

# Fr. ABEL PERIYAPPURAM, CMI. Creator of a Syriac Music Genre in Malayalam

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Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI (1920-2001), a Syro Malabar Catholic priest from Kerala who received no formal training in music during his formative years, became a pivotal figure in Kerala's cultural history and Christian music history of India. Fr. Abel's innate musicality came alive when Cardinal Joseph Parecattil (1912-1987) commissioned him to create a Malayalam version of the funeral services and the Hudra, the book of canonical prayers in Syriac. The commission came with a mission to retain the Syriac melodies already in use among the Syro Malabar Catholics. It also meant that the translated text should be viable to the original Syriac melody. Fr. Abel relied on a liberal approach in representing the source text but took extreme care to make the target text pleasantly singable. As a result, a new genre of old Syriac melodies with Malayalam text became an integral part of the Syro Malabar Catholics' religious experience. This article focuses on an analytical study of Fr. Abel's music leadership in enriching the cultural confluence in Kerala and reconnecting India to the source of Christianity in West Asia.

## **A time travel to the Ernakulam in 1965.**

Let us travel back in time to 1965, when Ernakulam was a bustling commercial town in Kerala, India. That is where Fr. Abel rediscovered himself as a lyricist, poet, art promoter, organizer, and administrator.

We shall focus on only one of the many creative phases of Fr. Abel's life. Fr. Abel arrived at Ernakulam at an exciting time in the Catholic Church. The repercussions of the Second Vatican Council's (1962-1965) first document on Sacred Liturgy reached the Catholic Church worldwide. Kerala was no exception. Interestingly, it would seem that the Syro Malabar Church was prescient of the movement in the Roman Catholic Church. The Syro Malabar Church promulgated the vernacular version of the Syriac *Qurbāna* (Eucharistic liturgy) in 1962. The other services continued to be in Syriac. Joseph Cardinal Parecattil (1912-1987), the head of the Syro Malabar Church, was enthusiastic in leading the efforts toward renewing the Syro Malabar Church's liturgy.

## **Joseph Cardinal Parecattil and the fate of the Syriac music of the Syro Malabar Church**

Cardinal Parecattil was aware of Fr. Abel's poetic talents and saw in him a trusted partner in modernizing the Syro Malabar liturgy. Initially, the Cardinal commissioned Fr. Abel to prepare the Malayalam version of the canonical prayers and the services for the dead. Early on, Cardinal Parecattil and Fr. Abel decided to keep the original Syriac melodies that the Syro Malabar priests had been singing for centuries. It meant that the Malayalam translation should fit into the Syriac melodies. Fr. Abel had to transfer the thought process and prosodic patterns that originated in a Semitic language to the target text following Dravidian syntax rules. In the process, the structure of the melody of the Syriac text had to be kept intact. Fr. Abel accepted the challenge.

The prophetic value of Cardinal Parecattil and Fr. Abel's combined decision comes to light when we examine the fate of the Roman Catholic Church's Gregorian chant. Had the Latin Church in Kerala followed a similar path, the Gregorian chant repertory would have acquired a second life in Malayalam.

## 1. Fr. Abel's advantages:

Singing Malayalam lyrics to secular melodies was very much in vogue among many Christian communities in Kerala since the 1950s. For example, in 1963, Dharmaram College in Bengaluru published *Dharmagīti*, a Malayalam hymnal (Dharmaram College 1963)<sup>1</sup>. This hymnal is a historical witness to the compositional practices among the Catholics in Kerala. There are 133 songs in the hymnal. Most of them are set to popular melodies from Hindi and Malayalam movies. For that reason, the hymnal did not include music notation. People already knew the melody. These songs were not part of the Eucharistic liturgy. They were sung during paraliturgical services, prayer gatherings, and other religious occasions.

Fr. Abel grew up in the Syriac tradition of the Syro Malabar Church. In those days, Syriac literacy was a requirement for becoming a priest in the Syriac churches. The seminarians learned to read and write the Syriac language during their formative years and used the Syriac *Hudra* (book of the liturgy of the Hours

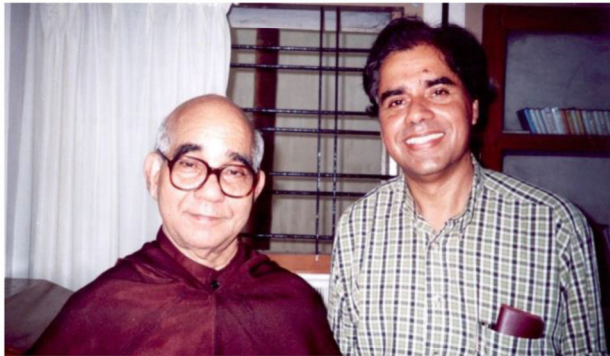


Figure 1: Joseph J. Palackal, CMI with Fr. Abel, CMI at Kalabhavan. Photo by K. S. Prasad. 23 August 2001.

for the entire year). Toward the final year of formation, they learned to celebrate *Qurbāna* and other sacraments in Syriac. More importantly, Fr. Abel spent his formative years in the CMI congregation. The CMI culture greatly valued knowledge of the Syriac language and music. The founding fathers were Malpans<sup>2</sup>. The CMIs owned a sense of pride in preserving the "authentic" melodies of the East-Syriac *Hudra*<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, the knowledge and exposure to Syriac culture during the seminary years were far from sufficient for the task that Fr. Abel agreed to undertake. Fortunately, help was available not far away, at St. Antony's Monastery at Aluva. Fr. Ludovic Kuniathodath, CMI (1888-1979), a scholar and grammarian of the Syriac language, lived in retirement due to ill health. Fr. Ludovic had ample time and willingness to help Fr. Abel. The story of a new music genre in Malayalam begins there.

### The Challenges:

There were a few challenges for Fr. Abel. Syriac and Malayalam have different syllabic structures.

The Malayalam translation would require more words to achieve a literal translation.

For example, St. Thomas the Apostle used only three syllables to profess his faith in Aramaic: *Mār(y) ālāh(y)*,<sup>4</sup> "My Lord and My God." The Malayalam translation, however, would require ten syllables instead of three in Syriac, *En-te-kaṛ-ttā-wum- en-te-dai-wa-wum*. So, the melody of the three-syllable Syriac phrase may not fit in the ten-syllable Malayalam text.

<sup>1</sup> See details on this hymnal at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/releases/dharmagiti-hymnal-book> Accessed 2 February 2024

<sup>2</sup> *Malpān* is a Malayalam adaptation of the Syriac word *Malpānā*, meaning "teacher." It is an honorary title given to an erudite priest who is also a scholar in the Syriac language and liturgy. See an article on the founding fathers of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/resources/resources-for-researchers/no-150-to-101/the-carmelite-congregation-of-malabar-1831-1931-centenary-souvenir-part-1>. Accessed 28 March 2024.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://thecmsindia.org/StaticFiles/docs/pdf/Our-liturgical-music-tradition.pdf>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

See Joseph J. Palackal's commentary on a letter by Fr. Amos Mechery, CMI (1904-1988) on the topic of the Syriac music culture of the CMI congregation, at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/StaticFiles/docs/pdf/Fr-Amos-letter-English-translation.pdf>. Accessed 28 March 2024.

<sup>4</sup> The transliteration system of Syriac words is based on a recommendation by Fr. Thomas Kalayil, CMI (1937-2024). Fr. Kalayil adapted the transliteration system that Brown, et al. (1997: 46) used in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* to represent the pronunciation of the Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala.

Beyond the syllabic structure, the Syriac fathers' genius can create simple phrases with multiple layers of meanings. Let us look at the famous Christological chant, *Sagdīnan Mār(y)*<sup>5</sup>

ܩܕܝܫܐܢܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܠܐܠܗܐ ܩܕܝܫܐܢܐ  
ܘܠܢܐܫܘܫܐܩ ܕܠܦܘܠܐܓܐ

സദ്ദീനൻ മാർ ലാലാഹൂസാക്  
വൽനാശൂസാക് ദ് ലാപുലാഗാ

Sagdīnan mār(y) lālā hūsāk  
Walnāšusāk d'lapūlāgā

‘We praise you, Lord, in your  
Undivided humanity and divinity, without doubt’.<sup>6</sup>

This chant consists of four phrases of four syllables each in two verses, for a total of 16 syllables. The original Syriac melody is set to these 16 syllables. The text's meaning is complicated because of the polysemic nature of the phrase *d'lā pulāgā*, which could mean "without a doubt" or "without division." Creating a Malayalam translation of this chant into two verses to fit the Syriac text's melody is almost impossible.

Also, Syriac and Malayalam have different approaches to poetic meters. Syriac poetry is syllabic; the number of syllables is the leading criterion without respect to the length of the syllable (short/long), accent, or pause. In contrast, the relative length of the syllable is a defining factor in Malayalam poetry. Besides, the grouping of syllables and pauses is also part of the metric structure.

In the melodic realization of the text, Syriac chants have a unique rhythmic structure that differs from the concept of *tālam* (metric cycle) in Indian music or metronomic rhythm in popular music. Rhythm in Syriac chants may be described as referential, i.e., rhythm exists only in reference to the text. Rhythm is not an independent entity with its theory as in the Indian classical traditions. Rhythm is linear, not cyclical, and, therefore, does not fall in the category of *tālam*. Rhythm emanates from the movement in the utterance of the text. For that reason, rhythm also has a semantic role. The durational values of the notes also depend on the meaning units. For example, in the text's musical realization, sometimes a steady flow of rhythm may be broken to draw attention to a semantic closure.

<sup>5</sup> The text of this chant is attributed to Babai the Great (c. 551-c.628). See details in *Encyclopedia of Syriac chants of the Syro Malabar Church*. <http://www.thecmsindia.org/sagdinan-mar> . Accessed 15 February 2024.

<sup>6</sup> English translation is by Zacharias Thundy

Music example 1: The transcription of the Malayalam version of a popular Syriac melody, “*Tuyay*.”<sup>7</sup>

## Pulariyil Nidrayunarnnangē

Text: Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI  
Strophic melody: Syriac, Tuyay

Transcription: D. Sebastian  
Ottaplackal

$\text{♩} = 92$   
Stanza 1



Pu - la - ri - yil ni - dra - yu - ṅaṛ - nna - ngē.

3

Pā - wa - na sa - nni - dhi - ya - ṅa - yu - nnu.

5

Kaṛ - ttā - wē nin ka - ru - ṅa - kkāy.

7

Nan - di - pa - ṛa - ṅṅū na - mi - kku - nnu.

9

Stanza 2



Ma - nu - ja - ku - la - ttin pā - la - ka - nē.

11

Wi - na - ya - mo ṭa - ṅa - ye wāzh - ttu - nnu.

13

Kṛu - - pa - - yum šā - - nti - - ya - -

14

Pā - pa - ppo - ṛu - ti - yu - ma - ru - ḷa - ṅa - me.

The rhythmic layout of ‘*Pulariyil Nidrayunarnnange*’ is based on a rendering by Fr. Abel, CMI.<sup>8</sup> The pauses at the end of measures 4 and 12 coincide with the semantic flow of the text.

<sup>7</sup> See more details on this chant at Aramaic Project-374 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ttcu7RovTAU> Accessed 10 April, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> See complete text in Abel ([1974] 1996: 14)

In this four-verse strophe, the fermata at the end of measures 4 and 12 indicate a pause. This pause, which causes a break in the regular rhythmic flow, indicates the closure of a semantic unit.

One of the unique features of the Syriac prosody is the use of incipit. The incipit is often a verse from the Scripture, mainly from the book of Psalms. It serves as a thematic introduction to the strophe or the entire chant. More often than not, the incipit is prose and does not follow the stanza's syllabic structure. With regard to incipit, there are six kinds of chants in the Syriac repertory:

- chants that have an incipit before every stanza
- chants with opening and closing incipit
- chants with one incipit before the opening stanza
- chants with only one strophe but are sung twice with two different incipits
- chants with only one strophe but are sung thrice with three different incipits
- Chants that have no incipits

Incipits also have a melodic function. The group's musically talented leader decides the incipit's pitch register. The intoning of the incipit is such that its ending pitch could conveniently lead to the beginning pitch of the strophe. Without a reference pitch from a musical instrument, the first group leader intones the incipit in a comfortable pitch register for the community.

Syriac chants existed primarily in oral tradition. A few attempts to create staff notation of model melodies did not gain popularity<sup>9</sup>. For that reason, individual variations in melodies were common occurrences.

Finally, Fr. Abel had to deal with liturgical texts. Liturgical chants are repositories of the theology of particular churches. A wrong word or phrase can make a world of difference. The writer had to be well aware of the nuances of both the source and target languages.

### **The choice of *Rēš Qālā***

One of the characteristic features of the Syriac chant tradition is the use of *Rēš Qālā* (Syriac, "head melody"/ model melody). *Rēš* ("head") refers to the opening strophe in a chant. The melody of the first strophe is the model for the rest of the strophes in the chant, which may range from one to any number of strophes. *Rēš Qālā* is, thus, a compositional practice of creating new chant texts to an existing melodic and rhythmic pattern (see more details in Palackal 2005: 130-138).

At the outset, Fr. Abel had to decide on the melodies he would use for the Malayalam version. The *Hudra* is a treasury of Syriac melodies that survived several centuries. After much deliberation, Fr. Abel chose twenty-four model melodies from many melodic options in the Syriac chant repertory. Nineteen of these melodies were part of an analytical study in Palackal (2005: 130-178).

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<sup>9</sup> See more examples at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/resources/resources-for-researchers/no-50-to-1/manuscript-of-syriac-chants-in-staff-notation-by-fr-aiden-kulathinal> Accessed 13 February



**Fr. Abel's version of the chant**

Table 2: Malayalam version by Fr. Abel, CMI (Abel [1965] 1986:55-56) and translation. Syro Malabar Church.

<p>മങ്ങിയൊരന്തി വെളിച്ചത്തിൽ          ചെന്തീ പോലൊരു മാലാകാ<sup>11</sup>          വിണ്ണിൽ നിന്നെൻ മരണത്തിൻ          സന്ദേശവുമായ് വന്നരികിൽ</p> <p>കേട്ടു നടുങ്ങി മാനമിളകി          പേടിവളർന്നെൻ സ്വരമിടറി          മിഴിനീർ തൂകിയുണർത്തിച്ചു          ഞാനൊരു നിമിഷമൊരുങ്ങട്ടെ</p> <p>ദൂതൻ പ്രാർത്ഥന കേട്ടില്ല          സമയം തെല്ലും തന്നില്ല          മൃതിയുടെ പിടിയിലമർന്നു ഞാൻ          നാഥാ നീ താൻ അവലംബം</p>	<p>At the dim glow of dusk          A reddish fiery angel          From the skies, with death's          Message came up to me.</p> <p>Hearing I shuddered, mind perturbed,          Fear grew, my voice cracked          Shedding tears, I said,          "Let me have a moment to get ready."</p> <p>The messenger did not heed my prayer          Nor did grant me any time;          I am crushed in the clasp of death,          O Lord, you are my only refuge.</p>
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In twelve verses, Fr. Abel presented a musical drama of an intense emotional encounter between a man and a messenger [Angel] of death. The angel descends from the skies, holding a glowing torch at an ominous time of darkness. The man in tears pleads with the angel for more time to prepare. The angel denies the request. Despondent, the man turns to God and pleads for refuge. The tension building reaches its climax in verse eleven; here, we see the man already in the grip of death. The dreadful mood changes in the final verse when the man seeks mercy from the higher authority of God. This is a strange combination of liturgy and drama.

Fr. Abel is a master of composing liturgical drama. From a third-party perspective, we feel enormous pity for the main character in the melodrama. The man is submissive and does not challenge his fate nor fight with the angel. Instead, he only asks for a few moments to prepare. In the Syriac version, the poet leaves us on the uncertain terrain; the man is in the clutches of death. The messenger does not heed the plea and is engaged in severing the soul from the body.

Fr. Abel is also a master of word painting. Departing from a literal translation of the text, Fr. Abel resorts to images that are not in the source text. In effect, Fr. Abel takes the Syriac text theme and creates a new poem in Malayalam. A cursory glance at the literal translation in table 1 and Fr. Abel's version in table 2 may highlight the differences. The Syriac text does not use the word *mālāka* (angel), instead *rūhānā* (a spiritual being). The Chaldean *Syrian Church of the East* retained a literal translation of the word *rūhānā* as *arūpiyuruwan* (a male spiritual being). Fr. Abel substituted *rūhānā* with *Mālākā*, which Malayalam speakers are more familiar with. Also, the messenger descends like a fireball; this is not in the original text. The drama heightens in the second stanza, *kēṭṭunaṭungi, manamiḷaki, pēṭiwaḷarṇnen swaramiṭari*, ("hearing, I shuddered, my mind perturbed, fear grew, and my voice cracked"). These biological changes resulting from row emotions are not part of the Syriac text.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Fr. Abel transliterates *mālāka* (മാലാകാ) exactly as in the Syriac text. For unknown reasons, the Malayalam speakers have modified the pronunciation as *mālākha* (മാലാഖാ). In later editions of this book as well as other publications, Fr. Abel represented the popular pronunciation

More importantly, the Syriac text ends without a resolution; in the final verse, we see the angel removing the soul from the body. Fr. Abel, however, adds a new dimension to the drama. In the final verse, the lead character in the drama is seeking refuge in God's mercy. O Lord, you are the only refuge, like a terrified child running towards the comfort of its mother's lap. Fr. Abel ends with a sense of hope and a prayer, creating a sense of calm resolution. Overall, Fr. Abel's version has all the characteristics of an independent composition of high literary quality rather than a faithful translation of the Syriac text.

What we should have asked so far is who the main character in this drama is. That man is the individual singer. See the repeated use of the first-person singular. The text is meant for community prayer, but the song is intensely personal and private. Each singer is enacting the drama. At the poem's end, the singer needs to probe into his/her inner self to see if he can respond to the messenger's call of death. It calls for a constant readiness that is required of every believer, much like the servant who keeps awake for the return of his master (Lk 12:36).

### The Melody

We are still in search of the melody of the Syriac text. Meanwhile, it will be worthwhile to examine the metric structure of the text. The verses consist of pentasyllabic phrases: 2 + 3 = 5, as in *B'ram- šā/b'mā-rā-wā*. Fr. Abel would have accessed the melody through his literary collaborator, Fr. Ludovic Kunianthodath, CMI. Nonetheless, Fr. Abel used the meter and melody of the heptasyllabic popular chant, *Tūyay*.<sup>12</sup>

<p>Tu-yay- bad-muṭ- he-šō-kā Prīsā wāṭ al beryāṭā Wadnah nuhrē(h) damšihā Waqnā ālmā būyānā</p>
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The text is set to a single, strophic melody in a medium tempo. The setting is syllabic. The conventional techniques composers use to create drama are conspicuously absent in the melody; there are no skips or jumps. Also, there are no ornamentations on the notes. Also, there are no dynamics (loud/soft); the volume stays steady on the syllables.

The rhythm is logogenic, i.e., based on the inherent motion in the utterance of the syllables. There is no intricate rhythmic play. The melody's movement is conjunct, i.e., moving from one note to the adjacent note. The articulation of the syllables is without accentuation. There is an even distribution of energy on the syllables.

### Critical acclaims of Fr. Abel's poetic genius:

Literary critics in Kerala were eager to praise Fr. Abel's use of the Malayalam language in its pure form. For example, *Mangiyoranti welichattil* caught the attention of Prof. G. Sankarakurupp (1901- 1978), an acclaimed poet laureate and literary critic in Malayalam. Prof. Sankarakurupp, a Hindu, developed a great admiration for Fr. Abel's poetic works.<sup>13</sup> What attracted Prof. Sankarakurupp was the setting of the scene in the opening line with that powerful image of the blazing angel against the background of the dim light of the setting sun. This image struck a chord with every Keralite of their generation.

<sup>12</sup> This chant is a Tešbohtā (praise) from Saprā (Morning prayer). See complete text in Bedjan ([1938] 2002: 35-36). See a video recording of this chant by Malpan Mathew Vellanickal in Aramaic Project-374 <https://youtu.be/Ttcu7RovTAU?si=Ig5VWNI-G7aqppAY>. Accessed 15 April 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Poet Laureate, Prof. Sankarakurupp wrote a letter of appreciation for the poetic caliber of Fr. Abel, see Kunnappally (1990: 61). <http://thecmsindia.org/resources/resources-for-researchers/no-200-to-151/kalabhavan-shilpavum-shilpiyum-a-memoir-edited-by-mathukutty-j-kunnappally> Accessed 14 February 2021. See the copy of the letter at <http://thecmsindia.org/resources/resources-for-researchers/no-200-to-151/g-sankarakurupp-on-fr-abel>. Accessed 14 February 2024

Prof. G. Sankarakurup wrote the letter on 1 October 1965. That is the year Fr. Abel started working on translating the funeral services into Malayalam. As per the letter, Fr. Abel visited the poet at his home at Karikkamuri, Ernakulam, in September, and showed him the work in progress and sang some of the chants in the Syriac tunes. The purpose was to see if the eminent poet would approve the quality of the target text. Prof. Sankarakurup probably felt connected with the text and thought process in Fr. Abel's work. About thirty years before (1933), the poet wrote a famous poem replete with imageries from the Catholic funeral rites in Kerala. The title of that poem, *innu ñān nāle nī* ("Today I, Tomorrow You") is the script that used to be on the caskets used for Catholic funerals in Kerala. Mr. Sankarakurup and Fr. Abel grew up when there was no electricity or street lights in Kerala. People traveled at night holding a torch made of cloth drenched in coconut oil or dried coconut leaves. The experience was quite common to people in Kerala. Indeed, Fr. Abel surpassed the genius of a Syriac poet.

Another famous literary critic in Kerala, Prof. Mathew Ulakamthara, quotes the opening stanza of *Mangiyoranti welichattil* as a prime example of Fr. Abel's literary style (see Kunnappally 1990: 72). Professor Ulakamthara is not sure if the chant has a Syriac source. The following is his scathing comment in 1969:

“ഇതിനൊരു സുറിയാനിമൂലമുണ്ടോ എന്തെന്നിരിക്കറിവില്ല.  
ഉണ്ടെങ്കിൽ മുലകുടി അല്പം ലജ്ജിച്ചു കൊള്ളട്ടെ”.

“I do not know if this has a Syriac source,  
Should there be one, let the original poet be ashamed!”

There could not be a more powerful testimony to Fr. Abel's literary talent.

### **Detractors of Fr. Abel:**

Fr. Abel had several detractors. Critics questioned Fr. Abel's approach to representing the Syriac texts in the vernacular. Fr. Abel had access to the literal translations of the Syriac texts from Fr. Ludovic Kunianthodath, CMI. However, Fr. Abel's concern was to make the vernacular version sound seamless in the original Syriac melody. With that goal in mind, Fr. Abel chose poetic meters and Malayalam vocabulary to allow the melody's free flow. Fr. Abel also chose imageries and allusions that people in Kerala would easily resonate with. It would seem that Fr. Abel preoccupied himself with representing the sense of the source text rather than a literal translation.

Justifiably, a few critics thought Fr. Abel took too much freedom in creating the Malayalam version of the Psalms that needed more fidelity to the Syriac source. In some cases, Fr. Abel omitted verses that needed to be clarified for modern speakers of the Malayalam language. In the preface to the second volume of the Hours, Fr. Abel acknowledged that he had edited the texts to suit the sentiments of contemporary times Abel [1974 1996: 6].

Another group of critics challenged Fr. Abel's arbitrary shortening of songs, prayers, and performance practices. One example is the incense song, "Ayk ethra," in the evening prayer (ramšā) on Sundays. The Syriac Hudra prescribes this song to be sung three times with three different incipits (see Bedjan [1938] 2002:3). In 1967, Heinrich Husmann published staff notation of this chant based on the rendering of Fr. Amos Mecherry, CMI (1904-1988) at the CMI Prior General's House in Ernakulam (Husmann 1967: 108-109)

The notation shows repetition of the exact text and the same melody with three different incipits. In Fr. Abel's version of the Hours in Malayalam, however, the song has only one incipit and is sung only once (see Abel 1996:22). Interestingly, the Chaldean Catholic Church in the Middle East went through a similar process of transferring the Syriac text into Arabic. The Arabic version is faithful to the performance practice of the Syriac Hudra. There are several other examples in which Fr. Abel shortened prayers or changed song performance practices by deleting repetitions.

A few critics thought that Mar Joseph Cardinal Parecattil's unstinted support prompted Fr. Abel to take too much freedom in following his artistic instincts because he was confident that the Cardinal would quickly grant imprimatur to his works.

Despite all these criticisms, Fr. Abel remained a winner in the court of popular appeal. The Syro-Malabar Catholics wholeheartedly and overwhelmingly accepted Fr. Abel's works. The Malayalam version appealed to the generation of Syro Malabar Catholics who grew up in the 1960s and did not know Syriac. They felt at home because of the literary quality of the text and the smooth flow of the melody. Ultimately, Fr. Abel's valuable and voluminous contributions shall remain a treasure in humanity's intangible cultural heritage.

## Summary

This study focuses on a specific area of Fr. Abel's contribution to the Syro Malabar Church and Malayalam literature. Beyond the history of Catholic liturgy, Fr. Abel's contributions are part of Kerala's cultural history. In retrospect, Cardinal Joseph Parecattil could not have entrusted creating Malayalam versions of the Book of the Hours and funeral services in Syriac to a more talented person than Fr. Abel. Fr. Abel took upon himself a problematic mission to retain the ancient Syriac prosodic practices and liturgical melodies. He used the translation of Syriac chants and transformed them into beautiful poems in Malayalam.

In the process, Fr. Abel improved upon the source text's content and intensified the dramatic effect by infusing into it emotive images that are familiar to the Malayalam speakers. One would not think that these are not songs of Kerala origin.

Fr. Abel's contributions also include Malayalam translations in prose of over a thousand pages of Syriac liturgical texts. That includes the translation of the Book of Psalms. This is subject matter for a separate study. Fr. Abel created a corpus of prose texts in contemporary Malayalam. In the process, Fr. Abel formulated a prayer vocabulary that flows smoothly in utterance and is endearing to Malayalam speakers.

Above all, Fr. Abel has bequeathed a set of recordings of the Syriac and Malayalam versions of the model melodies in his voice. The recordings are available on Aramaic Project- 11, 12, 13 & 14<sup>14</sup>. Aramaic Project-14 includes a discussion on the nature of rhythm in Syriac chants.

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<sup>14</sup> These recordings took place at three different locations and dates. Aramaic Project-11 (Kalabhavan Studios, 5 December 1997), [https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8\\_G1k](https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8_G1k); Aramaic Project-12 (Giri's Studio, New Rochelle, New York, 22 July 1998), <https://youtu.be/WAgly8eVRw0>; Aramaic Project-13 (Fr. Abel's office at Kalabhavan.), <https://youtu.be/4S3QAPWH-PY>; Aramaic Project-14 (Joseph J. Palackal's office at St. Stanislaus Kostka Rectory, 20 September 1997), <https://youtu.be/W0ANNKMTJq0>. Accessed 2 April 2024

All these are in addition to Fr. Abel's active participation in the audio recording of the *CD Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India* (Palackal 2002). These recordings may be primary source materials for future researchers. Also, we are fortunate to have a record of the Singing voice and speech voice of a cultural icon of Kerala.

## Conclusions

Fr. Abel's personal story is an indispensable tool in reconstructing the religious music history of India. The consequences of Fr. Abel and Cardinal Parecattil's early decision are far-reaching. The decision to retain the original Syriac melodies contributed to their preservation in a different cultural context. These melodies have become an essential component of the cultural fabric of India. Had they not done that, a precious repertory of East Syriac melodies would have been lost for humanity. For this reason, we may add to the discourse on India as a country that preserves an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Fr. Abel was a mediator in transforming and preserving a Syriac music tradition from West Asia and took a life of its own in Kerala in South India. The underlying transformation process of a melodic tradition that Fr. Abel set in motion may contain clues for researchers on the early history of intercultural music that we now refer to as Hindustani classical music of North India. For that reason alone, Fr. Abel's name should find a special place in the history books on music in India. Music historians have ignored the rich and varied musical traditions among the Christians in South India that came about due to continued cultural communications among countries and regions across the world. Over the centuries, these traditions have established unique identities and expanded Kerala and India's musical mosaic (Palackal 2019).

The way Fr. Abel blended the Malayalam text with the Syriac melody was so perfect that the generation that grew up in the 1960s did not think that the melodies came from the East Syriac tradition in West Asia. To them, they all sounded indigenous. Also, by adapting the characteristically simple Syriac melodies to Malayalam texts, Fr. Abel gave a model for future liturgical music composers to emulate.

Taken together, the East-Syriac and West Syriac music traditions of the Syriac Christians in India, along with their Malayalam versions, should be considered a *padhathi* (system), a third system of music in India, besides the Karnatak and Hindustani classical music systems. The unique principles of melody, rhythm, compositional practices, and performance practices require greater academic attention. And further studies on the contributions of Fr. Abel can only enrich the emerging field of Christian musicology in India. This may also be the forum to propose that Syriac music and the socio-religious systems embedded in it should find a space in India's high school textbooks.

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