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Mission und Macht im Wandel politischer Orientierungen

Europäische Missionsgesellschaften
in politischen Spannungsfeldern
in Afrika und Asien
zwischen 1800 und 1945

herausgegeben von
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GERMAN MISSIONARY ROTTLER'S INTERACTIONS WITH THE COLONIAL BRITISH POWER IN MADRAS, 1817/18

1. Introduction

1.1 The friendly India: It is historically important to note that the Indians neither waged wars on any foreign country in general, and on any western country in particular; nor did they ever go on expeditions to rule over or to plunder any foreign country. The reason is quite simple. The Indians did not at all lack courage or they were never valourless persons. It was on the other hand, based on the geographical ethnology of the ever-fertile Indian soil. Particularly the very fertile Indo-Gangetic plains provided the Indians with all commodities and amenities for their livelihood. Nutritious food grains, water, rich vegetation, milch animals etc., which are all needed for healthy life, were aplenty in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Moreover, the Indian climate was quite favourable for human habitat with an insignificant exception. Quite conspicuously, in the western countries, the soil was neither fertile, nor the climate so favourable for human livelihood as in India. It is a point to note in this context, that every society forms its lifestyle, solely based the climate and geography of the dwelling place. The customs and manners, rites and rituals, feasts and festivals and in short, all the day-to-day activities will be formulated with respect to the climate and geography of the place of habitat. This is an ethno-geographical characteristic feature of any race without an iota of exception.

There had been hundreds of foreign invasions on India from Alexander to Akbar and even later on too. The invaders were the Greeks, the Muslims, the Mughals and later on the Europeans, as well. Again, the reason is not far from one's imagination. The European and the Muslim soils were not as fertile as India – either sand for thousands of acres as in the Islamic countries, or snow and mist covered soil, as in Europe. Consequently, the Islamic invaders and the European powers liked very much to own this fertile land and to enjoy the richness of this soil and its friendly climate. Just one quotation from Clarissa Leifer will explain to any layman about this Indian fascination.

"Indien ist ein unbequemes Land. Es fordert zur Auseinandersetzung und zur Stellungnahme heraus. Man kann es lieben, man kann ihm verfallen, man kann es ablehnen, aber niemals kann man diesem Land und seinen Menschen gegenüber gleichgültig sein, niemals kann man sich seiner Faszination entziehen."¹

1 "India is an uncomfortable country. It challenges argument and the adoption of an attitude. You can love India, you can succumb to it, you can reject it, but you can never be indifferent

1.2 Germans in Tamilnadu: What brought the Germans to the southern part of India and especially to Tamilnadu as early as 1706 itself?² It all started with the Danish King Frederick IV, who had high ambition to spread the Gospel among the native Tamil people of Tranquebar in Tanjore district of Tamilnadu, which, since 1620, was ceded to the Danish Crown by the King of Tanjore, named Rangunatha Naickar. But it is a pity to note that no Dane came forward to fulfill King Frederick's religious commitment, and they criticized his religious ambition, saying that the King had enough to do for Christianity in Europe before spreading it in foreign countries.³ Germany then helped this King by sending trained young Lutheran theologians, who were paid by the Danish Crown for this religious assignment in the far off Tamilnadu. Thus, the Germans happened to come here not as German government sponsored persons; instead as employees of the Danish Crown and hence though they were all Germans by birth, they were called "the royal Danish" missionaries. This is rather a strange political identity for those Germans to be known as the 'Danish' missionaries. On the other hand, the other Europeans, viz. the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Danes, the English and French were all known as citizens of their respective home countries and their main intention was to colonize India and to rule over the Indians. "Flag follows the trade" was the political adage of the British not only in India but also in China. The opium wars⁴ waged by the British navy on China will prove this claim. The French entered foreign nations as "protector of Catholic Christianity" and then colonized.

From 1706, hundreds of Germans came to Tamilnadu as missionaries to spread the Gospel among the native Tamils. But very rarely did they involve themselves with political activities of the local kings or of the other European powers. The German political motto had been based on a specific tinge of scientific and technological interactions, which aspect again can be evidenced from the German interactions in the Shantung province of China.⁵ But every rule has an exception; so also the German way of interactions in Tamilnadu. Out of the hundreds of German missionaries, just a very few of them interacted with the ruling powers and that too to promote their religious mission. One such German missionary was Johann Peter Rottler (1749-1836) whose unbroken sixty years devoted service in Tamilnadu, for the cause of the spread of Christianity and for getting social status to the down-trodden inhabitants of the then Chennai city, are far remarkable. In this paper, an attempt is made just to bring out Rottler's interactions with the ruling British colonial power for this noble cause.

to this land and its people, never escape its fascination." Walter Leifer: *India and the Germans*, Bombay: Shakuntala Publishing House, 1969, p. 9.

2 A detailed investigation of which can be found in the first chapter of my doctoral dissertation: C. S. Mohanavelu: *German Tamilology*, Madras: Saiva Siddhantha, 1993, pp. 12 f.

3 Ferd Fenger: *Geschichte der Trankebarschen Mission*, Grimma 1845, p. 269.

4 Paul H. Clyde/Burton F. Beers: *The Far East. A history of the Western impact and the Eastern response*, 1830-1970, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 68 ff.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 295-297.

2. Subject Matter

2.1 Johann Peter Rottler: Rottler was born in Strassburg (Lower Rhine, France) in June 1749, was ordained at Copenhagen 1775, arrived at Tranquebar on 5 August 1776, where he laboured till 1803 (27 years), after the death of missionary Gericke, took over the Madras Mission in Vepery, where he died after 60 years labour in Tamil Nadu at the ripe age of 87 years on 24 January 1836. His magnum opus, *A Dictionary of the Tamil and English Languages* was published in four parts. The first two parts were published during his lifetime in 1834 itself, by the Vepery Mission Press; the third part was revised by Rev. Taylor and T. Venkatachala Moodely and published in 1839 and the fourth part was published in 1841 posthumously.

2.2 The Madras District Committee: The Madras District Committee (MDC) of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge had been viewed in this context as the ecclesiastical section of the British colonial secretariat at Fort. St. George. So, all the interactions of missionary Rottler are to be investigated as his interactions with the British Colonial power via this MDC. So much so for the reason that the colonial British power at Madras patronized the cause of the spread of the Christian faith through this MDC. The Secretary of this MDC named Richard Clarke was the liaison officer between the Christian mission and the ruling British power in Madras during this period.

2.3 Early attempts: Every school of German missionaries conducted themselves in their own way to promote Protestant Christianity. While some of them interacted with the native people to educate them about the racial and social equalities, the other set organized certain other modes of interactions to promote their mission. Rottler perhaps found the most effective way to curb the social injustice meted out to the poor people. He appealed to the ruling colonial British power in the then Madras Presidency to achieve his goal. Also, the MDC for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) had good relations with the British colonial Government in Madras. This was properly and fully made use of by Rottler to promote his mission. As soon as he took over the Madras Mission in 1803, he left no stone unturned to achieve this effect.

2.4 A fit person: At a time when the Vepery mission languished due to the death of German missionary Paezold, without an efficient protector of the converts, the MDC was in a dire need of an efficient missionary and the choice fell rightly on Rottler. About his able leadership, the following lines from the letter dated 4 December 1817 of Richard Clarke to Rottler may here be investigated

"The Madras District Committee of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge have lately received a letter from Rev. C. Pohle and the Rev. J. Kohlhoff, the only surviving Missionaries of the Parent Society in this part of India, stating the Death of Rev. Mr. Paezold, in consequence of which the Mission is deprived of a *fit person* [...] they are convinced that they

cannot better consult the spiritual Interest of the Vepery congregation than by entrusting them to your Care and Superintendence."⁶

No other testimony will be needed to vouch for the fitness and dedication of Rottler not only to promote Christianity; but also to safeguard the legitimate interests of the down-trodden native people.

2.5 Old age: Commitment and sincerity to the core are what one can infer from the following passage of Rottler's letter dated 12 December 1817 which runs thus:

"Sir, I have been honoured with your letter of 4th instant and feel very grateful for the good opinion expressed in it of my private & clerical characters. [...] With respect to the Superintendence and care of the Mission Church at Vepery, I am to say that my age is great & my avocations manifold, still I am willing to do any thing that I can for this Mission [...] I have the charge of a Tamil Congregation assembling at present, by Permission in the Black Town Chapel for which I receive from Govt. 25 Pags. per month and I have also to officiate at Pulicat once a gurantee under an appointment of Govt. at a salary of 100 Pags. Per annum."⁷

Rottler would not like to cite his old age as an excuse to shirk such high responsibility besides a couple of such other missionary duties. Herein lies his deep sense of duty and concern to the cause of the spread of Christianity. The term 'Govt.' refers to the ruling colonial British power. Yet another inference is that the British rulers were the paymasters of German missionaries too.

2.6 Government Order: The next source material for our perusal now, is the letter of the Secretary to the British government named D. Hill. In succinct and lucid words, the Public department at Fort. St. George issued an order to the MDC which runs thus:

"I am directed to acknowledge the receipt of your Secretary's Letter, with the papers which accompanied it, and to state that the Right honourable the Governor in Council agrees that the allowances of Twenty five Pagodas per mensem shall be continued to Dr. Rottler provided it be found that the native Christians on whose account he officiated in Black Town Chapel, are able to attend his Ministry in the Missionary Church at Vepery."⁸

Two inferences come forth from this letter. First and foremost, the colonial British Government at Fort St. George kept in their control all aspects of personnel and administrative set up even with regard to ecclesiastical appointments and other allied religious governance. When this particular German missionary Rottler came here under the banner of "the Royal Danish missionary" and when his service conditions and pay matters were controlled by the British power, can it be taken as a political challenge to the Danish Crown, is very much a debatable topic. The British Governors at Fort St. George, during this period were Mr. Hugh Elliot (1814-1820), Major General Sir Thomas Munro (1820-1827), Mr. Henry Sullivan

6 Clarke to Rottler, 1.12.1817, in: Franckens Foundations Archives, Halle/Saale, IC52:2.

7 Rottler to Richard Clarke, in: *ibid.*, IC52:3.

8 D. Hill to the Madras District Committee, Public Department, 21.1.1818, in: *ibid.*, 18.94.

Graeme (1827), Mr. S. R. Lushington (1827-1832) and Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Adam (1832-1837).⁹

The second inference is that the British Government did not seem to compromise on religious matters. That is, the Government would pay Rottler 25 Pagodas if and only if he can do additional duty of taking care of native Christians in the Black Town besides his new work at Vepery. This tells us that the British rulers were keen in promoting Christianity besides spreading and protecting their political hegemony in the Madras Presidency. Can this be taken as a pretext by the ruling British colonial power, to thrust Christianity on the natives, is yet another aspect for healthy debate among Church historians.

2.7 Religious competition: Next, the letter of Rottler dated 10 February, 1818 to the MDC may be taken up for investigation. A few lines of it are as follows:

"I have the Honour to acknowledge the Receipt of your Letter of the 31st Ultro. enclosing a copy of the Secy Hill's Letter to the Madras District Committee dated the 21st Ultro. in which you request me to inform me whether the transfer of Tamil Congregation from the Black Town Chapel to the Vepery Church has been effected. The Congregation in question originally consisted about exclusively of inhabitants of Royapooram who were received into the Protestant Church *as converts from the Roman Catholic Religion*. They were entered as members of my Congregation on the 11th of April 1813. They were in number forty four Persons; some of them have since died, but the greater part, I am sorry to say, *have returned to the Roman Catholic Religion*-so that the present number is only nineteen. On receipt of your Letter, I called upon the heads of the Families now members of the protestant Congregation to declare them my Wishes & intentions as to attendance on my Ministry at the Vepery Church. These persons by a writing under their Signature certified to me their determination to attend the Service in the Vepery Church, to receive in it the holy Sacrament, and to bring their children to Baptism, and this, I have the pleasure to add, they have already begun to do."¹⁰

A sort of religious competition, between the German Lutherans and the Roman Catholics surfaces now when we peruse these lines of Rottler. A rather uneasy inference is that the ruling colonial British Government at Madras, must have patronized the Protestant faith much more than the Catholic Christianity and when this German, as missionary of the SPCK carried on his religious conversion, then the Government came to his help more readily. Yet another inference is that Rottler had been so very meticulously careful in his assignment, that he even went to the extent of getting written consent from the natives to the effect that they and their children would thenceforth convert back to the Protestant faith.

2.8 Government Press: Rottler's efforts to promote his mission did not stop with his direct correspondence with the Government for his emoluments alone; instead, there are instances to show his dedication to elevate the educational stan-

9 Mrs. Frank Penny: Fort St. George Madras, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Lim., 1900, p. xvi.

10 Rottler to MDC, 10.2.1818, in: Franckens Archives, IC: 18.95.

dard of the native converts also. His letter dated 30 March 1818 may now be taken up for investigation:

"Mr. Adamson, the Agent of the Government Press has informed me that the 50 Reams of printing paper have been issued 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. I therefore beg you will have the Goodness to submit to the Madras District Committee at their general meeting my request for the supply of the above mentioned Quantity of Printing Paper from the stores of the Vepery Mission." ¹¹

A careful perusal of this letter gives us the inference that Rottler acted as a liaison person between two Government departments viz. the printing department of which the said Mr. Adamson was the agent and the ecclesiastical department of which Mr. Richard Clarke was the Secretary. When the Govt. press needed some quantity of paper, he did not pester time and again the government agency; but instead, liked to make use of the excess paper stationery in the Vepery mission and for this, he liked to get the consent of the members of the Vepery mission through the MDC Secretary. All these go to prove my earlier claim that Rottler left no stone unturned to promote his mission of spreading the Protestant Christianity among the native Tamils in the then Chennai city.

2.9 A unique dedication: In this section, I wish to bring out a rather unique and to some extent, a strange kind of dedication, shown by Rottler in his magnum opus *A Dictionary of the Tamil and English Languages*. The dedication note runs thus:

"To his Excellency the Right Honourable Lord William Cavendish Bentick, Governor General and Commander in Chief in India.

My Lord,

The grateful sense of your Lordship's condescending friendship and kindness for many years, has emboldened me to dedicate this Work to you, which, partly by the difficulty attending the undertaking, and partly by the intervention of other duties, has been retarded in its publication. The first Part of it has now issued from the press, and the three remaining parts will appear as soon as possible.

On this occasion I most thankfully acknowledge the valuable assistance afforded me by the Madras Government through their College in writing the work." ¹²

When viewed from an ecumenical, broad-based and an universal angle, this is of course the most polite form of a Christian expressing his gratitude, reciprocating the patronage rendered to him by none other than the supreme British colonial power head in India at that time. One inference is that Lord William Cavendish Bentick himself had been personally helping this German missionary in this lexical work for a few years and it is no wonder that such a high-sounding dedication note is very much due to him. But when this note is viewed from the political an-

11 Rottler to Richard Clarke, 30.3.1818, in: *ibid.*, IC: 53:97.

12 Dedication, in: Johann Peter Rottler: *A Dictionary of the Tamil and English Languages*, Madras: 1834, title page.

gle, tinged with administrative protocols, one looks at this high-sounding and embellishing dedication note with raised eyebrows. The reason is Rottler was first of all a German by birth and secondly was paid by the Danish Crown for his religious works in Tamilnadu and under such preliminary conditions, why should at all he set aside the Danish King and chose to dedicate this work to a British colonialist? Above all Rottler's very presence in India was caused by the benevolence of the Danish Crown and this implies that he was the servant of the Danish King first and foremost!

3. CONCLUSION

Though not a politician, Rottler commanded the respect and patronage of the colonial British power in Madras for nearly forty years. Though he was a German, the British Government chose to honour his service in a fitting manner. In Vepery near Madras Fort St. George, a street had been named after Rottler. The Rottler street, today, is a fitting monument to cherish our memories and reminds us of the dedicated service of this German for an unbroken sixty years in Tamilnadu. It is a point to note in this context, that Rottler did not even enjoy the concession of visiting his home country Germany on furlough; but utilized even that small duration for the uplift of the down-trodden people in Chennai. It is therefore painful to note that the sustained labours and contributions of this missionary are conspicuously left out in the book titled *German Indologists* authored by Valentina Stache Rosen and published by Max Mueller Bhavan twice. It is more painful to note that besides this German missionary, there were still more a few Germans like Johann Ernst Gruendler, Benjamin Schultze and Karl Rhenius, to name a few at random, whose contributions to different branches of Tamil studies, like for example Tamil language and literature, culture, medicine are far significant and whose profiles are conspicuously left out in this book of Rosen. It was all perhaps due to the reason, as rightly pointed out by Arno Lehmann, that to the present day Germans, Indian literature mean only Sanscrit literature! It is high time that this kind of *German neglect* for Tamil studies had changed, especially when Tamil studies by German scholars get prominent momentum now. German contributions to Tamil studies should get its due worth.

With this aspect as the general backdrop of this paper, I fervently appeal to all those concerned with mission history, to cast their attention as to how effectively this and other similar lapses can be undone. I may here be permitted to state a research proposal. Establishing a full-fledged "Tamilo-German Research Institute", will very much enable us not only to undo these lapses; but also to promote further researches in this area, having a vast research potential, which remains as yet not fully explored. The year 2006 will mark the tercentenary of the arrival of the first ever German Lutheran missionary named Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg in India or even in the whole of Asia! Ziegenbalg bequeathed a rich legacy as early as 1706, which had been nurtured and developed further by hundreds of Germans over the past 300 years. This, I humbly feel, will be the fitting tribute to the im-

mense pains taken by the pioneer German missionary Ziegenbalg, nearly 300 years ago. There cannot be an iota of exaggeration, if it is said, that the German Tamil Studies will outshine and overshadow the German contributions and interaction in other Indian language areas. If any Church history organization takes steps to celebrate this type of tercentenary occasion, then my aim of this paper will just be fulfilled.