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# Puthen Pana: A Musical Study

By

**Fr. Joseph Palackal, C.M.I.**



**1995**

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# PUTHEN PĀNA: A MUSICAL STUDY

by

Joseph J. Palackal

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Hunter College of the City University of New York

1995

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations 2

Preface 3

Introduction 5

Chapter I
Christianity in India 11

Chapter II
History of Christian Music in India 30
Early Christian Era 30
Liturgical Music of the St. Thomas Christians 31
Liturgical Music of the St. Thomas Christians after 1498 32
Liturgical Music of the Jacobite and Syro-Malankara Churches 37
Liturgical Music of the Mar Thoma Church 39
Liturgical Music of the Latin Church 39
Music of the Protestant Churches 40
Other Christian Musical Genres 41

Chapter III
Life and Works of J.E. Hanxleden 50

Chapter IV
Literary Aspects of Puthen pāna 57

Chapter V
Musical Study of Puthen pāna 75
Performance Context 75
Music of the Twelfth pādam 84
Music of the Tenth pādam 114

Conclusions 134

Appendix 139

Bibliography 140

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Map of India 9

Chart of the History of the St. Thomas Christians 10

Map of Kerala 49

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## PREFACE

The music of Puthen pāna is an important part of the memories of my childhood. I grew up listening to Puthen pāna at home and Syriac liturgical music in our parish church in Kerala, South India. At that time it did not occur to me that the two musical styles were related or that one day I would study them. Today, the practice of singing Puthen pāna and Syriac liturgical music are on the decline. A few melodies of Syriac chants are still sung in Kerala, but Puthen pāna is hardly ever performed. The average age of people who can sing Puthen pāna is steadily on the increase, and there has been no attempt to record their performances. This study aims to preserve the Puthen pāna tradition and to create a new interest in Christian music of India.

Many people contributed to this study. I am grateful to the informants from the Kerala communities in New York and India, who found time to sing for me and answer my questions. I am specially thankful to Dr. Barbara Hampton who has been my guide and mentor all through my academic pursuits in the United States. Dr. Hampton's insightful comments and queries helped in clarifying many issues related to this study. I thank Dr. Meena Alexander for reading this manuscript and for her valuable suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr. Joseph Aquilina for his support and

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encouragement and to Dr. Irene Zaderenko for her assistance. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all the professors who taught me at Hunter College and the Graduate Center.

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# INTRODUCTION

Puthen pāna (new song) is a case in point for cultural communication at multiple levels. Its author, John Ernest Hanxleden (1681-1732), popularly known as Arnos Pathiri, was a German Jesuit missionary. He went to Kerala in the south-west coast of India, learned Sanskrit and Malayalam,[1] and used these languages to write many books, religious as well as secular. Among his works, Puthen pāna, which narrates Biblical events, became the most popular.

Pāna tradition, a capella singing[2] of devotional songs at home and at temple precincts, has been prevalent among the Hindus. As an attempt to indigenize the Christian faith, Hanxleden modelled Puthen pāna after the already-popular Jnānappāna (Song of Divine Wisdom) of Poonthanam Nambudiri. Poonthanam was a highly honored Hindu mystic poet of Kerala who lived in the sixteenth century. Like Poonthanam, Hanxleden used the Malayalam language to write his poem. At the time of Hanxleden, Malayalam was the

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[1] Malayalam belongs to the South-Indian branch of the Dravidian family of languages and is the official language of the present state of Kerala. Malayalam struck out on its own by 10th century. Today it is spoken by 35 million people, according to the Manorama Yearbook (1994:464-465).

[2] The verb more commonly used in Malayalam for singing pāna is pāna vāyikkuka which literally means "to read pana," regardless of the application of pitch and rhythm usually associated with the act of singing. The verb pāṭuka (to sing) is used less frequently with reference to pāna.

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language of the common people, while Sanskrit was the language of the elite and learned classes. Even though the Christians enjoyed high social standing, the learning of Sanskrit was the exclusive privilege of the Brahmin sects and, therefore, not accessible to them.

Hanxleden employed Dravidian meters, which are different from Sanskrit meters. Dravidian meters are commonly used in both Hindu religious and secular poetry and can be sung in several ways. For Puthen pāna performance, Christians adapted the music style of Chaldeo-Syrian liturgy from the Syrian churches in Kerala. The result was a unique style of singing Puthen pāna and new ways of singing the Dravidian meters.

Today, the practice of singing Puthen pāna is declining. So far, there has been no attempt to systematically document the melodies in the form of audio-visual recordings or music transcriptions.[3] Arnold Bake (1889-1963) made extensive audio field recordings of the performance genres of South India, mainly Kerala, in 1938. Although he recorded many Christian genres, he did not record Puthen pāna.[4] Probably Bake was not in Kerala during

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[3] From a recent communication from India, I understand that Christ Hall, a Jesuit institution at Kozhikode, Kerala, is planning to make an audio recording of Puthenpāna.

[4] I listened to a copy of these recordings preserved at the Center for Ethnomusicology at the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, in October, 1988. In 1984 Nazir Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin did field work in South India and

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the liturgical season of Lent or did not have an opportunity to attend a Christian wake, the two most common occasions on which Puthen pāna is sung in the present century.

As a literary work, Puthen pāna has gained much scholarly attention in the past (P.J. Thomas [1935] 1989; Nair 1974; Ulakamthara 1982; Thermadham 1983; Manavalan 1990). However, its musical aspects have virtually been unexplored. Generally, Indian Christian music has received very little attention from scholars either in India or abroad.[5]

According to traditional belief, Christianity was preached in India in the very first century. Historical evidence indicates the presence of Christian liturgy in Kerala from the fourth century. Yet, there has been no attempt to write a history of Christian music in India. The present study attempts to fill some of these gaps by reconstructing the history of Christian music and placing Puthen pāna in that general framework. The study also aims at understanding and explaining the musical aspects of Puthen pāna within its social and historical context and examining those factors that played a key role in the

---

videotaped the performance genres documented by Bake in 1938-39 for a longitudinal and comparative study, which did not include Puthen pāna.

[5] It may be noted that "Christian music" is not mentioned at all in an otherwise extensive entry on Indian music in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (Sadie 1980:vol.IX, 69-166).

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process of communication within and between cultures.

A survey of research on Indian music shows that the focus of studies in the last three decades has been the "High" classical traditions: North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Karnatak) music with special emphasis on the North Indian tradition.[6] Local styles have received comparatively much less attention. Puthen pāna is a local form from South India. Yet, it is a product of cross-cultural communication at a larger level and sheds light on the processes of formation of important musical traditions in the country.

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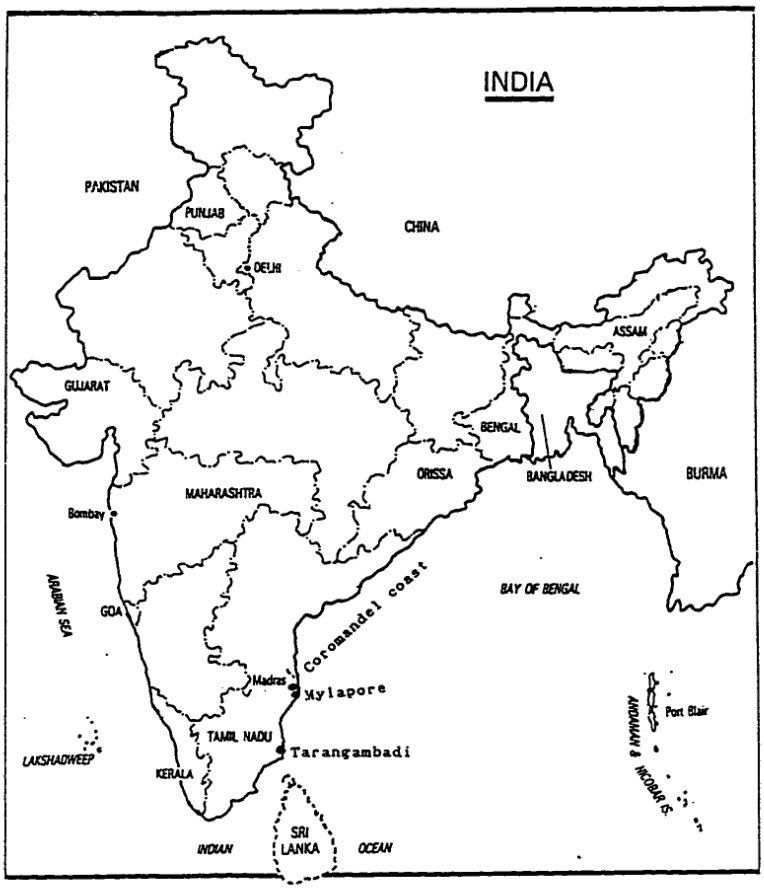
[6] See RILM Abstracts (1967-1989); Music Index (1971-1990); Journal of the Indian Musicological Society (1970-1994); Daniel M. Neuman (1990); Bonnie C. Wade (1979).

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Map of India, showing the places mentioned in this study.




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# CHAPTER I

## CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

The history of Christianity in India, until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, is mainly the history of Christianity in a relatively small geographical area of South India: Kerala on the western coast, and Tamil Nadu on the eastern coast.[7] According to traditional belief, Christianity was preached in India by St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ. The earliest documentary source for his mission in India is the Acts of Judas Thomas which was written in Syriac, probably in Edessa, in ca. A.D. 200. It describes the journey of the Apostle to India and his activities there.[8] Much of its narrative is fictional, but many scholars --Medlycott (1905), Bernard of St. Thomas ([1916] 1992), Farquhar (1927), Tisserant (1957), and Mundadan (1989)-- find in it "a historical nucleus which

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[7] For a discussion of Christian communities in other parts of India before the 16th century, see Bernard of St. Thomas (1992:35-37, 250-251) and Mathias Mundadan (1989:108, 130-134).

[8] The Syriac text of the Acts of Judas Thomas was first edited by William Wright (1871) in two volumes; vol.I the Syriac text, vol.II the English translation by the editor. Besides Wright's edition of the text, there is an edition by Rev. Paul Bedjan (1892). Adolphus E. Medlycott (1905) analyzes different versions and editions of the Acts. Albertus F.J. Klijn (1962) gives an English translation, based on Wright's version, and a critical history of the different versions.

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church; and, the most important of all these privileges, they are given guardianship of the steel yard, the weights, and measures. There is a mention of seventy-two social privileges granted to the Christians, but only the first one was recorded in writing: carrying water on an elephant's back at the time of marriage.[26] The Jews of Kerala also received similar copper plate grants during this period, known as Anchuvanam plates, issued to Joseph Rabban, the Leader-Prince of the Jewish community of Anchuvanam.[27] The contents of these plates indicate that the Christians as well as the Jews enjoyed high social standing, almost equal to that of the upper-caste Brahmins.

The Christian communities continued to flourish mainly in cities like Quilon in the south and Cranganore in the north of Kerala, and in Mylapore on the eastern coast. They

---

[26] Elephant is considered an auspicious animal even today in India. The use of an elephant to carry water or for other similar services was the privilege of the upper classes. A few other privileges are mentioned in the traditional kalyānappāttu (weddings songs) of the St. Thomas Christians. The musically important ones are the use of pancamēḷam (ensemble of five [musical instruments]), kombu (wind instrument made of horn), kuḻal (wind instrument made of wood), śankh (conch used as wind instrument on ceremonial occasions by the Hindus), and the seven royal musical instruments (unspecified). The Malayalam text of the song can be found in P.U. Lukas ([1910] 1980:7). For an English translation of the Malayalam text, see Chummar Choondal (1988:38).

[27] For a translation of the inscriptions on these copper plates now preserved in the Synagogue in Cochin (Kochi), see S.S.Koder (1973:183-185).

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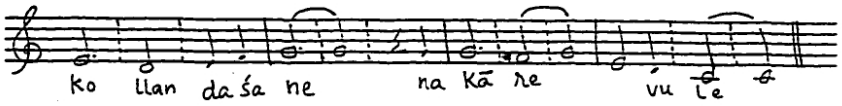
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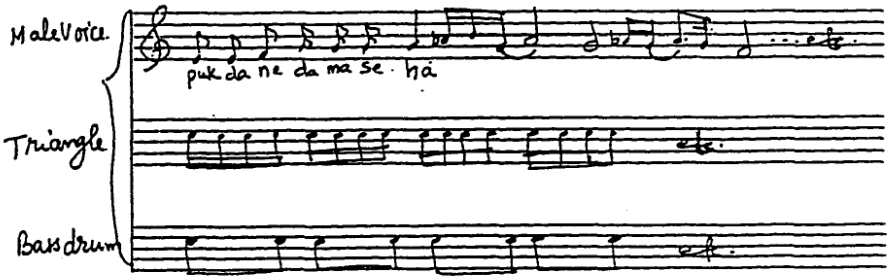
misra chapu talam.[47]

Music Example:




Those parts of the chants which were not set rhythmically were accompanied on bass drum and triangle in a faster melodic rhythm.

Music Example:




The music of the Syriac Office of the Hours, the Office

[47] misra chapu talam consists of seven matra (beat) divided into three sections: 3 + 2 + 2 = 7, with accents on the first, fourth and sixth beats. Dotted lines are used in this transcription to indicate the subdivisions of the talam in each measure.

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churches mostly built in the seventeenth century; caritṛappāṭṭu (history-songs) which deal with important events in the history of the community as well as the life and activities of the leaders of the community;[66] vaṭṭakkaḷippāṭṭu (songs for vaṭṭakkaḷi, a group dance in circular movement) which describe mostly stories from the Old Testament;[67] and yaunān nivyāyuṭe pāṭṭu (song about the prophet Jonah).[68] Songs such as these are important for the study of the development of the Malayalam language and literature. They are also important documents of the history of the communities which sang them. Most of these songs were transmitted orally from generation to generation, and very few are preserved in print. A scholarly study of the musical aspects of these and similar songs is yet to be undertaken.[69]

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[66] For example, abrāhammalpaṇṭe pāṭṭu (song about Abraham Malpan) narrates the life and activities of Mar Abraham (d. 1597), Bishop of the St. Thomas Christians. This song is a document of the historical events related to the St. Thomas Christians' struggle for self-rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see P.J. Thomas 1989:75-76).

[67] For example, ādattiṇṭe vaṭṭakkaḷi (circular dance about Ādam), yākkōbiṇṭe vaṭṭakkaḷi (about Jacob), pūrva yavusēppiṇṭe vaṭṭakkaḷi (about Joseph of the Old Testament).

[68] For textual excerpts and literary comments about these and other songs, see P.U. Lukas (1980); Chummar Choondal (1988:49-57); P.J. Thomas (1989:70-78); and Scaria Zacharia (1989:460-467).

[69] During my fieldwork for the present study, I came across some respondents above the age of seventy who could sing from memory several such songs, some of which I have preserved in audio recordings.
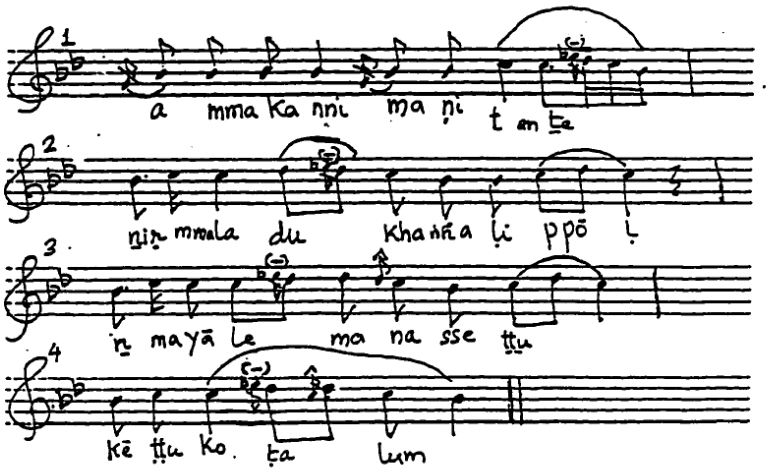
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Music Example 5. Sung by Kunjuvareed Pulikkal (66).




The most important characteristic of this rendering is the pitch register of the melody. Unlike the previous examples, the singing takes place at a high register. When asked about the reason for singing at this register, the singer said that in the context of a death in a family, singing "high"[120] helps the sound travel far away and informs as many people as possible in the village.[121] The informant added that in his younger days there was no public address system or telephone to inform the villagers about a death. According to Kunjuvareed, the two most important qualities

[120] The word used by the respondent is uyarattil ( high).

[121] Esthappan, Monica, and Veronica also shared this opinion.

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three men in one group, and two women in the other. Each group sang in unison. The women started the singing. The groups took turns singing two couplets each.[146]

The text is divided into four melodic phrases. The melody covers the range of a minor sixth. The pitches are: B, C, D, E-flat, F, and G. Most of the melodic activities, however, are centered around four pitches: C, D, E-flat, and F. The note G is sung mostly in the form of ornamentation and, therefore, does not have an independent presence, except for a very short while (a sixteenth note) in phrase 3.

The treatment of the text is mostly syllabic, except for the melisma of eighth notes on the last syllable of phrase 2. The melodic motion in phrase 3 consists of two instances of skips of thirds. Notes in the other three phrases move stepwise.

There are two kinds of half cadences in this melody, one ending on D, a full tone above the tonic in phrase 1, and the other ending on B, a half tone below the tonic in phrase 3. The note B, sung below the tonic in phrase 3, is an example of how a single note, even though sung only once, makes a big difference in a melody. It has a significant

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[146] The division of the text into units of two couplets is unique to this performance. The information I gathered from the other respondents regarding performance practice in group singing is different. Generally, the first group sings the first couplet, followed by the second group singing the second couplet, and so on.

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themselves to be the composers of the melody they sang. Rather, they thought of themselves as participators in an ongoing tradition. Achamma Kora commented on her rendering saying: "this is how it is sung in this place." Monica, Veronica and Rosamma said that they sang the way they learned from their mothers. Yet, each informant has her/his version of the melody. Individual training and exposure to various styles of music influenced the renderings. For example, Achamma Kora's familiarity with the Syriac hymn baṛu maṛiam (son of Mary) influenced her rendering of the twelfth pāḍam. The presence or absence of tāḷam in the melody also seem to be the result of individual preferences of the singers. Musical elements from the surrounding culture are absorbed by the singers who may choose to incorporate them into the singing of Puthen pāna, making it a "living" tradition.

The textual variations found in many renderings are also examples of individual expression in the singing of Puthen pāna. Even though Puthen pāna is a written text, it was transmitted mainly in an oral form. The original text was modified in the course of time. In some cases, as in music example 10, the meaning of the text was substantially altered by singers. These variations, however, do not seem to be the result of a conscious attempt toward textual and thematic recreation. They appear in individual performances in which there is no control of group members. The

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