

CHEKOTTU ASAN

Hymn writer (1772 - 1856)



Life story of Chekottu Asan

(Chekottu Kuruvilla - Kochoonju)

ELANTHOOR

CHEKOTTU ASAN

The Author of Hymns 7 & 15
in the Kristheeya Keerththanangal
(Hymn Book of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church)

A. D. 1772 - 1856
M. E. 948 - 1032

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Introduction

St. Thomas an apostle of Jesus Christ established Christianity in India in A.D.52. It is believed that he landed in a place called Cranganore which was a famous sea port in olden times. Through his preaching ministry, he converted many high class Hindus to Christianity. He established seven churches viz. Malankara, Chavakad, Parur, Gokamangalom, Niranam, Kalyan and Chagall (Nilakkal). After establishing the churches in Malabar (Kerala), he went to St. Thomas Mount in Madras, where he was killed by Brahmins.

Nilakkal (Chayal)

Nilakkal is a place east of Ranny, about 50Km away from Vadasserikkara on Chalakayam Road. During the early centuries, Nilakkal was an important commercial town with a large Christian population. In A.D.1319, Nilakkal was destroyed by a Tamil Chieftain called Fakhruddin Ali. His army looted the town and burnt the Church in Chayal. The remains of the old church and other buildings can still be seen today. The Christian families staying in Nilakkal escaped to various parts of Travancore. The fore fathers of Chekottu Asan were one among them and they settled in a place called Kadampanadu in the Sasthankotta Taluk. From there they migrated to Kozhencherry and later on to Elanthoor.

Birth of Chekottu Asan

Chekottu Asan was born in Chekottu Kochukallil in Elanthoor in 948 M.E. (A.D.1772)

His father Chekottu Kuruvilla Idiculla (Perumal Idiculla) and mother Kaipettoor Pallikkal Rachelamma were god fearing Christians. Asan had an elder brother (Geevarghese) and three younger brothers (Koshy, Idiculla and Mathen). Asan's parents died in their old age and were buried in the Omalloor Church Cemetery.

Childhood and Education

In those days there were no schools. Students would stay with the teacher in his house and study various subjects. This type of education was called Gurukulam Vidyabyasam. We do not know who Chekottu Kuruvilla's teacher was. He learnt Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit. In addition to this he learned music, literature, mathematics, and astronomy.

Marriage

Chekottu Asan married Mariamma from a traditional Christian family in Tiruvalla. They had two sons, Idiculla and Mathai. Like a heritage, they were known as Idiculla Asan and Mathai Asan and they faithfully followed the footsteps of their parents in the Lord's service. After marriage, Asan settled in Chekottu Kochukallil House.

Kalari Asan

As there were no schools, Asan started kalaries (Malayalam word for a training centre of martial arts, gymnastics, and general education) in his own and neighboring villages. The students would stay with the teacher.

His taught his children through poems which could be easily memorized.

Teacher in Old seminary- Kottayam

For many years Asan was a Malayalam teacher in the Old seminary, Kottayam, which was established in A.D.1813 for theological education. The famous CMS missionaries, Bailey, Fenn and Baker, were teachers at the Seminary for English, Greek and Hebrew. Abraham Malpan and Konatt Malpan taught Syriac.

Palakunnathu Thirumeni, Student of Chekottu Asan

Maramon Palakunnathu Mathews Mar Athanasius (1818-1877) Mar Thoma XIII did his primary education under Chekottu Asan, who taught him Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit. Asan was a regular visitor to the Palakunnathu house. They kept up their student - teacher relationship till the end of their lives.

Literary work

Before Chekottu Asan, there was very little Christian poetry in Malayalam. There were a few folk songs/ballads like Maargam Kali and Ramban Paattu and Palli Paattu. But they were not for the common people to use in daily life. It was through poets like Chekottu Asan that Christians got Hymns for daily family prayer. Being one of the first Christian poets who dealt with the Bible themes and stories, he will always be remembered. He had a good command over Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit. His deep knowledge of the Bible and Christian subjects enabled him to write Poems and other literary work based on Biblical stories.

Some of his titles are:

- **Israel Ulbhavam (Beginning of Israel):** This is a Thullal song based on the story of Jacob. (Thullal is a kind of dance performed in temples)
- **Alphudha Malika:** This is a collection of poems based on Jesus' miracles.
- **Chekottu Asan Sthuthippukal:** Collection of hymns of praise and extols sung during morning and evening family prayers. These hymns are published in the Hymn Book, Kristheeya Keerththanangal, Nos. 7(393) and 15(394). During the Episcopate of Juhanon Mar Thoma, these hymns were very popular in Mar Thoma Church.
- **Other Literary work:** Many of his literary works haven't been published. Successive generations were not interested in their publication, and are therefore forgotten and lost.

Meeting with Sri Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma

Modern history Travancore begins with Marthanda Varma, generally regarded as the Father of modern Travancore (1729-1758 AD). Thiruvananthapuram was known as a centre of great intellectual and artistic activity in those days. Sri Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (April 16, 1813 - December 25, 1846) was ruler of Travancore from 1829 until his death in 1846. Besides being an able ruler, he was a patron of music and a musician himself. He encouraged both broad systems of Indian music, Hindustani and Carnatic music, though he was essentially a connoisseur of the carnatic music tradition. The king was fluent in a number of Indian languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Bengali, Tamil and Oriya.

Chekottu Asan with the help of his students from the Travancore Royal Service arranged a meeting with King Swathi Thirunal. The King was very pleased with the poems submitted to him and presented Asan with valuable gifts including a Pattu (Pure Silk), a Silver knife (Vellipichathi), and a Ponnu narayam (writing instrument) in an ivory casket.

Nithaya Parvathyam, Village officer

By Royal Decree, H R. H. Sawathi Thirunal, made Chekottu Asan a Village Officer/ Administrator for life. It was a great honour. Parvathyar was the word for village officer/ administrator.

Place of Worship

People from Elanthoor, Punnackadu, Nellikala, Pulithintta, and Pariyaram worshiped at the Omallur Church. Lack of proper roads and the distance made it difficult for many to attend services and sacraments in time.

On 18 September, 1817, the people of Elanthoor dismantled the porch of the Omalloor Church and erected it in a plot of land donated by Chekottu Asan and dedicated a church in the name of Mother Mary. At present this church is known as Elanthoor Valiyapally (Kumaranalloor palli). Asan was a strong supporter of Abraham Malpan's Reformation Movement.

Juhanon Mar Thoma and Chekottu Asan

Dr. Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan was a great admirer of Chekottu Asan. During evening meetings, and on the final Sunday meeting of the Maramon Convention, he recited Hymns of Chekottu Asan. Many a time he would explain to the church members the meaning of the Sthuthippukal (hymns) of Chekottu Asan. As per Thirumeni's instruction, a special prayer book (Namaskarakram) was printed by the Publication Board of the Mar Thoma Church incorporating the Hymns of Chekottu Asan. It was his earnest desire that all Mar Thoma members would use Chekottu Asan's Hymns for family prayer. Juhanon Thirumeni regularly used these hymns in his personal prayers.

Chekottu Asan in Christteeya Keerththanangal

Hymn nos. 7 and 15 in Kristheeya Keerththanangal are written by Asan. But these hymns do not appear in any of the transliterated versions. It is sad to note that his hymns are not given proper place in worship services.

Final days

Asan was busy with his Kalary schools till the end of his life. In 1032 M.E (A. D. 1856), at the ripe old age of 84, he passed away to be with the Lord. His demise was a great loss for the Christian community.

A huge crowd, comprising of his relatives, friends and students, attended the funeral and paid their respect. He was buried at the Elanthoor Valiyapalli Cemetery.

Events connected with Asan's Life

M.E. = Malayalam Era (Kolla Varsham) started in 825 A.D.

- 1772** Birth of Chekottu Asan. (948 M.E.)
- 1796** Birth of Abraham Malapan (971 Edavam M.E.)
- 1799, Apr 12** Formation of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East in London.
- 1800-1810** Colonel Macaulay becomes Resident of Travancore.
- 1810-1819** Colonel John Munro becomes Resident of Travancore. He was a "Divan" for some time and was a true friend of the Syrian Church
- 1811** Publication of the book "Christian Researches in Asia" by Claudius Buchanan.
- 1811** Abraham Malpan became deacon - Ordained by Mar Thoma VIII
- 1811** Publication of Four Gospels in Malayalam
- 1812** Royal declaration abolishing slavery in Travancore
- 1813** Beginning of Theological College (Seminary) In Kottayam- Chekottu Asan was a Malayalam Teacher here.
- 1814** T. F. Middleton becomes the first Anglican Bishop of India, in Calcutta
- 1815** Abraham Malpan is ordained as a Priest
- 1816, May 8** Thomas Norton- first CMS missionary arrives at Cochin with wife and two year old son.
- 1816** Second CMS Missionary, Benjamin Bailey, arrives in Alleppey.
- 1817, Mar 7** Hindus burn the Christian Church in Tiruvalla.
- 1817, Sep 18** Dedication of Elanthoor Valiya Pally, (993 Kanni 2 M.E.)
- 1818, Apr 25** Birth of Mathews Mar Athanasius (Mar Thoma XIII) (993 Medam 10 M.E.)
- 1821, Oct 18** First printing press arrives in Kottayam, as a gift from CMS
- 1829** New Testament printed in Malayalam, translation by Benjamin Bailey.
- 1830** Missionary Alexander Duff arrives in Calcutta. He gave leadership for the propagation of English Education in India
- 1833** CMS Missionary Joseph Peet arrives in Kottayam.
- 1835, Sep 6** Birth of Vidhuwan Kutty Achen, Rev. Yusthus Joseph
- 1836** Mavelikkara Padiyola (Agreement) - CMS breaks relationship with Syrian Church.
- 1836** Beginning of Reformation- Abraham Malpan
- 1837** Abraham Malpan conducts Holy Communion Service in Malayalam with the new liturgy. (Chingham 15, 1013 M.E)
- 1838** Beginning of CMS College, Kottayam
- 1841 - 1842** Publication of the Complete Bible in Malayalam - Bailey's translation.

- 1842 Consecration of Mathews Mar Athanasius in Mardin, Syria.
 1843 Mathews Mar Athanasius arrives in Cochin from Mardin in Syria.
 1845 Abraham Malpan passes away (1021 Chinghom 24 M.E.)
 1856 Death of Chekottu Asan (1031 M E)
 1877, July 15 Death of Mathews Mar Athanasius (1052 Karkadakam 2 M.E.)



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The End

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