

The Contribution of German Missionaries to Tamil

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In the 17th century, several north European trading companies established their trading posts along the Indian coastline, eventually ousting the Portuguese from their position of sovereignty. The Danish, although they never acquired an influence comparable to the Dutch or English, also participated in the quest for Asian merchandise—spices, pepper, cotton textiles and indigo.

A Danish Admiral Ove Gedde was sent by the king of Denmark as his ambassador to India. He, with the help of a Holland captain Roeland Crape wanted to meet the king Regunatha Nayaka (1600 - 1633), the ruler of Thanjavur. As Roeland Crape had spent his early days in the Nayaka court at Thanjavur, he was sent to negotiate with the Nayaka ruler. He was able to impress the king of Thanjavur who wrote a fine letter to Ove Gedde.

Regunatha in his letter, informed Ove Gedde that he was extending his friendship to the king of Denmark. The letter was written on a gold leaf resembling a palm leaf in Tamil. Regunatha's signature is however in Telugu. This golden letter of friendship is preserved in the Royal Archives of Copenhagen.¹ Later, Ove Gedde himself went to Thanjavur and negotiated the treaty. Portuguese language was used then by the south Indian rulers in their transactions with foreign power. A treaty was drawn up in Portuguese and signed by Ove Gedde and the king of Thanjavur. The treaty with the Thanjavur king's signature, signed in 1620 is preserved in the Royal Archives, Copenhagen.² As per the treaty, the Danish crown acquired Tranquebar on an annual rent Rs. 3111 from 1620.³

The Danish East India Company (1640) was settled in the small village of Tranquebar on the Coromandel coast. For many years no missionaries were allowed in Tranquebar apart from the Portuguese priests who were in charge of Portuguese settlers and the so called 'Indo-Portuguese'; i.e. the people who spoke Portuguese either

because they were of mixed Portuguese and Indian descent or because they worked with the Portuguese.⁴

The Danish king Frederick IV (1699-1730) desired to spread the Protestant religion in foreign countries, especially among the Tamils of Tranquebar or Tarangambadi (land of dancing waves). He sent missionaries to 'handle nothing besides the holy doctrine' and write down in their diaries, letters and proposals to promote the missionary activity in Tranquebar. The Danish missionary group mainly included Germans; rather it can be called German missionary. Forty eight German missionaries came to India to propagate Protestant religion under the Danish patronage.⁵ The most remarkable among them were Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, Heinrich Plutschau, Benjamine Schultz, John Philip Fabricius, Walther and Schwartz.

The first Protestant enterprise in India began with the arrival of Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau in July 1706, at the Danish settlement of Tranquebar.⁶ To a certain extent both continued the tradition laid down by the Jesuit missionaries, albeit in a fashion which reflected their background in German Pietism. In order to understand Tamil people and Tamil culture, they established close connections with the local Brahmmins who were to teach them about Hindu rituals, customs, gods and goddesses and morals. The result of their work, understandably coloured by the kind of informants they had is found in Ziegenbalg's two manuscripts. These were considered to be too disturbing and demoralising for the cause of Danish missions and were not printed until more than a century later.⁷ The two missionaries argued against the total rejection of Hindu religion and the morals it represented, maintaining that it was wrong to view '...the Malabar heathens as a completely barbarian people who know nothing of learning or of moral manners'.⁸ After having known the reality in the land of Tamils the German missionaries wrote letters to their superiors praising Tamils and their culture and language. They even requested Pastor August Herman Franke in Halle (Germany) to publish the letters. But Franke, unable to tolerate Ziegenbalg's praise of Tamil language, did not publish them. He even remarked that 'the missionaries were gone to exterminate heathenism in India, not to spread heathen nonsense all over Europe'.⁹

On the contrary, the two missions considered themselves under an obligation to study the religious world of the heathen in order to build a successful mission on the reservoirs of 'natural religion'. Ziegenbalg's work significantly from that of the Jesuit missions. He

established a printing press in Tranquebar in 1713 and the first Tamil book to be printed here was a collection of sermons; then came the Luther's Catechism and a translation of New Testament and parts of the Old Testament.¹⁰ This was the beginning of the tradition of Protestant presses. Printings of vernacular translations of the Bible, as well as printing of books on religions and secular matters, were to have an immense impact on social and intellectual history from the end of the 18th century and far into the 19th century.

The Tamils, their language, grammar, law, justice, philosophy and the method of writing on palm leaves were of great attractions to missionaries. Ziegenbalg learnt Tamil from a pandit called Ellappan. He evinced a keen interest in understanding the meaning of many Tamil words with the help of a great scholar namely Alagappan. For nearly three years he had interacted with the Tamil students and their society and learnt the greatness of Tamil language and literature. His greatest achievement in the field of Tamilology was the introduction of Tamil Dictionary consisting more than 40,000 Tamil words. This formed the basis and source for the dictionaries which appeared later, particularly the Tranquebar Dictionary. He collected a good number of Tamil books and sent them to Halle where they are preserved till date. He wrote a grammar on Tamil poems. He had established a Tamil manuscripts library and collected palm leaves from the neighbouring places. He also prepared an index for them. He was instrumental for the spread of Tamil language in Europe.

The following account of Tranquebar and its people in Ziegenbalg's own words would be of interest. 'The inhabitants consist partly of white Europeans partly of half white Portuguese, partly of yellow moors, but principally black-brown malabarians. I do not exactly know the number of various inhabitants, but I must say that Tranquebar is well-peopled town, swarming with old and young, especially as its trade attracts men of all nations both by sea and land.

The language of the black-brown malabarians (Hindus) is Tamil which has long been formed into a written language. They write their books and letters with an iron style on palm leaves. They possess authors on almost all sciences and are experts in many trades and handicrafts.

Most Christians in Europe suppose the malabarians to be a very barbarous people but this arises from the Europeans who have amongst them not understanding their language. I must acknowledge

that when I first came amongst them, I could not imagine that their language had proper rules or that life had the laws of civil order and took up all sorts of false ideas on their actions as if they had neither a civil nor a moral law, but as soon as I had gained a little acquaintance with their language I could talk to them on various subjects, I began to have a much better opinion of them and when at last I was able to read their own books. I found that the malabarians discussed the same philosophical subjects as the savans of Europe and that they had a regular written law wherein all theological subjects were treated and demonstrated. This surprised me extremely and I was delighted to be thoroughly instructed in their heathenism from their own writings.

When as often happens the poets of the country visit me, or I them, one hears but little but verses from their month in confirmation of their teaching'.¹¹

His important works are the *Genealogy of Malabar Gods* (1707), *Malabar Heathenism* and miscellaneous writings. Extracts of *Needhi Venba*, *Konrai Vendan* and *Ulaganeedhi* are the other works. He also wrote a few books on Indology. His book *Malabarisches Heidenthum* throws light on several aspects. It includes the celebration of Hindu festivals like Deepavali and Holi, building from work of Siva and Vishnu temples, their architectural layout of Hindu temples and 18 ragas found in Karnatic music. Another book *conferences* deals with the conferences held between the Danish missionaries and Malabarian Brahmanas. It focuses on the truth of Christian religion and letters received by the missionaries.

During his stay in Tranquebar he engaged himself in an active translation of New Testament into Tamil and a comparative analysis of Christianity and Hinduism.¹² In fact, Ziegenbalg was named as an 'ice breaker' and regarded as the first European to translate a Tamil text into European language.¹³ Tamil works like *Needhi Venba*, *Konrai Vendan* and *Ulaga Needhi* were translated into German by him.

The most important contribution of Ziegenbalg was the establishment of printing press at Tranquebar (1712). This was sent to Tranquebar mission from England by the society for the promotion of Christian knowledge, with which they first printed books in Portuguese. Soon the German friends, sent a Tamil printing press. First Tamil letters were made at Halle in Germany and sent to Tranquebar with three men Johan Berlin, Johan Adler and his brother. The first part of the translation of the New Testament by Ziegenbalg

was printed with these types, but they were found to be too big: so smaller types were designed and cast at Tranquebar. As it was very expensive to impart paper from Europe, a paper mill was set up at Poraiyar by Adler, but it was later given up. When the Tamil Press was sent to Tranquebar, the king of Denmark Frederick IV, gave the missionaries permission to print in Tranquebar 'with out being subject to censor'.¹⁴

Ziegenbalg's 'Grammatica Timulica' was printed in the following year, and this book was used as a guide book to the later missionaries like Fabricious, Gravel and others. He published 213 religious books in Tamil. He established schools for the poor at Tranquebar and Cudalore. In his last days he went back to native land with a Tamil student, so as to remember Tamil language forever.

The other German missionaries who came later followed the footsteps of Ziegenbalg. Benjamin Schultz (1689-1760) landed in Madras in 1719 and learnt Tamil. He took more care in training a group of native students numbering to forty and visited all villages with them. He also visited the schools at Tranquebar, Cudalore, Devipatinam and Parangipettai. At Muthaiyalpettai he rented a house for running a Tamil school. In 1749, he returned to his native land where he taught Tamil to Rev. Christian Frederick Schwartz.¹⁵

Walther (1699 -1741) was a great scholar in Tamil. He made additions to the work on Tamil grammar by Beschi (Veeramanunivar). In 1733, his translation of New Testament into Tamil reveals that the art of translation had attained perfection during this period. He was very much impressed by the writings of the Tamil poet Thayumanavar.¹⁶

John Philip Fabricious arrived at Cudalore in 1740 and held his first sermon in Tamil.¹⁷ He was called as Brahmin ascetic (sanyasi Ayyer) because of his simplicity and celibacy. He prepared the English-Tamil Dictionary based on the works of Constantine Beshchi. It was during this period colloquial Tamil attained importance. Further, Tamil language was influenced by Sanskrit. So he classified the Sanskrit terms from Tamil. He read his translations in front of the people of different castes and simplified the difficult terms. He translated the whole Bible into ordinary Tamil.¹⁸

Another remarkable German missionary was Rev. Christian Frederick Schwartz, the brightest star in the constellation of Danish Halle missionaries. He had arrived in 1750 and served for 11 years at Tranquebar. With the arrival of Schwartz, the Tranquebar mission had a new phase in its development. The mission extended its works

in Trichirappalli and Tinnelvalley in the south. Many educational institutions were established which later became well known centres of learning. He did immense services to Tamils and their language. So he came to be called as 'Father of Tamil Christianity'. In one of his letters he had emphasised early schooling of children. All the Christian schools south of the river Kaveri were under his supervision.¹⁹ Many schools were established in his name at Thanjavur and Ramanad. He had an intimate relation with the rulers of Maratha dynasty (i.e. Tulajaji I, Serfoji II). It was because of his efforts, Raja Serfoji II ascended throne of Thanjavur.²⁰ He translated many works into Marathi. Serfoji erected a marble monument to Schwarz in the Church at Thanjavur. It is known from the above, that the German missionaries landed in the land of Tamils for the propagation of Gospel. Beyond doubt Tamil language became an instrument for their proselytising activities. Their propagation of Protestant religion consequently led to the development of Tamil language. Though printing and publication of Tamil works were sequel to their missionary works, the Tamil language was enriched by them.

The Protestant literary activities gave stimulus and support to an emerging class of young intellectual Hindu reformers later (i.e. Raja Rammohan Roy). These Hindu reformers wanted to reform the Hindu society by peeling away all social evils. Ziegenbal and Tranquebar missionaries believed that the best way of being concerned was through the reading of the Bible and that therefore the establishment of schools was the most important of means of conversion. The lower castes at whom the efforts of Protestant missions primarily directed had, traditionally no opportunity of education, by setting up schools, the mission could speak to create their own upper class (or atleast the middle class) in operating Christianity 'downwards' in the social system.²¹

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