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**Enduring Echoes: Preserving Knanaya Heritage through
*Purathana Pattukal***

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Abstract: Music is an art form that crosses barriers of language, country and culture, and can be understood by all. Music is also an essential part of the Knanaya Catholic community from Kottayam that traces its roots back to migration from the current area of Iraq in 345 CE. As instructed by their ancestors, this small, endogamous community continues to uphold and abide by the traditions and customs brought alongside from Mesopotamia. As a community with numerous ceremonies, music forms a major part of their heritage.

The songs of this community are known as *Purathana Pattukal* (literally, ancient songs) and form part of their oral tradition, documenting their history and tradition as well. The songs have been categorized into wedding songs, migration songs, church songs, Margamkali songs, and folk songs.

These songs act as a form of collective memory for the community, helping them pass on their history and tradition to the next generation. They are also integral in helping understand who they are and their legacy. Each song retained is important to the community and many are sung on a regular basis as per the occasion. For example *Barumariam* is the concluding song of the wedding mass, referring to Jesus Christ, the son of Mary. *Marthoman* is another song often sung to auspiciously begin an event, and invokes St. Thomas and their wedding traditions.

Music this helps the Knanaya community, wherever they may be, to remember their origins, history, culture and legacy and hence forms an integral part of their traditions. With the joy, dance and exuberance that often accompanies these songs, it is also a reminder of their Christian, Middle Eastern traditions that they are reminded to continue and cherish, wherever in the world they may be.

Keywords: *Knanaya, Music, Heritage, Oral Tradition*

It was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who said, “Music is the universal language of mankind” (qtd. in Gottlieb). Music is one of the most enduring and universal forms of human expression, flowing through cultures, histories, and emotions with quiet power. Long before words were written, music shaped rituals, marked time, and gave voice to collective feeling. It accompanies life’s milestones, birth, celebration, mourning, and remembrance, turning personal moments into shared experiences. A Harvard study found that across societies, “music is associated with behaviours ... songs that share behavioural functions tend to have similar musical features” (Gottlieb).

At its core, music can be seen as both structure and freedom. Rhythm offers order, while melody invites imagination. A simple tune can carry complex emotions, joy, longing, devotion, or resistance, without the need for explanation. Across cultures, music preserves memory, whether through folk songs that record everyday life or sacred hymns that shape spiritual practice.

Music has another function too: it acts as a bridge, crossing linguistic and social boundaries, and allowing people to connect beyond words. In communities, it strengthens identity and belonging; in individuals, it becomes a space for reflection and emotional release. Even in modern, digital forms, music continues to adapt, absorbing new sounds while echoing ancient traditions. Ultimately, music is not just an art form but a human necessity. It listens when words fail, remembers when history fades, and reminds us that feeling, like sound, is meant to move.

According to Sumanta Murmuru, “Music is not just a means of artistic expression but a living, breathing testimony of the individuals who create and perpetuate it. It bridges the past to the present, the local to the national, and the personal to the communal” (937). Music thus holds a central place in the cultural and spiritual life of the Knanaya community, serving as a living link between history, faith, and identity. Rooted in ancient Syriac Christian traditions, Knanaya music carries echoes of early Christian worship while absorbing local Kerala influences over time. It is through music that collective memory is preserved and passed on.

The Knanaya Community traces its origins to a Jewish-Christian group that migrated from southern Mesopotamia to Kerala in 345 CE under the leadership of the merchant Thomas of Cana (*Knai Thomman*), a movement regarded as a turning point in the history of the St. Thomas Christians (Vellian 16). As per the episcopal decision, to help the new converts in Kerala with their faith, about 400 members from seventy-two families (seven tribes), including a bishop, priests, and deacons, migrated and settled in Kodungalloor, with the patronage of the then king *Cheraman Perumal*, who granted them seventy-two royal privileges recorded on the Knai Thomman copper plates, shaping their social status and life for centuries (Vellian 16). Maintaining a distinct identity through endogamy and

cultural practices, while co-existing with other St. Thomas Christians, the Knanaya people remained Syrian Christians until the *Koonan Kurisu Sathyam* (swearing at the cross in retaliation to the killing of their bishop), after which they were divided between Jacobite and Roman Catholic affiliations, without changing their cultural traditions (Vellian 16). In the current era, their ecclesiastical identity was consolidated with the establishment of the Vicariate Apostolic of Kottayam in 1911, its elevation to an eparchy in 1923, reaffirmation of its status in 2003 by Pope John Paul II, and its elevation to a Metropolitan See in 2005, marking the continued recognition of the community's unique historical and religious identity (Vellian 2).

Though it has been almost two millennia since they first arrived in India, this community continues to maintain its customs and practices, passed on by their ancestors through oral tradition. Music is an essential part of their culture and they have their own euphonious tradition passed on across generations. Anitha M. notes that traditional music is deeply interwoven with ethnic, regional, and national identities (3). The music of this community, known as *Purathana Pattukal* (ancient songs), form part of their oral tradition, documenting their history and tradition alongside.

Knanaya music is largely communal rather than individual. It is meant to be sung together, reinforcing unity and shared belonging. Passed down mainly through oral tradition, these musical forms adapt subtly across generations while retaining their symbolic depth (Vellian 45). For the Knanaya community, music is not merely entertainment; it is memory sung aloud, faith made audible, and identity kept alive through sound. "The folklore of the Knanaya Christians is a relatively vast oeuvre of over eighty folk songs, multiple traditions, and a few legends surrounding Knai Thomma that exist along with allied folk material culture" (Aleyas 46).

Purathana Pattukal occupy a treasured place in the cultural heritage of the Knanaya community. These songs are among the oldest surviving expressions of Knanaya oral tradition and serve as powerful vessels of memory, faith, and identity. Passed down across generations primarily through oral transmission, *Purathana Pattukal* preserve the community's worldview, historical consciousness, and social values in lyrical form (Vellian 45). One of the defining features of *Purathana Pattukal* is their antiquity. Composed in archaic Malayalam mixed with Syriac and Tamil influences, these songs reflect the early cultural milieu in which the Knanaya community evolved (Vellian 45). The language itself acts as a historical marker, offering insights into older linguistic forms and expressions that are no longer used in everyday speech. Through this preserved diction, the songs function almost like living manuscripts, safeguarding fragments of the past that written records may not fully capture.

Historically, *Purathana Pattukal* are closely linked to the collective memory of migration and settlement. Many songs recall the legendary migration led by Thomas of Cana, describing long journeys, divine protection, trials at sea, and the eventual establishment of the community on the Malabar Coast. These songs do not merely narrate events; they interpret history through faith. Migration is portrayed as a sacred journey guided by God, reinforcing the belief that the community's existence is rooted in divine purpose and providence.

Religious consciousness forms the spiritual backbone of *Purathana Pattukal*. Biblical imagery, references to saints, and expressions of devotion are woven seamlessly into their narratives. Unlike formal liturgical hymns, these songs occupy a space between the sacred and the social. They may be sung outside church settings, yet they carry deep theological meaning. In this way, *Purathana Pattukal* help integrate faith into everyday life, allowing religious belief to flow naturally through cultural expression.

Social life and customs are also richly reflected in these ancient songs. Themes of marriage, family lineage, hospitality, honour, and communal unity frequently appear in their verses. Songs associated with weddings and domestic rituals offer valuable insights into traditional gender roles, social expectations, and emotional relationships within the community. Women, in particular, have played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting *Purathana Pattukal*, singing them during household activities and ceremonial occasions. Through their voices, cultural continuity is sustained.

Another important aspect of *Purathana Pattukal* is their performative nature. These songs are rarely meant for solo performance. They are sung collectively, often in call-and-response patterns, encouraging participation and shared ownership. This communal mode of singing reinforces solidarity and belonging, reminding individuals that identity is not solitary but collective (Vellian 45). The act of singing together becomes a cultural ritual in itself.

In the contemporary context, *Purathana Pattukal* face challenges from modernization, changing lifestyles, and declining oral transmission. However, they continue to hold immense cultural value. Efforts to document, perform, and teach these songs through cultural organizations, schools, and community events have helped revive interest among younger generations. When performed today, *Purathana Pattukal* function not as relics of the past but as bridges connecting tradition with modern identity.

In essence, *Purathana Pattukal* are more than ancient songs; they are repositories of history, expressions of faith, and mirrors of social life. Through melody and memory, they ensure that the Knanaya community's past continues to resonate in the present. They remind the community who they

are, where they came from, and how their collective story continues to unfold through song. Today, the songs have been categorized as wedding songs, migration songs, church songs, Margamkali songs, folk songs, and other songs (Lukas 3).

Wedding songs of the Knanaya community form a lyrical archive of memory, faith, and social identity, woven carefully into the rituals of marriage. Known traditionally as *Kalyana Paattukal*, these songs are sung collectively, usually by women, during all wedding-related ceremonies (Lukas 3). Songs such as *Marthoman* trace the community's ancestry, recalling the migration led by Thomas of Cana, while also celebrating the union of the bride and groom as part of a divine plan (Lukas 3). Today though there is much commercialization, the songs are still an important part of rituals.

The wedding ceremonies include the *Orappiru* (Betrothal), engagement, *Mylanchi Idiyil* (bride's henna ceremony), *Chantham Charthu* (groom's shaving ceremony), wedding, and reception. Each ceremony is accompanied by its own rituals and songs. Though the *Orappiru* and engagement don't usually have too many songs associated with them, the rest of the ceremonies are celebrated with the help of accompanying songs. The *Marthoman* is of course integral and sung as prayer at the beginning of each event. Below are the opening lyrics:

Marthoman nanmayal-onnu thootungunoo

(May I begin with blessings from St. Thomas)

Nannai varaynamay-innu

(Let there be prosperity and success)

Oothamanaya mishiha thiruvullam

(We truly beseech the blessings of the sacred heart of Jesus to be upon us)

Unmayerlunnalka venam

(May the Holy Lord enter and dwell in this ceremonial dais) (Mapleton 3-4).

The lyrics are an indication of the important role Christian faith and beliefs play with the Knanaya community. The multiple religious references and the request for blessings for the future, provide key insight as well into the daily life of the community that centres around its church and prayers.

The wedding festivities begin with the *Mylanchi Idiyil* and the *Chantham Charthu*, the day before the wedding. *Maaraanarul* (Our Lord God) is sung while henna is applied to the bride's hands.

Maaranesho (By the grace of the Lord Jesus) is sung for the traditional first shaving of the groom. There are even songs for the bathing of each betrothed. Below are the opening lyrics of *Maaranesho*:

Maraneesho pathaviyilay manarkolaputhuma kanman

Koorana bendhukkalum gunamutaya arivullorum

Appanotu ammavanma-rayalarum bendhukkalum

Thorana dhanatheyothu vegamotay than pithakal

(While giving honour to the Divine Lord, the close and loving relatives, neighbours, the respectable, elderly and scholarly members of the locality, the relatives of the father and maternal uncle along with the parents of the wedding couple have arrived) (Mapleton 8).

In the pre-wedding ceremonies, it is a normal practice to have the betrothed's elders on stage such as parents and immediate uncles and aunts. Alongside the songs, these are indicative of the close-knit relationship amongst the members of the community.

The wedding mass is almost entirely in song, with much lyrical music, such as the *Berumariam* (In the name of Mary) sung right at the end, accompanied by the blessing. The following are the lyrics of *Berumariam*:

Baroomariyam baroomariyam

Baru alaha theyaldus mariyam

Haveekowkai baroomariyam

Akanivyoosa baroomariyam

Kanthayshmayya baroomariyam

Be mammodeesay baroomariyam

Aykal pesaha baroomariyam

Umthal-meedavoo baroomariyam

Shanther-rooha baroomariyam

Parayk laytha baroomariyam

La aljam aimeen baroomariyam

Ammenoo-ammen baroomariyam

(May the Son of God, son of Mary, bless you always. Let Christ's words lead and guide us. May Jesus, who gave his own body and blood at the last supper, grant eternal life. May God, who made the supreme sacrifice by dying on the cross to save us, give us grace. May Jesus, who rose from the dead and sits at the right hand of his Father, bless us always) (Mapleton 16-17).

Though the song might at first glance appear Marian in character, it is actually one invoking the blessings of Jesus on the new couple. This song continues to be sung in Cyriac till date, indicative of the importance of ancient practices amongst the community in general.

During the wedding reception, songs such as *Vaazhvanna vazhu* (And we will be gathered) are an essential part of the ceremonies (Lukas 4). Today dances and other songs have also become a part of this event. These are the opening lines of the above mention song of blessing:

Warhwenna warhoo ninakkakay thannayn

(Blessed life I have bestowed on you)

Neeyum nin bharthavum makkalum kootay

(May you live long and in happiness with your husband and children) (Mapleton 18).

The bride's mother usually performs this blessing, with crossed hands indicative of the blessing given to Jacob in the Old Testament. It is often an emotional moment for both mother and daughter as it indicates the upcoming separation when the girl remains in her new home.

The songs move fluidly and Biblical imagery blends with details of daily domestic life, offering advice on marital harmony, fidelity, and communal responsibility. Sung in an unadorned, rhythmic style, they rely on repetition and call and response patterns, creating a shared emotional space where marriages thus become communal events (Lukas 3). Knanaya wedding songs also function as acts of cultural preservation. Passed down orally across generations, they safeguard historical consciousness and reinforce endogamous identity. In their measured cadences and symbolic language, these songs transform weddings into performances of collective memory, ensuring that each marriage echoes the community's past while blessing its future.

Migration songs of the Knanaya community occupy a special place in its oral tradition, preserving collective memory through rhythm and refrain. These songs recall the historic migration of the community under the leadership of Thomas of Cana. Sung in a narrative style, songs like *Othuthirichaver Kappalkeri* describe long sea voyages, the hardships faced by the migrants, and the

divine guidance believed to have protected them along the way. *Munnam Malankara* is a historical Knanaya folk song describing the migration of the community to India and the privileges they received (Lukas 13).

The songs blend faith, identity, and emotion, and include Biblical imagery, references to foreign lands, and praise of God – all woven together, turning migration into a sacred journey rather than mere movement. By singing these songs at communal gatherings, weddings, and cultural events, migration songs function as living archives, reminding each generation of shared origins and unity. In this way, Knanaya migration songs are not frozen relics of the past. They are memory set to music, carrying history forward as one voice, across centuries.

Church songs of the Knanaya community form a vital strand of its religious and cultural life, echoing faith shaped by history and tradition. Rooted in the Syriac Christian liturgical heritage, these songs are sung during the mass, feast days, and for special sacraments. Their melodies are solemn and prayerful, as they are designed less for performance and more for collective devotion. The lyrics often draw from biblical themes, saints' lives, and theological reflections, while also reflecting the community's strong sense of continuity and belonging.

Anna Pesaha Thirunnallil commemorates the Last Supper, while *Ambaramanavaratham* (praise song) glorifies the Lord. *Karthavil Njan Dhrudamayi* celebrates the mysteries of the Eucharist, *Sarvashaktha Thathanam* professes the faith via the Apostle's Creed, and *Karthavam Mishiha Vazhiyayi* concludes the mass with the final blessing (Lukas 18). Passed down orally and via the church, these songs act as carriers of both spiritual instruction and cultural identity. For the Knanaya community, church songs are not merely hymns but sacred expressions that bind worship, memory, and community into a single, enduring chorus. Below are the lyrics of *Anna Pesaha Thirunnallil*:

anna pesaha thirunnalil (On the feast of Passover)

karthavaruliya kalpanapol (As our Lord commanded)

thirunaamathil chernneedam (Let us gather in His holy name)

orumayodeebhaliyarppikkam. (In unity, let us offer this sacrifice)

Anuranjitharaai theernneedam (Let us be reconciled)

navamoru peedamorukeedam (And prepare a new altar)

guruvin snehamodeeyagam (With the love of the Lord Jesus)

thiru munpakeyannacheedaam. (Let us offer this Mass) (Toshen M. Thomas).

These lyrics, sung at the beginning of the mass, can be seen as a call to the faithful to gather and praise God, while remembering the sacrifice on the cross.

Margamkali songs are the rhythmic heart of the ritualistic *Margamkali* dance tradition of the Knanaya community. Margam literally means the way and kali refers to dance. Thus, it was a dance form meant to encourage the new converts to continue in the Christian faith. Sung in a narrative style, these songs recount the life, missionary journeys, and martyrdom of St. Thomas the Apostle, blending history, faith, and performance into a single flowing form. The songs help understand the cultural history of the community. The lyrics guide the circular movements of the dancers, setting pace and mood while turning the dance into a sung story rather than silent motion. Traditional songs include *Vandana Gaanam* (welcome song), *Thamburaan* (my Lord) and *Maanikyakallaaya* (I will not leave you). Though initially men performed this dance, today it is mostly young women who perform (Vellian 31). The songs begin with an invocation before moving on to describe the historical accounts of the community. There are also references to the Bible and Christian tradition in general, constituting fourteen *padams* or verses in all. As the song's tempo increases, so do the speed of the steps of the dancers till the last verse literally has them leaping within the circle before ending with reverence.

Traditionally passed down through oral transmission, *Margamkali* songs preserve archaic language, symbols, and imagery, offering glimpses into the community's early Christian heritage. The songs also appear to have much commonality with Syrian liturgical music (Vellian 106). More than accompaniment, the songs function as a cultural script, teaching theology, collective memory, and identity through repetition and rhythm. In this way, *Margamkali* songs remain a living archive where devotion moves, sings, and remembers. Below is the first stanza of the *Vandana Gaanam*:

tha... mbu...ran, aan, munbaake, ke..
ko...nda..poo..., pu...ka..zhcha...aa...
thaa...shi...yaal, aal..maa...arggam, aam..
vilayum...um, naa...ttil.... itha thai thai
moovaroruvante kalppana kondu thithey thai thara
munbinaalundaya palliyidathu ithu thai thai
aadiye munbu sheelemmon chamacha thiranje thai thara
aalayam bhashayil kandoru chozhan,
itha thai thai aayathupolthanne namukkumingu, thithey they thara

aadaraalonnu chamaykkave/nam

thaa karku thee theyya theethey

kaika theyya they.

(Thampuran, before, the flower, the praise, the path, the harvest, in the country.... This is the temple that was built by the order of three people, this is the temple that was built in the past, this is the temple that was built by the ancients) (Knanayology).

The song is an invocation to the Holy Trinity and a form of prayer as well, sung right at the beginning of the dance.

The folk songs of the Knanaya community reflect the everyday rhythms of life, carrying culture in simple tunes and familiar words. Sung during weddings, agricultural activities, festivals, and domestic gatherings, these songs speak of love, labour, faith, migration, and community values. Their language is vivid and direct, drawing from shared experiences rather than formal theology. The folk songs of the community are ancient in origins and were first written down on palm-leaf manuscripts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The songs are considered a poetic amalgamate of Jewish-Christian, Hindu, and Syriac culture representing the centuries the Knanaya have lived as a minority in India.

Nallor Uraseelam (good Jerusalem), *Poorva Yousepinte Vattakalli* (old Joseph's circular dance), *Kulli Pattu* (bath song), *Mishihayutte Pattu* (Messiah's song), etc. *Panan Pattu* (bard's song) is about the privileges of the Christian community and it also celebrates the greatness of Knayi Thomman (Lukas 14). The song is accompanied by a small drum.

Through humour, advice, praise, and gentle satire, Knanaya folk songs transmit social norms, moral lessons, and collective memory from one generation to the next. Passed on mainly through oral tradition, they adapt subtly over time while retaining a strong sense of identity. Together, these folk songs form a cultural tapestry, where ordinary life becomes song and tradition finds its voice.

Music thus occupies a central and enduring place in the cultural, religious, and social life of the Knanaya community. More than an art form or source of entertainment, music functions as a powerful medium through which history is remembered, faith is practiced, and identity is sustained. For a community that places strong emphasis on continuity, lineage, and tradition, music becomes a living archive, carrying collective memory across generations.

One of the most significant roles of music in the Knanaya community is the preservation of historical consciousness. The community traces its origins to a Jewish-Christian migration from the Middle East to the Malabar Coast and it is not remembered solely through written records but is vividly preserved in their music. Their songs recount sea voyages, trials, divine protection, and eventual settlement, transforming history into a shared emotional experience. Through repeated singing at communal gatherings, history becomes intimate and participatory rather than distant or abstract.

Religion is essentially the spiritual core of Knanaya life, and music is inseparable from worship. Hence church music rooted in ancient Cyriac Christian liturgical traditions plays a vital role in shaping religious experience. Hymns sung during the mass, feast days, and sacraments, guide prayer, express theological truths, and create a sacred atmosphere of and unity. These songs are not merely embellishments to ritual; they are essential acts of devotion. Sung collectively, they foster a sense of spiritual equality and communal participation, allowing worshippers to experience faith through sound and rhythm.

Music also functions as a key vehicle of catechesis and moral instruction. Many Knanaya songs, especially church hymns and *Margamkali* songs, convey biblical narratives, teachings of the Church, and the life and mission of St. Thomas the Apostle. *Margamkali* songs, in particular, combine music, movement, and storytelling to narrate Christian history in a performative form (Lukas 33). Through repetition and performance, theological ideas and moral values are internalized naturally, especially by younger generations, without the formality of classroom instruction.

Social life within the Knanaya community is richly accompanied by music. Folk songs and wedding songs play an important role in marking life-cycle events such as marriage, birth, and communal celebrations. Wedding songs, sung primarily by women, describe family bonds, expectations, blessings, and emotional transitions associated with marriage. These songs reinforce social norms, gender roles, and community values while also providing space for humour, advice, and emotional expression. Music thus becomes a social language through which relationships are negotiated and affirmed.

Music further strengthens community cohesion. Knanaya musical traditions are predominantly communal rather than individualistic. Group singing during rituals, dances, and gatherings reinforces unity and collective identity. The act of singing together creates a sense of belonging, reminding individuals that they are part of a larger historical and cultural continuum. In a community that values endogamy and shared heritage, music serves as an audible marker of difference and continuity, distinguishing Knanaya identity while strengthening internal bonds.

Oral transmission is another crucial aspect of Knanaya music. For centuries, songs were passed down by word of mouth rather than written notation. This oral tradition requires active participation and memory, making music a dynamic process rather than a fixed artifact. Elders become custodians of knowledge, and younger members learn through listening, repetition, and performance. This mode of transmission ensures that tradition remains alive, adaptable, and rooted in lived experience.

Music also acts as a bridge between faith and everyday life. While church hymns express sacred devotion, folk songs reflect daily labour, emotions, and social realities. Together, they create a holistic cultural soundscape where the sacred and the secular coexist harmoniously. Agricultural songs, domestic songs, and celebratory tunes reflect an intimate relationship between music and ordinary life, turning routine activities into meaningful cultural expressions.

In the current era, music continues to play an important role in preserving Knanaya identity amid change. Migration, urbanization, and globalization pose challenges to traditional cultural practices. However, music remains a resilient medium through which cultural memory is sustained. Performances of *Margamkali*, church choirs, and community festivals ensure that traditional songs remain relevant, even as they adapt to new contexts and audiences.

Ultimately, the importance of music among the Knanaya community lies in its ability to unite history, faith, and social life into a single expressive form. Music remembers what time might erase, teaches what texts alone cannot, and binds individuals into a shared emotional and cultural world. It is history sung, faith voiced, and identity affirmed. Through music, the Knanaya community does not merely preserve its past; it continually re-lives and re-affirms it, ensuring that tradition remains vibrant, meaningful, and alive across generations (Vellian 53).

Thus, the traditional *Purathana Pattukal* stand as enduring cultural treasures of the Knanaya community, carrying history, faith, and social values within their melodies. Through archaic language, sacred imagery, and communal performance, these ancient songs preserve collective memory and reinforce a strong sense of identity. Even in a rapidly changing world, *Purathana Pattukal* continue to resonate as living expressions of tradition, linking past and present through sound. They remind the community that heritage is not only remembered but sung, shared, and renewed across generations.

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