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**IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY –  
A CASE STUDY OF TAMIL CHRISTIANS**

**M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.**

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**M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.**

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## **CHRISTIANS IN INDIA**

Christians in India number over 24 millions according to Census of India 2001. They form the third largest religious community in India, but make up only 2.3% of the total population. The Southern States of Kerala, Tamilnadu, and Andhra Pradesh account for a little over 50% of Indian Christians. Various religious groups, including Christians, have questioned census figures for 2001.

## **CHRISTIANS IN TAMILNADU**

In Tamilnadu, there are nearly 4 million Christians. An analysis of district-wise distribution would indicate that the Christian population is rather well spread out in all the districts of Tamilnadu. The earlier concentration of Christianity in the southern districts of Tamilnadu and in the coastal belt has given place to widespread dispersal Christians in urban centers of Tamilnadu. In the past, the intensity of early missionary work in the southern districts and the coastal areas as well as the prevalent social and economic conditions of some of Hindu castes were associated with the growth of Christianity in these parts. A majority of the converts came originally from a community called NaaTaar (Nadar) and the minority from other so-called touchable and untouchable castes.

While some may claim continuity for the Tamil Church as far back as the advent and martyrdom of St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, near Chennai, large-scale conversion to Christianity became a reality only after the arrival of European merchants and political power since the eighteenth century of the Christian era.

## **SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF TAMIL CHRISTIANS**

The contribution of Christians—both native and European and in all walks of life—is immense, but does not receive our attention here. The Tamil Christians are not a single group except otherwise under the language banner. The major cleavage is between the Catholic and Protestant churches. Most of the Protestant churches come under the well-organized and established Church of South India, patterned more or less on the basis of the methods of worship of the Anglican Church. However, in recent decades the spur in the growth of Christianity among Tamils is due mainly to the spread of independent and Pentecostal churches.

Both the Catholic and Protestant groups have the same social composition in the sense that the original converts to these sects came from all Tamil castes including Brahmins.

Thus both the groups present an equally diverse social composition. All the same, one could identify a predominance of the members of Nadar and Adi Dravidar castes within the Protestant faith, whereas one notices a more disparate distribution of castes within the Catholic fold. Within the Protestant faith there are many smaller and disparate groups of Christians based on differences in forms of worship and other theological nuances.

## **CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY**

Conversion to Christianity among Tamils does not mean for the vast majority giving up the convert's caste. It is a fascinating story as to how this came about. We shall not narrate the story here. We shall only point out that retention of the caste even after conversion is matched by the retention of the original style and dialect of the convert in spite of the families being Christians for many generations (but see below for evolving exceptions).

## **A CHRISTIAN DIALECT OF TAMIL?**

While it is possible to establish to some extent a Muslim dialect of Tamil, it is not possible to establish a separate Christian dialect of Tamil. The "Christian dialects" of Tamil are easily grouped under various caste and regional dialects. However, we notice a phenomenon of adoption of the dialect of the majority in a church by the minority of that church—a switchover from one's own dialect to the dialect of the majority.

This switchover is preceded, in the speech of the majority, by a switchover to an urban form of language, showing an avoidance of regional markers. For instance, we notice that many non-Nadar Christian families native to the district/city of Coimbatore do no more exhibit their caste and regional markers and have switched over completely to the Nadar dialect of the Church.

## **RETENTION OF THE CASTE INSTITUTION AMONG TAMIL CHRISTIANS**

If the retention of the caste institution among Tamil Christians is a fascinating story and a sure sign of seeking an identity with the rest of Tamil society, more fascinating is the rationalization offered for the retention and thriving of the caste institution among Tamil Christians. The Jew-Gentile distinction is seen as a parallel—Gentiles were known to have group and racial distinctions among themselves, and so are the Tamil Christians! Culture differences based on food habits, choice of spouses, etc., are also offered as justification and rationalization for the retention of caste identity after conversion, although rarely does one come across a vegetarian Tamil Christian. Choice of spouses continues to be based on caste consideration. This again is another powerful process of identity with the rest of Tamil society.

While one might decry the evil influences of retention of the caste institution among Tamil Christians, the retention appears to have been the most positive factor for cohesion between Hindu and Christian Tamils. Acceptance of Christians as a part of Tamil society

was made easier by this retention. Propagation of prejudices against Christians by belligerent organizations may not have a strong foothold so long in Tamilnadu since members of the same castes, and even the same families, may be often found to belong to both Hindu and Christian religions. Unfortunately this phenomenon is not yet shared between Tamil Hindu and Muslim brethren. This function of the caste institution in bringing amity between diverse religious groups requires further investigation.

### **SUPPRESSION OF CASTE IDENTITIES**

Most educated Tamils seek anonymity and suppression of their caste identities through various means, notably through deletion of caste titles from their personal names. This is a phenomenon shared by Hindus and Christians, and was vigorously initiated and supported by the Dravidian movement among the Tamils. But seeking anonymity is matched equally in its intensity by the seeking of a caste identity both by Christians and Hindus through interesting means (I shall discuss this issue in great detail in my forthcoming paper, "Communication Among Diverse Castes"). Suppression of caste identity is also matched by processes of evolution of a standard dialect in Tamil, which aims at elimination of caste-marked features.

### **INTERMINGLING AND ADOPTION OF HINDU PRACTICES**

The Tamil marriage institution offers many interesting examples of conformity and deviation to cultural norms. **Thaali**, a typically Dravidian wedding necklace, accoutrement – part of the wedding ritual, is retained and it is the bridegroom who puts it around the neck of the bride in church wedding ceremonies. A wedding ring has introduced; this is also found in the marriage rituals of several Hindu castes. The "three-knot-connection," in which the yellow *thaali* thread is tied around the neck of the bride with three knots, remains identical to the Tamil Hindu practice. Likewise exchange of garlands is also retained. However, the ritual generally follows the wedding covenant model --promises and oath in Tamil based on Anglican Church convention, modified by the Church of South India. Caste conventions in the choice of brides and bridegrooms, such as preferring fair and rich brides, seeking dowry, and favoring cross cousins, as spouses are all maintained.

While caste is retained in many spheres of life, in death one gets a burial and not the cremation demanded by most Tamil Hindu castes. This is a very important deviation. Even in poetry this is not violated by Tamil Christians, although seeking identity in an extreme form could lead a writer to talk of Christ saving the faithful even at the verge of the cremation pyre. Cremation is never suggested in favorable tones.

### **NON-VEGETARIANISM**

Tamil Christianity is a religion of non-vegetarians. Even converts from vegetarian Hindu castes turn non-vegetarian. This is yet another important deviation, but except for this, the identity of Tamil Hindus and Christians as expressed in common dietary preference is unchanged.

A significant identity issue is revealed in the Tamil Christians' resistance or reluctance to beef-eating, noticed in other Tamil Hindus, not on religious considerations, but on grounds that beef-eating means a low economic and social status. The beef-eating Tamil Christian refers to beef and his beef-eating rather obliquely; it is referred to as 'big meat' and reference outside the family to eating it is generally done with circumspection. Reference to it outside one's group is generally avoided.

There is no difference in attire at all except the avoidance *poṭṭu* (kumkum) on the forehead, a feature shared by both Protestant Tamil Christians and Tamil Muslims. Wearing *poṭṭu* on the forehead is slowly treated as a secular and fashionable act by young ladies.

### **TAMIL CHRISTIANS IDENTITY VIS-À-VIS LANGUAGE MECHANISMS**

We shall now see the trends in the maintenance of identity by Protestant Tamil Christians and the language mechanisms that are cultivated to maintain the identity.

We shall do these under the following heads:

- (i) Translation of the Bible into Tamil,
- (ii) Religious practices,
- (iii) Songs, and
- (iv) Pure Tamil.

### **TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO TAMIL**

The Bible was translated into Tamil from the original texts/tongues, from Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) unlike the translations into many Indian languages based on the Authorized Version (King James Version in English). The translation is more than one hundred fifty years old and was done by a Committee, which consisted of nationals (both Christians and Hindus) and European missionaries.

The first major deviation from established conventions in Tamil was made by a deliberate decision to stick on to prose-type form of the original Hebrew and Greek sources rather than following the native tradition, which has had original religious texts in a highly structured and rigid poetic form. This change from a poetry-based religious-texts society to a prose-based religious-tests community is followed also in other aspects.

When Bible translation was at last done using the forms of 'spoken' Tamil, it was a change in pursuit of identity, and a breaking-away from the classical language, from a highly Sanskrit-mixed *maṇipraaḷa* religious language, and also from the highly Sanskrit-mixed advent of Christianity in Tamil society. This choice led to the giving up of a language based purely on written Tamil and to a preference on spoken language in written spelling, influenced both by dialects and written Tamil. This has established collocations whose meanings would be retrievable only in the Christian context. This has

also established collocations that would have meanings different from current Hindu terminology for the same lexical items.

## **COINAGE OF TERMS AND LINGUISTIC INNOVATIONS**

The Tamil Christian's pursuit of a terminology to reflect and establish his own identity is more easily exemplified in the choice of the pronoun to address God in the Bible translation. The second person pronoun slot in Tamil offers a four-tier classification, namely, *ni*: for single non-honorific and familiar, *niir* singular honorific but not quite honorific, almost neutral to honorific, and non-honorific addresses, *niṇikaḷ* singular honorific, also used for plural, and *taṇkaḷ* highly honorific and superior.

In all religious traditions in Tamil preceding Christianity (Jain, Buddhist, Saivite and Vaishnavite), God, gods, and goddesses are addressed in second person non-honorific singular. The Tamil Bible chose *niir* for the same, a form which is used to address equals, at times the inferior of some sort, acquaintances who are to be given some respect but not much, younger male adults, sons-in-laws and the younger and/or peer group males of the marital line. Nowhere in the Tamil Bible is the second person singular non-honorific pronoun *ni* used to address God. The verb is inflected in a manner required for the second person pronoun *niir*.

Some rare exceptions are found in Tamil Christian songs (lyrics) where the second person non-honorific singular is used. These lyrics are based on traditional Tamil prosody and musical compositions.

In individual and family prayers in the church and in Christian conventions, in short, in all gatherings, private and public, the second person pronoun *niir* and its corresponding finite verb inflection are used. This has been a deliberate change from the existing Tamil literary and linguistic tradition.

It is not clear as to how this terminology came about. Was it a direct translation from the Hebrew/Greek source, or was it a theological necessity, or was it due to an urge to establish a separate identity from the dominant Hindu religious trend? Whatever the reason, the choice of the second person singular pronoun *niir* to address God and the use of corresponding finite verb inflection serves as a distinct identity.

## **PREFERENCE FOR WRITTEN TAMIL**

I have already referred to the terminological changes made in the translation of the Bible into Tamil: a poetry-based religious text community chose prose for the new religious text; the prose so adopted was based not on classical language nor also on the immediately preceding or even current *maṇipraaḷa* style, but on a form close to spoken Tamil with written Tamil spelling and affixations and elaborations. This transition naturally led to a strange, amusing, beautiful, and also a bizarre blending of the archaic with the geographical scent of the language as spoken in the southern districts of Tamilnadu from where came the majority of early Tamil Christians.

While the language adopted is simple and close to spoken language, at times lexical choice is made from the classical language. Understanding such lexical items independently by the first or second reading is easier if only the reader has some exposure to classical Tamil texts.

## **ISSUES RELATING TO THE COMPREHENSION OF TRANSLATED MATERIAL**

Likewise understanding the dialect-based lexical items, which actually abound in Tamil Bible was easier for the earlier generations. The present generation, brought up in towns and subjected to the influence of evolving spoken and written standards, has difficulty in comprehending the texts.

In both cases, instruction, elaboration, and explanation both at home and in the church enable the Bible reader to retrieve what is authoritatively intended. With the growth of the habit of reading the Authorized Version in English and other novel English versions by Tamil Christians, retrieval of authoritatively intended meaning of verses in the Bible becomes more complicated for the reader.

The import of English usage in the Authorized Version is not easily understood correctly, and at times the reader arrives at a syncretic understanding that could be different from what the verse apparently means in the Tamil translation. Resolution is often made based on the text in Tamil, whereas enrichment of connotation is made on the basis of the Authorized Version in English.

## **SOME SPECIFIC SPECIAL FEATURES**

The following specific features may be mentioned:

- i. The translation of the Bible into Tamil exploits the morphophonemics of classical and medieval Tamil in several instances. As a consequence, there are spellings peculiar to classical and medieval Tamil that are adopted in the translation.
- ii. The translation exploits also the morphophonemics of non-standard dialectal Tamil.
- iii. It introduces several non-standard dialectal Tamil morphological inflections.
- iv. The translation also makes lexical choice from classical and medieval Tamil.
- v. It also makes lexical choice from non-standard dialectal Tamil.
- vi. Because of (v) the Tamil Bible exhibits many words of Sanskrit origin.

The reason for (ii), (iii), (v) and (vi) must be sought in the translator's attempt to make the text easily readable to the users of the Bible. In other words, the need for communication must have weighed more heavily in the decision-making process of the translators even one hundred fifty years back.

The reason for (i) and (iv) may be sought in the appropriateness of items thus chosen for the concepts they express, the lack of corresponding expressions in the spoken Tamil, and the desire to elevate the language of translation to a literary level with words from classical and medieval Tamil, and last but not the least, in the scholarly background of the translators themselves.

- vii. The Tamil Bible also has introduced, or rather revived, a genre, namely, the prose poems. The inspiration for prose poems in the 20th century could be partially traced to Bible verses.
- viii. The translation has also introduced certain peculiar grammatical constructions, which perhaps are not attested in any of the Tamil dialects, but might have been necessitated by the religious terminological conventions of Christianity. For instance, in Tamil, the embedded pronominalized construction in the slot of a quotative frame which is originally a finite verb ending sentence now changed into a pronominalized construction of an equational sentence type, and the embedded quotative sentence ending in finite verb in the slot of a quotative frame should end in a number and a pronominal termination appropriate to the pronoun in the subject slot. In other words, if the subject slot contains *naan*, the first person singular, the pronominalized nominal construction must end in the appropriate number (here singular) and pronominal termination for the pronoun, as in the following example:

*naan taaniyattaik koṭutteen*  
I grain gave

*naan taaniyattaik koṭuttavan*  
'I am the one who gave the grain'

The sentence given first in the finite verb construction is *not* inflected as in the following:

*naan taaniyattaik koṭuttavar*

However, such an inflection is attested in the Tamil translation of the Bible in the quotative frame in Hosea 2:8 and in several other places.

The translation retains the appropriate number and the pronominal termination for the pronoun in the subject slot of the embedded quotative sentence ending in finite verbs. But, as explained above, the translation does not maintain parity in the embedded quotative sentence ending in a pronominalized noun. A cursory review of the verses indicates that this disparity is especially seen when the embedded sentence is supposed to



be a quotative utterance of the Lord—a quotative utterance of God Himself. Whether this facility is admissible for the quoted utterances of other characters in such a slot is not easily confirmed.

ix. That the above maintained deviation or innovation is perhaps an influence of the terminological stance taken by the translators is also revealed in the translation of verses in which God is made in the translation to refer to Himself in an honorific form.

In normal language, humans are expected to refer to themselves in singular (which is also termed as non-honorific). Thus, in Ezekiel 35:11, we find that the Lord is quoted as saying *karttaraakiya aaṇṭavaraaka yirukkiṛa naan* as against the normally expected *karttanaakiya aaṇṭavanaayirukkiṛa naan*.

*Karttar* is Creator, referring to God in Christ which in normal ordinary language would be *karttan* in singular (non-honorific) ending. *Aaṇṭavan* is singular (non-honorific) meaning Lord/God and *aaṇṭavar* is singular (honorific) for the same.

There seems to be a deliberate deviation pursued here, perhaps in consonance with the choice of *niir*, second person singular pronoun more or less honorific, a choice dictated by grammatical conventions, or perhaps in consonance with religious conventions, or perhaps in consonance with the original texts and the concepts referred to and meant therein.

x. Yet another deliberate terminology chosen was the translation of the word Bible itself into Tamil. Holy Bible is translated into Tamil as *parisutta veedaagamam*, in short, *veedaagamam*. A curious blend is the word indeed, within the native dominant Saiva Siddhanta tradition: *veedam* ‘veda’ and *agamam* ‘agama’ are generally used to refer to the four *vedas* and numerous *agama* traditions/works, in native Hindu religious tradition, at times forming conflicting schools. The Bible translators perhaps made a deliberate choice and used the combination to indicate that all the essence of *veda* and *agama* are in the Holy Bible.

xi. A technique often followed in the coinage of terminology in the Tamil Bible was to accept a native Tamil Hindu term and use it, imputing to it the Christian theological connotation. With growing ignorance of Hindu systems among lay-Christians, the terms exhibit only a Christian meaning to Christians, in the course of time. It also acts as cementing force between the two communities. This deliberate choice to link the Christian faith with the native tradition and to adopt the native terminology is also seen in the usage of calling the Protestant priest as Ayyar (Iyer), which originally meant ‘leader’ but is now used as a caste title of the Savite Tamil Brahmins. Church is translated into *koyil/kovil*, the term used to refer to Hindu temples. While Islam preferred to make a Tamilization of the word *masjid*, Christianity chose to use a native Tamil word to refer to temple. Islam also has coined a beautiful Tamil word *pallivaacal* to refer to masjid and this Tamil coinage is more commonly used.

xii. Tamil Christians’ search for their own terminology naturally is governed by denominational polemics. In fact, terminology was chosen as the most effective weapon to protect one’s own denominational identity. There is a close link between denominational polemics and the choice of style between the Catholic and Protestant Bibles in Tamil. It must first be noted that only in 1960 Tamil Catholics brought out a complete translation of the Holy Bible in Tamil. This translation was based on the Latin

translation unlike the Protestant translation based on Hebrew and Greek texts, the original tongues in which the Bible was written. The terminology differences between the Protestant and Catholic Christians' Bibles were well-established from the beginning in various levels including the aural level. We shall not go into the differences between the Protestant and the Catholic Tamil Bibles as regards the order of Books, or the number of Books in each of these Bibles and other theological matters, as these are rather universal conditions. We shall only look into the choice of linguistic variables from Tamil to reflect this polemic and to establish and strengthen the position of each side.

xiii. There are four categories of linguistic variables exploited for the purpose. They are as follows:

- [a] Differences in the translation of names of characters.
- [b] Differences in the choice of collocations for basic concepts, and differences in the appellations given to various characters in the Bible.
- [c] Differences in spelling.
- [d] Difference based on splitting and nonsplitting of sandhi.
- [e] Differences in spelling
- [f] Difference based on splitting and nonsplitting of sandhi

## **RELIGIOUS PRACTICES**

Christianity is a religion that emphasizes aural skills. Oral expression (to pray aloud and give witness) is emphasized. This religion also emphasizes small group prayers, always said aloud unless otherwise instructed.

In the organized traditional Protestant churches the faithful go through a highly structured time-bound worship. Order of events in worship is prescribed and conducted by the pastor or the church committee, and in each step the congregation is to orally participate with/after the pastor.

## **IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY IN THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN**

Christianity is a written, text-based religion at least as far as the Tamil Protestant Christians are concerned. Hindu religion, for the vast majority of its adherents, cannot be said to be written and text-based. Hindu religion is mostly aural. Conversion from Hindu religion to Christianity demanded a change, a radical one, which had a great many consequences for the secular pursuits of Tamil Christians. A religion that emphasizes language skills—all the four language skills—a religion that sustains itself through an insistence upon and exploitation of language skills naturally insisted upon literacy as an integral characteristic of its adherents.

When one looks at the Tamil society at large, one is struck by the fact that there is hardly an illiterate Tamil Brahmin. If there is any illiterate Tamil Brahmin, the person or persons would be generally women and mostly from interior villages and of very low

economic status. The reason for their illiteracy can be ascribed to the family conditions in which they were reared and/or to the lack of aptitude, etc. A similar phenomenon is found among the Tamil Protestant Christians. Since the religion is text-based and is based on all language skills, there is an emphasis on literacy. This does not mean, however, that there are no illiterate Christians. The vast majority of illiterate Christians belong to that stream of Christianity, namely, Catholicism, which, in Tamilnadu as elsewhere, has an emphasis on aural skills and whose adherents were not encouraged to read the texts until recently.

## **AURAL SKILLS**

In Tamil, Christianity followed not only the existing tradition of using written Tamil for text making but also for individual and group prayers. While an average Hindu beseeches his gods in colloquial Tamil, an average Christian makes his supplications in written Tamil style in a syntax and lexicon based on spoken Tamil. This again is a change from the native tradition and is exploited as a mark of identity.

Since Christianity emphasizes praying aloud in groups, verbalization becomes highly valued in contrast to what happens in traditional Tamil society where verbalization—especially exhibition of one's own supplications through a louder voice—and immodesty are almost synonymous even in religious contexts. While on several occasions verbalizing prayer is not considered immodest and showing off, its excessive use on other occasions continues to be treated with a frown by Tamil Christians, sometimes for denominational reasons, sometimes as inappropriate for the occasion, and sometimes based on personality and stylistic factors. I propose to discuss these factors in a subsequent article.

It may be noted, however, that even while the Christian faith emphasizes verbalization of prayers, it has also identified occasions limiting the verbalization process. This limitation process is perhaps more culture-bound and could thus vary from society to society just as it could vary from content to content and occasion to occasion.

## **STYLISTIC TRENDS IN VERBALIZATION OF PRAYERS IN TAMIL**

Among Tamil Christians, the verbalization of prayers is conditioned by two stylistic trends at the moment. The first is the established style of language of the organized church with its own rhetoric. A second style of verbal delivery is the manner of speaking in political platforms, initiated by the Dravidian Movement. In the latter style, there is rhyming and alliteration, excessive repetition of synonyms, lengthy sentences (more often leading to awkward choice of finite verbs, since the original intent for beginning a sentence is almost always lost in the maze of successive clauses each one of which could have been uttered as a single main verb sentence), and repetition of the same content in different forms within a single discourse.

In the former, namely, the style adopted in organized and conventional or mainline church, Tamil, in the lips of the pastor and in the proceedings of the church, takes on a

curious accent, closely imitating the same in English services. Words are uttered in such rapidity and accent that unless the listener is familiar with the text that is being followed, he will not be able to comprehend what is going on. Comprehension of words uttered in such a fashion, thus, becomes an important characteristic of membership of the group.

Tamil Christianity is also marked by a growth, in recent times, of so-called non-conformist groups. Many Pentecostal groups have sprung up with a much greater emphasis on language skills than other conventional streams. This phenomenon is universal. Hence we restrict our observations to variables that operate in Tamil conditions.

Firstly, all these non-conformist groups accept a conformist form of language, if not the terminology, in the sense that all forms of worship are carried on through written language as in the conventional, mainline Protestant Church. The participation of the individual, more freedom to express oneself within church proceedings, flexibility of schedule of events in a service, the predominance of witnessing and singing, etc.—all these are marks of the non-conformist characteristic of these groups. However, use of written language is a convention shared between the conformist and non-conformist groups. The non-conformist groups also use the same translation of the Holy Bible as used by the conformist Protestant churches. Service in the church is in written Tamil with spoken mixtures.

Witness is given in written Tamil. The use of spoken-language in witness is generally frowned upon, and the use marks the witness-giving individual as the one whose initiation into Christianity is only of a recent period. It also indicates that the witness-giving individual is not yet fully absorbed into the mainstream of people and procedures in the church. In secular terms, it could also indicate that the witness-giving individual might be illiterate and/or belong to a lower social and economic group. Within the Pentecostal fold, speaking in tongues and prophesying are also done through written Tamil. This may be compared with the “speech of the deities” of folk temples through individuals on whom the spirit descends. These deities speak in spoken Tamil, whereas the deities of elitist temples, who do not generally descend as spirits in an institutional manner as in the case of the deities of folk temples, speak in written Tamil in plays and movies. Perhaps the overall literacy background of the devotees determines the style and form of language used by the gods.

There are also other trends, which seek an identity with native traditions. One such attempt is the wearing of saffron robes by Christian missionaries. Another attempt is to relate Hindu mythologies to Biblical characters and stories and to reinterpret the mythologies accordingly. Hindu gods are also sought to be related in some manner to the godhead in Christianity. Some have attempted to derive the lineage of a caste (Nadar) to the three wise men through an etymological analysis: the title of the caste *caṇṇaan* is claimed to be etymologically related to *caṇṇoor* ‘wise men’. Some have also attempted to prove that Jesus belonged to Tamil Nadar caste, and so on. Fortunately on none of these is the solid foundation of Tamil Christianity based.

## SONGS OF PRAISE AND WORSHIP

Acceptance of a terminology not their own and evolution of a terminology of their own are more clearly exemplified in the song books of Tamil Christians. A blend of the West and East in Tamil Church is clearly reflected in the hymnals and lyrics sung in Tamil churches. A codified book of lyrics was published from among the many available and old ones as early as 1853. Hymnals are called *paamaalai* ‘a garland of songs’ and lyrics are called *kiirttanai* ‘songs of praise.’ Almost all songs of the Book of Lyrics are original compositions in Tamil and set to the tunes of native *Carnatic* music. In the organized conformist Protestant churches, the pastors include songs from both *paamaalai* and *kiirttanai*. One to the exclusion of others is not generally practiced. No definite order of presentation, however, is emphasized.

At a time when singing in classical tunes was mainly through Telugu and Kannada compositions, Tamil Christians adopted classical music wholesale and used Tamil language for their compositions. Many have not seen the latter-day Tamil Music movement and renaissance as having its modern roots in Tamil Christian lyrics. (One of the greatest exponents of *Tamil Music* was Abraham Panditar (Pandit of Thanjavur). The Tamil church made a deliberate blend of the West and the East.

Since the organ and the syllabic structure of Tamil poetry/songs may not jibe well (in fact, many a time such a combination sounds awkward and amusing), the hymnals (*paamaalai*) established certain spelling conventions. The anthologists of the hymnals also decided not to print musical notations, because, as they said: “Since it is possible to bring forth the heart’s emotion and the meaning of the song by the volume and tone, the congregation could, by singing at times softly and at times loudly according to the meaning of the words, raise the soul to ecstasy” (a quote from an earlier edition of Tamil Hymnals). Songs in *paamaalai* (hymnals) do not appear to follow any prosodic conventions. The songs in *kiirttanai* (lyrics) are based on Tamil prosody. Furthermore, in *kiirttanai* (lyrics), Christ is sometimes addressed in non-honorific second person singular just as in Hindu poetry.

## TAMIL CHRISTIANS AND PURE TAMIL

Scholars have claimed that Christian missionaries were mainly responsible for the Dravidian resurgence in modern times. Some have criticized that the European Christian missionary and the European scholar were responsible for this alleged divisive element. While the English-educated leaders of the Dravidian Movement may have been awakened by the researches of the European scholar, and moved by the language developmental activities of the European missionary, the native Dravidian tradition in Tamil society, irrespective of religious sects, always prided itself on its distinctiveness.

In the beginning of modern times, Christians associated themselves closely with Tamil and broke new grounds in literature, thus establishing a close terminological identity with native traditions. In spite of the fact that Christian names cannot be written without the use of *grantha* letters, Christian Tamil Pandits wrote pure Tamil. The church-based

literature on rituals, etc., continued the Tamil Bible tradition. In recent times, the language of the Bible in Tamil is sought to be “purified”. The dialogue between opposing groups continues unabated. In the absence of a clear-cut “standard Tamil,” only piecemeal changes are brought about in lexical usage.

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