



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

FASTING IN THE SYRO MALABAR CHURCH



Joseph Varghese Kureethara, Christ University, Bangalore

frjoseph@christuniversity.in

www.TheCMSIndia.org



FASTING IN THE SYRO MALABAR CHURCH

Joseph Varghese Kureethara, Christ University, Bangalore

frjoseph@christuniversity.in

Introduction

“Pour forth your hearts before Him!

By fasting, prayer and repentance, let us please Christ and His Father and His Spirit.”
(Anthem of Mysteries, Raza)

Fasting is the willful abstinence for a period of time, from anything that pleases one through one's body. Willful abstinence gives the clear indication that what is available to please one through one's body is to be kept aside for a predetermined period of time. Abstinence can be total or partial, in quantity or in quality. Fasting is not abstinence for the want of something. It is not the celebration of the lack of opportunity. It is the most effective use of our free will in the midst of ample opportunities.

Biblically, the noun translated "fast" or "a fasting" is *tsom* in Hebrew and *nesteia* in Greek. It means the voluntary abstinence from food. The literal Hebrew translation would be "not to eat." The literal Greek means "no food."

Why does one abstain from certain things? Is there a spirituality that supports this action? Religions of all kind have one or other type of fasting. The rigour of fasts varies. Some fasts are public whereas some other fasts are private. There are many reasons behind fasting. Fasting has both physiological as well as spiritual aims. We discuss here only the religious relevance of fasting practised among *Mar Toma* Nazranis in the context of their existence.

Human existence in this world is experienced through body. God formed man from the dust of the ground (Gen 2: 7) and woman from the body of man. (Gen 2: 22) Minus body, human being is not of this world. However, plus body, human existence is an inferior existence according to St. Paul. He writes, “*Eesho* taking the mortal body was a humbling act by God.” (Phil 2:7) For the church father Athanasius, “God became man that man might become God.” *Eesho* says, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

Therefore every human being has two contradicting but complementing principles behind his/her existence, viz., body and soul. Soul is identified as spirit or mind which is the life principle. (Gen 2:7) In all philosophical and religious systems, there are substantial discussions that deal with the explanations on the body-soul dualism and monism.

This guides us to think that we need to look for a life beyond our mortal body because our mortal body is meant for the life on this earth. What about our life beyond this visible world? Do we have an existence beyond this world? Is there a life for us without our body?

Christianity is a way of life that teaches us to focus on a life beyond our normal sense and sensibilities. It urges us to strive for perfect union with God. "It is the spirit that gives life,



7. The Fast of Elijah or the Fast of the Cross - Period of Elijah-Cross
8. The Fast of Wednesdays and Fridays

Minor Fasts:

9. The Vigil fast of St. Hormizdas
10. The Vigil fast of Ascension
11. The Vigil of feasts of the patrons of the Churches
12. The Vigil of Transfiguration
13. The Fast of 12 Fridays after Christmas, in honour of 12 Apostles

21st century Fasts

The fasts as per the Liturgical Calendar of the Syro Malabar Church, 2014-15 are:

1. 25-day Fast - December 1-24 – 24 days.
2. 3-day Fast - Rogation of the Ninevites – 3 days
3. 50-day Fast - Period of Great Fast – except the first Sunday - 48 days.
4. 15-day Fast - August 1-14 – 14 days – The Fast of the Assumption of Our Lady
5. 8-day Fast - September 1-7 – 7 days – The Fast of the Nativity of Our Lady
6. Friday Fast – All Fridays except the Fridays between Christmas and Denha, and the Friday immediately after the Great Resurrection – 38/39 days in a year.

There are many private fasts in the Syro Malabar Church such as:

7. The Fast in the family after the death a family member until the burial.
8. The Fast before administration and reception of Sacraments
9. The Fasts during retreats
10. The Fasts with specific purposes by individuals and groups.
11. The Fasts among the consecrated women.
12. The Vigil Fasts on the eve of a major feast.
13. The Fasts of penance.
14. The Fasts for a pilgrimage
15. The Fasts with a pilgrimage
16. The Fasts related to local festivals

Jewish influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting

Jews fast very rigorously even by avoiding water. There are six traditional fasts for the Jews of which the *Tisha B'Av* and the *Yom Kippur* are the most important ones and are observed from dusk to dusk. For *Yom Kippur* Jews spend almost 25 hours in the synagogue fasting and praying. Marriage is considered as a personal *Yom Kippur* and hence in the Ashkenazic tradition the bride and groom fast like that of the *Yom Kippur* on their wedding day before the official ceremony.

The three major purposes for fasting are (i) the achievement of atonement for sins and omissions in divine service, (ii) commemorative mourning, and (iii) commemorative gratitude. Abstinence from food and drink which are corporeal needs helps to provide a unique opportunity to focus on the non-corporeal life. Fasting can potentially elevate one to the exalted level of the ministering angels. By refraining from such basic physical indulgences such as food and drink, one can more greatly appreciate the dependence of humanity on God. This in turn leads one to appreciate God's beneficence in sustaining His creations. Indeed, in Jewish philosophy, this appreciation is one of the fundamental reasons for which God endowed mankind with such basic physical needs. *Yom Kippur* is the only fasting is permitted (if it falls) on *Sabbath*.



Jewish fasts and related observances have direct and indirect influence on the Syro Malabar fasts. Some of them are follows:

1. The Syro Malabar fasts are observed from sunset to the following day's dusk.
2. The Fasts before the administration and reception of Sacraments.
3. Fasts during the mourning period. Unity with the dead in the family who is not eating.
4. The Rogation of the Ninevites
5. No fasts on *Sabbath* – No fasts on the Sundays
6. The Fast of Esther – The Fast of Virgins – 8 day fast.
7. The Passover Meal – The Fast of the Thursday of Pes'ha.
8. The Reading of the Psalms during the fasts – (Passion Week and 3-day Fast)
9. Three times of prayer during the fast – Evening Midnight and Morning.
10. Spending time in the Synagogue – Church during the fast.

Hindu influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting

Fasting is an inseparable aspect of the life of a Hindu. The vegetarianism that most Hindus keep is a type of fasting. There would not be a single Hindu woman who does not take some kind of *Vrat*. The Ekadasi *Vrat* is the most popular one in the South India. On the days of Pradosha, Purnima etc and certain other auspicious days also many do fast. *Vrat* connotes to willingly abstain oneself from certain pleasures including that of eating. Men and women fast on personal conviction rather than a rule. In epics and legends, there are stories about people fasting for many years for pleasing particular deities. Associated with festivals such as Navaratri, Shivratri, Karva Chauth, there is fast in the Hinduism. Besides these, there are many weekly fasts in honour of deities.

According to the Hindu religious scriptures, fasting helps create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. One is expected to live piously, give charity and refrain from eating non-vegetarian food. Fasting is mostly goal-oriented in Hinduism. Religious scriptures state that fasting is not only a part of worship, but a great instrument for inculcating self-discipline too.

Hindu fasts are ascetical in nature. Hindu fasts and related observances have many influences on the Syro Malabar fasts. Some of them are:

1. One-time-eating (vegetarian) during the fast.
2. The Fasts before Feasts
3. The Fasts by the Hindu women – The Syro Malabar women have similar fasts.
4. Fast with special intention
5. Taking bath before fast – bodily cleanliness
6. *Bhajana* (Be with God) in temples – During 3-day fasts and 8-day fasts *Bhajana* is conducted
7. The Fasts related to death in the family
8. The abstinence from conjugal relationship
9. The Fasts for a pilgrimage – Sabarimala – Malayatoor
10. The Fasts related to local feasts
11. Day specific fasts
12. Abstinence from all animal products, alcohol, chewing betel, marital relationship, smoking etc.
13. Fast and Abstinence go together

The Christian (Western) influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting

Although *Eesho* was critical of many of the actions of the Jews, He did fast for forty days and nights, (Mt 4:2) He directed His followers to wash their face and be cheerful while fasting. For



Eesho, fasting is not for appearances or for people, but for God the Father who sees beyond appearances, and God the Father, who sees what is kept secret, will reward those who fast (Mt 6:16-18). He asked His disciples to fast after His death. "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." (Mark 2:20) To His disciples he also said, "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting." (Mt 17:19-21).

Apostles Barnabas and Paul joined with the Christians of Antioch for fasting and prayer. (Acts 13:3) When they appointed ministers to churches they did with prayer and fasting. (Acts 14:23) The Christians of the first couple of centuries had hoped that *Mishiha* was coming soon. Hence they lived a life of preparedness. (Mark 2:20) The major fasts of the first two centuries were more of personal than institutional. They are

1. The Paschal Fast (Friday of Passion to Easter Sunday Morning)
2. The Fast on Wednesday (betrayal of *Eesho*)
3. The Fast on Friday (crucifixion of *Eesho*) and
4. The pre-baptismal Fast.

Being a struggling community, in the first two centuries fasts were more or less individual piety with Fathers of the Church promoting it. But when the Church became a glorified church, this attitude slowly diminished. This was the reason why people started going to wilderness. Wilderness was not a place for bodily pleasures. They hardly had food and drink. They spent time in singing psalms and lived in total insecurity. Wilderness made them realize that everything in this world is passing. Monks of the deserts and monasteries trained themselves for a life in the other world.

The Ecclesiastical Fasts between 200 and 500 AD

1. Paschal Fast – 2-days to 6 days to 40days
2. The Fasts of Wednesdays and Fridays
3. The Fasts of Saturday – (burial of *Eesho*)
4. Prebaptismal Fasts
5. The Fast before Holy Communion
6. The Fast of the Penitents
7. The Pentacostal Fast
8. Voluntary fasts – monks

Post 500 AD Fasts

Apart from the above fasts, new fasts that came into the Roman church were

9. The Vigil Fasts of major feasts
10. The Ember days- some days at the beginning of each season
11. The Rogation (three days before Ascension) and
12. The Advent Fast
13. Private fasts by ascetics

Fasting is a training time for our life in the other world. It is nothing but a dress-rehearsal for the heavenly life. It is the perfect understanding of the spiritual significance of our existence in this world. It is neither because somebody else fasted nor because the Church insists us to Fasting that we fast, but by clearly knowing about our future that we observe fasting here on earth. Most of the ancient Christian (Western) fasts are observed in the Syro Malabar Church. Moreover, by the 17th century, the Fast on the Saturdays was introduced and the fast on Sunday was withdrawn. Strict vegetarianism and non-alcoholism during the Fasts were



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA
REG. NO. 118/IV/2016

For further information
regarding this text Please contact:

info@thecmsindia.org

library@thecmsindia.org

Please join the
'CMSI Benefactors Club'
and support the ongoing projects of
Christian Musicological Society Of India

- DIGITAL LIBRARY
- ARAMAIC PROJECT
- DIRECTORY OF CHRISTIAN SONGS
- ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SYRIAC CHANTS
- MUSIC ICONOGRAPHY
- CHRISTIAN ART

www.TheCMSIndia.org