

# East meets West

by Holly Tsang

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Joseph Palackal has often been asked by Westerners whether Joseph is his real Indian name, because they presume he converted to Christianity upon coming to America.

In fact, Palackal's family has practiced Christianity for centuries. The documentary film he wrote titled "Kerala, the Cradle of Christianity in South Asia" was screened at the Queens International Film Festival on Saturday.

Asked why he wrote the screenplay, Palackal said, "This came out of a need to educate people. It's a kind of an existential need to explain myself to friends in the Western world."

Palackal was born and raised in Kerala, a state on the southwest coast of India. In the 4th century Christians from Persia came to Kerala; in the 16th century, the Portugese; and in the 19th century, the English.

He said that as a result of this long history of Christian influence, about six million of India's 30 million Christians live in Kerala.

"There's a lot of religious convergence in Kerala, in this part of the world. It's an interesting area for study on religion and culture, and there's art and music too," said Palackal.

He founded the Christian Musicological Society of India in 1999 to study and support Christian music in India. His area of expertise is in Syriac chants, which are in Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

In India much of early Christianity has been preserved in the language and traditions. It wasn't until 1962 that the liturgies became vernacular, noted Palackal.

Along with three million other people in Kerala, Palackal belongs to one of Kerala's eight St. Thomas Church communities. St. Thomas Christians believe that St. Thomas the Apostle himself came to Kerala and preached.

Interestingly, the Department of Tourism of the Kerala government fondly calls itself "God's Own Country." According to Palackal, however, only 19% of Kerala's population is Christian.

"In Kerala, there has never been religious persecution," said Palackal. "It's amazing, that is one place where Jews, Christians, Muslims, everybody lives in harmony, and it's one place in the world where Jews were never persecuted."

Growing up in a traditional Christian family in Kerala, religion was a huge part of his life. He likened religion to the air one breathes.

"You have no choice, you have to breathe the air that is there. You cannot say, 'I will breathe the air from the next village,'" said Palackal.

Though he left Kerala to pursue his studies in Christian music, Palackal chose to stay on the path he began as a child. He has been "Father Joseph" to parishioners at St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish in Maspeth, Queens, for the last 12 years.

"I'm very comfortable with it. Religion provides a comfort zone," said Palackal. "It gave me a community, it gave me a belief system, it gave me satisfaction, so I am perfectly fine."

In his film, he uses the relationship between a boy and his grandfather to tell the story. Palackal said the questions the boy asks his grandfather are questions that Westerners have often asked him.

Palackal emphasized that the film is not meant to proselytize anyone into the Christian faith, that it is purely educational.

"This is not a religious film. This is a film about religion," said Palackal. "I thought many more people should know about and be amazed by this part of the story of India."

"Kerala, the Cradle of Christianity in South Asia" was nominated for Best Foreign Documentary at the Queens International Film Festival.