Constantius Joseph Beschi (1680-1747), who was born in the Italian town of Castiglione delle Stiviere in the province of Venice, came to India from Lisbon in 1710 at the age of thirty, after getting all the training that a European Jesuit gets in theology, languages, philosophy, and grammar. One of his biographers notes that “his superior talents and attainments attracted the attention of the reigning Pontiff, by whom he was selected as a missionary to the East”, although another biographer disputes this selection by the Pope as it was not the custom in Rome (Besse 1918:12). From 1711 till his death at the age of 67, Beschi, who was popularly known as Viramaniváρ (the heroic ascetic’), contributed something unique to the understanding of the East, even though his major area of work was the Tamil language and literature. It should be noted that during his period, English was not an important language in India and Tamil was spoken in large areas of the subcontinent, if Caldwell’s description 150 years later is correct (Caldwell 1974: 7). According to some estimates, Beschi wrote 27 books, one of which is an epic on the life of Joseph, containing 3615 verses of four metric lines, and many other works, such as small poetic compositions, grammars, dictionaries, prose works in Tamil, Latin, French and Portuguese. But what fascinates a modern Tamil scholar is not the number of books and the breadth of vision of each work, but the total change these works brought about in the Tamil language.

Before we proceed with the study of the works of Beschi, from a modern point of view, we have to look at the competing discourses that have come up today in the field of scholarship which studies the relationship between the West and the East. Although the West-East encounter has been a field of debate for a long time, recently it has assumed important proportions. This two-world encounter is a worthy subject in humanities and it is, therefore, prudent to take a look at this angle too. Sheldon Pollock may be referred to here with respect to his division of the West-East relations into three stages, i.e.: a) English colonialism, b) missionary evangelism, c) German Romanticism (Pollock 1993: 80). Although the aim of missionaries like Beschi was different from that of the later colonial officers, their encounter with the East, nevertheless, left indelible marks on the Eastern countries. These early representatives of Western culture were well educated and highly motivated; hence, they undoubtedly created new paradigms of knowledge.
With the entry of Beschi into the Tamil Scholarly world, the well-ordered traditional Hindu Tamil situation began to change. He encountered a ‘different’ religious atmosphere in the Madurai Mission, which uniquely in India, adopted certain Indianised customs; this had been well laid down by Beschi’s predecessors. Those who came to the Madurai Mission had to eat strictly vegetarian food cooked by Brahmin cooks and confine themselves only to the practice of rice-eating avoiding meat; they had to wear purple dress as against the black dress of those in other provinces. The following passage will give a vivid picture of how Beschi appeared before the people: “Well knowing the influence of outward impressions of simple minds he affected showy and imposing magnificence. His dress was of a light purple colour, with a waist-band of the same; his turban was white, veiled with purple; embroidered Turkish slippers covered his feet; in his hand he carried a long cane which aided him in displaying a mysterious ring composed of five metals, which he wore upon his finger. His earrings of rubies and pearls were beautiful and costly. When he traveled, his palanquin was preceded by a man bearing an umbrella of purple silk, surmounted by a golden ball; at each side ran men with magnificent fans of peacock’s feathers; the holy man reclined in the midst of all this splendour, upon a tiger skin, remarkable for its beauty, which when he alighted, was placed upon the ground for him to sit upon” (Beschi 1997: ii-iii).

Along with this outward appearance, Beschi’s mastery of the Tamil language and other endeavours such as preparing new kinds of dictionaries following alphabetical order and writing a grammar separately for modern (Kotuntamil) as well as literary Tamil (Centamil) on the pattern of European language made him a formidable figure in the Madurai mission during his life time. His works of Tamil poetry include an epic and a few more poems and his prose books blazed a trail in Tamil prose writing as this collection of tales about a Guru was so popular that it was translated not only into European but also into many Indian languages. So he perfectly mixed Western themes with Eastern meters and rhythms or Eastern themes with Western logical structures in such a way as to create a new paradigm of discourse. As a result, his poetry and prose works were utterly new to native readers. Thus through both his life and his work Beschi created a new world of understanding which brought modernity to Tamilnadu. When he embarked on the ship in Lisbon, his aim, as a missionary, was to convert people and he might have been baffled by the situation he saw in the Madurai Mission, where people were not prepared to accept foreigners as foreigners. There are interesting anecdotes about the life of Beschi. Once a first minister to the Madurai Kingdom, who was a man against evangelisation and was described...
as a prosecutor of Christians, mistook him for a missionary. Expecting hard treatment from him, Beschi went to meet him and explained his position. When the minister told him that he had mistaken him for a missionary from Tranquebar, Beschi gave him his Tamil Book, which criticised the Tranquebar missionaries. Then the minister was happy and told the Brahmins who gathered around him that Beschi was not an European. It is very clear that these Madurai Mission priests lived like natives and preached like native gurus. A kind of a mask had to be worn by these people to encounter another culture. Here the word ‘mask’ is used to indicate that he function of the mask is to express multifarious meanings and not to hide something; the mask is a feature very often used in Eastern folk performances.

We also take note of another practice of these Madurai Mission priests – that they were all identified by their local names which in most cases were Tamil translations of their European names. Roberto de Nobili was known as Tattuvapōtakar (‘the perfect teacher’), John de Britto assumed the name of Amalagantham (‘the infinite grace’), Father Bottari – Periya Paṇṭhināṭhar (the great divine light) and father Bouchet was known as Periya Āṇcaśvināṭar (‘the great leader of eternal life’) (Besse 1918:19).

Actually the history of nativising Christianity started not with Beschi, but from the time of Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), another early author of Tamil translations of their European names. Roberto de Nobili, a controversial Jesuit, was criticized by his own uncle who was an influential Cardinal in Rome (Beschi 1997:ii). De Nobili laid the foundation for a particular and important interpretation of Hindu texts by Europeans, as he was the first to introduce the division of cultural versus religious aspects of Hindus, though the later studies of Sanskritists such as William Jones and Max Muller had very different dimensions of influence on the politics and history of both Asia and Europe. De Nobili said that the a sacred thread on the body of a Tamil Brahmin and his tuft of hair on his head marks his culture and not his religion. This ingenious interpretation places de Nobili as an astute observer of India, as the cultural markers such as the tuft later became very important for Gandhi and Periyar in waging their popular mass struggles. Another aspect of de Nobili’s interpretation hinges on his strategies for translation of Christian concepts into Tamil. He, of course, like many people, mistakenly believed that Tamil belonged to the Indo-Aryan group of languages and Sanskrit word and sentence formation rules could be applied to Tamil in coining words such as ‘soul’ and ‘scripture’, which he translated as āṭṭumam and vēṭam. Catholics even today are called vēṭakkārakal in Tamil areas in the whole of South Asia.
wherever they live. It may be useful to know that about 100 years later Robert Caldwell established that Tamil belongs to a different group of languages. Chronologically, even earlier than de Nobili, attempts at writing Tamil grammar and translating Catholic views were made and the name of Henrique Henriques is worth mentioning here. However, there are not many studies available comparing the language usage of these different priests.

Thus the West-East encounter started roughly from 1500 AD onwards and there was an effort to balance the scale of discrimination against the East. It is important to know that de Nobili, the theorietician of the period, adopted the practice of disseminating Catholic knowledge in Tamil according to his belief that Sanskrit words and rules could be used in this language. Beschi, however, played a greater role by bringing about a universality and practicality to the Tamil language as against the theoretical perspective advanced by de Nobili who, according to available details, had to win a theoretical battle with the well-equipped Sanskritists of the Brahmin caste of Madurai.

Another aspect of the West-East encounter we should take note of is that modernity’s new outlook coupled with new technical and mercantile advancement, which had come to the East through the initial stages of globalization, did influence the Tamil language as it was the first language in India to produce a book in printing. Thus a configuration of many things – the Madurai Mission, Indian modernity, the nativisation of the Catholic religion, the reordering of the linguistic reality of a great ancient and living language of two thousand years – emerged without the individual components losing their relation to one another. Beschi’s writings, undoubtedly shaped by his earlier training in Rome in languages like Greek and Latin, gave a new epistemological break to the understanding of an Eastern language like Tamil, which, unlike Sanskrit, is rooted in a particular region. In this way Tamil is a carrier of the ethos and mind of a specific group of people. The coming together of a Latinised linguistic mind such as Beschi’s and of this Eastern language with a centuries-old tradition gave a twist to Tamil studies which later produced new books of grammar, dictionaries, etc.

In the famous dictionary, Caturakarāṭī (‘a dictionary of four parts’), the first part, Peyar (‘name’), gives the general meaning of common words, the second, Puruḷ (‘meaning’), gives a list of several words bearing the same meaning, the third, Tokai (‘compilation’), gives a list of scientific and technical words and the fourth, Toṭai (‘a technique of poetics’) gives a list of rhyming words. The structure and presentation of this dictionary is unique in the sense that the usually available nikantu is a traditional dictionary in the form of poems. This was the first alphabetical dictionary that the Tamils had seen, and Beschi, as a practicing poet, took care to include the rhyming words in one section of
the dictionary as this method of rhyming created by the occurrence of similar sounds consecutively in a particular repetitive position (the second sound of each line) is a feature of Tamil. What one encounters in the case of this dictionary is a new kind of ordering of words which takes note of the regional language’s peculiarity, that is, rhyming words as separate form common words and scientific and technical terms. The enormous number of words in Tamil and the availability of many words for one designate make this language difficult to learn by foreigners and hence the idea of an inclusion of a list of synonyms in one section of the dictionary.

What is quite interesting is that poetry and aesthetic values are differentiated from science and technology through the meticulous planning of this dictionary. As everyone who is familiar with the underlying idea of classification would understand, Beschi introduced a new order of thinking. The visual dimension dominates here and this was the product of the new culture of printing introduced by the early Christian missionaries working in South India. Although all this may sound very simple today, the reordering of an oral transmission towards a visual effect, which was introduced through Beschi’s dictionary, impinged upon the traditional custom of learning which had been followed for centuries. Besides, a new idea of science and technology was introduced along with the new order of words. Thus one can guess what would have happened to a traditional Tamil teacher who used to sing or recite dictionaries from his memory to his students, had he come to know about this alphabetically arranged printed dictionary introduced by Beschi.

Another technologically necessitated change is the modification of the shapes of two letters introduced by Beschi and once they were accepted by everyone it was time to shift from palm leaf writing to printing. We may also mention other dictionaries prepared by Beschi: Tamil–Portuguese, Tamil–French–Portuguese and Tamil–Latin (Muthuswami Pillei 1840:18). Thus, a universal perspective of linking European languages with Tamil was a project Beschi carried out single-handedly.

Till the 1970’s the Tamil language did not allow its poets to eschew metre and one of the requirements of poets from ancient times was a good knowledge of all aspects of metre. The metre in Tamil is usually an arrangement of a few sounds constituting the smallest units and these smallest units combine to from slightly bigger units. The relation between these smallest as well as the bigger units is defined according to different patterns of rhythms. This kind of arrangement goes on till all the lines of a poem are defined in terms of rhythm first, and then the theme. Thus there is a continuous rhythmic flow from smaller to bigger units of metre; the rhythm and meaning then constitute all these units which form a whole. This simplified account of
complex Tamil prosody, according to native scholars, psychologically controls anyone who writes Tamil poetry by creating a Tamil cultural aura. The process of falling under the spell of this specially constructed metre guards them from slipping away form its culturally guarded ethos. For poets who write epics in Tamil, these faultless rhythmic lines have to be mastered and Beschi doubtlessly became an adept in this language and metre. As a result, he wrote an epic in Tamil, called Tēmpāvāṇi, on the theme of the life of Joseph, which, needless to say, attracted the attention of both native and foreign readers. Thus Beschi imbied the rhythmic aura of the Tamil language and its culture and in this process became a Tamil epic poet and this enabled him to assume a Tamil personality. Referring to his ability to compose verse with more cadences than the great Tamil Poet Kamban, Beschi says: “Those who are acquainted with this art applaud the poet Kamban, because in his Ramāyana, which contains 12016 stanzas, he has introduced 87 varieties of cadences: but in my poem Tēmpāvāṇi, which contains only 3615 stanzas. I have without any difficulty employed 90 such varieties” (Muthuswami Pillei 1840:10).

What we have seen so far gives us an account of how Beschi adopted a new life style, as well as a new mode of writing. During this process, there came about a new arrangement of different components of two cultures with which he was negotiating both consciously and unconsciously.

Beschi “imitates not only the expression but the mode of thought of the previous Tamil writers” (Muthuswami Pillei 1840: 28-29). Here is the poem:

Thou art the sea of virtue, thou art the sea of grace, thou art the most benevolent;  
Thou art the sea of power, thou art the sea of prosperity, thou art the sea of wisdom which enlighten the mind;  
Thou art the confirmation and the light of the world to whom is no likeness;  
Thou art the sea by which I am confirmed, thou art to me as a mother and father; art thou not all to me?  
Thou art the infinitely bright and heavenly sun which cannot be hidden by the assembled clouds and which sinketh not into the ocean;  
Thou art the sea of constant felicity which hath neither swell nor wave;  
Thou art an impregnable castle which no foe hath even taken; thou art the mountain which supporteth the earth;  
Thou art the life-giving nectar which cureth all distemper, allayeth all pain and removeth all defeat (Muthuswami Pillei 1840: 29)
Though Beschi followed the theory of de Nobili, what typifies Beschi is his superior knowledge of the grammar and poetry of a living language, Tamil. No doubt Beschi knew Sanskrit very well, as there are lots of references to this effect, and still he did not write like de Nobili about Indian systems of thought taking material from Sanskrit. Beschi’s epic on the life of Joseph follows all the traditional requirements of a Tamil epic which was, in many respects, different from Sanskrit epics and their rules, codified largely in books such as Dandiĩs Kāvyādarsa, and in a Tamil adaptation of this, the Tāntiyalaṅkāram, of the 12th century.

Attention may be drawn to an instance of Beschi’s adherence to the description of the fivefold division of land, a poetic technique one very often comes across in ancient Tamil poetics and poetry. Irrespective of the fact that Beschi is describing the natural scenery of the country of Judea, which Joseph crosses, he follows all the rules of how a Tamil epic should describe a country. The country, according to Beschi, looks like a battlefield where the army is arrayed for a battle all over the sky, where birds rove and white clouds appear resembling white banners. In another place, he describes the streams of this country. He says that the streams “passed boldly all the rocks that opposed their passage and leaving the far-extended tract of cultivated land, bright with exhaustless wealth, flowed towards the azure ocean”. This stream reaches the ocean like the wise that, renouncing everything, aspire alone to obtain heaven.

What is noteworthy is that the Holy Family comes from Bethlehem to Jerusalem crossing these streams and goes from Jerusalem to Egypt. This journey is described according to the Tamil tradition – giving details of the fivefold division of land – and Beschi is very accurate in saying that one of the five lands, the land of jasmine (Mullai), is crossed by Joseph on the way of Egypt (Muthuswami Pillei 1840:39). It may be interesting to note that Beschi, when writing his treatise on Tamil poetics, strictly follows the rule of including this method of fivefold division as a necessary item of knowing Tamil Poetry. What happens here is that Beschi not only follows the rule but also lays down rules in his grammar that this aspect of Tamil tradition should be known and followed. This aspect of the rule pertaining to the fivefold division of land is a point that Beschi decides to retain in his modern Tamil grammar, whereas he excludes many archaic elements. One should not forget here that Sanskrit poetics does not have any convention of this sort and Beschi prefers to follow the tradition of a local culture. His attitude of not losing the ancient elements of Tamil Tradition in favour of an overaching, dominant, interregional Sanskrit culture makes Beschi a champion of local knowledge. As some theorists say, globalisation started from the 15th century, and the tension between global versus local knowledge was, we should say, felt by Beschi in his own way and his sympathies lie with the local culture and knowledge of the locality.
Beschi negotiated with the West and the East not only by accepting the East fully but by also rejecting certain elements of the East. So there arises another equation that within the East there are conflicting and complementing paradigms and Beschi’s intense identification and work with the local language could really bring to the surface various levels of the underlying structure of Tamil culture.

A comparison of Beschi’s Latin translation of the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* with other commentaries available in Tamil will show two things: firstly, that Beschi falls in line with the tradition of other Tamil commentators for whom the original text is not the destination but a point from which many can start their journey; secondly, that Beschi understood that his Christian hermeneutics had a place among other commentaries, which number around eighteen, belonging to different periods and religions. In the introduction to his Tamil grammar, as a primary requirement, he asserts that there is only one God (Beschi 1978: 109). Likewise he negates any other god in this same section of Tamil Grammar (*Nāgappirakācam* no date: 19). In his Latin translation of the *Tirukkuṟaḷ*, he omits one third of the whole book, as that section deals with the Tamil concept of carnal love which runs through the two-thousand-years-old history of Tamil literature; thereby he exposes his partiality. There are examples to show his irreverence for the traditional meaning of words if they do not suit his purpose. He also changes the meaning of the Tamil word *uḻ* (‘destiny’) to ‘God’s desire’ (*Nāgappirakācam* no date: 19). One more coinage to denote God is *Vēdamutharporu* (Sanskrit *Vēda* meaning here ‘scripture’, *mutal* - first, *porul* - ‘matter’, which means that God is the “most important matter of the *Vēda*” but here the word *Vēda* can also indicate ‘scripture’ according to the new usage de Nobili introduced into Tamil. When giving a new order to the Tamil grammatical thinking, Beschi introduced the concept of a Christian God even when the Tamil tradition does not intend this. For instance, the traditional meaning of one of the parts of Tamil Grammar is ‘*porul*’ or ‘matter’, and Tamil commentators give two meanings: one is ‘matter’ and another is ‘a theme of poetry’; in this way both are secular meanings. Beschi’s meaning of ‘*porul*’ is completely different; he says that ‘*porul*’ is the truthful, indivisible and the ‘first matter of scripture’ (Beschi 1978: 109). A neo-Brahminical twist to word coinage was given and inserted into Tamil discourses to gain and develop a Christian meaning and vocabulary. Thus a Christian meaning is superimposed even on a traditional secular interpretation by Beschi and this is generally ignored in modern Tamil.

Still another area of interest is Beschi’s idea of five gods reigning over the five lands as described in Tamil Poetics. He writes that “even though there is one God who is everywhere and at all times in all lives, all words, and can create as well as destroy, we know according to the tradition of this country that there are five gods each one belonging to each land” (quoted by...
Beschi always strikes a balance in adopting different cultural strategies to write a new type of Christian literature. He was very careful that it should not be rejected by the long tradition of Tamil literature.

If one looks at the background of the prose writing of Beschi, it may be noted that prose was not a developed genre then. Beschi’s humorous stories called Paramārta Kuruvin Katai were duly considered pioneering in Tamil. It must also be noted that Westerners brought the technology of printing to India; the first printed book was in the Tamil language. Thus the Tamil language became the main intellectual medium for Beschi with which he identified throughout his life and constructed domain of discourses through different grammars, an epic, many compositions in minor literary genres, and many prose works.
On the whole, a study of Beschi’s encounter with the East will help us to distinguish two conceptual models: one is the Sanskrit model of Indianising which de Nobili recommended to all vernaculars due to his erroneous idea, prevalent then among all native scholars, that Tamil was an offshoot of Sanskrit, and the second is Beschi’s native language model of Indianising which emphasizes the specificity of the local language more than the pan-Indian model. Although Beschi started from the premises of de Nobili, he reached the second model due to practical necessity and in this process he formulated a theory that Tamil has two levels of manifestation, one, centamī (‘high Tamil’), and another, coming closer to modern speech, which he called kotuntamī (‘modern Tamil’), but which he did not identify with the spoken form. This novel division into high Tamil and modern Tamil shows his correct understanding of the history of Tamil grammar. He compares the division into centamī and kotuntamī with the division into Latin and Portuguese (Naappirakācam no date: 79). His understanding of the two phases of the history of Tamil was possible, as he intuitively understood that the Tamil language belonged to another group of languages very different from Sanskrit though no one had advanced that theory then. Caldwell established that Tamil belonged to another group of languages 150 years later.

From what we have seen so far, we may conclude that Beschi’s life and work show that he did not view the West and the East as two opposing poles, but as a unified field where a large number of criss-crossing elements and trends of modernity meet, share and oppose.

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