

Father of Tamil Printing in India

Prior to 1550s there was no printing press in India and after the arrival of European missionaries; in particular Portuguese, modern printing was introduced in India. Earlier Scriptures and literary works were written mostly on dried palm leaves. The basic purpose of printing press imported by the preachers was mainly to print religious matter - Christian literature in vernacular. The press was mostly owned by the Church.

In 1556, a Portuguese ship carrying 14 Jesuits, a printer and a press arrived in Goa. In the following 100 plus years printing in local languages spread along the coastal areas of south India - both on the west and east.

For unknown reasons, printing paled into insignificance and finally died out after 1612. The 18th century India saw the revival of modern printing press, with the arrival of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg.

Ziegenbalg, then a 23 year old man and his associate Heinrich Plütschau landed at Tranquebar (now Tarangambadi) on July 09, 1706 on orders from King Frederick IV. They took the honor of establishing the first formal Protestant Mission in Asia. One Johann Heinrich Schloricke, a 30 years old printer printed in Portuguese the Tranquebar Mission Press's first publications in 1712.

This heralded the revival of printing in India. The vast printing industries in India owe a debt of gratitude to Rev. Ziegenbalg and his associates at the Protestant Mission, Tarangampadi who gave life to the modern printing in the by-gone days. Rev. Ziegenbalg used the special Tamil typefaces made in Halle on his request. The Tamil typeface set arrived in Madras on June 29, 1713. It revolutionized the printing in Tamil. It was for the first time Tamil work was printed in 1714. Ziegen Balg is considered as the Father of Tamil Printing in India.



Ziegenbalg stamp by India Post to commemorate his tercentenary

First page of New Testament in Tamil Print. This book is available in Serampur College, West Bengal, India

