

CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST OF EPIPHANY AMONG ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS OF INDIA

Paulachan Kochappilly*

1. Introduction

As seasons change, so also festivals. Truly festivals bring colour and vigour in life. They envelop and envisage the values and vision of the community. This is true of every festivity, regardless of its sphere, level, and nature.

India is a land of fasts and feasts, for Indians take note of every minute change in the world and make it an occasion to celebrate. It is a land of playfulness as well as seriousness. There is gaiety and austerity. They go hand-in-hand. So also there is unity and diversity. This is the secret of the splendour and glory that India shares from time immemorial.

This article is an attempt to explore and expose the beauty of the feast of Epiphany celebrated in India. The name 'epiphany' comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning 'appearance' or 'manifestation'. The feast of Epiphany is celebrated on January 6, which is one of the three principal and oldest festivals of Christian Church (the other two being Easter and Christmas). It is celebrated with great solemnity and piety. The celebrations vary from place to place and from church to church. This variety in the form and content of Epiphany celebrations is an added beauty to the mystery of Christian faith. Fundamentally, it is the feast of the Manifestation of Jesus Christ. In his *Hymns on Epiphany*, St. Ephraem sings the greatness of *denha*, which he considers as one of the three great feasts in the Church:

*Dr. Paulachan Kochappilly, a member of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, and author of *Celebrative Ethics* (1999), holds a doctorate in moral theology from the Accademia Alfonsiana, Rome, and is currently teaching moral theology and allied subjects at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, and Samanvaya Regional Theologate, Bhopal.

He who enriches all came down and put on poverty,
That to the poor he might divide, the hidden stores
Out of the treasure house of the water.

He who is great became small,
So that the small one may become in him great.
He is like the greatest of all, but he became smallest of all.
He became small and raised to honour all men.¹

St. Thomas Christians of India² celebrate *Denha*, the feast of Epiphany, in a very fitting manner and with great cultural attire, taking into account the socio-religious-cultural components of the motherland. The appellations in the vernacular for *Denha*, namely, *pindipperunnal* and *rakkulipperunnal*, are suggestive and indicative of the ingenuity of St. Thomas Christians of India for contextual adaptability and textual fidelity.

This article has two sections. At the first instance, a general study will be made on the Celebration of the Feast of Epiphany. Then, the characteristic features of the celebration of *Denha* among the St. Thomas Christians will be presented. A brief mention of *Deepavali* in the conclusion might highlight the linkage and lineage of *Denha* against the backdrop of the cultural heritage of India.

2. Celebration of the Feast of Epiphany

The basic biblical passage for the feast of Epiphany is the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, which sets the scene and sense of the celebration. The text reads as follows:

¹Ephraem, *Hymns on Epiphany* 4: 9, 12, cited in Merja Merras, *The Origin of the Celebration of the Christian Feast of Epiphany: An Ideological, Cultural and Historical Study* (Univeristy of Joensuu Publications in the Humanities, No. 16), Joensuu: Joensuu University Press, 1995, 167; hereinafter referred to as *Christian Feast of Epiphany*.

²St. Thomas Christians trace their origin back to the preaching of the Gospel in India by St. Thomas the Apostle. They were in close collaboration and communion with East Syrian Church for many centuries. About this Christian community, it is rightly observed that it is Indian in culture, Christian in faith, and Oriental in worship. While being proud of the apostolic faith and tradition, there are at present no fewer than eight churches in this community of which two, the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches, are in communion with Rome. The former follows the East-Syrian tradition in worship, the latter the West-Syrian tradition.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."³

As a preliminary reflection, it is evident from the above passage that the thrust and the content of the feast of Epiphany is the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The Maronite liturgical prayer outlines the important features of Epiphany in Christian church, especially in the Eastern Church. Thus, the *Synaxarion* for Epiphany recounts:

Today we celebrate the manifestation or epiphany or the Trinity at the baptism of Christ as well as the manifestation of the glory of God in the person of the Lord come into the world, that is to say, the manifestation of Christ, the Word of God, among us... Let us then call to mind the grace of God who has appeared for the salvation of all, and thank him for the baptism through which we have been begotten in the Spirit and through which we have put on Christ and become children of the Father.⁴

So at the baptism of the Lord we have not only an epiphany or manifestation of Christ as God's Son, but also a theophany of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Again, the feast of Epiphany is not only a celebration of the baptism of Christ, but also the baptism of every Christian. Prayer for the liturgical celebration of Epiphany unveils its richness and beauty:

Jesus,
Light of the world,
you were baptised in the Jordan
and revealed to us the Father and the Spirit,
who bore witness to you from heaven.
Purify us through your holy descent,

³Mark 1:9-11.

⁴*The Prayer of the Faithful according to the Maronite Liturgical Year*, translated and adapted for use in the Diocese of Saint Maron, USA, from *Priere du croyant selon l'anneé liturgique maronite*, ed. Boutros Gemayel, vol. 1, *Sundays of the Church Season of Announcement & Birth of Our Lord, Season of Epiphany*, Brooklyn, New York: Diocese of Saint Maron, 1982, 662; henceforth referred to as *The Prayer of the Faithful*.

enlighten us with your true knowledge
and we will praise and glorify you,
now and for ever, Amen.⁵

The foundational motifs of the feast of Epiphany are well echoed in the above hymn, namely, the theme of light and water. Through the singing of the hymn, the event of the past is brought to the present for the appreciation of and assimilation by the assembly. It also represents the desire of the worshipping community for a greater enlightenment and a thorough purification of all the participants through the great mystery of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The ultimate end of the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of believers finds its reverberation in the above verses: the praise and glory of God, *kabod* or *doxa* of God.

Although the baptism of Jesus occupies the central stage of the feast, there are different hypotheses concerning the beginning of the feast of Epiphany. Merja Merras, in her dissertation, argues that the feast of Epiphany as an outcome of the thought of continuing the Jewish festival of Tabernacles, one of the three principal pilgrim festivities, in Christianity. Her point of departure is the celebration of the three main feasts of Jews. Since the Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost were taken over in Christian Church with Christological and Pneumatological nuances, it is legitimate to relate the feast of Tabernacles with the feast of Epiphany. Merja argues:

In Judaism there were three main feasts which involved the obligation of pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple. Two of them, Passover and Pentecost, have continued in the Christian Church, though their themes have gained new aspects. The Feast of Tabernacles, which was said to be the greatest of all celebrations, seems not to have any continuation in Christianity. In the early Christian Church there were also three main feasts. According to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, they were Passover, Pentecost and Epiphany... It is plausible that all the three ancient Jewish pilgrimage festivals gained a new Christian approach as the fulfilment of the eschatological time.⁶

⁵*The Prayer of the Faithful*, 668.

⁶*Christian Feast of Epiphany*, 17-18.

It is likely to think along the line of the author and to trace the connection of Epiphany with the feast of Tabernacles. In support of the argument, Merja puts forward a biblical foundation to her hypothesis:

The Gospel of John connects the Feast of Tabernacles with Jesus' existence as the light of the world and the fountain of living water. It might reflect the way the early Jewish Christian Church celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, which was now seen as the festival of the true descent of Yahweh's *doxa*, the appearance of the true light and the fountain of living waters.⁷

The Gospel episode in question throws light on the important symbolisms of the feast of Epiphany, namely, the symbolism of water and light. At the feast of Tabernacles, and precisely "On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"⁸ Referring to the rite of illuminating the court of the women during the feast, Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."⁹ It is, therefore, likely to establish a connection between the Jewish feast of Tabernacles and the Christian feast of Epiphany. Furthermore, Merja highlights two important features of the feast of Tabernacles which match with the feast of Epiphany:

The themes of the Jewish Sukkoth were at the latest stage celebrations of God's glory descending upon the earth, the torches and palm branches symbolizing it, and the living water flowing from the centre of the earth.¹⁰

Apart from the biblical insight into the origin and celebration of Epiphany, there are also historical reasons which could be cited in support of the feast. At the beginning of the fourth century the Church faced a threat in Arianism, which challenged the Divine Incarnation. In light of this danger, Merja presumes that "the Church found it necessary to strengthen the celebration of the Incarnation and the baptism of believers,

⁷*Christian Feast of Epiphany*, 60.

⁸John 7:37-38.

⁹John 8:12.

¹⁰*Christian Feast of Epiphany*, 60.

which is rooted in the baptism of Christ, in order to defend its existing faith. This might have been the final stage in the development of the universal Christian Epiphany feast."¹¹

The Feast of Epiphany occupies a prominent place in the liturgical calendar of Christian liturgy and life. It is both a feast and a season in the Church. It is a feast, for on this day the Christians celebrate the feast of the manifestation of Lord Jesus Christ at His baptism in the river Jordan. The feast falls on January 6. It is a season, for the mystery of the Manifestation is commemorated and celebrated for a period of seven weeks, starting with the Sunday after January 6. During this season, the Syro-Malabar Church of St. Thomas Christians remembers the life-giving words and works of Lord Jesus Christ together with the commemoration of the apostles, martyrs and saints on Fridays of the season.

Regarding the historical origin and meaning of the festival, Clement of Alexandria informs us that January 6 was observed by some members of a Gnostic Sect called Basilidians as a day in honour of Our Lord's Baptism. The celebration of the feast started in the East, and by fourth century it was spread to the West. Although the original occasion for instituting this feast in the East is not known, it is thought to have been an opposition to some pagan festival which claimed to commemorate "manifestations" of a pagan god.¹²

Depending on the particular Church, the community of the faithful focused on varied events or moments of the manifestation of Lord Jesus Christ. In the East the principal manifestation recalled was that made at the Baptism of Jesus, when a voice came from heaven saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In Jerusalem, the manifestation of the Son of God at the Nativity seems to have been included in the celebration of the Epiphany. In Cyprus, the manifestation of His Divinity at the miracle of changing water into wine for the wedding feast in Cana was commemorated together with the Nativity.¹³

The Greeks call this feast by additional names like, *Theophania* (divine appearance) and the Feast of Lights. They keep the Baptism as the

¹¹ *Christian Feast of Epiphany*, 18.

¹² James L. Monks, *Great Catholic Festivals*, London & New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1958, 21; hereinafter referred to as *Great Catholic Festivals*.

¹³ *Great Catholic Festivals*, 22.

principal object commemorated on the Epiphany. It came to be called as the Feast of Lights "because of the lighted candles held at Baptism which was administered on this day."¹⁴ In order to highlight the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, "it is customary for them to go to the sea or to a river where the water is blessed."¹⁵

Also St. Thomas Christians recall and relive the event of the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. The feast of Epiphany, for them, "is the manifestation of the Holy Trinity through the humanity of Jesus. Practically, it is the presentation of Jesus as the light and life of the world."¹⁶

An early account received in this regard is from the preaching of John Chrysostom at the feast of Epiphany in the year 387. It is revealing:

For this is the day on which he was baptised and sanctified the nature of the waters. Therefore also on this solemnity in the middle of the night all who are gathered, having drawn the water, set the liquid aside in their houses and preserve it throughout the year, for today the waters are sanctified. And this evident marvel is produced, that this water is not corrupted by the long passage of time, but through an entire year or even two or three years the water drawn today remains pure and fresh, and after such a long time it rivals that just drawn from the spring.¹⁷

Further, in his sermon, John Chrysostom illustrates the focus of the celebration and the rituals and ceremonies involved in it. As it is obvious, it was the baptism of Jesus which was emphasised in the feast of Epiphany. His testimony to the ceremony of drawing the sanctified water is another clear indication to the centrality of the celebration, that is, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, through which Jesus sanctified water. This points to the blessing of the waters at baptism and the sacrament of

¹⁴*Great Catholic Festivals*, 23.

¹⁵*Great Catholic Festivals*, 23.

¹⁶Varghese Pathikulangara, "St. Thomas Christians and Popular Devotions," *Journal of Dharma* 15,3 (July-September 1990), 266.

¹⁷Quoted from Michael Perham and Kenneth Stevenson, *Welcoming the Light of Christ: A Commentary on the Promise of His Glory (Services and Prayers for the Season from All Saints to Candlemas)*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991, 73; hereinafter referred to as *Welcoming the Light of Christ*.

baptism. Moreover, "And it is no coincidence that Epiphany both in France and Spain, and also in the East, becomes one of the occasions for baptism to be celebrated publicly. In the Byzantine rite, to this day, there is a special Blessing of the Waters at baptism which is an adaptation of the corresponding blessing of the water at Easter."¹⁸

This brief but basic understanding of the feast of Epiphany takes us to the study of the specific features of the feast celebrated among St. Thomas Christians of India.

3. Celebration of *Denha*

St. Thomas Christians retain the original Syriac word, *denha*, for the feast of Epiphany. It means rising, splendour, glory, manifestation.¹⁹ It also connotes the baptism of Christ. Hence, *denha* denotes the manifestation of Jesus Christ at his baptism in the Jordan. For them, this is one among their important feasts. St. Thomas Christians celebrate Epiphany as "*rakkuli* (night bath) in some places. On that feast day, tradition says, the Thomas Christians bathed at night in rivers or canals in memory of our Lord's baptism. In some other place for the same feast torches are lighted during the night and people cry out *el paiya* (God is bright) referring to the manifestation of our Lord."²⁰ The sense and significance of *denha* are beautifully painted in the night liturgy (*Lelja*) of the feast:²¹

I delight to do your will

Filled are those mysteries, which are all, filled with glory of
God, our Father.

God the Son was baptised in the river Jordan by the hands of
John Baptist.

When the Master bowed Himself for Baptism, John said to
Him:

"I should justly be baptised by Your holy hands, O Lord;

¹⁸Perham and Stevenson, *Welcoming the Light of Christ*, 74.

¹⁹Charles Payngot, *Thirunaalukal* (Malayalam), Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 1999, 42.

²⁰Placid J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970, 94.

²¹*Bless the Lord: The "Divine Praises" according to the East Syriac or Chaldeo-Indian Liturgical Heritage*, ed. Varghese Pathikulangara, Kottayam: Denha Services, 1996, 71-72; hereinafter referred to as *Bless the Lord*.

why should You then come to me for the sinner's baptism?"

Jesus replied: "Now we should fulfil justice, as is due."

Let us sing His praise.

Let your fountain be blessed

By the waters of baptism and the Spirit we have become
immortal.

O Lord, by Your baptism all fountains of the earth are indeed
made holy.

Since the lamb of atonement has undergone this baptism,

By the waters of the flood earth will not be swept again.

By the waters of baptism sinners are in truth redeemed.

He who gave us baptism as to heal the wounds of sin is the
Holy One.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit

By the holy manifestation when You, O Lord, gave us
sweetness of freedom,

Satan feared who through sin bound human race with debts and
obligations of all.

Through baptism You give mankind the bright lamp of faith in
You.

Let it, O Lord, shed its light for ever on all the earth.

As You have commanded us in Trinity's holy Name we receive
Your baptism.

Lord, let Your good will rest on us always for ever.

These verses represent the biblical, theological, liturgical and spiritual import of the feast for the faithful: it is the commemoration and celebration of the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan with great details, faithful to the biblical narration; it is the recollection of the significance of Christian baptism; it is the manifestation of the most Holy Trinity; there is the mention of the role of the Trinity in Christian baptism; there is the singing of praise and thanksgiving to the blessed Trinity, so also the main motifs of light and life are celebrated. In short, *denha*, on the one hand, is the theophany of the Trinity and the manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and, on the other, it is the participation of every Christian in the baptism of Christ.

To the celebration of *denha*, there are also some attractive and typical cultural, traditional and ecclesial renderings that deserve special attention. There are two festivities to solemnise and popularise the feast of *denha*, namely, *pindipperunnal* and *rakkulipperunnal*. While *pindiperunnal* is popular in the northern region of Kerala, *rakkulipperunnal* is a speciality in the southern region.

The popular celebrations of *pindipperunnal* include the erecting of a plantain trunk (*pindi*), specially decorated in the courtyard with many torches attached to it. According to the tradition, on the previous night of Epiphany celebration, the family members go round the decorated and illuminated plantain trunk, singing a Syriac hymn, *el paiya*, meaning, God is light. This hymn is addressed to Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, whose manifestation is commemorated and celebrated on the feast of *denha* or Epiphany. Needless to say that the celebration of *pindipperunnal* focuses on the theme of light, which is a constituent theme of the feast of Epiphany or *denha*. By lighting the torches fixed to the plantain trunk erected in the courtyard is a veneration of Jesus, the Sun of the world, or the Light of the world. It reminds the faithful about the declaration of Jesus on the feast of Tabernacles: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."²² As the people go round the illuminated lamps shouting the mantra, *el paiya*, they too declare that Jesus is the Light of the world and that he enlightens their path. In Jesus Christ, the faithful behold the glory of God and, consequently, they worship him as the Sun illumining the world and their mind and heart. The theme of light suits also on another count, namely, January 6 was a solemn day for the Egyptians, as they celebrated the birth of Aion from a virgin called Kore on the same date. It is likely that the early Christians found meaning in celebrating the Nativity of Jesus Christ on the same day. The celebration of the Nativity of Jesus is held on January 6 to this day in some Orthodox Churches. Another possible ground for the festivity of light in connection with *denha* and *pindipperunnal* is the winter solstice, when the day is shortest and the sun in the 'infancy' stage. Therefore, this day is celebrated as birth of the sun, the source of light. This is an added reason for the feast of light on January 6, the feast of *denha*.

²²John 8:12.

The contextualised version of the feast of *denha*, that is, *pindipperunnal* is a meaningful and successful step in evangelisation and inculturation, for it incorporates all the important factors of translation, transmission and transformation involved in the process. The Maronite hymn for the occasion is illustrative and instructive of the great significance of the feast of light on *denha*:

The Light of the just and joy of the upright is Christ Jesus, our Lord.
Begotten of the Father, he manifested himself to us.
He came to rescue us from darkness and to fill us with the radiance
of his light.

Day is dawning upon us; the power of darkness is fading away.
From the true Light there arises for us the Light that illumines our
darkened eyes.

His glory shines upon the world and enlightens the very depths of the
abyss.
Death is annihilated, night has vanished, and the gates of Sheol are
broken.

Creatures lying in darkness from ancient times are clothed in light.
The dead arise from the just and sing because they have a Saviour.

He brings salvation and grants us life.
He ascends to his Father on high.
He will return in glorious splendour and shed his light on those
gazing upon him.

Our King comes in majestic glory,
Let us light our lamps and go forth to meet him.
Let us find our joy in him, for he has found joy in us.
He will indeed rejoice us with his marvellous light.²³

Manifestation takes place in light, and, hence, the importance of light for the feast of *denha*. Jesus is acknowledged and adored as the Light of the world, who rescues them from darkness and fills them with the

²³*The Prayer of the Faithful*, 670.

radiance of his light. The supplication of the people on the feast of light deserves special attention. It is to light our lamps so that we may go forth to meet him. It is in finding him, the true Light, that one may find joy. The hymn, "el *paiya*," sung on the occasion is a clear indication of the fundamental Christian experience and the eschatological expectation.

Rakkulipperunnal is another name for the feast of *denha* or Epiphany. As the word *rakkuli* indicates a ritual bath (either in the night or in the early morning), obviously, it is a pointer to the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. So also, the importance of water in cleansing people is recognised. According to the tradition, remembering the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the faithful had a holy bath in rivers or lakes. This reminded them also of their baptismal consecration to the most blessed Trinity. Such a ritual bath on the feast of *denha* might have helped people to relive the experience of Jesus' baptism and their own baptism, revitalising and empowering them with genuine identity and dignity as Christians in the world. This realisation calls for greater commitment in the Church for the world.

The account of the feast of *denha* among Yakoba Church²⁴ of St. Thomas Christians illustrates the symbolism of water and its significance for the faithful. From this perspective, Susan Visvanathan provides an account of the feast of *denha* as follows:

The morning prayers begin at 7 am, at *Kurisu Palli*. After the *Tubdein* (which is the prayer asking for the blessing of saints, holy men and bishops, both alive and dead) the priest and deacons, wearing celebratory vestments, carry in procession a transparent jar of water with a small wooden Cross placed at its mouth. The jar is covered with the *sosafa* which is otherwise used to keep the paten and chalice covered. Taking the Cross, the Bible and candles, the

²⁴ 'Yakoba' or 'Jacobite' Church takes its name from Jacob Baradai, the bishop of Edessa in the sixth century. It is one of the Syrian Orthodox Churches. Its liturgy is West Syrian or Antiochene. Back in India, due to the unrest and unwanted interference of the Western churches in the affairs of the St. Thomas Christians of India, there took place a split among St. Thomas Christians. As a result of the split in the community, many leaders of the community resolved to break away the relationship with Rome and continue the allegiance with the Persian Church, with which St. Thomas Christians were at home. It was the Antiochene Church, which came to their help.

priest, deacons and worshippers leave through the northern door, circle around the church once, and enter again through the southern door. Carrying the jar of water signifies the Old Testament period in which everything remained implicit and unrevealed. Hymns are sung which refer to John the Baptist, to the River Jordan and to the dove, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. After the prayers and the blessings of the censer, the *sosafa* on the jar is lifted, the wooden Cross taken out of its mouth and the water blessed by the priest. The lifting of the *sosafa* signifies that the Old Testament period is over with the arrival of Christ the Saviour.

In the last part of the service the cross is taken to the baptismal fount and the blessed water poured over it, signifying the baptism of Jesus Christ. The priest returns to the altar with the jar and, placing it there, celebrates the Holy *Qurbana*. After the Eucharist celebration, everyone drinks a few drops of this sacred liquid, starting with the celebrant. The water left over in the jar is kept in a chest in the sanctuary, to be used when someone in the parish is ill or in trouble.²⁵

This narration of *denha* underscores the baptism of Jesus Christ and points to the healing power of water. An important remembrance on *denha* is the voice of the Father concerning Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."²⁶ The hymn for the occasion testifies the belief of the faithful:

Today, the light of the Father appeared in the waters of the Jordan.
Heaven and earth were astounded when John poured water on your
head.

Today the Father's voice was heard: "This is my beloved Son in
whom I am well pleased,"

And the Holy Spirit hovered above the head of the Son in the form of
a dove.²⁷

O pure One,
Who purified us by baptism,

²⁵Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba*, New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2001, 190-191.

²⁶Mark 1:11.

²⁷*The Prayer of the Faithful*, 660.

Received the incense and prayers which we offer you on the day of
 your holy baptism.
 Make us pure temples where the life-giving Trinity will dwell,
 And we will give glory and praise to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 now and for ever.²⁸

The idea of baptism and the theophany of the most Holy Trinity are adequately emphasised in the prayers of the Syro-Malabar Church of St. Thomas Christians as well. The following hymn for the feast of *denha* summarily states the effect of baptism and exhorts the congregation to take refuge in the mystery of the Trinity:

He has called us sons!
 Through the baptismal water
 which cleanses every stain of sin,
 O Lord, there flows Your mercy;
 thus we become purified.
 Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!
 Baptism is given in
 the name of the Trinity;
 we should also take refuge
 in three Persons equally.²⁹

Thus, the basic themes of the feast of *denha* are the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the baptism of Jesus in the waters of the Jordan, the baptismal water of Christians, Christ the Light of the world, and the declaration of the Father. All these point to one and the same episode, namely, the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. During the baptism of Jesus, the mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed; the identity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is made public; the function of the Holy Trinity in the baptism of Christians is underlined; and the importance of water and light in the absolution and illumination of Christians is described. Another hymn for the feast of *denha* paints most of these mysteries of faith in a single note:

Eternal Light,
 you enlighten all who come into this world,
 as you have enlightened the angels in heaven.

²⁸*The Prayer of the Faithful*, 660.

²⁹*Bless the Lord*, 77.

You came to bring light to Adam whom you formed,
and you instituted holy baptism, the mystery of our rebirth by water
and the Spirit.

You fulfilled the words of the prophets:

Moses, to whom you gave an image of baptism through the water
and the clouds;

David, who heard your voice when he sang:

"The waters saw you, O God, and the Jordan trembled and returned
to its sources;"

Jeremiah, who saw you when he said:

"Here is a man whose name is light which is light that shone in the
darkness."

Indeed, through your manifestation and baptism, well-beloved Son,
you fulfilled all the symbols and prophecies.³⁰

The celebrations of *denha* by St. Thomas Christians, namely, *rakkulipperunnal* and *pindipperunnal* are of great significance, for each of them focuses on one of the two fundamental themes of the feast of Epiphany, that is, cleansing of sins and enlightenment, characteristics of water and light, respectively. In other words, among the St. Thomas Christians water and light are considered important elements in the celebration of the feast of Epiphany, the commemoration and celebration of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Water and light are essential elements of Christian baptism as well. They point to one reality, namely, life: both earthly as well as eternal life. While *rakkulipperunnal* emphasises the element of water, *pindipperunnal* highlights the element of light.

The creative imagination and the theological insight of St. Thomas Christians into the celebration of *denha* are praiseworthy, for they have beautifully translated, transmitted and transformed the major themes and significance of the feast of Epiphany in the socio-religio-cultural settings of the faithful, that is, Indian.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, it is fitting to give a brief sketch of the feast of *Deepavali* or *diwali*, which literally means "a row of lights." It is the festival of lights, which falls on the last day of the dark half of the

³⁰*The Prayer of the Faithful*, 675.

month *Kartika* (October-November). Generally speaking, Hindus remember the return of Lord Rama (the incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the *Treta Yuga*) with Sita, and Lakshman to his capital city Ayodhya after an exile of fourteen years. It is in honour of welcoming their enchanting and endearing king the folk light the lamps. On this day, as prescribed in the sacred scriptures, people take an oil bath in the morning and wear new clothes. This is an evidence to the ritual bath in water and its sanctifying effects that accompany the celebrations of *Deepavali*. A ritual bath is an essential ceremony for the feast of *Deepavali*. The waving of light is also portrayed as another essential element of the feast. That is to say, ritual bath and illumination are fundamental to the celebration of *Deepavali* all over India.

To conclude, it is to be noted that though the story of the festivals differs radically, there is a striking commonality between the feast of *denha* and *deepavali*. As far as the rituals of these festivities are concerned, both of them give emphasis on sanctification and enlightenment. While *rakkulipperunnal* of *denha* underscores the aspect of purification through a ritual bath, *pindipperunnal* of *denha* underlines the phase of illumination through lighted lamps.

To my mind, though *rakkulipperunnal* and *pindipperunnal* of *denha* developed in different regions in the home state of St. Thomas Christians, they are to be considered as integral parts of the same feast. Put them together, the feast of *denha* presents the full meaning. Moreover, the ritual of bath in water and the ritual of lighting the lamps are inseparably linked in the feast of Manifestation of Jesus Christ during his baptism in the river Jordan. So too the Christian baptism, which is also commemorated and celebrated during the feast of *denha*, considers the symbolisms of water and light as essential for the baptismal ceremony.

In this age of reconciliation between localisation and globalisation, care should be given to preserve, promote and popularise the almost extinct patterns of celebrating the feast of *denha*, which give a taste of the perfect blending of the text and context and a testimony to the great heritage of St. Thomas Christians of India. As a step towards the revival of the particular ecclesial adaptation in connection with the feast of Epiphany, the Church could think of linking both *rakkulipperunnal* and *pindipperunnal*, since they together paint the integral picture of the feast of *denha*, the revelation of Jesus Christ at the baptism in the river Jordan.

The special merit of St. Thomas Christian tradition, as far as the celebration of *denha* is concerned, is in highlighting the twofold notions of the feast, namely, purification (water and bath) and illumination (light and declaration) through *rakkulipperunnal* and *pindipperunnal*, respectively, both of which are rooted in the soil and culture of the land.

In the celebration of the feast of *denha* by St. Thomas Christians, there is a continuity of the feast of baptism of Jesus Christ in the water of Jordan and the manifestation of the Son of God by the Father in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The novelty of the festivity consists in embracing the socio-religious-cultural elements of the people and place, though at the same time being faithful to the biblical, theological as well as liturgical traditions of the Church.

The festivity of *deepavali* helps us to appreciate the richness and relevance of the particular features of *denha* celebrated by St. Thomas Christians, namely, *rakkulipperunnal* and *pindipperunnal*. It explains the importance of the ritual bath (purification) and lighting the lamps (illumination) for any religious festivity in India, both of which are essential facets of *denha*. This is an added reason to revive and popularise the age-old forms of *denha* celebrations found among St. Thomas Christians, which are otherwise at the verge of extinction. Such a revival of the local forms of *denha* celebration will bring colour and vigour in the life of the believers. Through an experiential remembrance of the baptism of Jesus Christ in the river Jordan and the renewal of their own baptism, the faithful will be enabled to review their identity and dignity as Christians and, thus, to radiate the glory of God.