

*Long Essay*

TRACING CHRISTIAN MARGAM IN MALABAR:  
A STUDY OF SELECT SOUTHIST CHRISTIAN  
FOLKLORE

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Introduction

The historical trajectory of the arrival and growth of Christianity in India would find a precarious footing in the pre-modern narrative of the apostolic mission of St. Thomas in India. St. Thomas is conjectured to have visited India somewhere in the first century A. D. (c. 52 A. D.). The apocryphal and romantic narrative in the *Acts of Thomas*, a third century work from Edessa written in Syriac, has been much relied on in tracing St. Thomas' mission in India. As the narrative goes, St. Thomas arrived at the court of the Parthian King Gondophares to build a palace. Though originally a skilled carpenter working with wood, stone and metal, he later abandoned this vocation and travelled through the subcontinent, evangelizing and converting indigenous people to the Christian faith, and was later killed in Mylapore. The historicity of this narrative continues to remain in the realm of academic conjecture, given the absence of veritable written documentation upon which traditional historiography relies.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this being the case, St. Thomas' apostolic mission in India has been positioned as originary to the arrival of Christianity in India for two primary reasons. The first being the presence of the strong and living traditions of St. Thomas Christians in Malabar (contemporary Kerala) and in the Coromandel region; and the second, the existence of thriving trans-regional trade networks in pre-modern times, both terrestrial and oceanic. While the living traditions of St. Thomas Christians and pre-modern mercantile

maritime movements have received scholarly attention, little has been done towards comprehensively reading them in conjunction. When they are in fact read in conjunction, by thinking of how mercantile movement has been encoded in traditional narratives, as also to think of how cultural phenomena have been influenced by maritime activities, one opens up not only novel imaginations of the past but also a potential re-imagination of certain historical and cultural phenomena. With this premise, this essay undertakes a brief study of select Southist Syrian Christian folk songs that recount the legendary maritime migration of merchant leader Thomas of Knai (or *Knai Thomma*) and a group of Christians from Mesopotamia to Malabar in the fourth century, and subsequently argues that Christianity, as it was practised on the shores of Malabar till the sixteenth century, followed a distinct historical and culture trajectory that calls for its reconceptualization.

As mentioned above, the living traditions of St. Thomas Christians harbour the socio-cultural memory of St. Thomas' missionary activities in Kerala, along with the memory of select successive events which marked the community's life in Malabar. A zealous commitment to Syriac liturgy, a wealth of family genealogies tracing ancestry to St. Thomas' first Brahmin conversions, songs and performative traditions, and the devout celebration of St. Thomas' feast day are a few distinct ethnocultural elements of the said traditions of St. Thomas Christians. While many of these traditions have been subjects of few sociological and ethnographic studies, what has been overlooked is the large repertoire of folk songs and traditions of the ethnically distinct Southist Christians, which are of interest to this essay. Few terminological clarifications may be necessary at this juncture. The term St. Thomas Christians as is used today is an umbrella term which denotes the indigenous line of early Christians in Kerala who associate with the St. Thomas tradition. It encompasses, and often eclipses, two distinct Christian collectives who have organized themselves differently along the lines of historical ancestry, ethnicity and cultural traditions – Southist and Northist Syrian Christians. Further, it is also important to note that the term St. Thomas Christians, as is contemporarily used, encompasses various churches under different episcopal allegiances, which sprung out of the early line of indigenous Christians in the course of their development. Amongst these many denominations, the specific interest of this essay is the Southist Syrian Christians.

The Southist Christians are currently a community of over 3.5 lakh people, the majority of whom reside in Kerala, with minor

groups scattered globally. They currently fall under two different ecclesiastic authorities – the Catholic Church and The Syrian Orthodox Church, known as Knanaya Catholics and Knanaya Jacobites respectively. Though the divergence in ecclesiastical allegiance occurred subsequent to the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653, both sections of Southist Christians continue to cherish a shared pre-modern migratory narrative and other ethnocultural practices, while also involving each other for sanctioned marriage unions, though the community is otherwise endogamous. The wealth of living folk songs and traditions of this community sustain a collective memory of the arrival of early Christianity on the shores of Malabar through mercantile movement across waters.

Maritime activity in pre-modern times were primarily characterized by mercantile movements through the Spice Route. Accelerated by the Greek navigator Hippalus' discovery of the monsoon winds, traders from the Mediterranean, Egypt and the Arabian peninsula reliably travelled to East and South East Asian regions in search of commodities and markets. The rich spice-producing regions of Malabar rose to prominence overseas for the suitability of their climatic and agronomic conditions for the cultivation of pepper (popularly known as 'black gold' in the West), amongst other precious commodities (Menon, 1967: 57-64). Added to this, the geo-physical advantage of Malabar with its extended coastlines, and favourable political policies of the local rulers, brought further fame to the ancient port cities of Muziris and other ports such as Tyndis, Bakare, Nelkynda and Comorin. These dynamic oceanic trade networks, many of which converged towards Malabar, historically shaped pre-modern geographies and effected multiple border-crossings of people, ideas, objects, languages and cultures. In fact, such border crossings gave way to peculiar socio-cultural configurations which ought not to be limited to terrestrial idioms of colonialism and nationalism but must be read within paradigms of cultural translation. One such configuration was that of early Christianity in Malabar.

From St. Thomas' mission in the first century to the legendary Southist Syrian Christian migration in the fourth century, and the later infrequent visits of oriental bishops till the early modern arrival of the Padroado buttressed Portuguese, early Christianity was channelled through maritime routes. Thus, Christianity in Malabar was a phenomenon which developed in the background of the transcontinental maritime trade geographies of 'Monsoon Asia', dictated many a times by the movement of merchants and

merchandise.<sup>3</sup> Brought thus to the novel socio-cultural matrix of the then Malabar, specific and distinct articulations of Christianity emerged as they developed alongside dominant indigenous religions and cultures.

In the absence of conventional historiographic tools, an accurate ascertainment of the particularities of early Christian organization in Malabar in pre-modern times is difficult if not impossible. In such a case, a shift towards alternate sites of sedimented human knowledge that are re-produced and circulated through expressive culture, such as the case of the living folklore of Southist Christians, would be an ethical and epistemologically worthwhile undertaking. Further, while the historian's rhetoric of academic objectivity and singularity of historical 'truth' has rendered itself to the service of homogenized national narratives, or as Dilip Menon calls it elsewhere "terrestrial hypothesis", it is proposed here that a methodological shift towards regional and fluvial voices of collective expression may eschew the teleological tendencies of the former, and suggest alternative frameworks of imagining the past (Menon, 2018). It is owing to this impetus that this work studies the migratory narrative of Southist Christians, as it emerges in their folk songs, as well as the hybrid Christian organization evidenced at the heart of their folk traditions.

### The Legend of Southist Christian Migration

Southist Christians trace their ancestry to the legendary migration of a group of Christians from the Mediterranean region to the coast of Malabar in 345 A. D. under the leadership of an illustrious merchant *Knai Thomma* (or 'Thomas of Cana') and an oriental bishop, Uraha Mar Joseph (Bishop Joseph of Uraha). It is in relation to *Knai Thomma* that the said community is popularly known as Knanaya Christians today, 'Knanaya' loosely translated to mean 'followers of *Knai Thomma*'. According to the migratory narrative, the aforementioned immigrant Christians were about 400 people, comprising 72 families, some priests and deacons, and arrived by ship at the ancient port of Muziris in *Kodungalloor* or Cranganore. The Southist Christians, led by the merchant *Knai Thomma*, were subsequently received warmly by the local ruler Cheraman Perumal and were granted seventy-two royal privileges, which included socio-cultural privileges, mercantile rights and a certain portion of land (or kingdom) to settle on.

The migrant Christians eventually settled in the south of Mehadevapuram city, possibly on the south bank of river Periyar, alongside the existing community of Malabari Jews, possibly because

of the commonality in language and ethnicity. Consequently, these Christians came to be known as the Suddhists or Southist Christians (or *Thekkumbhagar*), while the indigenous St. Thomas Christians, who lived at the northern side of the city, were known as the Nordhists or Northist Christians (or *Vadakkumbhagar*). Though the terms Southists and Northists demarcated geographical positioning of settlements in relation to the city of Mahadevapuram, the said distinction extended to organizing these communities differently along racial, and ethno-cultural lines (Swiderski, 1988: 75). The Southist Christians, till date, have continued to emphasize the said distinction from Northist Christians through the above-mentioned legendary migration, their folklore and the social practice of endogamy (Philips, 40). This collective memory and associated practices thus provide the bases for the community's ethnic validation and for its emphasis on its 'otherness' from indigenous Christians. Thus, the narrative, by the very nature of its trans-regional mobilization, supplies to the community a sense of *un*belonging even as it firmly belongs to the land of Malabar today. As it happens, this dichotomy of belonging-unbelonging (insider-outsider) is often channelled as a currency of social and cultural superiority over other native Christians.

Although scholarship has acknowledged the importance of this legend in tracing the trajectory of the growth of Christianity in India, such scholarship has placed a necessary emphasis on the Christian character of this migration in its analysis. With the increasing consolidation of ecclesiastical authority in the past centuries, along with socio-cultural modernity, church historians have also deemed this emphasis appropriate given the rootedness of the church in the Christian canon since the sixteenth century. The Southists themselves corroborate such a position that identifies the purpose of the pre-modern migration as one which was aimed at spiritually strengthening the isolated, and possibly leaderless, Church of St. Thomas in India. While these understandings may not be incorrect, this obfuscates complex processes of translation effected through the migration of people, objects, community, languages and cultures which attended maritime mercantilism.

### Southist Christian Folklore and Christian *Margam*

The Southist Christian folklore consists primarily of folk songs and wedding traditions, amongst other things, which were passed down orally from generation to generation till the early twentieth century, with the occasional transcriptions on pam-leaf manuscripts. As

important artifacts of collective memory, these songs and traditions are mostly performed by the community in relation to wedding ceremonies, while the songs are also sung on other occasions such as *kudumbayogams* (large family meetings) or church functions. The Southist Christian folk songs can generally be categorized as *purathanapattukal* (ancient songs) and consist of the following rough categorizations: *aanpattukal* (male songs), *pennpattukal* (female songs) and *pallipattukal* (songs of churches). These classifications have been made on the basis of the singers, subject-matter and the function of these songs during Southist Christian public rituals. It must however be noted that these are not exhaustive classifications, and have been altered several times in the process of issuing revised editions in print. As for composition, the folk songs are largely composed in Malayalam, but carry linguistic striations of Syriac as well as Tamil. The presence of Syriac words leads one back to the oceanic routes followed by the language as it moved along with Christian travelers to the Malabar coast. The lexical hybridity of these songs was, however, in the course of time edited and standardized (and sometimes misread) as they were transcribed into print since 1910.<sup>4</sup>

For the purpose of this essay, I have selected two folk songs and a particular extract from the wedding tradition of the Southist Christian folk repertoire. The songs and the extracted tradition have been taken directly from the first edition of the *Ancient Songs of the Syrian Christians of Malabar* (or *Keralathile Syrian Christianikalude Purathanapatukal*), the first anthology of Southist Christian folk tradition in 1910.<sup>5</sup> As the compiler of this anthology P. U. Lukas notes in the Preface, these folk songs were transcribed from palm-leaf manuscripts of about three centuries of age. The compiler, along with an erudite priest, compared available manuscripts, rectified what were deemed as inconsistencies, and were granted church sanction before the publication of the aforementioned anthology. This means that these songs have not been procured directly from the singers but were written down in palm-leaf documents in the process of their transmission from generation to generation, before they were corrected and brought into print in 1910 under church authorization.

The song titled *nalloruosalem* ('The good city of Jerusalem'), categorized in the songbook as *penn pattu*, succinctly captures the legendary journey of Southist Christians from the land of Knai (in Edessa). The translation reproduced here is based on the preliminary translation of Jacob Vellian with minor changes made by me:

*In the good city of Jerusalem,  
 In the land where emeralds and pearls grow,  
 Of the lord, resplendent as a dancing peacock,  
 The complexion, I may say, resembles gold of ten and a half carats.  
 He speaks like Chinese flute;  
 He is not lacking in religious<sup>1</sup> zeal,  
 That noble lord wants reign Malabar.  
 He started by Bava's<sup>6</sup> command;  
 He obtained his permission and forthwith set out on his journey.*

*He was given high social rank,  
 He was given the several privileges of a Catholicos,  
 And he was fittingly sent off with regal musical instruments.  
 In his holy hand he received the Book,  
 The holy Catholicos, according to the ways instituted by St. Thomas,  
 He went to Uraha and obtained permission.  
 He received the good signet ruby,  
 In his wish he was in Cochin, in excellence he was in Rome.*

(Another tune)

*Together they started and embarked in a ship,  
 Set sail in the direction of Malabar,  
 And landed in Cranganore.  
 On their sighting the Cochin harbor,  
 Eighteen salutes were fired.  
 When he enters the city gate, after the firing of the salutes,  
 The sepoys they give a shout,  
 And the limbs are languishing!  
 On the royal palanquin a flag was raised,  
 And in it sat Raja Varma.  
 Chempakasseri also with him,  
 And the king of Vettattunaadu too.  
 Mar Joseph of Uraha goes.  
 Four priests are near him,  
 There are many deacons too.  
 Sepoys are close to him,  
 And Thomman Kinan is with him.  
 You came and obtained a permit,  
 And went there early in the morning,  
 And held him by the hand to disembark.  
 A royal palanquin plated with gold,  
 He mounted, and sat down,*

*And proceeding in pomp, entered the fort.  
In the fort was the Perumal, the king.  
(Another tune)*

*The day-light lamp, the foot-cloth, and regal musical instruments,  
We have come with the desire to govern Malabar.  
Longing to see my children well.*

*(Another tune)*

*By the grace of the loving Mother,  
He slowly got ready and to thinking of the solar race,  
Narrated the facts,  
And obtained a house and compound and slaves.  
Those who visited him bowed and received his blessing.  
And wearing the mudi, he governed three years (Vellian, 1986: 50-53).*

The song<sup>7</sup> narrates the regal journey of ‘Thomman Kinan’ (or Thomas of Knai) from Jerusalem, and later Uraha, to Malabar. The descriptive qualifiers used in the song allude to objects of transoceanic circulation, such as Chinese flutes, peacocks, pearls and emeralds. Symbols of transregional trade and affluence find their way into the local cultural expression, Southist Christian folklore. The migratory narrative, as it emerges in this specific song, seeks to reach beyond the immediate boundaries of the local to access a fluvial and far-reaching geography of trans-oceanic movement.

Further, the motive behind Knai Thoma’s journey is mentioned as two-fold in the song *nalloruosalem*. The first is indicated by the “noble lord wants reign Malabar” and the second is the Christian mission deigned on him by the ecclesiastical authorities. By the end of the song, the former aspiration to “reign Malabar” culminates in Thomman Kinan “wearing the *mudi*, he governed three years”, indicative of complete socio-political assimilation into Malabar. It is worth the while to note here then that Knai Thoma’s aspiration of governing Malabar, as it emerges in the song *nalloruosalem* and other folk songs of the Southist Christians, is not one of militarized colonization but part of the process of cultural integration which unfurls in the context of maritime mercantilism. Though the term ‘Christian colonization’ was inaccurately used by early scholarship to denote this migration, such as the works of Joseph Chazhikat, one can understand that this is telling of historiography’s reliance on modern phenomenon to analyze premodern socio-cultural



phenomena (Chazhikat, 1961: 1). In fact, one can suggest that the significance of the Southist migration stands in stark contrast to later European models of colonization predicated on their own visions of orientalism (Xavier, 2015). According to the Southist Christians folk repertoire, the Syrian migrants, having arrived in Malabar under the leadership of a foreign merchant, duly recognized the political sovereignty of the local Perumal and ‘obtained’ from him sanction to rule, functioning henceforth as satellite rulers under the prevailing political structure of the land. Other indigenous oral traditions such as the *paanan pattu* provide corroborative narrations of other diplomatic roles entrusted to Knai Thoma by the Perumal towards maintaining the stability of the land. This indicates the close nature of Southist Christian assimilation into the socio-cultural habitus of Malabar (Thomas, 1935).

Further, the privileges that are believed to have been granted to Southist Christians by Cheraman Perumal, as recalled in Southist traditions, not only integrated the community into Malabar but also positioned them in stature which was paralleled only by higher caste Hindus such as the Nayars. In the absence of an organized trading class within the existing ranks of society, eventually to be reified into the ‘caste system’, the social recognition and assimilation of the Southists, who were foreign traders, was not unlikely. The welcome reception of the trader Thomas of Knai and his group may be understood in this context of strategic political and economic interests as well. Further, in the course of adaptation into the new cultural habitat, Southist Christians followed caste-based practices such as untouchability, juridical rule over lower castes, etc. (Podipara, 1970: 79-91). In fact, it is this level Christian assimilation of regional practices and beliefs amongst the Southist as well as other St. Thomas Christians that perturbed Portuguese missionaries in Malabar. As Saumya Varghese notes, “The ‘Nazrani Margakkar’ followed the tenets of Christianity as preached by the Persian prelates. Yet, religion did not dictate their everyday engagements. The Nazrani adherence to caste privileges and obligations, specified by custom and law, shaped their interaction with the other social classes of Malabar. Thus, despite their encounters with Latin and Syrian prelates representing and educating them in ‘Western’ Christian customary practices, the space occupied by the Nazranis was more along *jati*<sup>8</sup> consciousness” (Varghese, 2011: 31). Though the above reference was in relation to Syrian Christians as a whole, vestiges of the said caste or *jati* consciousness continues to resonate in Southist Christians folk traditions, one of which is looked at below.

For the purpose of the same, we may look at a specific folk tradition of Southist Christians known as *anthamcharthu/chanthamcharthu*. *Anthamcharthu* (literal translation would be ‘to make beautiful’) is a ceremony conducted on the fourth day of the traditionally prescribed week-long wedding celebrations of the Southist Christians, though these have been significantly condensed in current day practice. It may be noted here that traditionally the Southist Christian wedding celebrations, apart from the aforementioned cultural borrowings from local traditions, also bear resemblance to Jewish wedding traditions. Their early settlement with the Southist Jews in Cranganore in the 4th century may well account for the cultural borrowings. Although scholarship is yet to study these modes of cultural diffusion, it may suffice here to preliminarily emphasise the hybrid and cosmopolitan nature of these local traditions. A selection of the proceedings of the *anthamcharthu* ceremony, as provided in the *Ancient Songs of the Syrian Christians of Malabar* has been translated by the me and presented below:

*All the invited guests will arrive at the man's house and partake in the dinner feast. After that they will assemble together in the panthal. At this time the man's sister would prepare a special seating (pavada), with special cloth laid over it, and keep it in the middle of the assembly in the panthal. Following this, the man will be brought in adorned with ornaments, and will be seated on the special seating by his brother-in-law. At this time the caste-wise barber would come on the front side of the panthal and with due reverence to the custom shout and ask "pathinambarishamaalorodu<sup>2</sup>, may I come and sit to anthamcharthu?". He asks this a total of three times. At that time the eldest of all who had gathered there, with the agreement of all others gathered, will command him to come in. Having received the permission, the barber will enter and groom the man seated on the pavada, and with the permission of the gathering apply oil on him. This being done, the barber has to leave the hall. At this time the women folks will sing the 'anthamcharthu' song. After this, women folks will sing several other songs in praise of God as well..." (Lukas, 1910: 5-6)*

All Southist wedding traditions are replete with the display of the aforementioned royal privileges granted by Cheraman Perumal. The use of *panthal*, *pavada* and the special cloth in the *anthamcharthu* ceremony are few such privileges which are an important part of folk material culture. One such privilege granted to the Southists was the command over seventeen artisan classes. P. U. Lukas in *Purathanapattukal* (1910) attempts to name some of these artisanal groups: *paakanar*, *thiruvirangan*, *villan*, *thachan*, *iravithandaan*, *vilakkithalayan*, *veluthedam*, *vaanibhan*, *chettinaalum*, *shankaran*, *vishamaandikurukkal*, *chekavan*, *uravaran naanguvarnaparishakal*. The *shurakan* or barber, who appears in the *anthamcharthu* ceremony,

belongs to one of these communities of which the Southist is the overlord. In ancient Kerala, indigenous communities were divided into caste-based occupations and assigned positions in a socially stratified society. As mentioned above, the Syrian Christians enjoyed caste-based privileges such as those of upper caste Hindus owing to the special privileges ordained to them. Given the same, that the performative politics of the *shurakan* places him as the ‘outsider’ and social ‘other’ to the Southists, is important to understand. Upon entry into the *panthal*, the *shurakan* reverently begs the Southist gathering, which is referred to as *pathinembarishamaalor*, permission to enter. The term ‘*pathinembarishamaalor*’ translates into rulers of the seventeen (*pathinezhu*) *jatis* or artisan classes (*parisha*). Other terms such as *mahalokar* or *pathinembarishachanmar*, which are also invoked at this time, imply the same meaning. Upon asking, he is ordered in and leaves the *panthal* soon after the completion of his assigned caste-based job. The left-over oil and the *kodi*, or special cloth on which the groom sits at this time, are the rights of the *shurakan*, which he takes back with him. We may note that the alternate names of the barber are *ambattan*, *vilakkithalayan*, *pranopakari* (Thomas, 1935: 28). While in ancient times the service of the *shurakan* in preparation of the groom was perhaps a practical necessity, as men did not customarily shave till the wedding time, in contemporary times this has become perfunctory. However, the symbolic function of the social ‘other’ in a Southist gathering, whose presence, and the lack of it, is authorized and willed by the latter, is entrenched in the performative politics of caste: the *shurakan* becomes a figure against whom the Southists define themselves. It seems that the Southist Christian folklore in Malabar brings into the ambit a unique configuration of the interaction of the global and the local phenomena, Christianity and native customs, eventually giving rise to the specific phenomena of Christian *margam* in Malabar. As Susan Visvanathan (1993: 1-2) writes:

*Christianity in Kerala must be understood as a unique configuration arising out of two kinds of situations. The first is its historical dimension: it came to the coast of Kerala in the early centuries of the Christian era, and was sustained by the Churches of the Middle East (hence the appellation Syrian). Secondly, it has existed within the encompassing framework of a dominant regional culture.... Its public life related to its political affiliation to Hindu kings, its acquiescence to Hindu norms of purity and pollution, its own status and rank consciousness, and its adherence to customs linked with food, language and culture.*

Visvanathan’s reading of Christianity as a historical phenomenon in Malabar has a greater significance than perhaps what has been

suggested in her work *The Christians of Kerala*. As she mentions, Christianity in Malabar grew in the early years of the Christian era, and was under the episcopal authority of the Antiochian or Persian Church. However, this episcopal authority was not exercised regularly or routinely. After St. Thomas' apostolic mission in Malabar, during which it was believed that seven churches were established, the migration of Southist Christians in the fourth century was the next big event in the development of Christianity in Malabar. There have been speculations of other Persian Christian migrations but no evidence conclusively establishes its importance for the growth of Christianity in Kerala. Apart from these, available historical records only suggest a rather infrequent pattern of arrivals and departures of oriental bishops till about fifteenth century. Consequently, Christianity in Malabar grew in relative isolation from other Christian centers of the world, till the arrival of the Portuguese. It unfurled itself as an amorphous, slow and somewhat haphazard phenomena – canonically and doctrinally weak – the contours of which were determined predominantly by mercantile activities. Early Christianity in Malabar is also not known to have predominantly concerned itself with missionary activities or indigenous conversions (as later Portuguese Padroado missions attempted too). On the other hand, it developed as *margam*, and not *matam* (religion), tangential to trade activities (Varghese, 2011: 36). This would consequently require us to understand Christianity as a practice or way of living, and not a codified set of dominant ideas. Christian *margam*, as has been used in this essay, thus denotes this particular organization of Christianity in India.

Further, the term *margam* literally translates to mean 'the way', and proliferates much of the Southist Christian folklore. It must be noted that this terminological use is not restricted to Christian practices alone, but has been used in vernacular tongues to refer to Buddhism, Jainism, etc. The connotations of *margam* points towards the imaginary of a system of practices which had not yet consolidated into a rigid ideological edifice that was wholly homogenous, and asserting radical separation from other ways of living or being. Instead, as Visvanathan noted previously, it "existed within the encompassing framework of a dominant regional culture", adapting and translating itself into it, yet without diffusing itself. This particular organization of Christian *margam* had escaped the attention of few renowned scholars in the field. The voluminous work of Stephen Neil, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, reads the early mode of Christian organization in Malabar as theologically and canonically rigid. According to Neil (2004: 25):

*The Christian, with his unvarying emphasis on the unity of God, could not but be repelled by what he understood as polytheism in all its forms. He could allow no place for magic, and for the cruelty which sometimes accompanies belief on that level. But, as he became aware of the preoccupation of the Hindu mind with the One and with the monotheism that seemed to be striving to come to birth, and still more as he became aware of the deep Hindu longing for fellowship with the unseen, of the yearning of the Buddhist for release, Christianity and native of the striving of the bhakta for oneness with the divine, he could not but be attracted, and feel the possibility of dialogue in place of denunciation.*

In Neil's reading, one sees a somewhat consternated explanation for the thriving of early Christianity amongst superstitious Hindu minds, at a time when the civic idiom of secularism had not emerged in socio-political organization. The prevailing ecumenical tendencies in twentieth century Kerala may have propelled this reasoning. However, an engagement with the premises of it ought to be undertaken for the notion of Christian *margam* to emerge. Primarily, Neil's application of an anachronistic notion of Christianity in reading pre-modern Christian articulations in Malabar is misleading. In such a conception, Christianity is seen as system of well codified doctrinal values, and is employed as an analytic tool. In doing so, this view not only homogenises Christianity but also produces an oversimplified vision of social experience in the dichotomous classification of Christian and non-Christian, the latter homogenously identified by the term 'Hindu'. What such a reading does is that it obfuscates the various histories of heterogenous articulations that sediment into the precariously homogenized religious categories of Christianity or Hinduism (Thapar, 1989). Secondly, Neil's reading also assumes that the premodern subject's social agency was primarily, if not wholly, dictated by Christianity and the vision of universal evangelization and proselytization. By the same logic, Christianity couldn't have survived amongst pagans if it had not found a common ground of ideological equivalence towards sustaining the possibility of dialogue or proselytization. Thus, this mode of understanding not only represses the historical and social contexts of maritime trade and mercantilism on which the movement of Christianity in pre-modern Malabar was premised but also disallows a reconceptualization of the practice of Christianity as Christian *margam* which was underscored in above mentioned folk traditions of Southist Christians.

In fact, the arrival and rise of Portuguese power in Malabar in the sixteenth century, although motivated by similar mercantile interests, was instrumental in re-organizing the terms of indigenous Christian *margam*. What started off as a friendly and tolerant alliance with the indigenous Christians soon turned inhospitable and largely

hostile. Though the Portuguese and indigenous Christians initially aligned with one another in the name of Christian brotherhood, the practical and compelling reasons for this alliance was that of trade. An association with the militarised and resourceful Portuguese Christians was seen as useful for the indigenous Christians whose commercial and social standing was threatened by the increasing influence of Arab merchants in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the Portuguese benefitted from the pepper-cultivating zones in the purview of the St. Thomas Christians to fill up their cargos. This alliance, thus predicated on seeming religious interests, however was fraught with tensions. The Padroado considered the non-doctrinal, culturally heterogenous phenomenon of Christian *margam* of indigenous Christians as 'heretic' and Nestorian. As has been observed by scholars, the meeting of the canon-based, doctrine-oriented Christianity of the Portuguese with the pluralist Christian *margam* in Malabar was essentially a conflicting encounter between West and the East, one in which East was subjugated. As history has it, the 'Catholic Orientalism' of the Padroado sought to regiment and 'rectify' indigenous Christianity through various well-orchestrated methods, some of which include the increased militarization and surveillance of maritime traffic (thereby cutting off connections of Malabar with the Oriental See), the establishment of Vicarate in Goa and the Synod of Diamper (1599).

As a corollary, Christianity in Malabar too eventually oriented and organized itself towards doctrinal and episcopal consolidations. Schisms, debates on episcopal legacy, devout allegiance to various oversea episcopal sees were some of the painful routes through which the once local Christian living later integrated itself to the global network of Christian identities. What was but only one of the many markers of indigenous social habits thus became its hallmark, i.e., religion. The sense of canonical Christian identity further strengthened, as the pre-modern heterogenous history of maritime mercantilism fell steadily away from individual actors to colonial powers. This shift had lasting impact on the Southist Christian cultural consciousness too. Many of the Southist Christian traditions today are preserved and mediated under church initiatives. The residues of an earlier organization of Christian *margam* are eroding steadily. In an age of rising religious fundamentalism, and ethnic wars, this collective amnesia may seem like a necessary one for the minority community of Southist Christians. The intractable tryst with modernity and nation-state has further accelerated this forgetfulness. However, an enquiry of such plural and heterogenous

modes of social and cultural organization of Christianity in pre-modern times, albeit through alternate historical resources, is an ethical undertaking for the very reasons of rising intolerance and majoritarian politics of contemporary times. This enquiry then has to move back and beyond, starting from the coastlines and fluvial terrains of the oceanic for its archives; and then connect back insular sites of terrestrial episteme.

## Notes

1. Klijn, A. F. J. *The Acts of Thomas*. Boston: Brill Leiden, 2003.
2. The term used in lieu of 'religious zeal' in the original song in Malayalam is 'Margam'.
3. Sebastian Pranje uses the term as used by Paul Mus. Pranje writes "Paul Mus recommends the term 'monsoon Asia' to encompass the borderless maritime world of pre-colonial East, Southeast, and South Asia as an area that, despite its rich diversity, shares certain cultural traits and that since the early historical period has interacted through the participation in a common world of commerce."
4. The work of Deepa S. J. C., titled *Nazranikalude Purathanapattukal*, published in 2011, studies in detail the presentation and variations across the various printed editions of Southist folksongs since its first publication in 1910.
5. Lukas, P. U. *Keralathile Syrian Christianikalude Purathanapatukal*. Kottayam, Kerala: Malayala Manorama, 1910.
6. Bava refers to the Patriarch of Antioch. Historical contentions exist as to which Patriarch is being referred to here between the Patriarch of Antioch and the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.
7. It is likely that sections of the song have been appended or altered in the course of its oral transmission. If the reader is attentive to the progression of the narrative, there seems to be a shift (more oppositional than aligned) in sentiments and tone from the line "Together they started and embarked on a ship"; coincidentally where the first change in tune occurs. The reference to "languishing limbs" suggests exhaustion and fear, which is almost immediately displaced by celebratory tones. Further, the reference to Cochin harbor and Cranganore, two different port harbors developed at different periods, poses unplacatable incongruity in any attempts of historically reconstructing the events of the song. However, the rationale of reading and studying folklore differs from that of the history.
8. '*Pathinambarishamaalorodu*' translates into rulers of the seventeen *jatis* or artisan classes. This is one among the privileges granted to the Southists by Cheraman Perumal.

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