

Dravidian Studies in the Netherlands Part I (1605-1690s)

Pioneers of Orientalism at the VOC

Research >
South India

Dravidian studies seemed almost non-existent in the Netherlands when I settled there eleven years ago. The renowned Czeck Dravidologist K.V.Zvelebil had just retired from Utrecht University, and his chair was abolished. Accustomed to the Soviet practice of propagating scholarly achievements abroad, and faced with the absence of such material on the Dutch Indological school but for a six-page paper by J. Gonda (1964), I decided to fill the gap. This article is the first of a three part series surveying four centuries of Dravidian Studies in the Netherlands.

By Luba Zubkova

Even a detached onlooker would soon deduce that the Dutch are a nation of doers, more apt to maintain reality than to philosophise about it. Practical incentives lie behind Dutchmen's aspirations to knowledge, a problem-solving mentality rather than dream-like idealism. The ever urgent problem being water – whether in the guise of overflowing rivers or untameable sea – scientific research in the Netherlands has often been linked to sailing and navigation.

Maritime republic

As is generally known, the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic between 1588 and 1702 was the epoch of great maritime expeditions and scientific discoveries. So it is not surprising that, as in the exact sciences, among the pioneers of what was later called Dravidian studies we find cartographers, adventurers and geographers.

After the discovery of the eastern sea route around the Cape of Good Hope by Vasco da Gama in 1497, the Dutch public was fascinated by India's wonders. They felt especially attracted to her exotic culture when in 1605 the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC) set foot on South India's Coromandel coast populated by Dravidian people.

Founded in 1602 by the wealthy middle classes to trade in the East and secure profits for its shareholders, the VOC set up trade posts and forts to purchase the world's best pepper, cinnamon, indigo and so on, and to provide the metropolis with a growing market for its manufactures. The VOC appointed governors who maintained garrisons and signed alliances with native peoples, under the supervision of the Staten-Generaal (the early Dutch parliament). The VOC, like its counterpart in the western hemisphere, the Westindische Compagnie, personified the expansive dynamics of the state economy, foreign policy and religious ideology.

By the 1640s the Dutch were entrenched on the Indian subcontinent and the Malay peninsula as well as in Indonesia. Challenging Portuguese military power in Ceylon, the VOC was soon able to control the coastal zone of the island and annex a whole string of Portuguese fortified bases around the tip of India (Israel 1995:937). From around 1660 until the 1720s the Dutch remained the leading European power in India.

Sending loaded ships to the Coromandel and then the Malabar coast of India and to Ceylon, the VOC hired Protestant priests to create a favourable moral climate in the trade posts. Some inquisitive Company servants in the 17th and 18th centuries contributed to the public

interest in India through their travelogues. Impressed by the learning of the brahmans and their views on life and death, clergyman Abraham Rogerius, who for seventeen years (1630-47) lived at Paliacatta on the Coromandel coast, wrote a book on the life, customs, faith and religious practices of Tamil brahmans (*De open-deure tot verborgen heydendom*, 1651). Rogerius was the first to mention the four Vedas, but their description, according to J. Gonda, was more in harmony with the Tamil Vaisnava hymns than Sanskrit sources (Gonda 1964:5).

Phillipus Baldaeus

Another missionary who came to Ceylon upon the conquest of Colombo by the Dutch in 1656 was Phillipus Baldaeus (1632-1672). A talented cartographer and writer, the Company appointed him a predicant responsible for converting the Tamil communities on the northern part of the island to the Dutch Reformed religion. He lived in and around Jaffna for nine years and sailed around to inspect the Dutch possessions in South India.

Baldaeus moved among the people, mastering the Tamil language in which he could preach and converse. He thought '...it is more befitting and seemly that a teacher or minister masters the language of his congregation, rather than for the congregation to learn the language of their minister' (Saparamadu 1958:XIX). Baldaeus compiled several manuscripts to be used by native proponents of Protestantism and schoolmasters, and prepared a Tamil Psalter. It was published in book form in 1755, 'the earliest vernacular book of music'

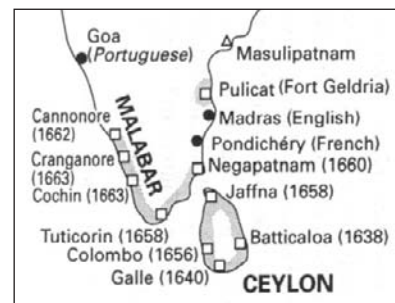
(Kesavan 1985:59). Printing was brought by the Dutch to Ceylon in the late 1720s, and the earliest Tamil work printed was a 1741 Tamil Bible by the Hollender Press of the VOC.

Baldaeus' personal observations of the life and mores of Hindus constituted a monumental work in Dutch, printed in Amsterdam in 1672. In the same year it was translated into German, and in 1703 abridged in English: *A True and Exact Description of the most Celebrated East India Coasts of Malabar and Choromandel. As also the Great Island of Ceylon and the Religion of the Heathens of the East Indies*. The book included maps, engravings illustrating the author's experiences, and a supplement entitled *Introduction to the Malabar language* which contained elements of Tamil grammar followed by the Lord's Prayer and the Creed in Tamil.

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Accompanying engravings contained the complete Tamil alphabet. Explaining his reasons for learning the local language, Baldaeus praises its richness and flexibility, anticipating the attitude of the famous English proponents of Dravidian studies, R. Caldwell and G.U. Pope two centuries later.

The Description is an interesting historical document abounding with sociological, ethnological and other valuable information, though the author is biased because of his dual loyalty to the Com-



VOC Trade Posts

pany and the Reformed Church. The two loyalties were often in conflict. A predicant was a Company official with the salary of a Senior Merchant (90-100 guilders a month apart from allowances) and had considerable influence. However, he could not fully use this influence in his ecclesiastical work because the Company was grudging of additional expenses. For example, the Company

objected to Baldaeus' suggestions for improving religious education and converting the natives, and ruled that funds should be raised from fines levied in the enforcement of school rules. Phillipus Baldaeus refused to conform and was nearly accused by the Governor of dishonest financial dealings. He could not continue his linguistic studies because the Church, bound by the state, thought it a waste of time. In 1666 he decided to leave Ceylon.

VOC research

The VOC demanded from personnel a certain expertise in native speech, local culture and political intrigue, which could prove handy in trade transactions. There were more officials and missionaries working on a glossary of 'Malabaric' (Tamil/Malayalam) language and Telugu. Others produced detailed accounts of the local conditions, climate and plants, and everyday life of various Hindu castes. To name but a few: Herbert de Jager, a peasant's son and former theology student at Leiden University, indulged in comparative study of 'Malabaric', Sanskrit and High-Javanese during his ten years' stay in Coromandel; Wouter Schouten, a surgeon attached to the Dutch fleet, wrote the book *The East Indian Voyages*; Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein, Malabar Governor in 1671-77 and vice-admiral, prepared the voluminous botanical treatise *Hortus indicus Malabaricus*; while Daniel Havart, the Company's senior official and a keen observer, published in 1693 a book with the title *The rise and fall of Coromandel*.

Havart's statement of 'fall' refers to the gradual decline in moral climate at

Paleacatta (Pulicat, the VOC headquarters until 1690) and twenty other Dutch trade posts which he visited over thirteen years. The causes were involuntary idleness in the monsoon periods which led to corruption, and the Company's infamous economy drive. With profits dwindling, the VOC offered its employees shackling contracts, usually picked up by unscrupulous fortune seekers or bankrupts, thus fuelling the forbidden practice of private commerce and smuggling ('mors-handel'). 'In Coromandel you see very few men with ideals', Phillipus Baldaeus complained. There was no zeal on the part of missionaries either, as the bookish, rational Calvinism proved hard to proselytise. Epidemics of cholera, political chaos in Tamilnadu, and British expansion in the 18th century did the rest; J.A. Braam's 1818 inspection reported that Dutch possessions in India had depreciated (Peters and de la Porte 2001).

The Company's commercial activities left no trace on south Indian life, except for numerous gravestones with inscribed life-stories of the deceased employees, which are nowadays used by the locals for laundry. Research work of the Dutch pioneers was continued by the German protestant Ziegenbalg, who belonged to a Danish mission in Malabar. The books by Rogerius and Baldaeus were reclaimed as sources of first-hand knowledge and translated into other European languages. They attracted the attention of the educated public and eventually contributed to the establishment of Indological chairs in French, German and British universities in 1814, 1818 and 1833. ◀

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The book by Baldaeus: bastard title page of 1672