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Demystifying a musical tradition

V. KALADHARAN

Joseph Palakkal, a scholar of ethnomusicology, has studied the craft and content of liturgical practices of Syrian Christian music.



PIONEERING WORK: Joseph Palakkal

"A piece of music may carry with it multiple stories of human interactions. In the pursuit of making sense of melodies, musicologists have the privilege to see and discuss what others, including practitioners of music, may overlook. For instance, the layers of 'inter-connectedness' between peoples and their respective histories that lie beneath the surface of sound structure. One way to comprehend this inter-connectedness is to view a musical tradition as existing in a local-locus continuum," says Joseph Palakkal, a scholar of ethnomusicology and a practitioner of Christian music.

He has demystified the craft and content of liturgical practices of Syrian Christian music. Based in New York, Dr. Palakkal has for decades been associated with music and religion in south Asia.

A graduate in Hindustani classical music (vocal) from Maharaja Sayajirao

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University of Baroda, his interest in music cuts across Christian theological studies he has specialised in. Yet the liturgical tradition of Syrian Christian music happened to be the nucleus of his research at the theoretical and practical levels.

Dr. Palakkal's analysis of the intercultural processes that influenced the singing styles of Puthen pana, an 18th century Malayalam poem by John Earnest Hanxleden, in the historical context of Christianisation in south India caught the attention of noted ethnomusicologists and church historians all over the world. For his doctoral dissertation, he zeroed in on to the Syriac chant traditions in South India.

"The study is connected with my life in many ways. I was born and raised as a member of the Syro-Malabar Church. At about the age of nine, I learned to serve mass at my local parish. In those days, the priests used books printed in Syriac, and the servers and the people read from books printed in Malayalam script.

"In the 1960s, Syriac liturgical texts began to be translated into Malayalam, and Syriac language itself began to lose its importance in liturgical celebrations. I started to learn the Malayalam version at about the age of 12. There is no system of formal training for liturgical music in the Syro-Malabar Church. The learning took place mostly through participation in the liturgical celebrations. It took a few years to master all the melodies, because there are melodies that you could hear almost every week and others that could be heard only occasionally.

Songs for specific occasions



MUSICAL REPOSITORY: The archive at St. Joseph's monastery, Mannanam, contains an extensive collection of Syriac manuscripts, including indigenous works.

"For example, some melodies are specific to the services for the dead, including one that is sung only during funerals for priests. Similarly, a few melodies are sung exclusively in the Divine Office that you could hear only in the public celebration of the Office, mostly in monastery chapels."

Dr. Palakkal has relied on his childhood recollections for an intimate understanding and appreciation of a musical lineage influenced by Eastern and Western Christian traditions as well as by the indigenous culture. He brought out a CD titled 'Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India' in 2002, consisting of field-recordings of the liturgical music of five Syro-Malabar communities.

Reviewing the CD, Dr. Rolf Groesbeck, an eminent ethnomusicologist in the United States, observes: "I was struck by the similarity between the voice-harmonium interaction in some of these chants and that in some Hindu bhajan singing; could this represent a Hindu influence? Palackal does not address this issue, but he does suggest a Carnatic classical influence on three of the chants on this CD; two of them according to him are in the Carnatic seven-count talam misra chapu, and part of another is in the six count talam rupakam."

'Christianity in India' has always been a favourite topic of Dr. Palakkal during

scholarly presentations, debates and discussions in academic circles and in private conversations.

Dr. Palakkal, an occasional visitor to Kerala, nurtures fond memories of his close affinity with people like Fr. Abel whose knowledge of Syriac chants and the Malayalam translations of the same were a revelation to him.

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