

TAMIL

The Land of the Tamils



Part 2

by C. P. Hallihan

Tamil Language

Tamil is part of the Dravidian group of over twenty languages, mostly found in the southern and eastern areas of India. Through ancient trading migration,¹ and more recent emigration, speakers of the main Dravidian languages are found throughout south-east Asia, in eastern and southern Africa, and in cities in many



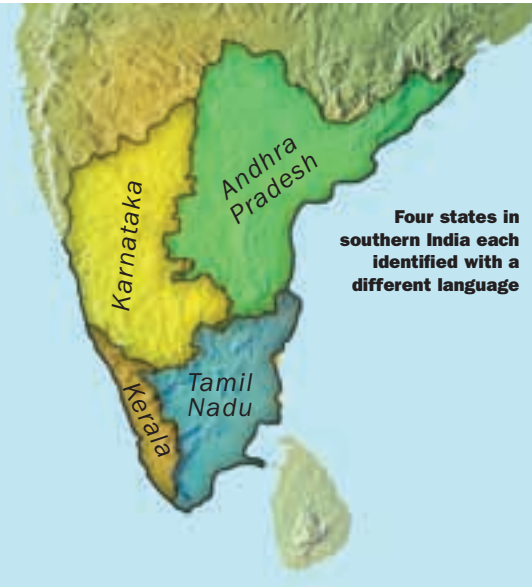
**15th or
16th century Tamil
script on palm leaves**

parts of the world. Dravidian language users are listed at about 150 million, standing 6th in a world list of language groups.

The name Dravidian comes from a Sanskrit word used in an early text with apparent reference to Tamil. Tamil has the oldest written records of this family, 3rd century BC, and is believed to be close to the supposed antecedent language, 'Proto-Dravidian'. Despite historical records and reconstruction, there is little agreement about the origins of the language or its speakers. Dravidian languages were once widely spoken in the north of India, but scarcely at all there now. In south India it did not remain as one language for long.

Partly by the political division of the country into three distinct Tamil kingdoms and partly because of natural geographical barriers, dialect differences arose.

The language spoken north and south of the Tirupati mountains became two independent languages, Tamil and Telugu.



Malayalam developed as a distinct derivation from Tamil, and Kannada from Telugu. Each of these languages is now identified with a state in southern India—Andhra Pradesh (Telugu, 55 million speakers), Tamil Nadu (Tamil, 55 million), Karnataka (Kannada, 25 million) and Kerala (Malayalam, 25 million). Of these, Tamil has the greatest geographical spread, with several million speakers in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, parts of east and south Africa, islands in the Indian and South Pacific Oceans, and Australia.

There is very real academic, racial, religious and political strife involved with the languages and scripts of India, and not least in the south. Academics dispute the priority of these languages and scripts based on their derivation from a basic Brahmi, and claim the supposed superiority of their favourites based on their findings. This in turn may lead to claims of superiority of one belief system, such as Hinduism, over another. As to the rest—well,

with Indian independence in 1947, Dravidian language militants began to fight for a political structure in which their separate languages would be represented. A 1948 Commission opposed any change, largely on the grounds that 'sub-nations' would be a major obstacle to unity in the new India. From 1949 the campaign intensified, especially among the Telugu speakers in Madras. The climax came in December 1952 with the death of Potti Sriramulu, who had chosen a hunger strike (think Gandhi) to make his point. Prime Minister Nehru gave way, and the first of the language-based states, Andhra Pradesh, was inaugurated in October 1953. Three years later, the whole of south India was reorganized on the basis of linguistic regions.² These issues need to be assimilated and accepted as a very real part of 'the place' where the Gospel is to be preached and the Bible distributed, especially by non-indigenous workers. Ziegenbalg's principle that *preaching and teaching must be based on accurate insight into the worldview of the local population* is vitally important when a lack of understanding of the mindset of the people can threaten to undermine their acceptance of the Gospel.

Tamil is written in a syllabic script,³ the combining into one form of a consonant with a vowel to form the syllable, together with myriad inflection indications and suffixes. Imagine that in English the way to represent 'the' was a meld of the old tau (th letter) with the vowel 'e' as an inseparable form, with indications of case, number and gender grafted on to it; now set to and learn the five hundred plus forms needed to write formal Tamil.⁴

In most languages there is a difference between formal and colloquial, and between written and spoken forms. In

contemporary English this is being blurred in favour of the colloquial forms and the writing of them;⁵ in contemporary Dutch the distinction between spoken and written, formal and colloquial, is still maintained and taught. In Tamil the gulf between colloquial and classical is enormous. The syllabic script is well suited to writing literary Tamil, *centamil*, but not to writing colloquial Tamil, *koduntamil*. Attempts have been made to create a written version of the colloquial spoken language, circumventing the strictures of the syllabic script. The need is especially great for school books trying to keep pace with the burgeoning vocabulary of modern technology, thought and leisure, as well as dialogue in fiction. We will return to this problem when we consider the problems of Bible publication and distribution.

Perhaps you will also gather the problems of the constraints of script on language into your prayers as you remember the whole work of Bible translation. We have in English a language that is admirably suited to Bible translation—Tyndale was adamant on this point. Whilst we bless the living God for this, let us not assume that it is the same everywhere. The extreme AV-only people have said of less-suited language groups, ‘Let them then learn English!’ This is the equivalent of Rome saying ‘Let them learn Latin’, or the Muslim saying ‘Let them learn Arabic, the only way to read the Qur’an’. We will not so handle the needs of the nations for the Word of

God. Others say, ‘Forget the strictures of text, words and script, just get the thoughts, ideas and stories across any way you can’. Whilst there may be some place for such in early oral endeavours in the Gospel, it can never continue long, or be expected to meet the need of believer and church for the sure Word of prophecy, the Bible.

■ Tamil Scriptures

Being one of very few early European visitors to the subcontinent to gain knowledge of an indigenous language, and a prolific writer as well, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg was well prepared of God for the task of Scripture translation. He accomplished works in German, Portuguese and Latin as well as Tamil. The Tamil works included dictionaries, hymnbooks, translations both into and from Tamil, school textbooks, catechisms, sermons, and book catalogues.⁶ Ziegenbalg had realised that to interact with local people he would need to learn both Portuguese, the lingua franca of the coast, and the local tongue that the Portuguese called Malabar, which was in fact



**Bartholomaeus
Ziegenbalg**

Tamil. In a few months he learnt enough Portuguese to be able to use it to learn Tamil. Ellappar, his untrained ‘tutor’, used the traditional teaching mode of tracing letters of the Tamil alphabet on a bed of sand. Soon the pupil was able to say that the Tamil tongue was as easy to him as his mother tongue.

With his learning, Ziegenbalg began translating the New Testament in 1708, completed in 1711 with the help of another arrival from Halle, Johann Gründler, and painstakingly revised and corrected over another two years. He had also begun a Malabar dictionary, and all this made a printing press urgently necessary. Bartholomaeus requested a printing press from Denmark, and the Danes forwarded the appeal to London, to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. The SPCK was not allowed to work in India by the East India Company merchants, but was eager to help. In 1712 SPCK shipped a printing press with type, paper, ink, and a printer to the Tranquebar mission. When this SPCK consignment arrived in Madras, the printer-man was missing. A German soldier in the Danish Company's service was able to help Ziegenbalg set up the first '2nd generation' printing press in India.⁷ There are unsupported tales of the lead covers from tins of Cheshire cheese, sent out to the mission by SPCK, being used to make the type for the Tamil New Testament published in 1715. Ziegenbalg had also started a paper mill in Kaduthasipattarai in 1714, as well as accomplishing translation of the Old Testament from Genesis to Ruth.

The Tamil New Testament printed at Tranquebar in 1715 was the first ever Indian (and perhaps even Asian) printed version, heading a now long list of Indian language versions, some in numerous editions. After Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg's death another colleague, Benjamin Schultze, brought out a revised edition in 1722 and issued the first seven books of the Old Testament from Ziegenbalg's manuscript. The remaining books of the Old Testament were translated by Schultze, who generously prefixed Ziegenbalg's name to the three volumes issued to complete the Tamil Bible in 1727. This early work had defects, but partly by revision and partly by new translation, Dr. J. P. Fabricius published a more secure version of the New Testament in 1777, followed by the complete Bible. This is considered to be one of the best and most faithful in the language and is the basis of all succeeding revisions.

In 1860 H. Bower undertook further revision of the Fabricius translation, made under the direction of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. As the Union version of the Tamil Bible it became the standard edition, highly valued for over one hundred years. Today the old Fabricius version is still used by the Lutheran Church, but the Bower or Union

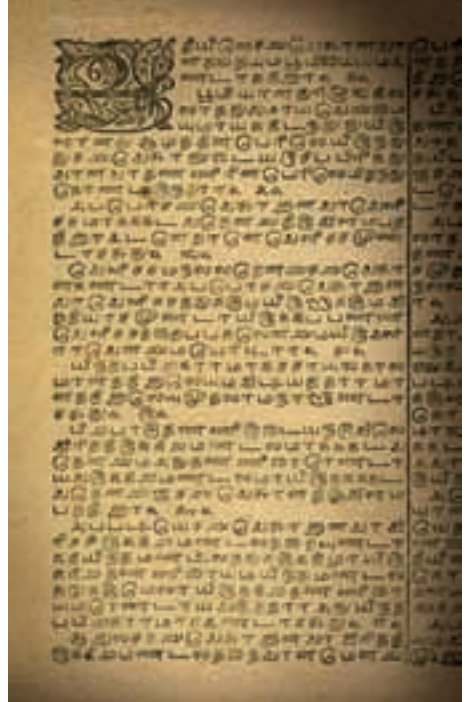
Detail from an historic map of Tranquebar



version is in regular use by most others.⁸ The Ziegenbalg-Fabricius-Bower version was made from the Greek New Testament, indeed the Union version is claimed to be almost identical with the English Authorised Version, being translated from the Received (Greek) text, the basis of the English Bible. This whole series of translations, then, is based on the *Textus Receptus*.

When the next question is asked—what about formal equivalence—the answers are more difficult to state with precision. It is not really enough to say that this was not an issue in those days—implicitly, it was. Until the middle of the 18th century the prevailing view of the Scripture text was (as it should be) that of verbal inspiration, and this in itself generates the desire and need for every word in the original to be reflected in the receiving language. The Dravidian languages are not alone in peculiar difficulties which make for a strange mixture of over-simplicity in structure (no passive tense, for example, and no relative pronouns) and complexity of form (the five hundred plus syllabic basis of the script). To produce, and especially to evaluate, Bible translations in such tongues needs more than a simple working knowledge of the language; it demands a truly nuanced understanding of both the Biblical languages and the receiver language. I quote from an internal memo from a highly capable colleague (now gone from TBS, married and living in Canada, but, to my immense relief, still in touch):

In the case of Tamil, Telugu, etc., where what Westerners would understand as a ‘word’ is sometimes replaced by myriad inflectional, postpositional, suffixed features, it is perhaps unwise to rush to



An eighteenth-century printing of Ziegenbalg's translation into Tamil of Genesis 1

judgement regarding whether a particular translation of Scripture is not sufficiently F[ormal] E[quivalence] in nature.⁹

Earlier I spoke of the challenge of the constraints of script on language; please pray also about the constraints of language on the principle of Formal Equivalence in translation, and for those who make all endeavour to honour these principles in onerous translation projects.

■ The Trinitarian Bible Society

Fifty years ago the Society published the Tamil New Testament and Psalms in a modified Roman script. A full telling of that



Mrs. Wilder's last fully corrected copy of the TBS Tamil New Testament open at Acts 2.

story is perhaps deserving of a *Quarterly Record* article of its own, but an outline must be given here.

That 'Roman Tamil' was issued in an attempt to address the difficulties outlined in the paragraph above, and because of a commitment on the part of TBS to the concept of advancement from illiteracy to literacy through the Bible. The publication of portions of the Scriptures of Truth has been the stepping stone to literacy in many lands and lives; where no written forms existed, the creation of a written language has been the work of missionaries desiring to make the Scriptures available. Strangely, the worst forms of illiteracy are found among peoples who not only have a written language, but have had one for over a thousand years. Such illiteracy is because the indigenous language, in written form, is difficult to learn, more difficult to master, and even more difficult to apply to new uses—typewriters and word processors, modern business/technology needs, etc.—and the needs of the vocabulary of the Bible in translation.

Alongside this a massive demand for English Bibles, and a voracious appetite for a TBS series of Scripture booklets issued in Tamil and Telugu, showed how great a need

there is in South India. Experts had long suggested that new written forms could be adopted in Roman characters with such additional letters and signs as needed to express the peculiarities of the local dialects. What might be called pilot work of this kind had been done in the Kashmiri and Balti tongues, published by TBS. Was this a way forward for Tamil?

In the early 1950s the *Madras Mail* printed lessons in the Tamil language in Roman type; so well were they received that the newspaper printed the whole series a second time; many used the lessons, discovering how easily they could read and write Tamil in the Roman characters. A Gospel of Mark was printed and distributed by the Christian Literature Society for India, of Madras. This was prepared by Mrs. E. W. Wilder of Nagpur, and found such a ready sale that more literature in this form was requested. Mrs. Wilder had spent much time over many years transliterating the Bower/Union version of the Tamil Bible into modified Roman script, and had completed the New Testament and part of the Old Testament. This was the work of about thirty years, a labour of love for the Tamil people. In hope of help and encouragement the manuscript was sent to the Madras Bible Society, but they were unable to accept the responsibilities of publication.

Later Mrs. Wilder, spending time in Kashmir, came across the little Gospels printed and published by the Trinitarian Bible Society in Roman type. The discovery was a door of hope for the publication of her Tamil New Testament, and in July 1952 she wrote to the TBS. One can sympathise with the reluctance of the Madras Bible Society to enter into such a project for the

Tamil millions, at a time when demand for the ordinary Tamil Bible was far in excess of their ability to supply.¹⁰ TBS, on the other hand, had long sought an opportunity to enter the Tamil field, and responded to this 'cry from Malabar'.

It was not until the end of 1953 that the complete manuscript copy reached the hands of the Society. In course of preparation section after section of the book travelled thousands of miles, either to India or to USA, so that every letter and word might be rigorously checked. Four years after the first letter, and after two years and nine months through the press, Mrs Wilder's thirty year labour of love, the Roman-Tamil New Testament and Psalms, appeared in print. With a certain surge of spiritual emotion I see open on my desk Mrs. Wilder's last fully corrected proof copy: there is a very stern pencil note on the flyleaf, possibly the hand of T.H. Brown, 'The sole copy in existence: must not be LOST, or damaged in any circumstances. 26/4/62'. It was another printed copy of this book which caused me such a moment of panic in the Library, mentioned in the introduction to Part 1 printed in the last *Quarterly Record*.

Thanks be unto God, we now have an outlet for remaining copies of this work. But then what? Reprint the Roman Tamil as is? Subject it to a thoroughgoing re-assessment and then reprint? Pursue the hope of a modern printing of the Ziegenbalg-Bower Tamil text? As well as the Roman or instead of it? In the late '80s TBS was involved in an India Literacy and Translation Workshop. On Tamil issues the strength of feeling against the pervasive Hindi-Sanskrit language and literature in India and preference for Tamil is stronger

than ever, so much so that the religious Sanskrit words embedded in the Ziegenbalg-Bower Tamil texts would be replaced in any current revision.

General attitudes on the use of the Scripture in literacy teaching are changed, as is the view of Roman script as an acceptable print medium. David Jerald¹¹ is of the opinion that there is a positive resistance to Roman script as an amusing oddity in Tamil Nadu, but a glad acceptance of it amongst the Tamil Diaspora.

■ Endnotes

1. Certainly dating to Roman and Phœnician times, and even a hint of the supply of peacock feathers, elephant tusks and spices to King Solomon!
2. Sri Lanka also suffers in this, with over 2.5 million Tamils, strongly resented by the Sinhala-speaking majority. 'Sinhala only' legislation, aimed at diminishing dependence on English, caught a Tamil tiger by the tail.
3. The script is like 'bendy Sanskrit', curved so that the endless series of straight lines of a devanagari script should not rip the palm leaves on which ancient Tamil documents were recorded.
4. English itself bears inherent syllabic problems—there is no way in which the various sounds and meanings of '-ough' (e.g., Dr. Seuss's *The Tough Coughs As He Ploughs the Dough*) can be determined from the letters; you just have to learn them as a syllable, and have a 'feel' for the usages.
5. What would you think of a TBS advert: 'AV is Kool' or 'Bibles 4U'?
6. Ziegenbalg's *Bibliotheca Malabarica*, a catalogue of Tamil texts, bears abundant witness to his involvement with Tamil literature. In a later letter he notes that his library contains three hundred 'Malabarian' books.
7. There had been an earlier printing endeavour in 17th-century Goa, when the Portuguese clergy there effectually hijacked a printing press from a ship bound for Ethiopia. This was long defunct by Ziegenbalg's day.
8. Tamil also had a series of Bible versions made by Dutch scholars in Ceylon, the New Testament in 1759, but the fame of the Tranquebar labours largely obscured this version.
9. M.J. Fenn, July 2000.
10. For copyright reasons it was never possible for TBS to publish any of the Ziegenbalg to Bower/Union versions in Tamil.
11. See *Quarterly Record* no. 581, October to December 2007, p. 45.