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by

Jonathan Koshy Varghese

India International Centre
40, Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi-110 003
Tel. : 24619431 FAX: 24627751

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In Search of Ephrem the Syrian: Suriani and the Materiality of Faith*

Perhaps the logical thing to do is to address how I reached here, to speak about a 4th century Syrian Christian saint. It is perhaps the only meaningful means to understanding my journey, and my research. That is not to suggest that this session is an exploration of my selfhood, but rather an attempt at bringing to the fore, an important aspect of the research, the person behind the fieldwork; to perhaps appreciate the fact that research is conducted by people like you and me, people who are also repositories of (historical and personal) narratives, carriers of traditions, who are conditioned and sometimes motivated by collective memory, passed onto us by our ancestors.

Memory is, however, not an empirical source. It is dynamic and sensitive to changes around one's personhood. How reliable is memory then? This is a question that frames the nature of my research,as for most parts of my work, I have decided to indulge the memories of people. While acknowledging the elusive nature of memory, I have come to appreciate its enormous potential to uncover the human aspects of historical narratives. Memory forces one to encounter the limitations of institutionalised history, with its often soulless abstraction of human lives, and rather invites one to scrutinise the various mechanics of historical narrativisation. No doubt this is a difficult conundrum, and it is not my attempt here to address or prove the reliability of memory as one of the sources of historical narratives. On the other hand, my research is an invitation for all of us to inspect the interactions of history, memory and narrative in the formation and sustenance of a community's identity. More than a session then, this is an invitation to explore the many manifestations of memory amongst the Syrian Christians of Kerala.

It is only natural to wonder why this session has been titled the way it has been, *In Search of Ephrem the Syrian,* and perhaps wonder at the relation it bears to the subtitle, *Suriani and the Materiality of Faith.* To

*Lecture delivered on 17 November 2017 at the India International Centre by Jonathan Koshy Varghese.

my mind, there are many reasons that invoke the necessity of such an arrangement of words; one such prominent reason is a sincere desire to see this session exemplify some of the anxieties, the excitement, and perhaps even the wonder that has come to characterise my own journey during the course of this research. The session and the discussion that would ensue are therefore shaped by the trajectory of my search for the elusive idea that is St. Ephrem.

One is not to misunderstand my statement: St. Ephrem was a real person, a 4th century Syrian Christian saint, a writer of hymns, and the beloved saint of the Syrian Orthodox Church. However, during the course of my research, I discovered that St. Ephrem was not just a distant historical figure, not just the famous hymnographer of the Orthodox Church, a theologian or a poet. Instead he became, to my research, a suggestive marker, a touchstone in the collective memory of the Syrian Christians of Kerala, perhaps even a crucial metaphor of a faith that travelled across the oceans, of a community of beliefs and imagined kinship.During the course of this research, St. Ephrem has come to represent the cornerstone of a community that was imagined, and sustained by narratives of legends, myths and histories. Metaphors, we agree, do not exist in isolation. They are a function of language. In this particular instance, the language happened to be Syriac, an ancient dialect of Aramaic.

Early Encounters

I first encountered Syriac as a young boy on a Sunday liturgy at St. George Orthodox Syrian Church in Kalamassery, Kerala.[1] I remember my first reaction as being that of bewilderment; bewilderment at hearing the strange sounds of something alien slipped in between Malayalam words. Yet, it was uttered with ease by the others in the church. I realised that my feelings were not shared by anyone else present. Later, my uncle explained that the strange and alien sounds were that of *Suriani,* the language of God, used during liturgy to say the Lord's prayer. It was the language of prayer, and was known to all members of the Orthodox Church. I then realised that perhaps I was the alien in that church. Years later, I would discover that Suriani was alien to me, perhaps because

of my upbringing as a member of the Syro–Malabar Catholic Church,[2] and though our respective histories claim allegiance to the same origin-myth—the arrival of St. Thomas in the 1st century, and the concomitant emergence of Christianity in India—the various schisms in the Syrian Christian traditions have alienated us from each other. This is in itself an incredible narrative, but the many legends of St. Thomas or Mar Thoma (as he is often referred to here), the nature of their inception, the subsequent patterns of evolution, and the associated historical narratives deserve a whole other session, and can hardly be summed up in a few sentences.

Closely linked to this flurry of historical narratives is what struck me as the peculiar relation *Suriani* shared with the indigenous imagination. Suriani referred to two simultaneous things at once: it referred both to the *people* who carried the faith of Syriac Christianity, and the very *language* of that faith amongst the Syriac Christians of Kerala. This almost poetic assimilation of an ancient alien language amongst the people of Kerala struck me as curious, and in these times, a very relevant aspect of the Indian cosmopolitan imagination. The idea that the word Suriani could mean both the language and the particular demography of the Christian population in Kerala, also struck me as an opportunity to explore the many identities ascribed to, or rather, associated with the Christians of Kerala—St. Thomas Christians, Nasranis, Syrian Christians—nomenclatures that evolved in response to particular adaptations of the origin-myth of the community. Moreover, it soon became clear that the overarching theme connecting the nomenclatures proposes the inherently complex relationship between the language and the identity formation. This would more or less constitute the first part of my presentation—I will showcase some of the facets of the relationship between the Syriac language and the Syrian Christians of Kerala.

The second part of my presentation will be an attempt to elucidate how the identities of the Christian communities thus generated also revolve around local histories; histories that have been embedded in the indigenous imagination, which have evolved into oral narratives

and continue to survive in the form of local legends. This is one of the defining modalities of my research, which, in this case, is suggested by the subtitle. The many origin-myths of the Syrian Christians splintered across the geographical landscape of Kerala, until they spliced with the indigenous legends of the Cochin and Travancore kingdoms, and were subsequently influenced by the socio-political schisms engineered by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Most of these legends survive as oral narratives in the many churches spread across Thrissur and Kottayam districts of Kerala.

In many ways, this session is an attempt to scrutinise the relationship of the Syrian Christians to history and historiography (all the while questioning the premise of the institutional frameworks where this relationship unfolds). It has been my task to look for the different manifestations of this relationship, to seek the many material evidences of this relationship as it is engineered at the intersections of language and community

Discovering a Metaphor

I first encountered St. Ephrem in the main hall of SEERI (St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute)[3], during the course of a conversation with Dr. Rev. Thomas Koonammakkal. The institution has adopted the name, Rev. Koonammakkal explained, to raise curiosities about the legacies of the Syrian Christian traditions. Like Rev. Koonammakkal, no one at SEERI had any doubt about the significance of St. Ephrem; the painting of his image was duplicated and reprinted on prayer book covers and posters, and was even the subject of research projects nurtured at the institute. The reproduction of the portrait of St. Ephrem typified the principle on which SEERI was founded: to reclaim the lost traditions of Syriac Christianity. To Rev. Koonammakkal and many like him, the key to doing this was the preservation and dissemination of the Syriac language. The task at hand is very challenging, they admit, but considering the relevance of the language to the traditions of the Syrian Christians (of Kerala), it is vital for preserving the community's sense of history.

Their very title, Syrian Christians, was fashioned by the Portuguese who were surprised to discover the natives practising the Christian[4] faith in Syriac. To them, this was nothing short of heresy, and their initial perplexity soon transformed to animosity, until it culminated in the Synod of Diamper[5] in 1599. Presided by Aleixo de Menezes, the then Archbishop of Goa, this marked an important turn in the history of the Syrian Christians: the Portuguese destroyed all the Syriac scripts, prayers and manuscripts in the aftermath of the Synod. It was an early attempt at destroying all traces of native history, not uncharacteristic of any imperial strategy, but what is strange here is the bewildering hostility of the Portuguese to the natives who identified themselves as Christians. The Synod worsened the relationship between the native Christians and the Portuguese Christians, until the Coonan Cross Oath *(Koonan Kurishu Sathyam)* of 1653, more or less ousted the Portuguese from the (spiritual and socio-economic) lives of the native Christians.

SEERI

At this juncture, it is important to recall that Syriac was not a monolith. In the wake of the Coonan Cross Oath, the East Syriac rite came to be used by the Pazhayakoor Catholic Church—which in time split into the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, and the Assyrian Church of the East (1710). The West Syriac rite was adopted by the dissenting Puthenkoor

Malankara Church,[6] which subsequently witnessed considerable shifts in alliance and ecclesiastical allegiances.

SEERI, though established by the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in 1985,[7] was founded on the principle of a common origin myth, the arrival and the apostolic activities of St. Thomas. True to its name, it is characterised by an unbridled principle of ecumenical learning—that anyone irrespective of faith, social class or education can study and participate in the process of Syriac language preservation. As I spent time there, something about the place, the philosophy of the monks, the nuns and the scholars that constitute it, and the larger network of intellectual discourses that it engendered, suggested the long lost glories of the many cosmopolitan histories of the Malabar, the kind that one might have observed on the beaches of Cranganore,[8] and the ports of Cochin in the erstwhile pasts of Malabar's stint with trade and commerce. Syriac maybe a fast disappearing language in Kerala, but in SEERI, a small group of priests, nuns and scholars is working meticulously to preserve it; they are working hard to nurture interest in a language that is arguably alien in its origin, and yet intimately native in its manifestation.

The Creole and the Native Tongue

This discusses the interactions of Syriac with Malayalam-bred *Garshuni Malayalam.* The alternate terms used to refer to the script, *Karshon* or even *Suriani Malayalam,* bear testimony to the procedures of Syriac indigenisation in the Malabar region. Istvan Perczel,[9] in his attempts to chronicle the script, informs us that the East Syriac version of *Karshon* had been documented around the 16th century, while the West Syriac version came in as late as the 19th century. Perczel's sources include letters of correspondence scripted in *Garshuni Malayalam,* the original *Garshuni* text of the Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper (1599) signed by the Nasranis, and most importantly, the concomitant emergence of other linguistic hybrids such as *Arabi Malayalam. Arabi Malayalam,*[10] like *Suriani Malayalam/Garshuni Malayalam/Karshon,* attracts our attention to a larger symptom of indigenisation that may be observed in the Malabar region.

The interactions of languages are an inevitability here; they were necessitated, and even shaped by, day-to-day interactions of the different communities settled in the Malabar region. One famous material evidence of this linguistic interaction/assimilation is the 9th century copper plates, *Tharisapalli Plates,*[11] issued to the Nasrani community by Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal, the then king of Quilon, which document signatures in as many as three different scripts: Hebrew, Pahlavi and Kufic. The plates are an important fragment of the Nasrani community's history, for it is not merely their past that interests us, but their present too.One part of the plates is preserved in the Devalokam Aramana of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, while the other plate is preserved in the Poolatheen Aramana of the Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church. That an important aspect of the Nasrani tradition is shared between two different factions[12] of the Syrian church only reinforces the many narratives of Nasrani historiography. However, without digressing, it is important for us to appreciate the infusion of Syriac into the daily conversations of the Nasranis. This is not difficult to substantiate if we recognise that seemingly colloquial Malayalam words like Pesaha, Isho and Mar (transliterated) were originally Syriac words—*Pesha, Isho* and *Mar,*[13] and that these words are fundamental aspects of the Nasrani's linguistic and social life. Though diminished, this aspect of their past still survives in the form of Syriac chants and songs used during the course of the liturgy, many of which I was able to record at SEERI. More than anything, it is the mechanics of Syriac assimilation that directs our attention to a larger system of indigenisation in Kerala.

Orality, Repetition and Ritual

I use the word orality to refer to anything that comes within the purview of the verbal and the communicated. There is a general consensus within the Nasrani community that their history survives largely in the oral form. This is not hard to grasp once we realise the problematic relationship the Nasrani shares with historiography, especially in the wake of the Synod of Diamper (1599), when all textual documentation of the community was destroyed. Amidst the many narratives that survive, it is possible for us to conclude that there were identifiably distinct rituals that characterised the

indigenous nature of the Nasrani community in Kerala. Scaria Zacharia's edited volume[14] on the Synod outlines the many rituals that offended the Portuguese, rituals that the European Christians identified as 'unchristian'. The irony of the situation cannot be emphasised enough—the seemingly 'heathen' rituals of the Nasrani community caused enough consternation amongst the Portuguese Catholics that they were convinced of the need to reform the wayward native 'Christians'. The Synod marked an idiosyncratic episode in Indian history where Christians were in a state of conflict with Christians about the authentic forms of Christianity. In retrospect, it is evident that these questions of authenticity had arisen at the intersections of racial profiling and class positioning, and eventually led to the deterioration of the relationship between the Portuguese and the (largely mercantile) Nasrani community. Among the few rituals that did manage to survive, the 17th century *Marghamkali* opens up a crucial window in helping us access the procedures of the Nasrani rituals.

The structure of *Marghamkali* is devised to reiterate its ritualistic function. For this reason, it is difficult to classify it as either a dance or a ritual. As dance, it is something that one can acquire training in, and it is often performed for commercial reasons, like any other popular form such as *Bharatanatyam,* and like *Bharatanatyam, Marghamkali* was engendered within a religious narrative. It is in its quality as a visual performance that *Marghamkali* seemingly reiterates its ritualistic role. The performance is organised by two parallel narratives: a linear narrative of the song, and a circular narrative of the bodily performance. The linear narrative retells the journey of Thomas the Apostle, his trials, his death; in essence the journey of this faith from a distant land and the sustenance of this faith in the Malabar. The circular narrative, the performance that complements the song, is characterised by its own code: the performers, who represent the disciples of Jesus, perform around a *nilavilakku* (oil lamp placed on the floor), which in this case represents Jesus; the performers wear *chatta* (blouse) and *mundu* (dhoti/wrap-arounds), mostly white in colour with red or golden seams, and the performance infuses within it the *mudras* borrowed from *Sangamkali* with a simultaneous combination of radiating and converging movements around the *nilavilakku*.

The coexistence of both these narratives is fundamental in recognising the connotation of *Marghamkali* in Nasrani history. The form was engineered to narrativise a faith that had not formally acquired an institutional shape, or alternately, *Marghamkali* was one of the means by which 'Christianity', as we understand it now, was understood back then by the Nasrani community. In this sense then, every performance of *Marghamkali* is a reiteration of the journey of a faith, the history[15] of that faith in the Malabar, and, by extension, the history of the Nasrani. Thus, as a form, Marghamkali is organised by the confluence of the principles of orality and ritual, and as performance it is characterised by repetition, wherein every occasion of this repetition is also consequently an occasion of the retelling of the Nasrani history.[16] This seemingly organised form is however not without its own idiosyncrasy—the *nilavilakku.* (It is an idiosyncrasy that will shape the next stage of this session.)

A rehearsal session of Marghamkali

The *nilavilakku* is a significant evidence of the indigenised form of Christianity, meticulously shaped by the Nasrani. Borrowed from Hindus,[17] the *nilavilakku* made its way into the interior narrative of the church with its connotations of 'light', and in that sense is a symptom

of the adaptive tendencies of the indigenous imagination in the frontiers of Christianity. The Nasrani tradition is replete with such incongruities, aspects that centuries back perplexed the Portuguese, aspects which were then classified as corrupt heathen culture. The following section will be a survey of two such astonishing 'incongruities' in the Nasrani[18] tradition.

Incongruity as Evidence

The oil lamps inside the Pazhaya Suriani Palli

Reaching St. Thomas Orthodox Cathedral, Karthikappally is not difficult if you know what you are looking for. Often the church is identified with the place itself, Karthikappally, a small village in the Alappuzha district of Kerala. The church is in close proximity to the Valiyakulangara Temple and Valiyaveedu Sreebhagavathy Temple, and as such this geographical proximity may be read as a larger symptom of the intersectional quality of faiths in and around this region. However, the most remarkable thing about the church is its very being, the shape of its aesthetics, its architecture.

As we walk in through the entrance of the church, it takes us a few minutes to grasp the very shape of its structure, which would seem deceptively

similar to the structure of a *kshethram* (temple in Malayalam). Records show that before it assumed the shape that it did, the original church had thatched roofs, which, as the building evolved, came to be replaced by mud tiles. Records also show that the original northern and southern walls were as high as conventional church walls. However, after the addition of the *poomukham* (traditional portico), with an entrance on either side of the church, the walls appear to be only a few feet high from the ground, giving the impression that they are supporting not a church, but a magnificently complex roofing system. It is an illusion, engineered by the tiled roofs of the northern and southern portico. In order to truly appreciate the uniqueness of the structure, we need to walk over to the (now sealed) western entrances[19] of the church. Here it would be possible to see how the tiled roof of the main building easily slips into the roofs of the northern and southern portico, giving the western facade the impression of a singular colossal triangular arrangement. The texture of the western facade is decorated with three wooden doors, with a wooden balcony window just above the central door. There are three crucifixes plastered into its surface around the balcony window. The edges of the tiled roofs are decorated by neat wooden carvings. The outside aesthetics of the structure, like the western facade, appear to be a suitable metaphor for the intersectional nature of the building plan.

The northern entrance (the only one open to the public) leads us through the *poomukham* to what appears to be a long corridor, making up the aisle. It is not too wide, and appears to be designed to lead us into a room, parallel to the *Madbaha*,[20] that houses the Relics of St. Thomas. The room is hardly a few feet high, and its ceiling is a complex network of wood carvings, and on its eastern wall is a painting of St. Thomas. At the foot of the painting, within a glass cubicle case, is the Relic.However, in spite of its apparent significance to the church and its legend, this room appears to be merely an appendage to the *hykala*[21] of the church's floor plan, the place where the laity assemble.

The *hykala* is organised by a code that is recurrent in the Nasrani tradition: there is a red carpet that stretches from the *Kestroma*[22] to the end of the western corner of the church; it divides the floor into the northern and

the southern halves. In the centre of the red carpet, equidistant from the northern and the southern walls of the building, is the *nilavilakku* (floor oil lamp). The lamp is an apparent incongruity, and like the architecture of the church, has been borrowed from Hindu traditions. With my back to the *nilavilakku,* we look at the now revealed[23] *Madbaha.* Unlike the famous St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church, Kottayam, or the St. Mary's Knanaya Church (KottayamValiyapally), the altar is bereft of any murals. The Masthaba (high altar) is defined by the characteristic gold and red wooden ornamentation, and the carvings are as diverse as angel busts and fruits and flowers, in the centre of which is the wooden crucifixion. Considering that within the visual and the spiritual aesthetic

The view of Karthikappally from south-west corner

of the church the *Masthaba* is conceived as the principle centre, the one in Karthikapally church seems an oddity. It does not appear to replicate the intricate narrative potential of the rest of the church's architecture. Looking away from it, we are struck, for instance, by the complex lattice-like network of wooden beams that supported the tiled roofing system. Suspended between the nave and the roof is a wooden balcony which houses the old and (now) dilapidated Bishop's quarters. However, the most striking aspect of the balcony is the peculiar ecosystem of animal

wood carvings that embellish its structure—the six animals represented included an elephant, a tiger, a bull, a horse and a house cat nursing its kitten. Seen in isolation, these wooden carvings seem to have no place in the interior narrative of the church. However, in the larger scheme of things these carvings, particularly their incongruous quality, typify the very essence of the church's structure, and with it the unifying vision of the Nasrani tradition's narrative formation.

Pazhaya Suriani Palli

The poomukham at the northern entrance of the church

Around 26 kilometres to the east of Karthikapally, close to Chengannur town, is the iconic *Pazhaya Suriani Palli,* often rendered in English as the Old Syrian Church. To its north, and in close proximity, is the Thrichittattu Mahavishnu Kshethram, another historical monument. The geographical proximity of the two buildings of *different* religious inclinations is not a novel occurrence in many of the small towns of Kerala. However, like the structure of St. Thomas Orthodox Cathedral at Karthikapally, the structure of this church in Chengannur is defined by a narrative principle that is as unique as its social history.

Though records date the church back to the 18th century, the legends surrounding it go further into the past. Records speak of one Ivanios Yuhanon, a metropolitan who travelled from Antioch, and laid the early foundations of this church. Records however morph into legends, and these legends attest to conflict between the Syrian Christians and the native Nairs, the splitting of Nasranis into several factions, and the evolution of the church trust through the ratification of the Travancore Royals, and later the Kerala High Court. This narrative aside, the architectural aesthetic of the church has a peculiar narrative to offer.

Even before one steps into the premises of the church, near the *gopuravathil*[24] on the road is an elaborately engraved *kalkurisu* (stone cross). The structure of the stone cross appears to be oddly placed away from the church gate, as if it was an ancient structure that refused to comply with the newly adopted rules of urbanisation. A closer look would unfold the more peculiar aspects of the structure. The crucifixion is itself placed on the surface of an inverted lotus (a characteristic feature adapted from Buddhism). However, this already composite structure is placed on a square pedestal, with each side of the pedestal revealing carved socket-like extensions, designed to facilitate the lighting of oil wicks. Each side of this already elaborate mounting is engraved with winged heads, suggestive of angels, but these figurines are flanked by more engravings of lotuses, and other aspects of a native religious aesthetic (for want of a better phrase).However, this is a pattern that extends to even the structure of the crucifixion, where there is a peculiarly uncharacteristic depiction of what appears to be a pantheistic deity worshipped by a native couple. Together with the other engravings, the *kalkurisu* appears to present a composite vision of the Nasrani religious imagination. As we approach the church and its structure, the format of the indigenous narrative appears to have more outlandish manifestations.

Before we approach the northern entrance of the church, we are confronted with the stone etchings and other artworks on the walls, and the wooden door of the erstwhile *gopuravathil*. The stone etchings include subjects as diverse as camels, peacocks playing with a saffron-clad figure (perhaps Murugan/Karthikeyan), and another one suggestive

of the mythical scene of Hanuman, carrying the Gandhamardhan hills to save the life of Lakshman. On the (now unused) wooden door are depictions of blue clad women, native bishops, monkeys and goats. The organisation of these subjects is as diverse as the artistic vision that appears to have engineered them.

Inside the Madbaha of Pazhaya Suriani Palli

So far there has been little to suggest a uniquely Christian narrative here, but such a structure also bears testimony to the fallacy of such a proposition; when we discuss the Nasrani traditions of Kerala, there is no such thing as a singularly separate Christian narrative. For this reason, as we walk through the *poomukham* of the northern entrance, we encounter a similar species of art work on its walls, and on the doorway of the church. The brown wooden door is embellished with gold paint, interspersed with the multi-hued figurines of indigenous and Christian legends—angels, natives, animals all co-existing. However, as we step through the doorway into the *hykala* of the church, we are invited to scrutinise a narrative of an entirely different species.

The interiors of the church have the characteristic red carpet dividing the *hykala* into the northern and southern halves; a carpeted (red) *kestroma*, leading you to the *masthaba*. The altar, though, is noticeably different.

When slowly unveiled, we notice a *masthaba* that is not a singular structure, but rather a complex one constituted by what appears to be three high altars—a central arched wooden *masthaba* whose frontal wooden pillars sew the wooden sub-structures into a singular unit. Colourful angel bust figurines are carved generously into the complex wooden *masthaba* to produce a strikingly remarkable aesthetic vision—we observe that the art in the altar offers the only bit of colour within the walls of the church. The interior walls of the church have no murals, no photographs of former bishops and inscriptions; the walls appear to be uncharacteristically austere even for the Nasrani tradition.

The indigenous aesthetic that characterises the stone base on which the Kalkurisu is mounted

After probing a little, the caretaker shared with us aspects of the church which had made it less of a mystery; he informed us that this is perhaps one of the few churches where the Malankara Orthodox Syrian church, and the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian church, conduct their services within the same building. In spite of the several court cases between them, one has heard of such an arrangement between the Orthodox and the Jacobite Syrian factions.[25] This is not how we perceive the relation

between the Mar Thoma and the Orthodox factions. From around the 19th century,[26] influenced by British Evangelicals, when the Mar Thoma Syrian church was instituted, any sense of fraternity between them and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian church was largely symbolic. Here, within these walls, however, there was a new narrative being created. The austerity of the walls and the laconic organisation of space made sense now.

As we approach the western door (closed) of the church, however, the austerity is rendered obsolete, and the persistence of the overarching Nasrani imagination is made obvious. Arranged sequentially, with their edges parallel to that of the red carpet, are three oil lamps—a nilavilakku in the centre, with two *thookuvilakku* to its front and its rear.This is not an isolated occurrence though—the whole church has been engineered under circumstances of social and religious dialogue. It was possible to read the interior of the church as a continuation of the historical narrative observable on the outside of the church—in the northern pillar of the *poomukham* of the northern gate are accentuated etchings of what appear to be an older form of *Vattezhuthu* script, an older form of Malayalam. On either side of the northern entrance are tall *kalvilakku* fashioned like the stone lamps used in a conventional Hindu *kshethram*; the interior walls of the *poomukham* have engravings of disparate themes—of a saffron clad *namboothiri*, grapevines, elephant trampling a man, a horse and blue clad angels, all existing together, creating an ecosystem of religious dialogue. Moreover, on the walls of the *gopuravathil*, facing the church, are etchings that appear more eccentric—a small elephant herd, monkeys, a lion hunting an elephant, a native couple under a grapevine, peacocks and tigers—an eccentric flourish of artisanal imagination, unbridled and nonconforming.

If the structure of the church is a narrative, then both these churches portray vivid narratives of the procedures of the formation of the identity of the Nasrani community; procedures engendered at the intersections of religious and social dialogue. The church is no longer just a building, but a meticulously organised system of narration conceived at the intersections of history and myth. It is a narrative that is constituted by

oil lamps, stone crosses, Syriac and Karshon manuscripts, *Vattezhuthu* etchings on the walls of old churches; it is a narrative that can be read on the doors and walls of the Nasrani churches, a narrative that survives in the repetitive churning of a *Marghamkali* performance.

K.P. Punnoose with his Marghamkali students

For a session shaped by initial discussions about a poet and a language from ancient Turkey, and concluded on the shores of Malabar amidst its *nilavilakku*, *kalkurisu*, elephants, lions, goats and grapevines; amidst *namboothiris*, bishops, angels and lotuses, it would appear that we are left with a perplexing array of the fantastic—this apparently dichotomous arrangement of materials was deliberate. This session did not promise any conclusions, but it has hopefully delivered a glimpse of the history, and the imagination of a people on the southern shores of the Malabar, as they came to terms with a faith and its fragments as it travelled across the Arabian Sea.

Notes

[1] I had travelled from Chennai, where I spent most of my childhood, to meet my paternal grandparents staying in the outskirts of Cochin.

[2]Though they emerge from the same fold, unlike the Orthodox Syrian Church, the Syro Malabar Catholics chose to shift their liturgical services from Syriac to Malayalam.

[3]An institution dedicated to the research and preservation of the Syriac language.

[4]The Portuguese, who erroneously referred to them as Nestorian Christians, were initially confused by this discovery. Eventually, when all attempts at 'converting' them to the Latin liturgy failed, they accused the natives of being heretics and even conducted Inquisitions.

[5]Udayamperoor is a suburb on the outskirts of Ernakulam.

[6]This subsequently split into several factions—Malabar Independent Syrian Church, Mar Thoma Syrian Church, St. Thomas Evangelical Church, Jacobite Syrian Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and Syro-Malankara Catholic Church—as reactions to different ecclesiastical and political disagreements.

[7]It is located in Baker Hill, Kottayam in Kerala.

[8]Kodungallur in Thrissur district.

[9]The article, 'Garshuni Malayalam: A witness to an early stage of Indian Christian Literature' outlines some of the arguments around the emergence of Karshon.

[10]Unlike Karshon, Arabi Malayalam does not incorporate Malayalam letters into the indigenised script.

[11]Signed as it is by officials of the state and members of merchant guilds, it sheds light on the king's taxation policy and the general scheme of religious tolerance practised by the rulers of the Malabar region.

[12]Influenced by Anglican missionaries, the Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church split from the Malankara Orthodox Church under the aegis of Abraham Malpan.

[13]Pesha (Syriac) is Passovar (English); Isho is Jesus and Mar is Lord.

[14]*Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1599 (1994).*

[15]Origin-myth is also an apt description.

[16]The difficulty of distinguishing history from myth is in itself an underlying narrative in the Nasrani oral tradition.

[17]Primarily, a reference to the Nair community.

[18]Here on I will use the term Nasrani to identify the Christian community in Kerala.

[19]There appears to be three doorways which have been sealed to the public for some time now.

[20]The sanctuary, the Altar.

[21]The nave of the church.

[22]Where the Vicar conducts the main part of the service. The Kestroma represents the link between the world of the laity *(hykala)* and the Sanctuary (Madbaha).

[23]The *Madbaha* (Altar) in the Orthodox Syrian tradition is veiled using a *Madbahaviri* on all occasions except during service.

[24]The entrance is designed like that of a traditional *kshethram* (temple).

[25]Often referred together as the *Yakoba,* since the 17th century the two factions have seen plenty of schisms and court rulings regarding possession of Church property and ecumenical rights, the most recent ruling on 3rd July, 2017 being in favor of the Orthodox faction.

[26]The series of schisms developed in the 19th century until it culminated in the formation of a separate Mar Thoma Syrian Church in 1898.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Koshy Varghese is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College for Women. The lecture, 'In Search of Ephrem the Syrian: Suriani and the Materiality of Faith', is an outcome of two years of collaboration with Parzor, the UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian Project. The collaborative exercise with Parzor is part of a larger attempt to create a digital archive of the many forms of intangible 'histories' of the Syrian Christians as it manifests in India. The nature of the research and its corresponding documentation is shaped by an interdisciplinary vision where the formal conventions of history writing collude with oral myths, local legends and personal insights. Documentation is but the first half of a research whose full ambition can only be realised by an appropriate method of writing. In many ways then, his writing has been an attempt to narrativise the Syrian Christian narrative with its characteristic versatility; an approach that bears resemblance to that strain of critical writing that is referred to as *fictocriticism*. Besides this, as part of his formal training in literature, his interests include, the American Novel and Art History. Though not formally trained in the visual arts, he works with acrylic, oil and canvas whenever time permits.