



Standard of education of native Tamil people 300 years ago as observed and reported by the Germans

C. S. MOHANAVELU

1. Introduction

German interest für Indology, or better-said, the Tamilo-German interactions date back to the very beginning of the 18th century. German Indology has its firm origin only in Tamil Nadu. The first Indian people to master the German language were the Tamil people and the first Indian to set foot in Germany was a Tamil scholar, who arrived in Germany in 1713 itself and taught Tamil language to the German missionaries, who were selected to go to Tranquebar for the spread of the Gospel. This kind of rare overseas eminence, not other Indian language, including Sanscrit, seemed to have attained, 276 years ago. The first German missionaries, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg und Heinrich Pluetschau arrived here, in Tranquebar, on the 9th July 1706 as “Royal Danish” missionaries to spread the Gospel among the native Tamil people in this Danish colony, which was ceded to the Danish Crown in 1620. With this, a new era of Tamilo-German interactions had dawned and many more Germans, who came in here, as missionaries or otherwise, contributed so much to nurture and develop this Tamilo-German interaction. Following these two Germans, many more were sent to Tranquebar on the expenses of the Danish Crown and hence they came to be called “Royal Danish” missionaries, though they were Germans by birth. The Danish King Frederick IV (1699–1730), besieged with the pietistic fervour, searched for young theologians to be sent to the East Indies. The Danes did not come forward to take up this religious task in the far off Tranquebar. They in fact disliked their King spending money on such religious commitments. The Danes expressed their dissatisfaction in the following lines¹⁾:

„Indessen sieht man hieraus, dass es in Europa noch wohl so viel gibt im Christenthume zu begiessen, dass man, ehe solches geschehen, sich nicht in andere Theile der Welt zu pflanzen, zu begeben hätte ...“

But then, Germany came to the rescue of this King. Halle was then an important centre of pietistic movement and Prof. August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), who himself was a staunch pietist, selected young Germans for this religious task. These German missionaries were ordered to write down in their diaries all about the new field of labour and send them to Copenhagen “*whenever a ship leaves India for this country ...*”²⁾ In letter and spirit, did the Germans obey this Royal order dated 17 Nov., 1705 and they kept on writing volumes of all they came across and heard about in Tamil Nadu. Result: Today, we have heaps and heaps of original source informations in the form of diaries, letters, travel accounts, personal observations, missionary reports etc. on very many subjects, all preserved in Francken’s Foundation Archives in Halle. More informations about this archives and its holdings may be had from my article ³⁾, a copy of which has been sent to the Director of this archives. These original source materials are to offer us first hand reports on very many subjects and about the richness of their contents, Prof. ARNO LEHMANN says thus⁴⁾:

“... Let it be said in this connection that there are also many Oleis (Tamil word for palmleaves

books) written in the Tamil of that time which are not yet being worked at nor translated, but which are very revealing and useful for any Tamil scholar. These Oleis and the heaps of letters and printed papers of those early missionaries are to be likened to a green pasture for any student of Tamil and the Tamilnad of the 18th century and many a doctorate could be earned by working on that material."

From these original source materials, we can very well get the correct picture and conditions of the society, lifestyle, day-to-day activities of the natives, their knowledge of education, tropical medicine, herbology, social customs and manners etc. In this article, I made an attempt to bring to new light the standard of education of those native Tamil people, taking up other aspects in different articles.

2. Memorize the books

Committing to memory, whatever the native school boys learnt, was the prime method of study. The lessons were in the form of verses, the teacher taught them to his students, who in turn recorded in their memory and recited them whenever the teacher liked them to do so. Writing the daily lessons in note books or slates was not a practice then. The art of getting by heart all the verses by the native school boys was observed by German missionaries.

Ziegenbalg mentions in one of his conferences⁵⁾ thus:

"On the Eleventh of April 1708, I went into a Malabarian School, and ask'd the Children what they learnt. I found they had learnt several books by heart; but when I asked them the Meaning of the same Expressions they had committed to Memory, and repeated readily. They excus'd themselves, saying that their Masters did not explain to them any of the occuring Difficulties that are obvious enough to all that read those Books."

We thus come to infer that those native school boys memorized hundreds of verses even before knowing the meanings of the words in them. Also in his *Bibliotheca Malabarica*, Ziegenbalg mentions thus⁶⁾:

"... Dahero werden dergleichen Bücher von ihnen nicht nur allein gelesen, sondern alle auswendig gelernet: wie denn derjenige Poet, den ich im Hause habe, dieses Buch nebst sehr vielen anderen schweren Büchern accurat auswendig zu sagen weiss, uneracht daß er blind ist ..."

Even today, one may find a few school children to have memorized a few hundred Kural couplets and so it may not be a wonder that 300 years ago, during Ziegenbalg's times, the school children memorized hundreds and thousands of such verses. Also in this same work of Ziegenbalg we find⁷⁾

"Ulaganidi, die bürgerliche Gerechtigkeit, darinnen seine moralische Regeln gegeben werden zur Unterlassung der ..."

Dieses Büchlein ist das erste, das in Schulen von der Jugend auswendig gelernet wird, aber gleichwohl werden ihr dergleichen Regeln nicht recht erklärt, ..."

"Nalwari, ein moralisches Büchlein von Meidung der Laster und Ausübung der Tugenden, welches in der Schulen von der kleinen Kindern auswendig gelernet wird ..."

"Kodeiwehten, ein moralisches klein Büchlein, so gleichfalls die Göttin Aweiar gemacht hat und von der Jugend in Schulen auswendig gelernet wird ..."

These observations prove that even in the very beginning of the boyhood, every Tamil school boy learnt all these Tamil literature by heart.

Even before knowing the implied meanings of the verses of these ancient Tamil literature, the then school boys were expected to commit them to memory and recite the verses or a particular verse when the teacher wanted him to. How many of such Tamil books did the native boys study? This is best answered in Ziegenbalg's *Bibliotheca Malabarica* and Karl Graul's list of books⁸⁾. We come to understand that even the medical books of the native Tamil people were in the form of verses and the school boys learnt them too by heart. Graul writes⁹⁾.

"... Lehre von den giftigen Thieren und der Heilung ihres Bisses im Nonditchindu – Versmaass."

The more famous and the oft-used Tamil books were "Thirukkural", "Uлага Needhi", "Nal

Vazhi", "Needhi Venba" and "Aathichudi". These books contained in them moral ethics and easy-to-understand worldly rules and advices. Two important points to note in these are i) they prominently breathe the air of Dravidian civilization of monotheism and the Aryan polytheism is conspicuously absent in them. ii) Secondly, we find the influence of the Aryan language, the Sanscrit, totally absent in these ancient Dravidian literature. This is in sharp contrast to what one may find in the later Dravidian literature, which are influenced by both the Aryan language and polytheism. Such a systematic education, coupled with an easy but wide-ranging syllabus was what the early German missionaries found among the native school children.

About the method of their writing, we hear from the German missionaries that the native boys wrote on sand with their fingers. Benjamin Schulze observes thus¹⁰):

"All the school boys, that write upon the black wooden tables with a stone pin are Gentou Boys; but those, which sit on the ground and write with their fingers in the sand are Malabarians Boys ..."

By "Gentou", Schulze means the Telugu speaking class and by "Malabarian" is meant the Tamil speaking people. These two kinds of students, did Schulze come across in Madras city, where he laboured as missionary and one may find that in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu, Malabarians i.e. Tamil people were only found.

Another point to note, in this context, is that the early German missionaries selected very clever native boys and groomed them to become assistants to the future German missionaries. To such intelligent boys, the Germans taught German language and converted them into the Christian faith. This is best proved from what Stephen Neill observes¹¹):

"The missionaries, in addition, taught German to a number of the more intelligent among the younger converts."

The native Tamil converts, showed remarkable zeal for German learning and one of such native converts, Peter Malleiappen mastered German language to a great extent. His skill for learning German and his ability to speak German needs special study. When Ziegenbalg set sail for Europe, after nearly seven years of labour in Tamil Nadu, he took his scholar disciple with him on the expenses of the Danish Crown. The till-then-acquired Tamil knowledge, did Ziegenbalg wish to keep in touch with, while he was in Europe and that was why he took this German knowing Tamil scholar with him. Fenger's observation proves this. Fenger says¹²):

"Er hatte auch einen Knaben aus der Malabarischen Schule bei sich, um mit der Sprache in Uebung zu bleiben."

The ship which left Madras on 26th October 1714, reached Bergen in Norway on the 1st June 1715. There Ziegenbalg met his Koyal patron King Frederick IV, who granted an audience to this Tamil scholar guest and Malleiappen delivered a "well-sounding" German speech before the King and his officers in the audience hall¹³). In this context, Baureuther's original German version may be perused¹⁴):

"Am 26. Juli 1715 steht Ziegenbalg vor dem König. Friederich IV. ist aus seinem Kabinett in den grossen Audienzsaal getreten, und inmitten der versammelten Spitzen seines Reiches beginnt er das Huld und Anerkennung öffentlich zu erkennen gibt. Unter königlicher Zustimmung betritt dann der junge Tamule Peter Maleiappen den Zeltsaal. Der orientalischen Sitte gemäss vollzieht er vor dem Monarchen den Fussfall. Der König heisst ihn aufstehen. In einer kurzen deutschen Rede dankt der junge Inder namens der Tamulenchristen dem König für das von ihm ins Leben gerufene Missionswerk und bittet um weiteren Beistand."

In the history of Tamil Nadu and its people, this day, 26. 7. 1715 is highly noteworthy in as much as this incident is concerned. History does not record such a parallel, wherein any other scholar, other than a Tamil citizen of having been steeped up to such high academic prominence, 274 years ago: Peter Malleiappen should have certainly a very high command of the German language — otherwise Ziegenbalg would not have permitted him to stand before the King and deliver the speech in German. It is certainly a rare credit and privilege for the Tamil people to have had in their race such a well-read German-knowing Tamil scholar, nearly 300 years ago. Without being proficient in the difficult German grammar, one cannot talk in German language. Malleiappen should have mastered German grammar and leant many German words to gain a considerable vocabulary, thanks to his German teacher missionary Ziegenbalg.

3. Tamil short hand, 300 years ago

We have seen that the small native Tamil school boys wrote on sand with their fingers. How did the grown up boys write? They wrote on palm leaves with a metal stylus. Were they able to write as fast as today's scholars, who write on papers with ball point pens? A clear answer is available for this question. Certainly those native Tamil boys wrote much faster on their palmleaves note books. We thus come to understand that not only the standard of education was high, but also the mode of taking down notes on palm leaves was far superior than what it is at present. The eye witness report of Rev. Claudius Buchanan, Vice Provost at the College of Fort William offer us certain technical data of how the native Tamil scholars took down daily class lesson notes and what were the conditions at the European Universities at that time. Buchanan's observations can not be set aside as of having been said by a layman of less knowledge. Buchanan held a high post at the College level, where the Visitor was none other than the Governor General Marquis Wellesley himself. Buchanan travelled widely into the Indian states and his wide travels resulted in his celebrated travel accounts. Here, we will take up for investigation, his diary dated 2nd September 1806, better than which, no other record could ever bring out the correct picture of the mode of writing of the native Tamil boys on the palmleaves books. This passage runs thus ¹⁵⁾:
"... As Mr. Whitfield, on his first going to Scotland, was surprised at the rustling of the leaves of the Bible, which took place immediately on his pronouncing his text (so different from any thing he had seen in his own country) so I was surprised here at the sound of the iron pen engraving the Palmyra leaf. Many persons had their Ollas (Tamil word for palmyra leaves) in their hands, writing the sermon in Tamul short-hand. Mr. Kolhoff assured me that some of the elder Students and Catechists will not loose a word of the preacher if he speak deliberately. It is well known that natives of Tanjore and Travancore can write fluently what is spoken deliberately. They do not look much at their ollas whiles writing. The fibre of the leaf guides the pen. This, thought I, is more than some of the Students at our English Universities can do. This aptitude of the people to record the words of the preacher, renders it peculiarly necessary that the priest's lips should keep knowledge. An old rule of the Mission is, that the sermon of the morning should be read to the Schools in the evening, by the Catechist, from his Palmyra leaf."

Startling inferences come out of the investigation of this passage. Only in the southern part of India in general, and in Tamil Nadu in particular, this kind of writing on the palm leaves with metal stylus would have prevailed. The proof for this claim is, that the scholar missionary (of this diary) Buchanan started his journey from Calcutta and came down to Tanjore, crossing so many north Indian cities. When he wrote in this diary that he was surprised at the sound of iron pen while the students wrote on palmleaves, Buchanan says that prior to his visit to Tamil Nadu, he had nowhere seen this kind of writing on the palmleaves with iron pen in any north Indian city. Otherwise he needed not to have been surprised at all. For the first time, Buchanan saw here in Tanjore this kind of writing on palmleaves. This investigation also makes one to think, how then, the contemporary scholars in the north Indian schools wrote and took down their daily lessons. The next inference is more important. Buchanan observed the native Tamil students did not look into the leaves while writing but the fibre of the leaves guided the pen. What an intricate observation about such a very technical recording of notes by those native Tamil school boys, 300 years ago! We know not from when this kind of writing on palmleaves came into practice here in Tamil Nadu. These written leaves, bundled together with a strong string through coaxial equidistant perforations, formed the note book in those days. The sharp end of the metal stylus, while the students wrote, created a groove-like impression on the palmleaves. Then for reading them, one had to smear a black paste, which filled the grooves. Another inference is that when the speaker kept on speaking, the boys kept on writing them down in their palmleaves note books and this goes to prove that the students wrote as fast as the teacher spoke. Buchanan says that the native school boys wrote in Tamil short hand: Three hundred years ago, the native Tamil school boys wrote in Tamil short hand is even now a surprising fact, revealed by an European, who also says that even in European universities such kind of advanced mode of writing in short hand was not practised then. All these prove that the educational standard in Tamil Nadu, 300 years ago, was far above the standard of education in any European university. One can even today see

hundreds of palmleaves preserved in the Francken's Archives. After the advent of the Europeans, this mode of writing on palmleaves was discarded gradually and papers and lead pencils were used. Though the traditional method of reading and writing underwent changes, the diligence of the native Tamil students never decreased. The native Tamil converts started using more and more of the printed books and wrote profusely on papers. To what extent did these native Tamil students use the papers will become more clear from a private unpublished letter of missionary Rottler dated 30th March, 1818 which he wrote to Mr. R. Clarke, secretary to Madras District Committee ¹⁶⁾:

"Sir, Mr. Adamson the agent of the Government Press has informed me that the 50 Reams of Printing Paper have been used for the Tamul Translation of the Common Prayer Book now in the Press, and that agreeably to a former Estimate still 92 Reams are required to finish the whole. ..."

So, $50 + 92 = 142$ reams of paper were in need of, for the use of the mission school students. At a time when paucity of funds drove the Vepery Mission to a very critical stage, the native Tamil school children raised such a demand for papers and this goes to prove that the thirst for knowledge shown by the native Tamil students — whether it was for learning Tamil literature or the Christian Bible — kept on increasing. Their diligence never waned.

Besides Tamil language and literature, the Tamil students, 300 years ago, knew the art of music also. They possessed technical books on how music was composed and how songs were sung. One such book is the Bala Kawi tsuwari. Ziegenbalg says about the contents of this book thus¹⁷⁾:

"Bala Kawi tschuware, ein Buch von allerhand musikalischen Gesängen über die Abgötter. Solche Lieder sind nicht nur allein sehr schwer zu verstehen, sondern auch sehr schwer zu singen, also dass sie nur allein von denjenigen können gesungen werden, die bey der Poesie ex professo auch die Vocalmusik gelernet. ..."

Bala in Tamil language means small boys; 'Kawi' means poetry and 'tschuware' means palmleaves book. Thus, this one was exclusively a palmleaves book on poetry meant for small boys. Composing poetry, setting tunes for them and singing songs with certain rules and regulations are all proofs for the very advanced standard of education of the native Tamil people during the yester-centuries. Certain it is, that their educational standard had been unsurpassed both in terms of quality and quantity.

I may take this opportunity to thank the following organisations and individuals. I thank the West German Government (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) for granting me financial assistance not only for my trip to Heidelberg; but also to Halle 'ausnahmsweise' (as an exceptional case), the East German Government and especially the archives people, Prof. Dr. H. W. Gensichen, Vorsitzender, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missions-Wissenschaft and Prof. Dr. Dietmar Rothermund, without whose assistance and encouragement, the entire project and my visit to Germany would not at all have become possible.

REFERENCES

- 1) FENGER, J. F.: Geschichte der Trankebarschen Mission. Grimma 1845. p. 269.
- 2) PAMPERRIEN, K. (Tr.): History of the Tranquebar Mission worked out from the original papers by J. F. Fenger. Translated into English from the German of E. Francke. Madras 1906. p. 238.
- 3) MOHANAVELU, C. S.: A Brief Account of Francken's Foundations Archives, Halle/Saale, G.D.R. In: Indian Church History Review, Vol. XXII, No. 1. Bangalore June 1988.
- 4) LEHMANN, A.: German Tamil Studies. In: Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Univ. Halle Jg. XVII, H. 6 (1968) p. 140.
- 5) PHILIPS THOMAS, J.: Thirtyfour Conferences Between the Danish Missionaries and the Malabarian BRAMANS (or Heathen Priests) in the East Indies concerning the Truth of the Christian Religion: Together with some Letters written by the Heathens to the said Missionaries. London MDCCXIX. p. 113.
- 6) GERMANN, W.: Ziegenbalgs Bibliotheca Malabarica. In: Missionsnachrichten der Ostindischen Missionsanstalt zu Halle. Halle 1880. Jg. XXXII, H. 1 und 2, p. 63.
- 7) Ibid., p. 85.

- ⁸⁾ GRAUL, K.: Notizen, Correspondenzen und Vermichtes. Die tamulische Bibliothek der evan. luth. Missionsanstalt zu Leipzig. In: Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft (1853) H. VII, pp. 558–568.
- ⁹⁾ Ibid., p. 566.
- ¹⁰⁾ SCHULZE, B.: Madras Stadt. Halle MDCCL. 27th Dialogue.
- ¹¹⁾ NEILL, S.: A History of Christianity in India. Cambridge 1985. p. 476.
- ¹²⁾ FENGER, J. F.: op. cit., p. 84.
- ¹³⁾ BEYREUTHER, E., LANG, Tr. S. G. and GENSICHEN, H. W.: Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg. Madras 1956. p. 65.
- ¹⁴⁾ BEYREUTHER, E.: Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg Bahnbrecher der Weltmission. Stuttgart 1955. p. 83.
- ¹⁵⁾ BUCHANAN, C. REV.: Christian Researches in Asia. London 1812, pp. 70–71.
- ¹⁶⁾ Call No. IC 53: 97. Franckens Archives, Halle/S.
- ¹⁷⁾ GERMANN, W.: Ziegenbalgs Bibliotheca Malabarica, op. cit. p. 93.

Manuskript received: 12. 4. 1990

Author:

C. S. MOHANAVELU,
18, Reddy Street
Irumbuliyur
Tambaram West
Madras-600 045
Indien