For the love of Christ and music

New York-based Father Joseph Palackal is making all-out efforts to preserve the traditional Syro-Malabar music in Kerala through recordings, research articles.

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read them. So, people learned the poem by heart. My mother could narrate the entire Pana in a more than two-hour sitting.”

Syriac is a dialect of the Aramaic language, the mother tongue of Jesus. The music came from West Asia hundreds of years ago and mingled with the local Culture.

“The music in Indian Christianity is multi-faceted,” he says. “So, the versions in the North-east are different from what we hear in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Goa, which has the Portuguese influence. Christians in Kerala have two major systems—the one with the Syro-Malabar Church, to which I belong, and the other with the Syrian Orthodox-Jacobite churches.”

Until the 16th century, songs were sung without instruments. “It was the Portuguese who introduced Violin, Harmonium, Bass Drum and Bugle,” says Fr Palackal. But everything changed in 1962, when the church authorities gave permission for songs to be sung in vernacular languages. “It was a watershed,” says Father. “Syriac literacy diminished, even among the priests. But the Jacobite churches retained most of the Syriac language.”

However, in the Syro-Malabar church, the people resorted to film-style music. “Modern musical instruments, like the keyboard, have been added. But it has lost its essence,” he says Fr Palackal is trying his best to preserve the memories and the melodies. He comes to Kerala every year to meet people who are able to capture the melodies of the Syriac songs. “But the time is running out,” he says. “Most of the stalwarts are losing their memory or passing away.”

Fr Palackal has uploaded many recorded songs with notes on YouTube as part of the Aramaic Project. He has even started working on a digital encyclopaedia of Syriac Chants of the Syro-Malabar Church, and a directory of Christian songs in India. The priest, who has written an article on the subject in the just-published Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities, says, “I am trying to do my bit to preserve the history.”