



## **Kerala, the Cradle of Christianity in South Asia: The Cultural Interface of Music and Religion**

Film (English / 34 minutes)

Script & narration: Joseph J. Palackal, Ph. D. (Music)  
Screenplay, cinematography & direction: Jain Joseph ftii

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### **Long abstract**

The spice trade between Kerala and the Middle East, established much before the Christian era, paved the way for the import of the Eastern form of Christianity to South India. According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus preached the Christian faith in South India. In the fourth century, a group of Christians from Persia migrated to Kerala; they brought the liturgy in Syriac, a form of Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke. Continued commercial and religious interactions between the two regions helped the preservation of the linguistic and musical traditions associated with the Chaldean rite from the Middle East, as if in a time capsule, in Kerala.

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Vasco de Gama brought Portuguese missionaries to Kerala; they introduced the Roman Catholic form of Christianity along with liturgy in Latin. The missionaries converted many local people into the Roman Catholic faith. The Latin Church, thus established, flourished in Kerala through the zealous activities of the Franciscans, Jesuits, and Carmelites. The missionaries also introduced the Western chants

in Latin for use in the Roman Catholic churches in Kerala. This musical tradition continued until the 1960s when the Latin liturgy was translated into the vernacular. However, there are active musicians and singers who were raised in the Latin chant tradition. The film uses excerpts from a recording of the Latin hymn, *Pange Lingua*, written by St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and from another recording of *Kyrie Eleison*. In their zeal for uniformity, the Portuguese missionaries made an attempt to change the Syriac language and music of the St. Thomas Christians to Latin language and Western chant. However, the St. Thomas Christians considered the Syriac language and music to be crucial to their unique religious identity and, therefore, resisted the move. The missionaries finally gave up their attempt; instead, they translated a number of Latin chants into Syriac and incorporated them into the Roman Catholic ritual that they introduced among the St. Thomas Christians. These Syriac translations of Latin chants were set to music locally, incorporating indigenous musical elements.

In 1653, a group of St. Thomas Christians revolted against the Portuguese missionaries who wanted to take complete control over the religious and social lives of the local Christians. These Christians gathered at the church in Mattanchery, near Kochi, and took an oath that they would never subject themselves to the Jesuit Archbishop Garcia. Later, they contacted the Patriarch of Antioch to send them bishops. The bishops who came to Kerala gradually introduced the Antiochene liturgy in West Syriac (different from the East Syriac of the Chaldean rite). The Antiochene liturgy has its own musical repertoire. The film shows segments from the celebration of this liturgy with chants in West Syriac.

In the nineteenth century, the Church Missionary Society, an auxiliary society of the Church of England, became active in Kerala. They introduced the Anglican liturgy and chants in English. The film includes a popular hymn in English as background for the narration of events in the nineteenth century. The British influence is seen also in the Church festivals for which the Western band has become an important item.

In the 1960s, churches in Kerala began to translate Syriac and Latin liturgies into the vernacular. Most of the melodies that originated in Middle East with Syriac texts are now sung in Kerala with Malayalam text. Thus, the melodies have received a second life in a completely different cultural and linguistic milieu. The film incorporates a chant in Malayalam. While keeping up with the present, the St. Thomas Christians continue to preserve the ancient Syriac language and musical traditions associated with it, and add to the already complex linguistic and musical mosaic in Kerala. There are a few priests who were trained in the Syriac tradition who continue to celebrate Mass in Syriac. The film documents a segment from one such celebration that took place at Palai, in the Kottayam district of Kerala.

There has been a renewed attempt in the recent past to interpret Christianity in Indian terms through music, art and literature. In the area of music, worshippers are adapting semi-classical and bhajan styles of singing with Christian texts, indicating an ongoing intra-cultural dialogue that is happening in Kerala. The film shows samples of artworks as visual background during the performance of a bhajan in Sanskrit, written by Chevalier I. C. Chacko in the mid-twentieth century.

Kerala is famous for its interreligious harmony. For centuries, different religious traditions have coexisted through sharing many cultural elements. Several traditions related to the celebration of life-cycle events of the St. Thomas Christians are directly borrowed from the local Hindu tradition. Also, Christians invite Hindu musicians, mostly instrumental ensembles, to perform during church festivals. The film showcases a unique performance context in which Hindu instrumental ensembles share space in a church festival at Pallippuram, in the Alappuzha district of Kerala. It is the Chenda ensemble, which consist of performers who are all Hindus, that leads the church procession, placing themselves in front of the processional cross. The same segment of the film shows brass-band ensembles, consisting of Western musical instruments, playing alongside with Chenda ensembles. The festival also includes several ritual elements that the Portuguese missionaries introduced in the sixteenth century. This segment of the film presents a festival of sounds, rituals and colors, within a relatively small space. The confluence of these sights and sounds is not a coincidence, but a consequence of centuries-long religious and cultural interactions that took place in Kerala.

In short, the film explores the historical embeddedness of the liturgical and musical traditions and the events that led to the introduction of the Chaldean, Antiochene, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other liturgies along with their musical styles. Over the centuries, these styles have become an integral part of the musical mosaic of Kerala. The film documents excerpts from the current practice of chants in East Syriac, West Syriac, Latin, Sanskrit, English, and old and contemporary Malayalam. Drawing attention to the lesser known aspects of the religious, musical, and linguistic complexity of the region, the film presents Kerala as a potential field for inquiries in an emerging area of scholarship on Christian music in India.

Joseph J. Palackal  
President  
Christian Musicological Society of India