

# **TAMIL SOCIETY AS REFLECTED THROUGH GERMAN MIND AND THINKING: TRANQUEBAR – A CASE STUDY**

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## **Introduction**

The social history of the Tamils during a crucial period of a new cultural encounter due to the advent of Europeans thorough Coromandel Coast is complex due to the different interpretations made on the Indian and European source materials. This was a period when a stream of new values and practices till then unknown, were introducing into Tamil traditions and culture which were at hesitation to accept and assimilate them. Biographies written during this period are of immense help to observe the various events and give a pen portrayal of very many aspects of Tamil society.

Anathatankam Pillai's private diary, in particular, is of great use to write the history of Tamil Nadu for the period between 1736 and 1761. Gifted with a thorough knowledge of Tamil and French languages, he served as a mediator between the French and the Tamils at Pondicherry and recorded the main events that took place during his time in his personal diary which he maintained consistency from 1736 till his death in 1761. He did not have the slightest inclination to publish it and wanted his posterity to cherish it as his treasure.<sup>1</sup>

The traveler's accounts also played a vital role in the study of Tamil society. Dubois', "Hindus Manners, Customs and ceremonies" and Heyne's, "Tracts on India" are valuable in this regard. Nearly 30 years of stay and sojourn in the Tamil country gave him a rare opportunity to him to study the life of the people in proper background and perspective which make his account reliable and fascinating. Heyne's Tracts contain much material regarding the industry and also referred cultivation and trade to some extent.<sup>2</sup>

As India has fascinated the imagination of Europeans for a long time, German travelers, merchants and military people, and Christian missionaries came to India. As observed by Prof. Daniel Jeyaraj, Germans scholars - Von Glasenapp, Halbfass, Leifer, and Dharmapal Frick are among the growing scholars who have studied the long relationship between Indians and

Germans. These scholars illustrate how Germans were fascinated by Indian people, their customs, arts, sciences, and literary achievements. Most of the European reporters either visited European colonies along the seashore or lived in the palaces of Indian rulers or travelled through the mainland. They had little or nothing to do with the common people. Often they worked through Indian interpreters and sub-ordinates that were bent on promoting the political and economic welfare of the Europeans and hence did not acquaint them with the heart and soul of the Indians. But there was another group of German authors in India who produced more comprehensive and authentic reports on India and Indians. These authors were the Christian missionaries who lived among the Indians, spoke their languages, read their literature, and studied their socio-religious beliefs and practices. Their firsthand accounts are full of useful information.

After careful review of the literatures on the study of Tamil society in the 18th century, the Research scholar has found that the contribution of Bartholomaus Ziegenbalg's letters to their counterparts in Europe played a very vital role in studying the nature of Tamil society in the European perspective. The writings of Batholomaus Ziegenbalg (1682-1719), a German Pietist missionary provide firsthand details of the Tamil society to their European counterparts. As he has landed in Tharangambadi, a notable trading seaport town of Danish trade in the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu on 9th July 1706, and lived there up to 1719.

This study is undertaken to understand the different components of tradition and culture among the Tamil society as expressed in his writings and also analyse the way in which he has applied his European mind and thinking.

Tarangampadi, a fishing village is situated 15 kms, south of the famous ancient port Kaveripoompattinam (Pumpuhar) referred to Kaberis Emperion in the works of classical geographers like Ptolemy, Kaveripoompattinam attracted traders from all parts of the world, especially from the Roman Empire.

In the earliest reference to Tarangambadi occurs in a 14th-century inscription, which is mentioning the place as '*Sadanganpadi*'. The inscription also refers to a merchant's guild known as *Pathinen Visha ayattar* (traders of 18 countries) and also a family of sailors called *Karaiar*, residing at Tarangambadi. Thus it was already a commercial port attracting traders from different countries.

*Kaveripoompattinam* is celebrated in ancient Tamil literature and Buddhist work. It has served as the most important port of the entire Tamil country from the 3rd century B.C. A little to the north of Kaveripoompattinam lies *Nangur*, a famous port, from where, Pallava. Warriors in the 8th century have sailed to far-off countries. About 7 kms South of Tarangambadi is another port known as Karaikal Ammaiyar was born. 15kms further south of Tarangambadi lies another ancient port Nagapattnam In the 7th century a Buddha Chaitya and Vihara were erected here by a Chinese ruler with the help of the then Pallava ruler, Narasimhavarman II.

### **Ziegenbalg's Initial perception on the Tamil Society**

Three months after his arrival in Tranquebar, on September 25, 1706, Ziegenbalg recorded his initial perception on the Tamil people and their culture:

“The Tamil people are very intelligent. If they would hear how the learned scholars in Europe teach from their pulpits the subjects of logic, rhetoric, and metaphysics, they would ridicule and laugh over it. They would also consider this art of teaching as the greatest folly and the most unfortunate thing that could happen on earth. By contrast, the Tamil people love free, unrestrained, and clear lectures that are mostly rational. They reject all kinds of figurative speech because they think that the time which is spent in speaking strange and colourful words, can profitably be used in perusing the search for truth. I earnestly desire to understand their secrets and therefore spend a lot of money in having their books copied”<sup>3</sup>

### **Tamil Language**

Eighteen languages are spoken in Tranquebar. But Tamil, Sanskrit, and Telugu are the most prominent languages. The people on the Coromandel Coast speak the pure Tamil language. Most of the Tamil books are written in the linguistic dictions of this region. European found it difficult to correctly pronounce the Tamil words. Regarding Tamil language, Ziegenbalg wrote Tamil is –

“very exact and copious, as the German and Latin are. Its words are somewhat difficult to remember, and to pronounce; yet very easy to be learned with the help of Grammar – Rules. The reading Part, I think, is almost as difficult as the Reading of Hebrew. During my three Years stay in this country, I have hardly read any German or Latin books, but have spent most of my time from Morning till Night, perusing Malabarick composures. In this language, I do also discharge my Ministerial Labours, and converse by its means with such Heathens as are Natives of this Coast; being now as readily versed in it as in my own vernacular Tongue. I have also for two Years writ several books in the same”<sup>4</sup>

### **Moral Codes**

In order to illustrate the moral codes of the Tamil people, Ziegenbalg translated Nitivenpa, Ulakaniti, and Konraiventan, three ancient Tamil works on ethics, into German.<sup>5</sup> These books demonstrated the fact that many Tamils were strict monotheists who had rejected the worship of multiple deities; they insisted that rational human beings should follow sound moral principles.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, by August 1708 he systematically reviewed 119 Tamil books, of which twenty-one were on Rome Catholic Christianity, eleven books on Islam, and the remaining were on Tamil culture, religion, and literature. The variety of Tamil literature was to convince the readers of the fact that the Tamil people had a long literary tradition and developed almost every kind of theological and philosophical discipline. No printing press is available here; Indians write on palm leaves. They prohibit anyone selling a book to a Christian and consider such a sale an act of great abomination. They do not want a (European) Christian to understand the secrets of their religious beliefs and practices.

### **Caste System**

Among the South Indians [in and around Tranquebar alone], there are ninety-eight casts, which have, along with other things, their own characteristic ceremonies related to marriage and food habits, dress, dignity, and profession. Because of ship transportation, Europeans belonging to different nations and people other people have come here. The South Indians classify them according to the languages they speak and group them into various castes such as the Danes,

English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Germans, etc. Moreover, the South Indians have another method of classifying peoples and languages. They identify the names of Europeans who are better known to briefly mention a few names of the ninety-eight castes and the principal occupation associated with each. The four principal castes [i.e., varnas], mentioned in the previous chapter, are the Brahmins, the ksatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras.

### **Faith of Tamils**

As time went by, Ziegenbalg began to understand several aspects of Tamil life. In another letter dated 1st October 1706, he wrote to A.H. Francke and explained his observation on the Beliefs of the Tamil People.

“The Tamil people are indeed brilliant. They should be won with great wisdom. They have an accurate understanding about their faith just as we (European) Christians tend to have. They are more convinced of the life to come than the unbelieving (lit. atheistic) Christians. They possess numerous books which they claim to have received from their gods just as we (Christians) have received the Holy Scripture. These books contain not only several amusing stories about their deities but also excellent things about the life to come. By contrast, they consider our Bible (lit. Word of God ) uninteresting. At the same time, they live a peaceful, honourable, and virtuous life, in which they, depending on their natural powers, they excel at least ten times over (the life of) the Christians.<sup>7</sup>

In 1713, he writes in the “Genealogy of the South Indian Deities” that the Tamils know from the light of nature that there is one God. This truth does not need to be taught to them by Christians at all. It is implanted in their minds by the witness of the conscience.<sup>8</sup>

### **Religious Life**

As far as Hindus, Four temples, where the adherents of various *bhakti*-religions worshipped, were situated in close proximity of this *Jerusalem church*. These were dedicated to *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, and other Indians deities. The *bazaar* (“market”) was held near these temples. One of these temples faced *Fort Dansburg* and stood just next to the Governor’s Residence on Queen’s Street.<sup>9</sup>

The Muslims too had their own quarters. They occupied almost one-third of the area within the city wall—beginning on the one side of Queen Street, and the bastions “Norwegen,” “Holstein” and “Lolland” on the other side. Since a Muslim merchant was the first person to come and settle down immediately after Ove Gjedde laid the foundation for Tranquebar, Muslims had a very prominent place within this colony, as symbolized by their prominent mosque that stood immediately next to the *Admiral Garden* and close to the Bastion “Norwegen”.<sup>10</sup>

### **Responses of Tamils towards Christianity**

Tamils are proud of their language and history. They are also proud of their cultural and intellectual heritage. For many centuries have interacted with Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, and Roman Catholic Christians. By now they were exposed to Protestant Christianity first in the form practiced by the British, the Dutch, and the Danish colonialists in the coastal regions of Tamil

country, and then in the form observed by German Pietists in the Danish colony of Tranquebar. Christian interaction in and around Tranquebar evoked various kinds of responses, of which the following can be mentioned.

### **Occupation and other Social Factors**

Many Indians in Tranquebar are merchants. Some of them are engaged in agriculture or work in the fields. Being a coastal area, Tranquebar offers many employment opportunities both inland and in ships. Except for those, who for religious reasons renounced their family and wealth, and live by begging, no other beggars are found in Tranquebar. There are physicians, surgeons, barbers, money changers, dyers, painters, masons, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, tailors, weavers, shoemakers, and those who knit stockings. Most women spin wool, grind rice, sell fish, milk, and other milk products, bake cakes and fetch water and work as maids.<sup>11</sup>

### **Other Social Factors**

The Tamil calendar resembles European calendars. Their month begins nine days after a month in the European calendar has begun. October 9 in Europe is actually October I here in Tranquebar.<sup>12</sup>

Indians have a few schools among them and teach similar disciplines that are known in Europe. Famous medical doctors are found among the Tamil people; these doctors are good at healing several sicknesses such as fever, diarrhea, headache, eye ailments, chest pains, diabetes, paralysis, and the like.<sup>13</sup>

It is a general custom of the Tamil people in Tranquebar to unconditionally sell their children as slaves to others. Polygamy is not uncommon here. Children who are eight, ten, or twelve years of age are given in marriage, especially to avoid adultery.<sup>14</sup>

### **Cosmopolitan Nature**

Due to national, regional, and international trade, Tranquebar became a meeting place of different peoples, their cultures, regions, and languages. Of the eighteen Indian languages that were spoken in Tranquebar Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit were the most important languages. European languages such as Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, German, and English were also spoken in Tranquebar. Many Indian merchants of that time would have known several languages so that they could communicate with people who spoke different languages.

Economic and colonial prospects of the Danish depended on the favour of Indian merchants and inhabitants of the colony. The Danes, therefore, implemented the principle of administrative neutrality. It seems that they learned this principle from their experience in Denmark. Denmark, for example, officially began to tolerate the presence and work of the Roman Catholic Christians (1671), the Jews (1684), and the reformed Christians (1685). Accordingly, Danish people who belonged to any of these religious groups were free to practice their religious faith as long as it did not disturb social harmony. When the Danes took over Tranquebar, they also introduced the principle of religious tolerance and administrative neutrality.<sup>15</sup>

Administrative and religious neutrality meant that Europeans and Indians lived in separate quarters within the colony. All Europeans lived within the walled city. Even this city was divided into several settlements. Most Europeans lived on one side of Queen Street, and most Indians lived on the other side of this street. As a result, except for employment and trade, both Europeans and Indians avoided one another. The Danes, as colonialists, were not interested in the overall wellbeing of the Indians. Indians, as hosts, were also indifferent to the Danes and other Europeans. Even though these two groups lived side by side, the social, cultural, and religious gulf between them was indeed deep and wide.<sup>16</sup>

The factors that held them together were their desire or dire necessity to live near and work in the colony of Tranquebar. Indians and Europeans became so interdependent that they could not imagine one without the other. Their economical prospects, military, judiciary, and all other social units depended on their mutual understanding and cooperation. In this fragile situation, they were unwilling to let any outsider like a Christian mission to come to them, and start a new enterprise. They feared that any new movement of the people might disturb the social equilibrium, and their trade would decline. When the Danish King Friedrich IV sent his missionaries to Tranquebar, things were to change.

### **Conclusion**

The writings of the Travellers and Trading company associates are thoroughly Euro-centric. They portray Indians as ignorant and uncivilized people who could easily be manipulated to accept Europeans political and economic values and ways of life. Besides these Euro-centric reports, there exists another body of European literature on India, largely on Indian languages. A few European intellectuals studied classical languages like Sanskrit, edited literacy pieces, and wrote commentaries primarily for the purpose of helping Indians, but also to improve European perception of Indian literature.

In this regard, the writings of missionaries who were generally not colonialists pursuing political and economic interests give a fuller picture of Indian life. The missionaries described the nature, Character, strength, and weakness of Indians, among whom they lived and whom they served and like colonialists did not exploit. They also engaged the minds of their European readers and tried to help them to slowly overcome their Euro-centric perspectives and develop positive attitudes towards non-European peoples.

The writings of Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg provide first-hand details that broaden and deepen our current knowledge of Eighteenth-century Tamil Society, religion and literature in and around Tharangambadi. At the same time, his writings reveal the mindset of his European contemporaries. He sought to help them become familiar with the South Indians and their way of life. His accounts also reveal his knowledge of the Tamil-speaking peoples who helped him understand the codes of their personal, domestic and corporate conduct at home, in temples, and the society. It is also helpful to grasp the major forces that lie under the visible aspects of Tamil life.

### **End Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> P.Subramanian, Social History of the Tamils (1707 -1947), D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi. P.21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ziegenbalg 1706-1719, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt , Berlin,1957,p.40

<sup>4</sup> Ziegenbalg, An Account, 1717, pp.8-10

<sup>5</sup> AFSt/MII A 6, II A 6:1, cf. Ziegenbalg, 1930.

<sup>6</sup> AFSt/M II A 6, 37, printed in Ziegenbalg, 1930, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ziegenbalg, 1957, p. 44

<sup>8</sup> George Oomen and Hans Raun Iverson (ed.) , It began in Copenhagen, ISPCK, Delhi. 2002. P.108.

<sup>9</sup> Ferd J.Fenger., History of the Tranquebar Mission: Madras: The M.E. Press. 1906, p.21

<sup>10</sup> Lehmann, Arno. It Began at Tranquebar, English Translation by M.J.Lutz Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1956, pp.36-39

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg,: the Father of Modern Protestant Mission, IPCK , Delhi, 2006., p.128

<sup>12</sup> Ziegenbalg, 1957, 116-121

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg,: the Father of Modern Protestant Mission, IPCK , Delhi, 2006., p.128

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg,: the Father of Modern Protestant Mission., p.128

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 122

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,pp.111-112