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GERMAN MISSIONARY H. W. SCHOMERUS

Trendsetter or “Salt Betrayer”

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INTRODUCTION

Explanation of the title: “Trendsetting” is a process of setting norms, methods, and like procedures that others may follow. To put it more simply, it is a sort of trailblazing process in which one forsakes the routine and oft-beaten track. “Salt,” in a broader sense, refers to the pay or honorarium which a paymaster gives a person to perform a particular task or mission. A “betrayer” is one who receives such payments but does not at all carry out the work or mission assigned by the paymaster. How far a particular German missionary named Hilko Wiardo Schomerus (1879–1945) betrayed his paymaster – the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Leipzig, (LELM) – or, to be more specific, how far and why he deviated from his mission of spreading the Gospel among the Tamil people, form the nucleus or the crux of this paper.

As to what brought the Germans to South India more than half a millennium ago, how they happened to be in Tamil Nadu from 1706 onward, what those inquisitive Germans did in Tamil Nadu over the following three hundred years, and above all, how the fathomless German fascination for the indigenous Tamil language and literature, society and culture, diseases and medicines, etc., dragged them away from their very mission of spreading the Gospel, I have already made detailed reference in my earlier publications and conference papers;¹ hence, I will not repeat myself here. Here it will suffice to examine how far this particular German missionary, Schomerus, deviated from his assigned mission to go deep into the realm of the Siava Siddhantha cult.

1 Annotated Bibliography for Tamil Studies conducted by Germans in Tamil Nadu during 18th and 19th Centuries, a virtual digital archives project, post-doctoral major research project, funded by the University Grants Commission, New Delhi, and published by Stanford University, California, October 2014, 538 pages. Access code: <http://purl.stanford.edu/xh950zd4962>.

SUBJECT MATTER

We have a slight sketch of this German missionary by Valentina Stache Rosen.² Hilko Wiardo Schomerus was born on January 7, 1879, in Marienhafte, had basic schooling in Emden and Leipzig, and received training as a missionary. Even before coming to Tamil Nadu, Schomerus had learned the Tamil language. The LELM sent him to India in 1902. He took over the mission in Erode in southwest Tamil Nadu. From the beginning of his tenure, Schomerus evinced keen interest in the Tamil language and literature. Valentina says he even “dreamt in Tamil.”³

For cross-checking, we present here his life-sketch data from the Google search engine:

“Hilko Wiardo *Schomerus* (7.1.1879 Marienhafte/Ostfriesland – 13.11.1945 Halle) war von 1926–1945 Professor der Religionsgeschichte und Missionswissenschaft der Universität Halle. *Schomerus* hatte am Seminar der Evangelisch-lutherischen Mission zu Leipzig studiert und war von 1902 bis 1912 im Dienst der Leipziger Mission als Missionar in Südindien tätig. Aufgrund seiner Arbeit zum Saivasiddhanta, die von *Söderblom* und *Otto* sehr positiv aufgenommen wurde, bekam er 1912 Urlaub und studierte in Kiel bei *Deussen* und *Schaefer*. Schließlich wurde er Assistent bei *Söderblom* in Leipzig, hörte bei *Windisch* und *Wundt* Vorlesungen. Auf *Schaefer*s Betreiben wurde ihm 1923 von der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Breslau der Dokortitel h. c., später auch der Titel eines Professors verliehen. 1926 erfolgte seine Berufung nach Halle. Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten der christlichen Mission in einem Gebiet mit eigenständiger alter Kultur und Religion standen im Mittelpunkt seiner Arbeiten. Seine guten Kenntnisse dravidischer Sprachen, vornehmlich des Tamil, verhalfen ihm dazu, wichtige Quellentexte des Hinduismus im Original zu verstehen und auf der Grundlage von Textkenntnis und persönlicher Erfahrung vergleichende Studien zu Hinduismus und Christentum zu unternehmen, um so bei den angehenden Theologen und Missionaren ein gewisses Verständnis für eine ihnen fremdartige Geisteswelt zu wecken...

Verzeichnis ausgewählter Publikationen von Hilko Wiardo Schomerus:

1. 1912: Der Saiva-Siddhanta, eine Mystik Indiens. Nach den Tamulischen Quellen. Leipzig.
2. 1919: Indische Erlösungslehren. Ihre Bedeutung für das Verständnis des Christentums und für die Missionspredigt. Leipzig.
3. 1923: Die Hymnen des Manikka Vasaga. Texte zur Gottesmystik des Hinduismus. Jena.
4. 1925: Sivaitische Heiligenlegenden (Periyapurana und Tiruvatavurar-Purana) aus dem Tamil übersetzt. Jena.
5. 1925: Indien und das Abendland. Wernigerode. 1928: Politik und Religion in Indien. Leipzig.

2 Cf. Rosen, Valentina Stache: German Indologists, New Delhi 1990, pp. 194–195.

3 Ibidem, p. 194.

6. 1931: *Buddha und Christus*. Halle. 1932: *Ist die Bibel von Indien abhängig?* München.
7. 1932: *Parallelen zum Christentum als religionsgeschichtliche und theologisches Problem*. Gütersloh.
8. 1936: *Mission heute*. Halle. 1941: *Indische und christliche Enderwartung und Erlösungshoffnung*, Gütersloh.
9. 1981: *Arunantis Sivajñanasiddhiyar. Die Erlangung des Wissens um Siva oder um die Erlösung. Unter Beifügung einer Einleitung und Meyakantadevas Sivajñanabodha aus dem Tamil übersetzt und kommentiert*. Hrsg. v. Hermann Berger, A. Dharmotharan und Dieter B. Kapp, 2 Bde. Wiesbaden [aus dem Nachlaß; Bd.1, S. XI-XV enthält einen biographischen Abriß von H.-W. Gensichen].

After a ten-year tenure as a missionary, Schomerus went back to Germany with his family in 1912. In 1913, he joined a Swedish professor named Soederblom and studied the history of religions. At this juncture, the First World War broke out (on July 28, 1914) and continued until November 11, 1918. During the war, Schomerus could not return to India and hence spent this period working as a clergyman in Rendsburg⁴ while translating much Saiva Sidhantha literature. In this way, the First World War acted as a catalyst and enabled Schomerus to add more and more to his translations of Tamil literature into German. He was also able to write a few religion-related articles.

In January 1918, Schomerus was appointed reader at Kiel University at the recommendation of Professor Soederblom. In 1929, he returned to India. During World War II, when only a few students attended the university, Schomerus devoted much of his time to literary pursuits. He prevailed upon the Russian occupation army to reopen the University of Halle, but he died on November 13, 1945, at sixty-seven years old.

A survey of his works on Tamil religion, especially Saiva Siddhantha, merits mention here. Schomerus authored the following works:

1. *Indische Erlösungslehren, Ihre Bedeutung (Indian Doctrines of Salvation and Their Significance)*, Leipzig, 1919
2. *Die Anthroposophie Steiners und Indien (The Anthroposophy of Steiner and India)*, Leipzig, 1922
3. *Die Hymnen des Manikkavasaga aus dem Tamil übersetzt (The Hymns of Manikkavasaga Translated from Tamil)*, Jena, 1923
4. *Sivaitische Heiligenlegenden, Periyapurana und Tiruvadavurarapurana aus dem Tamil übersetzt (Shaivaite Holy Legends, Periyapurana and Tiruvadavurarapurana, Translated from Tamil)*, Jena, 1925
5. *Politik und Religion in Indien (Politics and Religion in India)*, Leipzig, 1928
6. *Indien und das Christentum (India and Christianity)*, 3 volumes, Halle/Berlin, 1931–1933

4 Cf. *ibidem*.

5 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 195.

7. Buddha und Christus. Ein Vergleich zweier großer Weltreligionen (Buddha and Christ: A Comparison Between Two Great World Religions), Halle 1931
8. Parallelen zum Christentum als religionsgeschichtliches und theologisches Problem (Parallels to Christianity as a Religious-Historical and Theological Problem) , Gütersloh, 1932
9. Meister Ekkehardt und Manikkavasagar, Mystik auf deutschem und indischen Boden (Master Ekkehardt and Manikkavasagar: Mysticism in Germany and India), Gütersloh, 1936
10. Indische und Christliche Enderwartung und Erlösungshoffung (Indian and Christian Eschatology and Hope of Salvation), Gütersloh, 1941”

Besides these monumental works, Schomerus also contributed the chapter on Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam literature to Glasenapp’s book *Literatures of India*.

A detailed investigation is very much needed here. Schomerus “worked” as a missionary in Tamil Nadu for only ten years, but continued his quest into Tamil religion for a further thirty-three years in Germany.

Now let me examine a more debatable aspect of the work of Hilko Wiardo Schomerus. We, the Tamil people, are immensely grateful to Schomerus for the deep study and publication of the voluminous Tamil Saiva Siddhantha literature. But was it this purpose for which the LELM sent him to Tamil Nadu? How many native Tamils did he really “convert”? German missionary William Tobias Ringeltaube (1770–1816) was quite right when he observed ⁶ that the activities of the German missionaries – who were sent to Tamil Nadu for the spread of the Gospel – caused “spiritual paralysis.” This was because the indigenous Indian society, with its multifaceted linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic features, fascinated dozens of the Germans who visited India from 1505 onward. From tiny ants to huge elephants, from small herbs to large banyan trees, from nascent infants to age-old centenarians, from the rich riding the palanquins to the poor walking barefoot, not a single observation escaped the watchful German eye.

This unending German quest resulted in thousands of diary and letter reports, travel accounts, and even indigenous literature and artifact collections. The Germans wrote voluminous reports about the indigenous legends and fables, rites and rituals, customs and manners, feasts and festivals, and sent those documents (together with many palm-leaf bundles) in ships back to Germany and Denmark. These treasures are now preserved in the Francke Foundations in Halle, Germany. Most of the Germans’ time, it appears, had been spent keenly observing and analyzing the indigenous lifestyles of various sections of native Tamil society. And here, the term *lifestyles* encompasses a vast spectrum, from the routine day-to-day activities of the native Tamil people to that which could be gleaned from their indigenous literature – grammatical, lexical, epic, lyrical, dramatic, theological, medical, philosophical, moral, juridical, and folk.

6 Cf. Lehmann, Arno: Es begann in Tranquebar. Die Geschichte der ersten evangelischen Kirche in Indien, Berlin 1956, p. 300.

Learning the Tamil language, interacting with the native Tamil people, educating them, learning the indigenous religious tenets, identifying the different strata of indigenous Tamil society, and especially learning the Tamil medical secrets and the indigenous flora and fauna would have consumed most of the Germans' time – how did the missionaries find time for conversion of the native Tamils? “The missionaries shall attend to and only to the conversion of the heathens and to nothing else,” was one of the explicit orders issued by the Danish Crown⁷ to each Lutheran German missionary. But how far the German Lutheran missionaries obeyed this royal order is very much up for investigation. There is no source material – primary, secondary, or even tertiary – to exactly ascertain the number of native Tamil conversions that each German missionary effected in Tamil Nadu.

In this context, we can also refer to what Anders Nørgaard has to say.⁸ After giving a graphic account of the mission activities, the author offers just the year-wise list of the number of converts. Further, he says:⁹ “From the figures one cannot make a reliable picture of the scope of the mission work...”

This implies that the number of converts given in the list cannot be considered fully dependable. Thus, what I had been searching for – that is, a detailed list of how many native Tamils each German missionary “really converted,” if possible with the original and baptismal names of the converts – cannot be exactly ascertained as yet. It would certainly be worthwhile to know the names of all the native Tamil citizens who were converted to the Christian faith.

Ziegenbalg's diary entry¹⁰ dated October 8, 1714, gives the name of one Tamil convert as Malaiyappan. There was another native convert named Timotheus who was taken to Copenhagen by Heinrich Pluetschau. Aside from these instances, we do not get any other source material for the names of native Tamil converts. A few German missionaries lived as missionaries in Tamil Nadu for just a few years; a few more lived and worked there longer. Johann Peter Rottler (1749–1836) spent an unbroken sixty-year period in Tamil Nadu, and we have no information about the names or number of native Tamil people he really “converted.” The exact conversion data would have been highly informative and statistically valuable.

To return to the present investigation on Schomerus, it is amazing to discover how he acquired such vast knowledge of Tamil religion – namely, the Saiva Siddhantha cult. His tenure as missionary would have been insufficient to do this kind of in-depth research of an ancient religion. Did he find any time at all for conversion – the very purpose and mission assigned to him? Many eyebrows in Leipzig would have been raised to find in his diaries not a single entry recounting native conversion! He set aside the orders of his paymasters – the LELM in Leipzig – and showed greater interest in Tamil language, religion, and culture. This is what I brand “salt betrayal.”

7 Ibidem

8 Cf. Nørgaard, Anders: *Mission und Obrigkeit*, Gütersloh 1988, pp. 308–311.

9 Ibidem, pp. 308–309.

10 Cf. Anonymous: *Life of B. Ziegenbalg*, 2nd ed., Tranquebar 1893, p. 27. See also *Missions Diarium, 1706–1719*, dated Anno 1714, 8 Oktober.

To get a sense as to precisely why this German missionary was drawn into the realm of Saiva Siddhantha philosophy, here is Saiva Siddhantha in a nutshell, according to N. R. Murugavell:¹¹

Many religions of the world, such as Judaism (B.C. 1500–1200), Shintoism (B.C. 604), Zoroastrianism (B.C. 660), Taoism (B.C. 604), Jainism (B.C. 600), Buddhism (B.C. 560), Confucianism (B.C. 55), Christianity (4 A.D.), Islam (570 A.D.) and Sikhism (1469 A.D.) have their dates of origin and names of their founders. Saivism is a pre-historic religion and has been followed from times immemorial...

Renowned historian Sir John Marshall reportedly observed¹² that “...Saiva religion is the most ancient religion of the world...” And about the universal nature and practicability of this ancient religion, Murugavell quotes from Maraimalai Adigal thus:¹³

... the fundamental and the most important principles of Saiva Siddhantham, seem to bear a close resemblance to modern European and American thoughts as developed by John Stuart Mill, William James, F. C. S. Schiller, James Ward and others...

On the commendable nature of Saivism, Murugavell also observed thus:¹⁴

The Saiva Siddhantha philosophy is rational – not superstitious, logical – not dogmatic, practical – not unworldly and otherworldly, universal – not parochial and sectarian, liberal – not fanatic, scientific – not fantastic and whimsical, comprehensive – not elusive, progressive – not reactionary, charming and enlightening – not dull and drab.

Saivam, in the strictest sense of the term, means *vegetarianism*. But in the religious sense of the term, it refers to a separate religious cult like Vaishnavism. *Siddhaantham* is *philosophy*. Thus, *Saiva Siddhaantham*, in a broader sense, betokens certain philosophical dogmas which percolate between the Creator, the created, and the ones that prevent the created from uniting with the Creator. The following lines will explain this religious concept.

In Saiva Siddhaantham, the Creator or God is called *pathi*; all the souls (the created ones – all living creatures) which experience birth and death are called *pasu*; and the bondage which prevents the *pasu* from uniting with the *pathi* is called the *paasam*. This *paasam* can be classified into three kinds: *aanavam* (the “ego”), *kunmam* (deeds and their effects), and *maayai* (the illusion). Because of *paasam*, the *pasu* suffers from not uniting with the *pathi*. When *pathi* approaches *pasu*, then *paasam* vanishes.

An ordinary analogy will simplify this theory. When snow falls on the leaves of a plant, the leaves bend down and suffer due to the weight of the snow. When the sun shines, the snow vanishes and the leaves become happy as the burden of the snow goes away. Likewise, when the *pathi* – the Creator – approaches the *pasu* – the living creatures – the *paasam* vanishes and *pathi* and *pasu* unite, resulting in religious ecstasy.

11 Murugavell, N. R.: Saiva Siddhantham, Chennai 1984, p. 323.

12 Ibidem, p. 324.

13 Ibidem, p. 327.

14 Ibidem, pp. 327–328.

CONCLUSION

Even after nearly half a century of contact with Germany (and, to be more specific, nearly thirty years after I first visited the Franckens archives in Halle) I am dismayed to state that I now wonder if this institution can produce any source material to contradict my gentle but pointed accusation that there is no source material containing the pre- and post-baptismal names of each native Tamil convert.

This kind of fathomless German fascination should be duly acknowledged and accepted. Herein lies the strength and beauty of the Tamil language and literature, society and culture, feasts and festivals, legends and fables. Recently, the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University procured the manuscripts of Schomerus from his son and published¹⁵ two volumes: Arunandhi's *Sivagnana Siddhiyar* and Meikanda Deva's *Siva gnana Bodham*. It is noteworthy to find that the late Professor Hans Werner Gensichen included a biographical sketch of Schomerus in the first volume (pages XI to XV).

It is my humble suggestion that the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg or the Cologne University take up the thread and bring out many more such as-yet-unpublished manuscripts – containing dozens of original source materials about Tamil language and literature, society and culture, religion and faith – above all to keep glowing the very torchlight which the first German Lutheran missionary, Ziegenbalg, left on the sands of the coastal hamlet Tarangampaadi more than three centuries ago!

15 Cf. Berger, Hermann/Dhamotharan, A./Kapp, Dieter B. (eds.): *Arunantis Sivajnanasiddhiyar. Die Erlangung des Wissens um Siva oder um die Erlösung. Unter Beifügung einer Einleitung und Meykandadevas Sivajnanabodha aus dem Tamil übersetzt und kommentiert*, 2 vols., Wiesbaden 1981.