

# THE NEW GROVE

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THE NEW GROVE  
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MUSIC & MUSICIANS

INDIA:  
§VI, 3(i): Religious Music:  
**The Syrian Churches**

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India, §V1, 3(i): **Religious music: The Syrian Churches**

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3. CHRISTIAN. (Page 233 – 234)

The approximately 30 million Christians in India constitute a diverse set of communities differentiated variously in terms of race, language, region and caste. Migrations, conquests and colonizations over the centuries have shaped their history, and the resulting interactions between local traditions and external ones, especially those of the Middle East and Europe, have generated a wide spectrum of Christian musical styles, from the predominantly European to the more distinctively indigenous.

*i) The Syrian churches.* The liturgical and non-liturgical songs of the Christians in south India refer to the mission and martyrdom of St Thomas the Apostle, who, according to traditional belief, established Christian communities in the region now known as Kerala in the 1st century CE. The St. Thomas Christians, as they are known, celebrate the life of the saint in songs and dances such as *margam kali* ('dance of the Christian way'). Persian Christians, who started migrating to Kerala in the 4th century, introduced the Chaldean liturgy in Syriac. Owing to hierarchical relations between the Indian and the Chaldean churches (from at least the middle of the 5th century) and to the use of the Syriac Liturgy, ecclesiastical documents name the St Thomas Christians also as Syrians.

As a result of a series of divisions that took place among the St Thomas Christians from 1653 to 1908, there are five

independent churches in Kerala: the Syro-Malabar Church, the Church of the East (Nestorian Church), the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Syro-Malankara Church And the Marthoma Church. The first two of these churches follow the Chaldean liturgy, originally in East Syriac; the others use the Antiochean (also known as Jacobite) liturgy, originally in West Syriac. During the process of vernacularizing the liturgies in the 1960s, translators took special care to adjust the texts in Malayalam to the metre and melody of the original Syriac chants. For instance, Syro-Malabar congregations sing the melody transcribed in ex.21, which is designated by the first two words of the Syriac text, *kambel māran* ('receive O! Lord'), in the Office for the Dead with Malayalam translation of the text.

It is probable that a number of melodies that were once part of the common repertory of the Syrian churches in the Middle East and India are now extant only in Kerala. However, the existing melodies appear to have been indigenized somewhat over the course of time by incorporating musical elements such as the Karnatak seven-beat *Mīśra Cāpu* and six-beat *Rūpakam tālas*.

While maintaining different melodic repertories, the music of the Chaldean and Antiochean liturgies in Malayalam share many common features: unaccompanied antiphonal singing of monophonic hymns; use of modal melodies as a compositional device; textual and melodic incipits; syllabic setting of text; neumatic or melismatic ornamentation of either the ultimate or the penultimate syllable of a text line or strophic unit; limited melodic range (in most cases of a minor 3rd to a perfect 5<sup>th</sup>); rhythmically free cadences at the ends of phrases; and the use of more than one metre in the same strophic melody.

A number of these features are apparent also in the music of other performance genres of the St Thomas Christians, for example in wedding songs and the songs of *mārgam kali* (fig.10).



10. *Mārgam kali* of the St Thomas Christians performed by Devagiri team, Kozhikode; from a photograph by P.J. Shelley, 3 January 1998

See also SYRIAN CHURCH MUSIC.

(ii) *The Catholic Church.*

Portuguese missionaries introduced the Latin rite to south and central India in the early 16th century. The Western music tradition established by the missionaries continues today in the churches of Goa and other metropolitan cities, where choirs sing Western style hymns in harmony and counterpoint to the accompaniment of instruments such as violin, guitar and keyboard. In spite of initial ecclesiastical disapproval, Catholics in some regions actively participated in local music genres and contributed their own syncretic secular musics, such as the Konkani-language MANDO, *dekni and dulpod* of Goa and Mangalore.

Since the 1960s the more tolerant attitude ushered in by the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) towards ‘non-Christian’ religions and their parent cultures facilitated the adaptation of indigenous dance and musical styles into liturgical and social celebrations. Throughout South Asia Christian *bhajans* flourish in forms stylistically similar to their Hindu counterparts (see §1 above). The numerous Ādivāsī converts to Catholicism in north India often recycle their traditional melodies with Christian texts and perform them to the accompaniment of dance. Gujarati Catholics dance the *rās and garba* (local dances otherwise associated with the Hindu *navarātra* festival) during

Christian feasts, with song texts based on biblical themes. A number of Catholic cultural institutions in the north and south train students in *bharata-nāṭyam*, a south Indian classical dance performed with Christian lyrics.

(iii) *The Protestant churches.* From the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, various Protestant missions from Europe and America evangelized in the east and north-east. The missionaries translated German chorales and Anglican hymns into South Asian languages (keeping the original melodies) for the new converts, who came mostly from the lower castes. The proselytization policies of the missionary groups have impacted variously in different regions. For instance, general antipathy towards indigenous cultures together with the exclusive promotion of Western-style hymn-singing appears to have led to a marked decline of indigenous traditional music in the north-eastern states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. In the south, however, the pioneering Lutheran missionaries, in particular, encouraged local musicians to compose songs in indigenous styles. Thus, there are two stylistically different music traditions among Protestant churches in south India popularly distinguished as ‘hymns’ and ‘lyrics’. German and English hymns and their translations in local languages are referred to as ‘hymns’, and indigenous compositions, such as *kīrtanam*, as ‘lyrics’.

The initiative to adopt south Indian art music to express Christian faith came mostly from singer-poets who converted to Protestant Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Vedanayagam Sastriyar (1774-1864) in Tamil Nadu, Purushothama Chaudhari (1803-90) in Andhra Pradesh, and Mosavalsalam Sastriyal (1847-1916) in Kerala, to name but a few, created a vast corpus of Christian poetic literature in their native languages. They composed poems following the *kīrtanam* of Karnatak classical music, using the tripartite

structure of *pallavi*, *anupallavi* and *caranam*. These poems remain an integral part of worship, even though congregations do not always adhere strictly to the *rāga* and *tāla* prescribed by the composers.

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