and poetry," says Palackal. He cites an example, rendering a chant sung at the funeral of priests: Edta Pus(y) lek (Y) Bslama ... azelna li ... (O church, remain in peace, I am going; and thy dwellers in righteousness, Pray for me)

Interestingly, in the poem, the dead priest 'asks' his colleagues to celebrate his remembrance, not to mourn. In the fourth stanza, the narrative of the song shifts and the people who had gathered inform the priest that they

shall offer themselves as oblation (Kurbana) and he can go in peace. "I got goose bumps when I read the lyrics," Palackal says, pointing out that he was delighted to see the word Kurbana used in such a sublime context. This analysis of the poetry segment is now part of an essay that Palackal penned for The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities.

He says that these songs are perhaps the last remaining pure forms of Syriac chants right from the age of Jesus because "the modern Syria we see today has been Arabised to a great extent." Syrian Christians in Kerala never had to face persecution and for centuries they lived peacefully in God's own country. Over the years, Malayalam borrowed words and phrases from Syriac. "The phrase Aram means land in Syriac and Aram Pattuka has a negative connotation. The word Appa (father) came from the Syriac Abha and the word Kurbana has today become part of the national vocabulary. Other Syriac words like Mamodisa and Malakha are now part of the lingo of the average Malayali," he says.

Palackal is proud of his pluralistic Indian lineage and holds degrees not only in theology and psychology but even in Indian classical music and musicology. "This is a nation where the word Om originated, which is the primal sound, from which everything originated. If someone says Om belongs to one religion that is a stupid statement because it is like saying electricity can be produced only in one area," he says.

Palackal even sang a Christu Sahasranamam which was critiqued by some people within the community. "God is called by different names by different religions. The Aramaic word Alaha becomes Allah and both Christianity and Islam are closely related. It would be foolish to wage a war claiming superiority over another religion," he says.

Palackal was inspired to begin the

Aramaic project to preserve the Syriac chants after he realized that music that originated in a particular era is not only about music, but also reveals how a community spoke, loved and imagined collectively. "Music and literature are the highest forms of imagination in pursuit of spirituality, and when we comprehend Syriac chants we are actually receiving a glimpse of what the gospels meant in its original spirit," he says.

But is not going back to roots dangerous, like it has been with the extreme Arabisation of Islam? He counters: "As an academic if I want to understand the core philosophy of Upanishads, for instance, I need to learn Sanskrit. The words Yoga and Advaita do not have an English translation. But I feel the problem arises when we interpret the text literally instead of understanding the underlying spirit."

As part of the Aramaic project, Palackal has so far recorded 120 hours of Syriac chants, travelling all over the state. "We as a nation have not taken folk and non-classical music seriously which is sad because these lyrics speak about stories of human evolution which is part of a great civilization called Maha Bharat," he says.

Palackal hopes that church authorities will come forward and fund this project to digitize the songs for posterity. "The government of Kerala too should convince UNESCO to list Syriac language of the Syro Malabar church among the endangered languages of the world," he feels.

CRUSADER OF CHORDS: (above) Fr Joseph J Palackal; (left) His performance in New York in 1990, becoming the first Indian to perform in an Off Broadway show
Pic courtesy: thecmsindia.org

