

## **Fasting in the Syro Malabar Church**

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### *Abstract*

Christianity is a way of life that teaches us to focus on life beyond our normal sense and sensibilities. Following the footsteps of *Eesho*, Christians Fast and pray with a focus on the life beyond the material confines. Among the several Christian traditions, the Syro Malabar Church also has spirituality developed based on Fasting. This article is an exploration of the history, philosophy, and spirituality of Fasting in the Syro Malabar Church considering its Jewish, Christian, East Syriac, and Hindu roots.

*Keywords:* Fasting, Christian Fast, Penance, Spirituality of Syro Malabar Church.

### **Introduction**

“Pour forth your hearts before Him!

By Fasting, prayer, and repentance, let us please Christ and His Father and His Spirit” (Pathikulangara, 1998b)

Fasting is the willful abstinence from anything that pleases one through one’s body for a period of time. Wilful abstinence gives the clear indication that what is available to please one through one’s body is to be kept aside for a predetermined period of time. Abstinence can be total or partial, in quantity or in quality. Fasting is not abstinence from

desiring something. It is not the celebration of the lack of opportunity. It is the most effective use of our free will in the midst of ample opportunities. Biblically, the noun translated “Fast” or “a Fasting” is *tsom* in Hebrew and *nesteia* in Greek. It means the voluntary abstinence from food. The literal Hebrew translation would be “not to eat.” The literal Greek means “no food” (Hickey, 2015).

Why does one abstain from certain things? Is there a spirituality that supports this action? Religions of all kind have one or other type of Fasting. The rigor of Fasts varies. Some Fasts are public whereas some other Fasts are private. There are many reasons for Fasting. Fasting has both physiological as well as spiritual aims. We discuss here only the religious relevance of Fasting practiced among *Mar Thoma* Nazranis in the context of their existence.

Human existence in this world is experienced through the body. God formed man from the dust of the ground (Gen 2: 7) and woman (Gen 2: 22). When the body is put aside, we can see that the soul is not of this world. However, with the body, human beings are an inferior existence according to St. Paul. He writes, “*Eesho* taking the mortal body was a humbling act by God” (Phil 2:7). For the church father Athanasius, “God became the man that man might become God.” *Eesho* says,

*“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”*  
(John 17:20-23).

Therefore every human being has two contradicting but complementing principles behind his/her existence, viz., body and soul. The soul is identified as spirit or mind which is the life principle (Gen 2:7). In all philosophical and religious systems, there are substantial discussions that deal with the explanations on the body-soul dualism and monism. This guides us to think that we need to look for a life beyond our mortal body because our mortal body is meant for life on this earth. What about our life beyond this visible world? Do we have an existence beyond this world? Is there a life for us without our body?

Christianity is a way of life that teaches us to focus on life beyond our normal sense and sensibilities. It urges us to strive for perfect union with God. “It is the spirit that gives life, flesh is useless” (John 6:63). We consider heaven as the abode of God, and *Eesho* clearly teaches us that there are no bodily pleasures in heaven: “For, when they rise from the dead, men and women do not marry, but are like the angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). There is no eating, drinking, and merry-making in heaven. Is it possible for us to have preparation for heavenly life while living in this world? *Eesho* answers the devil, “Man cannot live on bread alone” (Luke 4:4). In the heavenly life, there is no pleasure as far as the body is concerned. Body is of this world while the soul is beyond this world. What we have in the other world is what the soul really requires now in this world. Any pleasure that is of the body alone may be a rider for enjoying life in the other world. It is with this view that abstinence from bodily pleasures became a very important spiritual exercise among the followers of *Eesho Mishiha* from the beginning of the Messianic Age. Though the Garden of Eden is a prototype of heaven, the three gifts are given to the bodily existence of man in the paradise, viz., food, dominion, and sexuality are the things from which one abstains while Fasting.

### **Fasts in the Syro Malabar Church**

The Syro Malabar Church which is apostolic in origin has this clear vision. Her rule of prayer (*lex orandi*) is her rule of faith (*lex credenti*). Fasting and pray were the crux of their life. Fasting is an integral part of the life of a *Nazrani*. Jesuit Dionisio wrote in 1578, “They are friends of Fast by obligation” (Thuruthimattam, 1965). There are four pillars of the strong tradition of Fasting in the Syro Malabar Church. Theologian Placid Podipara calls the Syro Malabar Church as Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship (Podipara, 1959). This characterization of St. Thomas Christians of India is very significant. Apart from these three foundations of St. Thomas Christians, the Jewish background of Indian Christianity is worth exploring even though the Jewish root of Christianity might be included in the characterizing of “Christian in Religion.” Considering the Fasting in the Syro Malabar Church we come across all the four inputs i.e., Jewish, Christian, East Syriac, and Hindu. Hence, one could characterize the Syro Malabar Church as Jewish in Origin, Christian in Religion, Syriac in Worship and Hindu in Culture.

Thuruthimattam (1965) had done his doctoral studies on Fasting in the Syro Malabar Church. We use many data from his work. On the development of Fasting among the *Mar Thoma Nazranis*, three periods viz., pre – 1599, 1600-1896 and post-1897 are worth mentioning.

### **Pre-1599 Fasts**

Pre-1599 list Fasts among the *Nazranis* can be found scattered in a couple of documents viz., (Thuruthimattam, 1965)

1. 1301 - The Kodungallur Calendar - Syriac
2. 1501 - The Testimony of Joseph the Indian - Latin
3. 1557 - The Letter of Fr Carneiro S.J.
4. 1557- The Annual Letter of Cochin College
5. 1578 - The Letter of Fr. Dionisio S.J.
6. 1579 - The document of a visitor of Malabar – Fr. Monserrate S.J.
7. 1590 - The Letter of Fr. Jerome S.J.
8. 1599 - The Document possessed by Fr. Kocheppu Peediekal

Fasts that are recorded in the above eight documents are the following.

Major Fasts:

1. The Lent - Period of Great Fast – except the first Sunday - 48 days
2. The Fast of Annunciation - December 1-24 – 24 days
3. The Fast of the Migration of Marth Mariam - August 1-14 – 14 days
4. The Fast of (Rogation) of the Ninevites – 3 days
5. The Fast of the Apostles - Period of Apostles
6. The Fast of the Virgins - September 1-8 – 8 days
7. The Fast of Elijah or the Fast of the Cross - Period of Elijah-Cross
8. The Fast of Wednesdays and Fridays

Minor Fasts:

9. The Vigil Fast of St. Hormizdas
10. The Vigil Fast of Ascension
11. The Vigil of feasts of the patrons of the Churches
12. The Vigil of Transfiguration
13. The Fast of 12 Fridays after Christmas, in honor of 12 Apostles

## 21st-century Fasts

The Fasts as per the Liturgical Calendar of the Syro Malabar Church (Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Commission for Liturgy, 2018) are:

1. 25-day Fast - December 1-24 – 24 days
2. 3-day Fast - Rogation of the Ninevites – 3 days
3. 50-day Fast - Period of Great Fast – except the first Sunday - 48 days
4. 15-day Fast - August 1-14 – 14 days – The Fast of the Assumption of Our Lady
5. 8-day Fast - September 1-7 – 7 days – The Fast of the Nativity of Our Lady
6. Friday Fast – All Fridays except the Fridays between Christmas and Denha, and the Friday immediately after the Great Resurrection – 38/39 days in a year

There are many private Fasts in the Syro Malabar Church such as:

1. The Fast in the family after the death of a family member until the burial
2. The Fast before administration and reception of Sacraments
3. The Fasts during retreats
4. The Fasts with specific purposes by individuals and groups
5. The Fasts among the consecrated women
6. The Vigil Fasts on the eve of a major feast
7. The Fasts of penance
8. The Fasts for a pilgrimage
9. The Fasts with a pilgrimage
10. The Fasts related to local festivals

## Jewish influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting

Jews Fast very rigorously even by avoiding water. There are six traditional Fasts for the Jews of which the *Tisha B'Av* and the *Yom Kippur* are the most important ones and are observed from dusk to dusk. For *Yom Kippur* Jews spend almost 25 hours in the synagogue Fasting and praying. Marriage is considered as a personal *Yom Kippur* and hence in the Ashkenazic tradition the bride and groom Fast like that of the *Yom Kippur* on their wedding day before the official ceremony (Gesundheit, 2009).

The three major purposes for Fasting are (i) the achievement of atonement for sins and omissions in divine service, (ii) commemorative mourning, and (iii) commemorative gratitude. Abstinence from food and drink which are corporeal needs helps to provide a unique opportunity to focus on the non-corporeal life. Fasting can potentially elevate one to the exalted level of the ministering angels. By refraining from such basic physical indulgences such as food and drink, one can more greatly appreciate the dependence of humanity on God. This, in turn, leads one to appreciate God's beneficence in sustaining His creations. Indeed, in Jewish philosophy, this appreciation is one of the fundamental reasons for which God endowed mankind with such basic physical needs. *Yom Kippur* is the only Fasting is permitted (if falls) on the *Sabbath* (Gesundheit, 2009).

Jewish Fasts and related observances have a direct and indirect influence on the Syro Malabar Fasts. Some of them are as follows:

1. The Syro Malabar Fasts are observed from sunset to the following day's dusk
2. The Fasts before the administration and reception of Sacraments
3. Fasts during the mourning period. Unity with the dead in the family who is not eating
4. The Rogation of the Ninevites
5. No Fasts on *Sabbath* – No Fasts on the Sundays
6. The Fast of Esther – The Fast of Virgins – 8 days Fast
7. The Passover Meal – The Fast of the Thursday of Pes'ha
8. The Reading of the Psalms during the Fasts – (Passion Week and 3-day Fast)
9. Three times of prayer during the Fast – Evening Midnight and Morning
10. Spending time in the Synagogue – Church during the Fast

### **Hindu Influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting**

Fasting is an inseparable aspect of the life of a Hindu. The vegetarianism that most Hindus keep is a type of Fasting. There would not be a single Hindu woman who does not take some kind of *Vrat*. The *Ekadasi Vrat* is the most popular one in South India. People also Fast on the days of Pradosha, Purnima, and certain other auspicious days. *Vrat* connotes to willingly abstain oneself from certain pleasures including that of eating. Men and women Fast on personal conviction rather than a rule. In epics and legends, there are stories about people Fasting for many years for

pleasing particular deities. Fast in the Hinduism can be associated with festivals such as Navaratri, Shivratri, Karva Chauth. Besides these, there are many weekly Fasts in honor of deities (Rajendran, 2010).

According to the Hindu religious scriptures, Fasting helps create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. One is expected to live piously, give charity and refrain from eating non-vegetarian food. Fasting is mostly goal-oriented in Hinduism. Religious scriptures state that Fasting is not only a part of worship but a great instrument for inculcating self-discipline too.

Hindu Fasts are ascetical in nature (Rajendran, 2010). Hindu Fasts and related observances have many influences on the Syro Malabar Fasts. Some of them are:

1. One- time-eating (vegetarian) during the Fast
2. The Fasts before Feasts
3. The Fasts by the Hindu women – The Syro Malabar women have similar Fasts
4. Fast with special intention
5. Taking bath before Fast – bodily cleanliness
6. *Bhajana* (Be with God) in temples – During 3-day Fasts and 8-day Fasts *Bhajana* is conducted
7. The Fasts related to death in the family
8. The abstinence from a conjugal relationship
9. The Fasts for a pilgrimage – Sabarimala – Malayatoor
10. The Fasts related to local feasts
11. Day-specific Fasts
12. Abstinence from all animal products, alcohol, chewing betel, marital relationship, smoking
13. Fast and Abstinence go together

### **The Christian (Western) Influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting**

Although *Eesho* was critical of many of the actions of the Jews, He did Fast for forty days and nights, (Mt 4:2) He directed His followers to wash their face and be cheerful while Fasting. For *Eesho*, Fasting is not for appearances or for people, but for God the Father who sees beyond appearances, and God the Father, who sees what is kept secret, will reward those who Fast (Mt 6:16-18). He asked His disciples to Fast after His death. “But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will Fast in that day” (Mark 2:20). To

His disciples, he also said, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and Fasting” (Mt 17:19-21).

Apostles Barnabas and Paul joined with the Christians of Antioch for Fasting and prayer (Acts 13:3). When they appointed ministers to churches they did with prayer and Fasting (Acts 14:23). The Christians of the first couple of centuries had hoped that *Mishiha* was coming soon. Hence they lived a life of preparedness (Mark 2:20). The major Fasts of the first two centuries were more personal than institutional. They are:

1. The Paschal Fast (Friday of Passion to Easter Sunday Morning)
2. The Fast on Wednesday (betrayal of *Eesho*)
3. The Fast on Friday (crucifixion of *Eesho*) and
4. The pre-baptismal Fast

Being a struggling community, in the first two centuries Fasts were more or less individual piety with Fathers of the Church promoting it. But when the Church became a glorified church, social acceptance and freedom caused the Christians to start leading life of material enjoyment and pleasure-seeking. This was the reason why people started going to the wilderness. Wilderness was not a place for bodily pleasures. They hardly had food and drink. They spent time in singing Psalms and lived in total insecurity. Wilderness made them realize that everything in this world is passing. Monks of the deserts and monasteries trained themselves for a life in the other world.

### **The Ecclesiastical Fasts between 200 and 500 AD**

1. Paschal Fast – 2-days to 6 days to 40days
2. The Fasts of Wednesdays and Fridays
3. The Fasts of Saturday – (burial of *Eesho*)
4. Pre-Baptismal Fasts
5. The Fast before Holy Communion
6. The Fast of the Penitents
7. The Pentecostal Fast
8. Voluntary Fasts – monks



## **Post 500 AD Fasts**

Apart from the above Fasts, new Fasts that came into the Roman church were:

1. The Vigil Fasts of major feasts
2. The Ember days- some days at the beginning of each season
3. The Rogation (three days before Ascension) and
4. The Advent Fast
5. Private Fasts by ascetics

Fasting is training time for our life for the other world. It is a foretaste for the heavenly life. It is the perfect understanding of the spiritual significance of our existence in this world. It is neither because somebody else Fasted nor because the Church insists us to Fasting that we Fast, but by clearly knowing about our future that we observe Fasting here on earth. Most of the ancient Christian (Western) Fasts are observed in the Syro Malabar Church. Moreover, by the 17th century, the Fast on the Saturdays was introduced and the Fast on Sunday was withdrawn. Strict vegetarianism and non-alcoholism during the Fasts were condemned. A host of dispensations and exemptions helped those who do not Fast. In general, the laity became more observant of Fast than clergy due to the European influence in the local Church and the knowledge of the dispensations.

## **The Oriental Influence of the Syro Malabar Fasting**

The Greek and the Syriac oriental churches gave much prominence to Fasting from the first century itself. Fasting plays a significant role in the Oriental Christian living (Stamatis, 2003). Fasts were observed strictly in the early Church by having a single meal that is just bread and water alone in the early evening. Public Fasts in the various Oriental traditions are listed below (Thuruthimattam, 1965):

<b>Fasts</b>	<b>Byzantine</b>	<b>Alexandrian</b>	<b>Antiochian</b>	<b>Armenian</b>	<b>East Syriac</b>
The Lent	8 weeks	7 weeks	7 weeks	7 weeks	7 weeks
The Fast of Annunciation	40 days	40 days	40 days	1 week	25 days
The Fast of Assumption	15 days	15 days	15 days	1 week	15 days
The Fast of Wednesdays and Fridays	All except <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Week of Easter</li> <li>• Week of Pentecost</li> <li>• Week of Carnival</li> <li>• Christmas to Epiphany</li> </ul>	All except the Pentecostal Season	All except the Pentecostal Season Christmas to Epiphany	All except the Octave of Epiphany	All except the Pentecostal Season
The Fast of the Apostles	Pentecost to Feast of Peter and Paul	Pentecost to Feast of Peter and Paul	Pentecost to Feast of Peter and Paul	NO	Seasons Apostles
The Fast of the Ninevites	NO	3 days	3	1 week	3
The Fast of the Cross	1 day			1 week	NO
The Fast of Elijah	NO	NO	NO	NO	7 weeks
The Fast of the Virgins	NO	NO	NO	NO	3 days
The Fast of Transfiguration	NO	NO	NO	1 week	NO

Since the Syro Malabar Church comes under the Oriental Churches, it is worth exploring how oriental the Syro Malabar Church is in her observance of Fasting. To know more about this, the very specific Oriental tradition the Syro Malabar Church belongs to is worth noticing. The traditional Fasts in the Church of the East until the 17th century are listed below:

1. The Lent/40-days Fast/Seven-weeks Fast  
Begins on the Monday after Sunday of the Entrance of the Great Fast and ends on the Thursday of Pes'ha except for the Sundays
2. The Fast of the Apostles
3. The Fast of Assumption
4. The Fast of Elijah and the Fast of the Cross
5. The Fast of Annunciation
6. The Fast of the Ninevites
7. The Fast of the Virgins
8. The Fast of Wednesdays and Fridays

In tune with the true traditions of the Church of the East, the *Mar Thoma Nazrani* Tradition also gives utmost importance to Fasts. Most of the Fasts of the Church of the East were practiced in the Syro Malabar Church. Hence, among all the external influences, the one that most influenced the Syro Malabar Church is that of the Church of the East. In some cases at least, the Fast of the Virgins, the Fast of the Ninevites and that of the Apostles, there were adaptations in the Malabar Church. Though the names were almost the same, they were observed in very different ways in India.

### **Significance of Fasts in the Syro Malabar Church**

In all the four seasonal Fasts, the last days are the most solemn feasts of our tradition.

At the end of the 50-day Fast, we have the feast of the Great Resurrection. At the end of 25-day Fast, we have the Nativity of *Mishiha*. At the end of the 15-day Fast, we have the assumption of *Marth Mariam* and at the end of the 8-day Fasting, we have the feast of the Nativity of *Marth Mariam*. These are the four most important events that happened in this world. Hence, in all these cases Fasting is a prelude to a great feast. In other words, Fasting is nothing but an advanced feast. The three-day Fasting is an alarm which reminds us of the commencement of the Weeks of Great Fast after three weeks. Thursday following three-day

Fast is a great day of solemnity in places such as Kuravilangad and Pulincunnoo.

Sunday is the day of the Lord, whereas Friday is the day of the Church. It is not because *Eesho Mishiha* was crucified on Friday that we Fast, but because it is the birthday of the Church. The church is heaven on earth and hence we celebrate the birthday of the Church by Fasting. Similarly, Wednesday is the day to honor *Marth Mariam*. We Fast on Wednesdays to symbolically participate in the heavenly life of *Marth Mariam*. For, *Marth Mariam* is the only human being who lived on earth and led a heavenly life even with her body.

Fasting is the nature of God. Hence, Fasting has spiritual results only if we obey the commandments of God. Fasting is not an external action. It has to come from within, spread to all our actions and raise us to the heavens.

Fasting is not a period of sadness; it is a period of enjoyment. It is a period of enjoying heavenly bliss. It is a period for celebrating the Holy *Qurbana* and the Liturgy of the Hours in the most solemn manner possible. It is the time of being with God in His temple. A clear example is the arrangement of readings in the Syro Malabar tradition. During the seven weeks of great Fast, in the first week, in the fourth (middle) week and in the seventh (last) week and on all Fridays, we have four readings from the Scriptures for the Holy *Qurbana*. An obvious indication of the solemnity of the celebration of the Holy *Qurbana* is the number and length of the biblical readings.

Celebrating the feast using food and drink is not a typical Syro Malabar tradition. Rather, in the feast, the liturgical celebrations are more important. Lengthy and repeated readings and services and prayers add to the solemnity of the feast. They are nothing but the heavenly experience brought to the world. Food and drink come as the last item. Hence in the Fasting also, more than not eating or drinking or taking part in any bodily entertainments, it is the spiritual entertainments that are more important.

The authentic spirit of Fasting is a meaningful Liturgical celebration. In the heavenly life, there is no pleasure as far as the body is concerned. If Fasting in the Old Testament was a sign of repentance, in the New Testament it is for acquiring the divine qualities and is equal to the heavenly life.

Fasting is for purifying the heart. It is for humbling ourselves in the presence of God in the heavenly kingdom. We know the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18: 9-14). The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I Fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ But we know, the tax collector, rather than the other, went home justified before God. St Paul warns us not to be mistaken in thinking that contempt for the body is a sign of holiness (Col. 2:20-25).

Fasting is a precursor to heavenly life. It is a period of thrill and excitement. It is a time for purifying the body. It is the preparatory period for the heavenly life. How do we purify our body? To purify our bodies there is nothing on this earth that is comparable with the Holy *Qurbana*. The Holy *Qurbana* we celebrate is the experience of heaven on earth. It is not the linguistic styles or the instrumental music that is making *Qurbana* a heavenly experience, but rather the real and authentic celebration with clean hearts and pure thoughts.

## Conclusion

The purpose of Fasting is not to suffer, but to guard against gluttony and impure thoughts, deeds, and words. Fasting must always be complemented by charitable works and increased prayer (Gesundheit, 2009). To engage in Fasting without them is practically useless. The Holy *Qurbana* reminds us every day the purpose of Fasting and leads us through the fruits of Fasting, the heavenly life. In the first *Slotha* on Feasts of our Lord and other important Feast days the priest prays: “With clean hearts and pure thoughts may they (those who firmly believe in Your name and earnestly confess that faith) offer You priestly ministry and always praise You for the salvation that You have mercifully granted...” (Pathikulangara, 1998b).

“If we the faithful succeed in our daily life to please Christ and His Father and His Spirit through Fasting, prayer, and repentance, we also shall be counted among them who are resting in peace in the hope of resurrection” (Pathikulangara, 1998a).

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