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

**Pioneers of Orientalism at the VOC**

Dravida studies seemed almost non-existent in the Netherlands when I settled there eleven years ago. The renowned Czech 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 philosophize about it. Practical interests, the search for profit, the desire to accumulate knowledge, a problem-solving mentality rather than dream-like idealism. The ever urgent problem being water – whether in the guise of overflowing rivers or untenable 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 spread through the 17th century. 1602 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 pub- lic was fascinated by India’s wonders. They felt especially attracted to her exot- ic culture when in 1605 the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindi- esche 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 metropo- lis with a growing market for its manu- factures. The VOC appointed governors who maintained garnisons 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 hemi- sphere, 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 for- tified bases around the tip of India (Israel 1995:537). From around 1660 until the 1720s the Dutch remained the leading European power in India.

Sending loaded ships to the Corim-andel and then the Malabar coast of India and to Ceylon, the VOC hired Protestant priests to create a favourable moral cli- mate in the trade posts. Some inquisi- tive Company servants in the 17th and 18th centuries contributed to the public interest in India through their trave- logues. Impressed by the learning of the Brahmins and their views on life and death, clergyman Abraham Rogerius, who for seventeen years (1650-47) lived at Pallacotta on the Coromandel coast, wrote a book on the life, customs, faith and religious practices of Tamil brah- mans (*De open-deure tot verborgen hey- denhouden, 1651*). Rogerius was the first to mention the Four Vedas, but their description, according to J. Gonda, was more in harmony with the Tamil Vais- nava hymns than Sanskrit sources (*Gonda 1964:5*).

**Phillipus Baldaeus**

Another missionary who came to Cey- lon upon the conquest of Colombo by the Dutch in 1656 was Phillipus Bal-daeus (1612-1672). A talented cartogra- pher and writer, the Company appoint- ed him a prolific responsible for con- verting 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 pos- sessions in South India.

Baldaeus moved among the people, mastering the Tamil language in which he could preach and converse. He thought ... it is morebefitting and seem- ly that a teacher or minister masters the language of his congregation, rather than for the congregation to learn the language of their minister” (Sparapadi 1958:191). Baldaeus compiled several manuscripts to be used by native pro- ponents of Protestantism and school- masters, and prepared a Tamil Psalter. It was published in book form in 1755, ‘the earliest vernacular book of music’ (Kesavan 1985:359). 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 Hollander 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 ele- ments of Tamil grammar followed by the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed in Tam- il. The company’s activities left no trace on South Indian life, except for gravestones with life-stories of the deceased employees, which are nowadays used by the locals for laundry.

The book by Baldaeus inscribed title page of 1752

Accompanying engravings contained the complete Tamil alphabet. Explaining his reasons for learning the local language, Baldaeus praises its richness and flexi- bility, 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 his- torical document abounding with soci- ological, ethological and other valuable information, though the author is biased because of his dual loyalty to the Com- pany and the Reformed Church. The two loyalties were often in conflict. A pamphlet was Company official with the salary of a Senior Merchant (90-100 guilders a month apart from allowances) and had considerable influence. How- ever, he never really used his influen- ce in his ecclesiastical pastoral capacity because the Company was grudging of addition- al expenses. For example, the Company objected to Baldaeus’ suggestions for improving religious education and con- verting the natives, and ruled that funds should be raised from fines levied in the enforcement of school rules. Philippus Baldaeus refused to conform and was nearly accused by the Governor of dis- honest 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 transac- tions. There were more officials and missionaries working on a glossary of ‘Malabaric’ (Tamil/Malayalam) lan- guage and Telugu. Others produced detailed accounts of the local condi- tions, climate and plants, and everyday life of various Hindu castes. To name but a few: Herbert de Jager, a peasant and former student teacher at Leiden University, indulged in compara- tive study of ‘Malabaris’, 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 Voyage*, Hendrik Adriaan van Rende tot Drak- enstein, Malabar Governor in 1675-77 and vice-admiral, prepared the volu- minous botanical treatise *Hortus indi- ius Malabaricus*; while Daniel Havart, the Company’s senior official and a keen observer, published (1656) 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

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**References**


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