

# A SURVEY OF TAMIL CHRISTIAN WRITINGS IN EUROPEAN LIBRARIES

By J. GNANASEELAN MUTHURAJ

What are the primary sources for the early history of the Tranquebar mission? One depends on Danish, German and English sources, in that order of priority, because the mission was initiated by the King of Denmark, executed by German missionaries and financially supported by the English. The history of Christianity in India, however, is not equivalent to the history of mission boards and missionaries, though these are necessary components of a true understanding of the history of the Church. To be fair, equal importance should be given to the Tamil sources which have been underestimated by historians. The first step must be to collect them, for there is evidence that they were neglected from the very beginning of the mission in Tamilnadu.

I have had the privilege of working on such a programme for the past two years as a compiler of the Tamil section of the projected bibliography of original Christian writings in India, a project of the Senate of Serampore. References to 3000 writings have been collected. I recently undertook to tour several European countries in order to compile a bibliography of Tamil Christian writings preserved in important libraries and archives. My visits to 50 libraries have produced another 2000 references to Tamil items, both published and unpublished. A search for old writings in the Christian centres of Tamilnadu resulted in the discovery of some 300 unknown and rare Tamil Christian writings. In this article I present a survey of the Tamil material in Europe, emphasising the rarer items relating to the history of the Church and to Tamil literature. The complete bibliography will be published as a book.

*England.* In London Tamil material is preserved mainly in the British Library, the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Methodist Mission Archives and the India Office Library and Records. The catalogue of Tamil books in the British Library is in three volumes.<sup>1</sup> There are references to nearly 1000 printed Tamil Christian books dating from the beginning of the 18th century to the present. There are also 25 (Christian) Tamil MSS which include a Tamil grammar in Portuguese, a Tamil-French dictionary, Beschi's grammar, MSS relating to the early work of the Tranquebar mission, the Gospel of St Matthew in Tamil and Portuguese, and a few works of Vedanayaga Sastriar, a Tamil Christian poet, which are not to be found in India. There are paper MSS containing bibliographical notes on missionaries and scholars such as R. Caldwell, Robert Ome (1728–1801), T. Burrow, including one of his letters, W. H. Drew, Richard Hall Kerr and members of the Danish mission in Tranquebar. At the India Office Library and Records

there are four volumes of catalogues of Tamil books, but there is no subject-index. There are nearly 100 books printed between 1900 and 1950. Some of those relating to the history of Christianity in India are not found even in the British Library. The Malabaric dictionary of Ziegenbalg, C. T. Walther's book on the history of the Church (1799), 19th century catechisms, and Roman Catholic prayer-books are the few rarities. I found that most of the MSS from the Methodist Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society had been transferred to the School of Oriental and African Studies. There are very few MSS at the India Office Library, the most interesting being copies of *Thembavani*, the Tamil Christian classic by the Italian Jesuit Beschi.

In the Bodleian Library are the books of the Anglican missionaries of the mid-19th century, Rhenius, G. U. Pope, P. R. Hunt, etc., and in particular their translations from the Bible. In addition to 50 printed books there are MSS of which G. U. Pope compiled a hand-list. Here I saw an 18th century MS. which employed terminology different from that of the Ziegenbalg tradition. I began a search for MSS belonging to what appeared to be a school of translators independent of Ziegenbalg. I found a MS. constituting a Tamil version of Genesis 19:14–24:33 and of 9:5–19:13. Of this Pope writes: "The handwriting resembles that in the manuscript of the 17th century. It is probably the oldest specimen of an attempt at translating portions of the Bible". There are as many as 25 Christian MSS in Tamil in the Bodleian. In the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, there is a short hand-list of Tamil MSS which enumerates ten Christian MSS, most of which are found in other libraries in England. Cambridge University Library does not possess an adequate catalogue of Tamil books; it has only a partial list of Tamil and Malayalam MSS. I examined and attempted to describe each MS. I saw a palm-leaf MS. of the epic *Mahabharatham*, written in 1562, Portuguese books printed in Tranquebar by C. T. Walther, and eleven copper plates recording Christian grants to Jews of the 12th and 13th centuries, which have Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. Official permission for microfilming is easily obtained in Britain, and so I was able to microfilm a few items for the archives of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary.

*Denmark.* King Frederick IV of Denmark was responsible for sending the first Protestant missionaries to India at the beginning of the 18th century. They landed at Tranquebar in 1706. I went to Copenhagen with keen expectations of seeing early printed works from Tranquebar, because the King had asked the early missionaries to send copies of their publications to Denmark. Moreover, Ziegenbalg brought a few books to Copenhagen when he visited Denmark. However, contrary to what I had hoped, I could find no printed books either in the Royal Library or in the State Archives. There is a typewritten copy of a draft description by A. Krishnamurthy entitled

“Tamil Collections in Denmark”, dated 1959. Although this is a detailed catalogue of Tamil MSS, it is often wrong in describing the Christian items. For example, a N.T. MS. is described as follows: “cod. Tamul. S–L. It contains about 18 separate letters of missionary work addressed to several centres in Europe. Many of these letters are written by Fr Paul to Rome, Corinthia and other cities. Not less than 250 years old. Christian Missionaries from Tamil area”. Among the 25 Christian MSS in the Royal Library the rarities are C. T. Walther’s *Phraseologia Tamulo–Arabica*, 1727, *French–Tamil Dictionary*, 1734, 429 pp. and 6864 entries, *Doctrina temporum indica* (belonging to C. T. Walther?). There are also three MSS of Rasmus Rask, an orientalist of the 19th century, comprising: (i) a MS. of one sheet which describes six books in Tamil; (ii) a comparative vocabulary of 410 words in Latin, Russian, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Sinhala; (iii) notes on certain Tamil works, including fragmentary notes on certain dictionaries, Tamil poets and their works, books on Christianity, etc. Rask refers to books printed in the early 19th century, especially the publications of the C.M.S., references to some of which are not found elsewhere. He also mentions a few books from Sri Lanka.

Many of the MSS were acquired as a result of Fuglsang’s collecting Tamil MSS, an enterprise he began in 1797 at the instigation of the Rev. Dr Moldenhawer, the first Librarian of the Royal Library. He requested Fuglsang to obtain for the library all valuable books printed and published in India, and at the same time to give him and other scholars an account of the progress of literature in the East Indies. There is also a letter from W. Hunter of Calcutta to Fuglsang, dated 19 March 1798, stating that he would endeavour to procure for him a catalogue of oriental MSS.

Details of the MSS in the Danish State Archives are given in *Sources of the history of North Africa, Asia and Oceania in Denmark*, compiled by C. Rise Hansen, 1980. This refers to thousands of letters in Danish and German relating to political, economic and religious conditions in Tamilnadu during the Danish colonial period. Many letters are about trade with the Danish colony and the Danish Government. There is a letter in Tamil on a sheet of gold from Rangunado, King of Tanjore, to the Danish envoys Ove Giedde and Roland Grappe permitting them to settle in Tranquebar. It is dated 1620. There is a MS. recording impressions of a stay in the East Indies, beginning at Tranquebar on 16 March 1671, with some Portuguese and Malabar word lists (95 pp.). There are also MSS of *Biblioteca tamulica*, a work of unknown authorship which gives references to many early 18th century MSS, and C. T. Walther’s *Synonyma ebraeo-tamulica ex inductione plurum exemplorum congesta*, compiled in 1740. In the Royal Library is a bibliography in German and Danish giving references to early printed books from Tranquebar in Tamil, Telugu and Portuguese.

The National Museum in Copenhagen has a few books relating to Hindu superstitions. The library of the Danish Missionary Society has no Tamil Christian books, but the Society helped me to meet some of the missionaries who had worked in Tamilnadu and to make enquiries about their own Tamil collections.

*Netherlands.* There are a few Hindu MSS at the Indology Department in Leiden where Tamil is taught. At the Hendrik Kraemer Institute in Leiden are a few printed books of the mid-18th century from Sri Lanka, such as the Bible translations of de Melho, the catechism of S. A. Bronveld, 1754, and the “sixteen sermons” compiled by Philippus de Vriest, 1747. The material at the University Library in Leiden could not be seen as the archives were being transferred. Nothing significant was found at the Department of Oriental Languages or the University Library in Utrecht.

*France.* At the École des Langues Orientales Vivantes in Paris I found many MSS of dictionaries compiled by the missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of the publications of the Catholic Mission Press at Pondicherry are there. A booklet, *La Bibliothèque tamoule de M. Oriol de Pondicherry*, 1866, gives references to the earliest books printed there. A few of the dictionaries in the library may be mentioned: *Dictionary Latin–French–Tamil*, Pondicherry, 1846; Sap, M. A., *French–Tamil Vocabulary*, Pondicherry, 1886; Mousset, L. P., *Tamil–French Dictionary*, Pondicherry, 1855–62; L. S. Dupuis, *Grammar French–Tamil*, Pondicherry, 1863; Vinson, J., *Le Verbe dans les langues dravidiennes, tamoule, canara, telineue, malayala, tulu*, etc., Paris 1878.

A prolonged stay in Paris would be needed in order to study and analyse these dictionaries, something which has not been undertaken so far. At the Société des missions étrangères in Paris the librarian declined to show me the Tamil books. Cobaton’s *Catalogue sommaire des manuscrits indiens de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris, 1912, gives details of the Tamil MSS there. It was exciting for me to see about 500 MSS of which 200 are Christian. This bibliography has been used as a reliable source for the study of Tamil writing. Examination disclosed that Cobaton had given inaccurate descriptions of many MSS. There are also serious mistakes in the dates assigned to MSS. Ariel’s bibliography of Tamil, Vol. 2, gives 30 titles, most of which are not available in European libraries. It includes a few unknown books attacking Christianity. In Vol. I Ariel gives particulars of the printing presses in the middle of the 18th century and he includes copies of some of the early lists of publications. On the first page is a letter from the Asiatic Society of Bengal, dated 1 February 1853, which tells of the efforts of the Society to compile a catalogue of books published in the principal vernacular languages of India; it appeals to the co-operation of institutions and individuals. A Mr Long was appointed to work on this project. Two books, *Catalogue des manuscrits*

*tamouls et telingas*, which is a hand-list by Julien Vinso and Léon Feer, and *Table de catalogue des manuscrits tamouls et telingas* by Feer, give details which supplement those in Cobaton with the Tamil titles of the MSS, but there are errors in these also.

The most important of the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale are such historical MSS as the history of Esthok, 1740, the history of St Pelendran, 1780, the history of Arulananda Swamy, 1820, the history of Beschi by Muthisami Pillai, 1830, and the history of Vaman. The *Kalambaham* and *Ammanai* and dramatic literature are also well represented. Most important of all is the collection of palm-leaf MSS of Bible translations into Tamil dating from 1666. According to Cobaton the titles of the MSS are:

1. Dialogues sur le Nouveau Testament, 1750, 313 olais. However the MS. has the date 1667.

2. Dialogue sur le Genesis, Exodus, Lévitique, les Nombres et le Deuteronomie, 1743, 324 olais. The MS. is dated 1667.

3. Dialogues sur Josué, Ruth, le premier et le second des Rois, 1739. The MS. is dated 1666. The catalogue gives the Tamil year 4840 but this is not to be found in the MS.

4. Dialogues on the rest of the O.T. and the intertestamental literature. These dialogues, called *challapams* in Tamil, are translations of the Bible into Tamil, but they are recast in the form of questions and answers. For example, Matthew 5:23, 24, is rearranged as follows: *Q*. What has Our Lord taught us we must do when one offers his gift at the altar and there remembers that his brother has something against him?

*A*. Our Lord said: Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift.

Each segment or verse of the N.T. is remoulded in this form while the content is retained. It is thus not a literal translation like Ziegenbalg's but is adapted to make it easier for people to understand. When one compares the Sermon on the Mount in *challapam* with Ziegenbalg's translation one finds that the Tamil construction is the same, but that a few terms have been replaced by synonyms. That Ziegenbalg himself used these translations when making his own is attested by his correspondence.

The question arises, then, whether a literal version was made first and then rearranged and simplified, or whether the literal version was made later in the interests of fidelity to the original text, whether French, Hebrew or Greek. With this problem in mind I found palm-leaves with direct translations of most of the parts of the Gospels assigned to be read on Sundays and Feast Days throughout the year. Lack of time prevented me from compiling a complete list of the translated portions of the Gospels. Unfortunately the palm-leaf literal translations are not dated. The *challapams*, however, are dated 1666 and 1667, i.e. 47 years before the first printed N.T. of Ziegenbalg.

I had still not seen a complete translation of a Gospel and had just an hour at my disposal before closing time at the Bibliothèque Nationale on the day before I was to leave for Halle, when I found a MS. of the whole Gospel of St John, with a short introduction to each chapter and titles assigned to the principal divisions. Chapter and verse numberings are also given. This was probably translated from French as French words and phrases are written under the most common Tamil verbs and important theological terms. The translation is little better than those on the palm-leaves. My contention is thus that Bible translation in Tamil does not begin with Ziegenbalg in 1714 but in 1666, so that by the time of the Protestant mission there was already a fully developed tradition of Bible translation in Tamil, of which the Protestant missionaries were able to make use. This enabled them to publish the Tamil N.T. in a mere six years. Ziegenbalg was thus the first to publish the Tamil Bible, not the first translator, and the claim for the originality of his translation is unwarranted.

*Challapams* and literal translations must have co-existed and it may be that one had given rise to the other. A search should be made for other translations of portions of the Scriptures. There are records relevant to the history of the Tamil Bible from the German tradition (e.g. Ziegenbalg), from the Dutch (e.g. Philip Baldeus from Sri Lanka) and from the English (e.g. Rhenius and others), but except for the above-mentioned MSS which I have identified there are no records of a French tradition.

A little text on palm-leaf makes it clear that a group had worked on the translation of the O.T. into *challapam*, for it states: "We have written this as we were taught by the Bishop Francis from the city of Heliopolis in the year 1667 A.D.". "Francis" was François Pallu, the founder of the Paris Société des missions étrangères. In 1658 he was appointed titular Bishop of Heliopolis and Vicar Apostolic of Tongking, Laos and South West China. He instituted a reform in the missions by founding a society of missionary priests who had not taken vows. Some French clergy and laity were eager to participate in missionary work which had hitherto been reserved for those belonging to orders, and also to gain control of missions which had till then been dominated by the Spanish and Portuguese governments through their claim of *padroado*. Some missionaries, notably Alexandre de Rhodes S. J., wanted to recruit native clergy in the Far East. These considerations resulted in the formation of the Société des missions étrangères in 1660 and of the Paris mission seminary which was established in 1663 and recognised by the Holy See in 1664. 100 missionaries, including many laymen, embarked for Asia between 1660 and 1770. The society founded a general seminary in Siam (1665), which was subsequently transferred to Penang, and another in Cochin China (1665). I have not seen any evidence for the existence of such a seminary or place of study in India. Pallu gave effective leadership in



establishing native churches. Throughout his life he travelled between the East and Rome to further missionary work and to obtain the help of the Holy See. It is conceivable that on his way to China he stayed in India to establish an institution for teaching in the vernaculars and that the students, especially in Tamilnadu, wrote works in Tamil including *challapams* and Bible translations. This suggestion must be considered purely conjectural until evidence is found to support it.

The story of the acquisition of the MSS at the Bibliothèque Nationale is interesting. A few *challapams* and in particular the St John's Gospel MS. came to the library in 1738 from Constantinople, while some came from the library of the Arsenal in Paris. How the Tamil MSS came to be in Constantinople is a mystery. Is it possible that Pallu collected some of the MSS and took them to Heliopolis, of which he was Bishop, and that from there they reached Constantinople? If so, we might predicate the existence of some Tamil material in Heliopolis or Constantinople. It would be worth while to visit both places and to make a further visit to Paris to study and analyse the rest of the 150 MSS which, I am sure, would throw new light on the history of Christianity in India.

*Germany.* The early missionary centres in Germany are now in the German Democratic Republic. It might well be a waste of time to search for Tamil Christian material in the libraries of the German Federal Republic, though not necessarily in personal collections. Prof. Gensichen at Heidelberg possesses a copy of the first Tamil tract against idolatry, printed at Tranquebar in 1713. I set out optimistically for Erlangen to see whether there were Tamil MSS in the University Library. There are a number, but other copies of them are found elsewhere in Europe. An old Hindu MS. was exhibited at the Leipzig Missionshaus in Erlangen.

I obtained a visa for East Germany with the help of a kind invitation from the Catholic churches there. I visited the Fränkische Stiftungsarchiv in Halle, where the archivist, Herr Störz, gave me much assistance and enabled me to complete my work in a short time. This archive is connected with the University of Halle, where Ziegenbalg studied and with which he maintained contact while he was a missionary in India. Tamil types were cut in Halle and sent to India for printing Tamil books. There are about 250 printed books, most of which are early publications from Tranquebar. I was happy to see an unknown poetical work on the entire contents of the Bible, printed at Jaffna in Sri Lanka in 1866. The author was the Rev. C. C. MacArthur. I saw only the first part, from Genesis to Exodus 20, written in the classical literary style. The other five parts are still to be discovered. I have not space to describe all the Tamil writings in Halle; it is one of the places where collections of the rarest Tamil books are preserved with great care.

There is a good collection of palm-leaf MSS, mostly containing Bible

translations by the Protestant missionaries, but there were a few unidentified MSS. There are MSS of various sermons probably preached by the early missionaries at the Jerusalem Church in Tranquebar at the beginning of the 18th century. There is a MS. of 48 prayers used at the same church. The most significant MS. is entitled “Questions” and comprises 200 questions about various Christian truths addressed to the early Protestant missionaries; we do not know whether the questions were answered. We read in the Halle reports that one Ganapathy *Vathiar* (teacher) was among the first converts from Hinduism through Ziegenbalg and other missionaries. The MS. is dated 1709.

There is a good collection of letters and diaries of the 18th century Christians. There are diaries of the catechist Sawarirayan, who worked in Palmacottah in the last quarter of the century, for the years 1789–9, 1793, 1795, 1796–97, and 1801–09. There are also diaries of a few catechists such as Savarimuthu Pillai, Sathianathan, Devasahayam, and Rajappan, all from the last quarter of the 18th century. This collection is one of the earliest indigenous sources for the history of the Church in India. The clan of Sawarirayan and Sawarimuthu Pillai has a long tradition of diary writing from the beginning of the 18th century until now when it is continued by Dr Raja Sawarirayan who is of the same lineage. My researches led me to the discovery of a printed diary in three volumes belonging to another catechist, Sawarimuthu, also a member of the clan, covering the years 1834–74.

At the Leipzig mission library there are as many as 200 Tamil books. They are well indexed and catalogued. The collection of printed books supplements that at Halle. I was able to see many printed books from the Tranquebar publishing house dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. The library has a good collection of printed Tamil Bibles from 1727 to 1894. There is also an extensive collection of liturgies, hymns and song-books. The early Lutheran journal in Tamil, *Arunodhayam*, is well represented. There are many more commentaries and books on the history of the Church. There is a handwritten letter signed by the Tranquebar missionary Grundler, thanking the person from whom he had learnt Telugu.

*Italy.* Work in Rome began with a visit to the library of the Pontificia Università Urbaniana, where I consulted the *Bibliotheca missionum* of PP. Robert Streit and Johannes Dindinger in six volumes. This gives references to mission literature in India, Indochina, the Philippines and Japan, including Tamil works about which no other information is available. It is not known whether some MSS and books mentioned exist or not, except in a few instances where the availability of copies is recorded. It is not clear in what precise sense the words “Malabar”, “Malabarica” and “Tamul” are used. It seems that in many instances “Malabar” refers to Malayalam rather than Tamil, in contrast to other early historical sources in which the “Malabar”



language means Tamil. The transliteration of the titles is sometimes misleading, and it is then hard to detect whether a particular title has been translated from Tamil or from Malayalam. There are references to 17th century Tamil writings of the missionaries which are now thought to have been lost, for example, nine works in Tamil by the Portuguese missionary, P. Manoel Martins (1567–1656). *Arte Tamul* by Baltasar da Costa (1627–1673) and *Vocabularium tamulicum Jafanapatham* by Ignacio Bruno (1627–1659) are unknown. There are references to a few missionaries who produced Tamil dictionaries and grammars in the 18th century which are so far unknown. Two other libraries in Rome were visited but nothing of significance was discovered.

The library of the Pontificia Università Urbaniana, which is also the library of the De Propaganda Fide, has a very good collection of Tamil books printed at the Catholic Mission press, Pondicherry. There are about 250. It is hard to find such collections in one place. In the Jesuit archives is a palm-leaf MS. on the catechism which gives the name of the writer and the Tamil year. In the Jesuit library there are a few modern Tamil writings. In the De Propagande Fide archives there is much correspondence of the Catholic missionaries who worked in India from the 16th century. There are nearly 100 files of such letters in Latin, Spanish, Portuguese and English. I searched for Tamil letters in some of the files. I found only a Tamil tract *Epistola pastoralis* by R. R. D. Clement Bonnard, printed at Pondicherry in 1838. There is a palm-leaf MS. containing sermons relating to St Francis Xavier and his history. This MS. was copied from another MS. in 1933.

The Vatican Library has two catalogues of Indian MSS. However, the descriptions in the catalogue need to be checked because there are mistakes even in the identification of the languages of the MSS. In 1954 Fr Xavier Thaninayagam identified a few MSS in this library. I was able to identify only a very few more unidentified MSS.

*Spain.* I was the first person to visit Madrid to study Tamil writings. The Biblioteca Nacional has two MSS, one of which was written in 1612 and is the earliest I have so far seen. It is a translation of the book by Bellarmino, the title of which is not ascertainable from the MS., by priests working at St Mary's Church in Madurai. It contains expositions of the Creed and the Ten Commandments, and detailed explanations of the Catholic sacraments. There is also an exposition of Biblical doctrine with a study of Greek words. This shows that the Catholic missionaries attached importance to the study and exposition of the Bible, and that it was not neglected as is often thought by modern historians. The whole work is arranged as questions and answers, a literary genre much used in the 17th century as is seen in the *challapam* MSS at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. According to the MS. this arrangement is intended to make it easier to understand the content. Another MS.,

probably of the late 17th century, called “Milk of Wisdom”, is a catechism for children containing 49 questions about Christian doctrine.

*Portugal.* The Biblioteca Nacional in Lisbon possesses the first Tamil grammar, which was written by Henriques in the 17th century.<sup>2</sup> In the Arquivo Historico Ultramarino in Lisbon are seven MSS mostly ascribed to P. Jacome Gonçalves, who worked in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the 18th century. They are: (1) a dictionary in Portuguese, Tamil and Sinhalese; (2) a translation and paraphrase of the Gospel portions to be read on every Sunday of the year 1730; (3) a treatise on the teaching of the Bible; (4) two copies of Gospel portions with expositions; (5) sermons on the Passion of Christ; (6) lives of many saints; (7) “The Feelings of Wisdom”; all these MSS were written between 1730 and 1740.

This survey is by no means complete. My search was conducted in 50 libraries, but there are as many as 30 more in Europe in which Tamil material can be found. In most of the libraries the material is not properly catalogued and sometimes “Tamul” is catalogued under “flowers”. Tamil materials still lie uncatalogued in many libraries and there is much in the custody of retired missionaries and their friends.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pope, G. U., and Barnett, L. D., *A Catalogue of the Tamil books in the Library of the British Museum*, London, 1909; Barnett, L. D., *A Supplementary Catalogue of the Tamil books in the Library of the British Museum*, London, 1957; Gaur, Albertine, *Second Supplementary Catalogue of Tamil books in the British Library*, London, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Xavier Thaninayagam, “Tamil Manuscripts in European Libraries”, *Tamil Culture*, vol. III, Oct. 1954, pp. 210–288.