

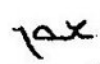


Koonammakkal Thoma Kathanar

An Introduction to Malayalam Karshon

Syriac is the most literary of all the Aramaic dialects. From the philological point of view it should be called Christian Aramaic¹. Though it emerged as an independent literary language of Christians, it had its pagan versions before the first century A.D. Syriac scripts employed in the earliest period are similar to Palmyrene. Once we come to the early centuries of Christian era, Syriac employs the script known as *Estrangela* (coming from the Greek word *Strongule* meaning 'round'). Compared with the 'square' Aramaic characters, *Estrangela* is rather 'rounded' script. After 5th century AD we find the emergence of two more scripts for Syriac: East Syriac and West Syriac scripts. Thus Syriac or Christian Aramaic is a language with three different scripts though similarities do exist.

Christians of the Middle East made use of Syriac script to write Arabic. Writing Arabic in Syriac script is called *Carshôn*, *Garđûni*, *Carshûni*, *Karshûnç*, etc. Syriac dictionaries describe it as "Arabic written in Syriac characters"². The words  and  are of Mesopotamian origin and the exact meaning is unknown. *Carsciun*, *Garscion*³ are also used.  is said to be the name of a Syrian who invented this writing technique and accordingly the script is called *Carshunica*⁴.

1. F. Young, "Syriac – A tool for the student of early Christian doctrine", Horizons in Semitic studies ed., J.H. Eaton (Birmingham 1980), p. 39.
2. J. Payne Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, P.79; I. Ortiz de Urbina, Patrologia Syriaca (Rome 1965) p. 17.
3. R. Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus I, Col. 790.
4. Ibid., col. 1839.



Today students of Syriac know that not only Arabic but also Armenian and Malayalam were written in Syriac scripts and they are all called by this term. So we can rightly speak of Arabic Karshon, Armenian Karshon and Malayalam Karshon. Syriac scholars and philologists have not yet scientifically studied Malayalam Karshon though it is a desideratum in the Indian context. "The Malabarians have been in the practice of writing Malayalam in Syriac characters, and new characters have been invented in order to supply the Malayalam consonants wanting Syriac Alphabet. This mode of writing has been called *Carshon* in imitation of the Syrians who have called by the same name the corresponding method of writing Arabic in Syriac characters, after its inventor Karshon... Double letters are formed by placing a (short line) below the letters⁵. Fr. Gabriel gives us a list of eight new characters added to the Syriac Alphabet by Malayalam Karshon writers⁶ who had to create them. The 22 characters of Syriac were no match for the 51 in Malayalam. Fr. Ludovic who revised Fr. Gabriel's Grammar has repeated the opinions of Fr. Gabriel; but he uses the terms *Carson* and *Garshun* to describe the script, pointing it out as an "imitation of the Syrians who write Arabic in Syriac characters"⁷. Fr. Emmanuel Thelliyil follows the above mentioned opinions. According to him this mode of writing is called "Karson ... after its inventor Karson"⁸. He repeats this view: "Most of you, I hope, know of the mode of writing Arabic in Syriac characters. This mode of writing has been known as 'Carshon' after the name of the man who invented or started the same. In Kerala, our people, from ancient times, used to write Malayalam in Syriac characters. This mode of writing is also called Karson (കർശൂനി), perhaps, in imitation of the mode of writing Arabic in Syriac characters"⁹. He mentions the eight new characters invented by Malayalees "to supply the Malayalam consonants wanting in the Syriac Alphabet"¹⁰.

It is to be noted that scholars in Kerala Have often noticed the existence of Karshon. The Malankara Orthodox Encyclopaedia calls it *Karsoni* (കർശോനി). *Garšuni* (ഗർശൂനി), *Karsçn* (കർശേൻ). It is Malayalam using Chaldean Syriac script¹¹. J.P.M. Van der Ploeg has

5. Fr. Gabriel of St. Joseph, *Syro- Chaldaic Grammar* (Mannanam 1922), p.6.

6. *Ibid*, P.7.

7. Fr. Ludovic of the Mother of Sorrows, *Syro-Chaldaic Grammar* (Mannanam 1951), P.4.

8. Fr. Emmanuel (*Syro-Chaldaic Grammar* (Mannanam 1961), p.2.

9. E. Thelliyil, "Catechism of Dr. Joseph Kariatti", *The Harp II* (1989), p.45.

10. *Ibid.*, p.45.

11. മലങ്കര ഓർത്തഡോക്സ് സഭാ വിജ്ഞാനകോശം (കോട്ടയം 1993), ജജ 209; 868

made some useful observations about Malayalam Karshon. His opinions are based mainly on the study of a seventeenth century codex kept in the National Library of Paris (Paris Syr. 25). This codex is a collection of various documents bound together. "The *Garšûni* texts seem to have been written in the time of Alexander de Campos (if not later). The present writer did not find any trace of Malayalam *Garšûni* in earlier manuscripts. For this reason he ventures to make the hypothesis that this kind of *Garšûni* originated at the initiative or under the influence of the Maronites who were in Malabar in the 2nd half of the 17th century, and for whom *Garšûni* (for the Syrians in the Middle East: Arabic in Syriac characters) was not only quite normal but even felt to be quasi – necessity"¹².

We cannot fully subscribe to the hypothesis put forth by Van der Ploeg regarding the time of origin of Malayalam Karshon. Alexander de Campos alias Mar Chandy Parampil was Metropolitan and Gate of All India during the period 1663-1687. In the post-Diamper period various Malabar Syriac Manuscripts were systematically destroyed. Is it not to be considered in this context? We do not know whether any of them contained Malayalam Karshon. Perhaps one should not easily dismiss the absence of evidence as a conclusive proof in this case.

Van der Ploeg goes on with further clarifications: "In the 17/18th century we observe the appearance of a new kind of writing: Malayalam written in Syriac characters, with the addition of some Malayalam letters. (Malayalam has many more consonants than Syriac). The practice of writing a language in a script of another one is very old in the Middle East, where it is now called *Garšûni* (written also *Karsûni* a word of unknown origin, perhaps the name of a person?), mostly Arabic in Syriac characters. At present the priests who can read the Malayalam *Garšûni* are rare: most of those whom I approached for explanations did not even know of its existence or even flatly denied it."¹³

If van der Ploeg could not find many priests able to read Malayalam Karshon it is no wonder now-a-days. It is because of the neglect of Syriac studies in Kerala. Manuscript studies too have been very much neglected. But Van der Ploeg does not seem to have seen the Syriac Grammars of Fr. Gabriel and others mentioned above. The present writer learnt Malayalam Karshon with the help of the list of consonants given by Fr. Gabriel in his Syro-Chaldaic Grammar. What I have noticed is the fact that Fr. Gabriel has not given a complete list of Malayalam Karshon letters. Hence we give the following list without claiming to be

12. J.P.M. Van der Ploeg, The Christians of St. Thomas in South India and their Syriac Manuscripts (Bangalore 1983), p. 244.

13. *Ibid.*, p.30

complete. Others might one day observe even more letters or different shape of the given letters, from manuscripts of Kerala or elsewhere. For reading practice a list of words are also provided; they are copied from a very dilapidated manuscript Grammar which is c. 150 years old.

The last two letters of my list (ⲉ and ⲉⲁ) are very rare and I have observed them only in a single manuscript. That is why I hope to find more letters in future. Doubling of letters is had by putting a small line under the letter concerned. Rarely this doubling line can be above the letter. The influence of Arabic in the case of one letter (ⲟ) has been suggested by some. But I am not sure since the East Syriac ⲟ (ⲣⲥⲱ) joined to the preceding letter has more or less the same shape as the above mentioned letter. Moreover in the manuscripts one can observe a variety of shape as far as this letter is concerned. Evidently those who knew Arabic might have given it an 'Arabic shape'.

The Vowels of Malayalam Karshon are always those of East Syriac. I have not yet come across an exception to this rule. It is perhaps another indication that Malayalam Karshon developed in Kerala when East Syriac was the common liturgical language of St. Thomas Christians of India. West Syriac became popular in Kerala only in late 18th and 19th centuries. It was a gradual, slow process among those who adopted West Syriac liturgy. Though West Syriac liturgy was introduced West Syriac language was not very much on the scene until the late decades of the 18th century. We have clear manuscript evidences for the slow transition. Van der Ploeg has lightly identified the period of this change c. 1825 though it was not that much abrupt ¹⁴.

Regarding the origin of Malayalam Karshon one can only speculate and in the absence of evidence come to no definite conclusion. Fr. Thelliyil has this to say: "In Kerala, our people, from ancient times, used to write Malayalam in Syriac characters" ¹⁵. I would rather think that Malayalam Karshon existed in the pre-Diamper period though I cannot prove this. The learned Malpans used to teach Syriac with the help of Karshon Syriac Dictionaries and Karshon Syriac Grammars. Many such works have survived even today as manuscripts. Unfortunately, Syriac printing resulted in the destruction of many such manuscripts during the last half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. It was only in 1995 I received a Syriac - Malayalam Karshon Dictionary of some six hundred pages. Also I obtained a Syriac-Malayalam Karshon Grammar. Both of them were on the point of being destroyed in fire! I am sure, many of the similar manuscripts actually ended up in fire.

14. J.P.M. Van der Ploeg, op.cit., pp. 84-85, 99, 107-110, 153, 157, 178, etc. cf. C. Malancheruvil, The Syro-Malankara Church (Alwaye 1973), pp.91-92.

15. E.Thelliyil, art. cit., p.45.



According to Brockelmann the term *Karshûnî* is of unknown origin. It is used "for the Syriac alphabet adapted to suit the Arabic language ... Just as the Jews used their alphabet to reproduce the language of the countries that afforded them hospitality, not only for the sake of secrecy but also as a sign of nationality, so also the Syrians must have written the language of their conquerors in their own alphabet soon after they had adopted Arabic for every day use. The letters lacking in the Syriac alphabet were supplied by pointing those already in existence, but in doing this more attention was paid to the sound than the shape of the Arabic letters ... Vowels are placed, sometimes in the Syriac, and sometimes in the Arabic way ..." ¹⁶. Both East Syrians and West Syrians made use of Arabic Karshon with some variations as noted by Brockelmann ¹⁷.

Scholars have pointed out the use of Hebrew script in writing Judaeo -Arabic literature as well as the use of Arabic characters in writing the Hebrew Bible ¹⁸. Based on the findings of Mingana and Voobus one may say: "... the use of Syriac characters by oriental Christians for transliterating Arabic seems *prima facie* to belong to a somewhat late period... the earliest writing in *Karshuni* known to (Voobus) is a colophon in the Syriac manuscript. British Museum Add. 14644, attributed to the ninth century. It may be, however, that the colophon is later than the manuscript. Prof. Voobus also gained the impression that *Karshuni* texts belong to comparatively late centuries. If my surmise is right, it would seem, *prima facie*, that the first to employ *Karshuni* were the *Maronites* and from them it passed to the other Christian communities. Since the Maronite started to write Arabic at a fairly late period ... this would explain the late use of *Karshuni*. But all this is sheer guess work, based on a somewhat superficial examination of restricted material, which may or may not be vindicated by a careful perusal of the manuscript material. On the other hand, perhaps the oldest Christian Arabic text preserved is written in Greek majuscules..." ¹⁹.

In the light of what we have already seen we propose some problems to the scholarly study and solution: what is the meaning and origin of the term *Karshuni*? When and where and under what circumstances did it originate? Who brought it to the Armenians and

16. C. Brockelmann, "Karshûnî", E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913-1936 (Leiden 1993), V, p. 775.

17. L. Costaz, *Grammaire Syriacque* (Beyrouth 1955), p.2 nl.

18. J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Back ground of Judaeo-Arabic. A study of the origins of Middle Arabic* (Oxford 1965), pp.34-44.

19. *Ibid.*, P. 42 nl.

Indians ? After answering these questions one should consider the role of Maronites in spreading Karshuni - a theory posited by well known scholars. The links between St. Thomas Christians and Maronites are rather negligible and the Maronites introducing Karshon in India is not probable. Moreover we cannot forget the fact that Malayalam script as it exists today is a comparatively recent one and that Christians made use of Vattezhuthu script. It seems to have been a necessity to create Malayalam Karshon for the easy communication between Malayalam and Syriac.

Van der Ploeg was fortunate to meet one who could help him: "Fr. Arayathinal was one of the few Kerala priests I met who could read *garšûni*; some other priests who could not read it even denied that it had anything to do with Malayalam!"²⁰. It is to be credit of SEERI and M.G. University to have introduced Malayalam Karshon in its M.A. Syriac Syllabus. Let us hope that St. Thomas Christians would one day take more interest in studying Syriac as well as Malayalam Karshon. Most of the Malayalam Karshon manuscripts are Syriac Dictionaries and Syriac grammars; liturgical information, rubrics, theological texts, historical notes, etc. too exist in Malayalam Karshon. Unfortunately no comprehensive survey and study of Malayalam Karshon manuscripts have so far been made. But such a talk would be extremely useful and challenging for Syriac scholars.

Karshon	Malayalam
ܐ ܐ	ഒ
ܒ ܒ	ബ
ܓ ܓ	ട
ܕ ܕ	ണ
ܥ ܥ	ന
ܦ ܦ	ര
ܩ ܩ	ഴ
ܪ ܪ	ഷ
ܫ ܫ	ഉൾ
ܬ ܬ	ൽ
ܭ ܭ	ൻ
ܬ ܬ	ശ്ച
ܬ ܬ	ഞ്ച
ܬ ܬ	ണ്ട
ܬ ܬ	ഭ
ܬ ܬ	ജ

20. J.P.M. Van der Ploeg, op.cit., p. 180.

കന്യാസ്ത്രീ	kanyāstri	كِنْيَا سْتْرِي	كِنْيَا سْتْرِي
പരുഷ	parusha	پَرُوشَا	پَرُوشَا
നടുവ്	naduv	نَدُؤْ	نَدُؤْ
മോതിരം	mōthiram	مُوْتِيرَمْ	مُوْتِيرَمْ
നകരി	nakari	نَكْرِي	نَكْرِي
മക്കൾ	makkal	مَكْل	مَكْل
പോതെജ്ഞാനം (ബോധജ്ഞാനം)	pōthejnānam	پُوْتِي جَنَانَمْ	پُوْتِي جَنَانَمْ
വെള്ളം	vellam	وَلَمْ	وَلَمْ
തനുപ്പ്	thanuppe	تَنُؤْ	تَنُؤْ
പെരുപ്പം	peruppam	پَرُؤْ	پَرُؤْ
ആടുമാടുകൾ	ātumātukal	اَتُمَا تُكَلْ	اَتُمَا تُكَلْ
മാനുഷൻ	mānushen	مَانُشَنْ	مَانُشَنْ
പള്ളി	palli	پَلِّي	پَلِّي
ഈവണ്ണം	ivannam	اِيَوَنْ	اِيَوَنْ
ആർ	āre	اَرِ	اَرِ
ആരാകുന്തു (ആരാകുന്നു)	ārākuntu	اَرَا كُنْتُ	اَرَا كُنْتُ
ഏവൻ	éven	اِيَوَنْ	اِيَوَنْ
ഏവൾ	éval	اِيَوَال	اِيَوَال
എങ്ങനെ	engane	اِنْجَانِ	اِنْجَانِ
എന്ത്	enthe	اِنْتِ	اِنْتِ
ഏറ്റത്താലെ	éttathāle	اِيَتْتَا لِه	اِيَتْتَا لِه
കൊറെ	kore	كُرِ	كُرِ
ഏറ്റം	éttam	اِيَت്ടَمْ	اِيَت്ടَمْ
അറിവ്	ariv	اَرِي	اَرِي
പ്രത്യക്ഷം	prathyaksham	پَرُതِي أَكْشَمْ	پَرُതِي أَكْشَمْ
താക്കോൽ	thākōl	تَا كُول	تَا كُول
(ശ)ചന്തൻ	chantran	چَنْتَنْ	چَنْتَنْ
(ശെ)ചെതൽ	chethel	چِتِل	چِتِل
തമ്പുരാൻ	thampurān	تَمُؤْرَان	تَمُؤْرَان
എന്റെ തമ്പുരാൻ	ente thampurān	اِنْتِ تَمُؤْرَان	اِنْتِ تَمُؤْرَان
ഇവൻ	iven	اِيَوَنْ	اِيَوَنْ
ഒൻറ് (ഒന്ന്)	onte	اَنْتِ	اَنْتِ
രണ്ട്	rante	رَنْتِ	رَنْتِ
മൂൻറ് (മൂന്ന്)	múnte	مُونْتِ	مُونْتِ
നാല്	nāle	نَال	نَال
അഞ്ച്	anche	اَنْചി	اَنْചി
ആറ്	āre	اَرِ	اَرِ
ഏഴ്	ézhe	اِيَز	اِيَز
എട്ട്	ette	اِيَت	اِيَت
ഒമ്പത്	ompathe	اَمُطَا	اَمُطَا
പത്ത്	pathe	اَط	اَط

പട്ടി	patti	ڤاتي	ڤاتي
കാള	kāla	قلا	ڤدو
രാശാവ് (രാജാവ്)	rāṣāṇ	رأب	ڤدو
മേകം (മേലം)	mékam	مك	ڤدو
പറവശാതി (പറവജാതി)	paravaśathi	ڤدو	ڤدو
കൊമ്പ്	kompe	كمپ	ڤدو
തി	thi	تي	ڤدو
പൊന്ന്	ponne	پون	ڤدو
കണ്ണ്	kanne	كان	ڤدو
ഇരിമ്പ്	irimpe	يرمپ	ڤدو
രക്ഷിക്കുന്നോൻ (രക്ഷിക്കുന്നോൻ)	rakshikkuntōn	رأب	ڤدو
എഴുതുന്നോൻ (എഴുതുന്നോൻ)	ezhuthuntōn	عز	ڤدو
കണ്ണിലുണ്ണി	kannilunni	كان	ڤدو
തലമുടി	thalamuti	طام	ڤدو
മരം	maram	مر	ڤدو
തെളിവ്	thelive	تلي	ڤدو
മിറോഗം (മൃഗം)	mirogam	مير	ڤدو
നിച്ഛിയം (നിശ്ചയം)	nichiyam	نح	ڤدو
പട്ടാങ്ങ	patanga	طان	ڤدو
എങ്കിൽ	engkil	انك	ڤدو
സന്തു	santhu	سان	ڤدو
ഇപ്പോൾ	ipōl	اڤ	ڤدو
കരത്തോൻ	karathōn	كار	ڤدو
കോതമ്പ്	kothampe	كوت	ڤدو
മയ്യൽ	mayyel	مئل	ڤدو
തൊരമൊകം (തൂറമുഖം)	thoramokam	تور	ڤدو
പാക്കിയം (ഭാഗ്യം)	pākiyam	پاك	ڤدو
യാവെന	yāvena	ياف	ڤدو
സ്നേഹിക്കുന്നോൻ	snéhikunnore	سنة	ڤدو
ഞെരുങ്ങപ്പെട്ടോൻ	njerungapettōn	نجر	ڤدو
അവെർ പെണ്ണങ്ങൾ	avere pennangal	اڤ	ڤدو
അവളിൽ	avalil	اڤ	ڤدو
മുന്തിരിങ്ങാവളി	munthiringāvalli	مثن	ڤدو