

The Use of Indian Music in Christian Worship

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It seems to be rather strange and paradoxical to suggest that the Indian church needs to be reminded that the use of Indian music and Indian hymnology in Indian Christian worship is not only of great importance but should be regarded as an essential feature of Christian worship in India. Since the third century there has been a Christian church in India and the Roman church dates from the sixteenth century. During the past two centuries Protestant churches have been established in many regions of India. With such a long history it is strange to find Western music persisting throughout the Indian church. It seems to imply that the Indian church, whether Syrian or Roman or Protestant, has not yet become truly indigenous in India.

In the Syrian churches of Kerala Syriac was used in the liturgy of the Holy Qurbana until about 1835, and the priests used Syriac chants even though the words were not intelligible to the congregation. Since then, however, Malayalam has come into use in the liturgical services of the Jacobite and Mar Thoma churches, but Syriac chants are almost entirely used in these services. It must be remembered that Syriac is an Eastern language and the music is Eastern rather than Western and so is not so foreign as Western music is. In all the other services of the Syrian churches Malayalam songs are freely used and are sung to Indian tunes. The Western harmonium is not much used in Syrian churches, but Indian instruments are also absent.

In the Lutheran churches in most towns and in many villages Western hymns and tunes predominate. The early German and Swiss missionaries translated a great many Western hymns into the regional languages and taught the congregations to sing them. The Swiss missionaries especially taught their people to sing the hymns in Western harmony with a considerable measure of success. In many of the Anglican churches in both towns and villages the present tendency is for Western hymns and tunes to predominate and the psalms and canticles are often sung to Western chants, which results in a most unmusical medley of language and music. In the non-Anglican churches, while in the town churches Western hymn translations are largely used, in

most of the rural churches Indian lyrics, that is songs set to Indian metres, are most frequently sung and in many places one almost invariably finds these. Unless, however, there is a good singer and someone who knows a little of Indian music in the village, they are often very badly sung.

One of the governing principles of the Church of South India when it was formed in 1947 is the following, as found in the Constitution:

'The Church of South India desires, therefore, conserving all that is of spiritual value in its Indian heritage, to express under Indian conditions and in Indian forms the thought and the life of the Church universal' (p. 3).

This article of the Constitution has neither been widely publicized nor generally implemented in the forms of Christian worship in most of the Dioceses. In Tamilnad there has been a general tendency to the Anglicanization of the forms of church worship, especially in the town churches, which has led to the singing of the canticles and psalms to Western chants and to the predominance of the harmonium and of Western hymns in the services. It is very unfortunate that the Western harmonium is now being largely used for the playing of the Indian lyrics as well of the Western hymns.

In the Tirunelveli Diocese Western music is found in all the congregations, whether urban or rural, and in the towns it is predominant. In the village churches, where Indian lyrics are used to a considerable extent, they are often sung very badly and also differently in different churches. There is no systematic training in Indian music. In the Madura-Ramnad Diocese of the Tamil church, there has always been a long tradition of indigenous music and the Tamil Theological College at Pasumalai has for many years specialized in the training of pastors, evangelists and people in Indian music. So we find Indian music very largely used in this Diocese.

In the Tirumaraiyur Theological College in Tirunelveli there is also a specific endeavour to teach and to popularize Indian forms of musical expression in church worship. The College has published an Indian form of the Sunday service with responses and canticles in Indian chants, and also a similar form for the service of Holy Communion. These are used frequently in the College and to some extent in the villages where the students from the College visit and conduct the services, but they have not found much favour in the large town congregations.

The S.I.U.C., one of the constituent bodies which formed the C.S.I. in 1947, many years ago produced an Indian form of church worship in which Indian lyrics were used for the Canticles, the Confession, Thanksgiving, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. This form of service, known as 'the Lyrical service of worship', was first produced at the home of Mr. K. T. Paul in Salem, with the help of the Rev. Francis Kingsbury and this writer, and was adopted by the General Assembly of the S.I.U.C. and issued and

published with its authority, in the year 1915. This was revised two or three times and the final edition was published by the C.L.S. in 1930. This lyrical form of service is used very extensively in the rural churches of the Madura-Ramnad and the Coimbatore Dioceses. The lyrical forms of Confession and Thanksgiving are taken from the Tamil Lyric Book and those for the Creed and the Lord's Prayer were specially composed for the service.

Many years ago Rabbi A. N. Sattam Pillai, of a Pentecostal section of the church in the Tirunelveli District, published a complete poetical version of the Psalms in Indian metres and a third edition of this work was published in Nazareth in 1931 by his grandson, Sri A. S. Rajanayagam Kulasekhararaj. A few of these Psalms are found in the Tamil Lyric Book and are regularly used by Tamil congregations, but the book as a whole is only used in the special sect connected with the Rabbi in Tirunelveli.

In the Andhra Pradesh, as one would expect among such a music-loving people, there is today a revival of Indian music in church worship, both in the urban and rural areas. This is especially noticeable in the Dornakal Diocese, but it is also found in the Rayalaseema and the Kistna-Godavari Dioceses. In these Dioceses Indian songs are being used more and more for the Confession, Thanksgiving, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Indian musical instruments are also becoming more popular in the congregations for Christian worship. The Bishop in Dornakal says that he expects that in the course of a few years they will be universally used in all the churches. Indian Bhajana Sangams are found all over the Dioceses. Hymns to Western tunes are still sung in most of the town churches and are likely to continue, though they do not predominate. But in the rural churches they are only rarely used.

In Madhya Pradesh there is said to be a preference for Hindi bhajans in most of the village churches, but in the urban churches the Western hymn in Hindi translation is most frequently used. In some of the rural churches, also, the canticles set to Hindi chants are sung to Indian music. But it is said that in the urban churches the Psalms are still sung to Western tunes. Western musical instruments are used in practically all urban churches, but in some of the rural churches the drum and the violin and the small Indian harmonium are used for the Hindi bhajans.

In Uttar Pradesh an increasing use is being made of Indian music and of Indian musical instruments, especially in the rural parts. The Allahabad Bible Seminary teaches Indian music regularly to all the students and they make full use of it in their evangelistic work and to some extent also in their conduct of church services. The Principal of the Seminary laments that out of the 250 bhajans and gazals found in the Hindi song book, only a very small proportion are known to the people. He also says

that the quality of the Hindi bhajans is not up to that of the Western hymn translations.

It is unfortunate that in many of the States in India the Western harmonium is used very frequently not only for the Western hymns but also the playing of Indian lyrics and bhajans. Except in the rural churches it is rare to find the Indian cymbals and drum and other Indian instruments in many of the churches. The Western harmonium with its tempered scale is quite unsuited to Indian music and it is high time that its use for these should be discontinued altogether. It may be used for accompanying Western hymns but it should never be used for Indian tunes.

In evangelistic work, however, all the churches make use of Indian lyrics and bhajans and use Indian musical instruments. It is well known that in order to appeal to Hindus it is of no value to use Western hymns and Western musical instruments. They can only be attracted and won to attention by means of good Indian music. Since this is well known to the churches it is strange that they should continue to give so large a place in their worship services to Western music. It is perhaps because the leaders and people think that non-Christian Indians will not be attracted to the regular services of Christian worship and so it is no good trying to appeal to them to attend such services. But this is surely a mistake.

From this survey we may conclude that in the urban churches and the larger rural churches the services of Christian worship are sadly lacking in indigenous features. So to the ordinary Hindu the Christian religion still shows itself as a foreign religion in its worship services.

This is undoubtedly due in large measure to the fact that the origin and growth of Christianity in India has been due mostly to Western missionaries and evangelists, who have, consciously or unconsciously, imposed their forms of worship on the Christian congregations. Many of them considered the Hindu forms of worship to be so tainted with idol-worship as to be quite unsuitable for any form of Christian worship. Robert de Nobili and Constantine Beschi in the eighteenth century attempted to introduce into Christian worship some of the Hindu customs, but they were very severely criticized by the other missionaries and the Tournon Decree of 1704 forbade even the use of the *tali* in the marriage ceremony, as well as the kunkumam on the forehead. In the case of the Protestant missionaries, beginning with the arrival of the German Lutherans in 1706 at Tranquebar, they introduced into the Indian churches the traditional forms of worship in the Western churches from which they came and also the translations of Western hymns and taught the Christians to sing them.

In the nineteenth century there arose in the different regions many talented Indian Christians, who were both poets and musicians. In Tanjore, where the trinity of Carnatic music flourished, the Vedanayagam Sastriar family studied Carnatic

music and composed many Indian lyrics in Tamil to Indian classical tunes and also some to Indian folk melodies, and taught the congregations in Tanjore and the surrounding villages to sing these with Indian accompaniments. Many of their lyrics are now found in the Tamil Lyric Book and are used very frequently in the churches in the Tamil country, though they are not always sung correctly. In Kerala also there were poets, such as Devaram Munshi and John Palmer, who did the same. In the Maratha region Narayan Vaman Tilak, a gifted Maratha poet, composed many beautiful songs of devotion which have found a place in the Marathi song book and are used in the Marathi churches. In the Punjab many of the Psalms were set to simple folk tunes, called *zaburs*, and they are now sung throughout the Punjab in the Christian churches. In Bengal also, which has a rich and ancient musical tradition, many songs in Indian metres are found in the Bengal Hymn Book and are sung in the rural churches in Bengal. There is however a present tendency for the harmonium to be introduced and these beautiful melodies are often played on the harmonium, which spoils their beauty and robs them of their real Indian characteristics. This also leads to the use of some form of harmony for the Indian music which ill accords with the melodic character of the music.

As we have already noted Indian music and musical instruments are very greatly used in evangelistic work all over India. The fiddle, the drum, the tambour, cymbals and, in the north, the esraj are all commonly found in evangelistic services. Special forms of Indian musical services, such as the Bajanai, the Kalakshepam or Harikatha, are widely used. The Bajanai is a concerted singing and playing by a group of songsters and musicians and may be performed in a hall or in the open air. This is specially performed on Christian festival occasions. The Kaccheri is another form of this, in which a singer or a group of singers, with musical instruments, sing special songs connected with the particular festival being celebrated. The Kalakshepam or Harikatha is a kind of Indian opera in which one man, called a Bagavathar, assisted by another singer and players on various instruments, including the drum, cymbals and the violin, and either the tambour or the sruti harmonium for the tonic note, sings the different episodes of a Bible story. This is modelled on the Hindu performances by Bagavathars, who sing the story of some episode from the Puranas or from the lives of the Bhakti saints of Hinduism. This is called the Kirtan in the north. There have been many such talented Bagavathars in the south of India, including Vedanayagam Sastriar and his family, Sri T. Aiyadurai Bagavathar, the Rev. L. I. Stephen of Erode, and a few Westerners, as the Rev. E. E. White, the Rev. R. A. Hickling and others. In Maharashtra the Rev. L. R. Carner of the Christian Missionary Alliance conducts such Kirtans in Marathi. The story taken is usually one of the incidents in the life of Christ or one of His parables or an incident from the Old Testament. The whole of

the story is worked out in songs, usually specially composed either by the Bagavathar himself or by some other poet, and all the actions of the story are shown in the various songs. Such a performance may go on for as long as three or four hours and usually takes place in the evening and night. If the Bagavathar is a good singer and has good accompaniments the whole audience, both Christians and non-Christians, stays throughout and listens attentively. The Bagavathar will interpose between the songs prose narratives, enlarging the story, which he either intones or gives in ordinary speech. These performances are usually conducted in a good building so as to get the full character of the sound and so as not to strain the voice of the Bagavathar unduly. But nowadays with the aid of the microphone they are often held in the open air, with a small pandal for the singer and the musicians. Such performances are also conducted in churches on special occasions. This method of preaching the Gospel really means that its exposition is linked closely with the Indian form, and the audience in this way obtains a very good knowledge of the stories of the Bible.

In Tamilnad and in Andhra Pradesh there have been many fine Christian poets who have enriched the hymnology of the church in these regions with beautiful songs of devotion, penitence and Christian living. Narayan Vaman Tilak of the Maratha country has also contributed many such songs to the Maratha hymn book. The earlier Christian poets usually composed mostly songs of devotion and penitence and songs illustrating the life of Christ, especially His sufferings and resurrection. Later poets added many songs on the Christian life and the Holy Spirit. Most of these poets make use of Indian expressions and similes to express Christian ideas, such as the sacred feet of the Lord to indicate the grace of Christ. This is especially so in the case of those who were converted from Hinduism, such as H. A. Krishna Pillai and N. V. Tilak. Very few of these poets composed songs on the national life or on the Kingdom of God but later poets have to some extent filled in this vacuum.

HOW TO INCREASE AND IMPROVE THE USE OF INDIAN MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

The best way to increase and improve the use of Indian music and Indian musical instruments in Christian worship is through the media of the Theological Colleges and Seminaries, where the future ministers of the church are being trained. In Tirumaraiyur, Pasumalai, Andhra Theological Colleges and in the Allahabad Bible Seminary, a good deal is being done in regard to this, but it is not entirely successful in winning the students to a real enthusiasm for Indian music or to a thorough knowledge of it.

In every such College or Seminary there should be a good teacher of Indian music who can train the students to sing and

play Indian music properly and to sing accurately the Indian lyrics already in our Lyric Books. It is also important that among the Christian teachers there should be someone who can help the students to make use of this in worship and to use Indian settings of canticles and Psalms in the services of the church. Then, too, the Colleges and Seminaries can conduct short courses for both ministers and laymen during the vacation, to which men and women from the surrounding towns and villages should be invited for specializing in Indian musical forms of worship. For many years the Y.M.C.A. in Madras conducted a Summer School of Musical Evangelism for about six weeks each year and this was attended by large numbers of students. Later it was carried on by the Pasumalai Seminary, but in recent years this has been discontinued. Now I understand that it is proposed to start this Summer School again this year and one must hope that it will be successful in attracting a large number of Tamil Christian workers. In such a school the more gifted can also learn how to conduct a Kalakshepam. This will be a great service to the whole church. It is also very important to demonstrate the value of Indian musical instruments in place of the Western harmonium. If the small Indian harmonium is used at all, it should only be used for playing the tonic note and its fifth. No attempt should be made to try and fit harmony to Indian music, as this is quite foreign to the melodic structure of Indian music.

Music is of great value in the conduct of Christian worship services and the Indian tradition of worship always places great emphasis upon this for expressing the deepest feelings of the worshipper. For the ordinary person both in rural and in urban churches only Indian music can do this adequately.

Then, also, only a very few in the churches can really appreciate Western music and play and sing it correctly. It is no doubt true that in many Christian congregations the Western hymns as translated into the regional languages are popular, and so it must be admitted that these will continue. But that should not mean that the Western hymns should have a predominating part in the service and the Indian lyric and bhajan or kirtan be relegated to a small and unimportant place. It is the practice in many town churches for three Western hymn translations to be used as against only one Indian lyric. This is very unfortunate and will not help the ordinary non-Christian to find much help or attraction in Christian services.

There are now in every regional language a large number of Indian lyrics and bhajans in Indian metres, which express often very beautifully the truths of the Gospel and the spirit of Christian teaching. Most of them are written in easily intelligible language which can be well appreciated by simple Christians and many of the tunes to which they are sung are very beautiful and inspiring.

It is very important that in every church, both rural and urban, there should be a small group of people who can sing these Indian lyrics properly and can lead the singing of the whole congregation. They should also have one or two Indian musicians who can play them on the violin or the sitar or esraj. This choir should be regularly and well trained. If there is one good Indian musician in a group of villages he could go to three or four villages around his own village and help the choirs in those villages. One who has listened to a good English choir will know how much such a choir can contribute to the spirit of worship and will be able to understand that Indian lyrics and bhajans sung accurately and with deep feeling will stir the religious emotions and strengthen the religious convictions of both singers and hearers. Such Indian songs will also be remembered by many of those who take part in the singing and will help them to express their feelings and ideas in the home and in times of private devotion. A friend of mine who was an educated man and used to Western hymns used to tell me that at night when he could not sleep he would always sing over to himself some of the Tamil lyrics which he knew and that in this way he calmed his spirit and spent the hours of sleeplessness to good purpose.

I have often heard the boatmen of Bengal and of Travancore singing their devotional hymns as they poled their boats along the waterways of these States and have noticed how well they sung, sometimes with musical accompaniment, and expressed their devotion to the God whom they knew. In Travancore where many of them were Christians they often used to sing Christian lyrics at this time. This is the natural way of Indian people to express their religious feelings and devotion.

It is important that more use should be made of the Kalakshepam and of the kirtan in evangelistic work. These are the regular means by which the Hindu impresses on the ordinary people the truths of their religion. If this is done reverently and with real sincerity and the Bagavathar and the singers and musicians are good it will have a very great and useful effect. It can also be used for special church services at festival times and similar occasions.

It is sometimes said that Indian music is not suited for congregational singing. This is not true. It is true that in classical music and in the singing and playing of Ragabhava it is the individual alone who can do it properly and so this aspect of the music will not be useful for congregational purposes. But this is only one aspect of Indian music and is no reason why in general there should not be more and more Indian music in our Christian services, as groups of singers are not expected to sing these individual extemporizations. I have heard in Santiniketan groups of young men singing the Bengali songs to Indian musical instruments in their worship and found it very inspiring and helpful. The main thing is that the congregation should sing the raga

correctly in correct tala, and if there is proper training this should not be difficult.

It is good to know from the brief survey that I have been able to make that in many States there is a strong and extending movement to introduce more and more of Indian music and musical instruments into Christian worship services and one can only hope that this movement will continue and that our worship services will become more Indian in style and spirit. It is very important that we should all help in this and do all that we can to make our services more indigenous, so that the ordinary people will be able to appreciate them more. I am sure that if this is done the majority of the congregations will be able to worship more reverently and more intelligently.

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For the (Hindu) Bhaktas, the God within is infinite joy. He is milk, sugarcane, nectar, luscious fruit, the finest of delicacies. Bhakti hymns use these terms again and again to describe the immanent God. . . . On the other hand the Fourth Evangelist speaks of the Christ within as water, bread, the staple of human food. What the Bhaktas desire is rapture, ecstasy—flights of emotion reserved for the few and that in extraordinary hours. What the Fourth Evangelist emphasizes is the moral strength which all men and women need to exercise every day of their lives. The Bhaktas would sing and dance, using highly aesthetic means for expressing their emotion. According to the Fourth Evangelist, the Christian brings forth 'fruits'—deeds of love and help. In the Fourth Gospel, mystic union is union with Christ, dominating our normal moments and providing us with the strength and peace necessary for our daily life. The indwelling Christ means enhanced energy for ordinary tasks, increased vitality for daily work. Mystic union for the Bhaktas spells sweetness, joy, all those feelings and thoughts and activities which belong to the realm of emotion.