German scholar’s Malayalam mission gets a digital life

Manuscripts, Novels, Texts Collected By Scholar Hermann Gundert To Be Available Online

German missionary, scholar and linguist Hermann Gundert, who gave Kerala the first encyclopaedic Malayalam-English dictionary, left Indian shores in 1859. But he took along his private collection containing some of the earliest Malayalam texts, palm leaf manuscripts and novels, which ultimately made their way into the library of his former alma mater, the University of Tuebingen. And now, Gundert’s legacy will be made available to people all over the world, thanks to a digitization project.

The Gundert portal — gundert-portal.de — to be released on November 20 at the University of Tuebingen, will aid researchers across the world. “People who are interested in Indology, philology, theology, and mission studies as well as those interested in the history of Malayalam or Kerala will benefit from the portal,” says professor Heike Oberlin, Eberhard Karls University of Tuebingen, department of Indology.


“Gundert tried to understand an entire culture and capture it in literature, so his legacy contains famous works such as ‘Indulekha’ and ‘Kunadalata’ the first novels in Malayalam. He also collected old texts from Sanskrit and the Manipravalam tradition, for instance, the Sanskrit work ‘Vajrasuchi’, with a Malayalam commentary, or ‘Nalacharitham Maipravam’, a largely unknown version of the wellknown Nala story,” says Oberlin. “The latter was newly published as the second volume in the ‘Hermann Gundert Archive Series’ along with Malayalam University and is based on the Tuebingen edition.” Besides Malayalam, the Gundert collection contains printed and lithographed books and pamphlets in Kannada, Tulu, Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and other languages; Indian manuscripts, including several palmleaf manuscripts, copies of texts and notebooks in various languages and letters by Gundert and his missionary colleagues.
The desire to preserve his legacy has brought together researchers from India and Germany. “In the 1980s, Malayalam scholar Scaria Zacharia discovered the collection in Tuebingen. He edited a few texts, brought it back to Kerala and published it,” says M Sreenathan, professor and dean of Malayalam University, Tirur, which established a Gundert chair at the University of Tuebingen in 2015. Dr Zacharia was the first holder of the Gundert Chair. As part of a memorandum of understanding, faculty from the Malayalam University has been conducting classes in Malayalam and on Kerala culture in Tuebingen. “The digitization project was launched in January 2016. Since then, with the support of the German Research Foundation, printed and handwritten source material from the estate of Gundert and his surroundings has been scanned, partially transcribed in cooperation with Indian partners and made publicly accessible,” says Oberlin.

The proposal to digitize Gundert’s legacy, however, came from Bengaluru-based digital archivist Shiju Alex. “I have been digitizing and sharing public domain documents related to Malayalam and Kerala and wanted to digitize Gundert’s collection also,” says Alex, who along with other volunteers, has helped digitize 50,000 pages. “About 25,000 pages of those are printed books, others are palm leaves and handwritten manuscripts, and we have converted it to Unicode.” The metadata, indexing and cataloguing were contracted to young scholars in Israel, Poland and Germany, all former students of Oberlin who studied Malayalam and manuscriptology. “All the materials have been labelled with a few formal keywords, which will allow you to quickly gain an overview of the different literary genres,” says Oberlin.

More than 800 prints, lithographed works, essays and manuscripts have been digitized and indexed. “On the portal, we have included all 19th century works in south Indian languages that are at the University Library, even if they were not strictly speaking from the Gundert legacy. English and German material written by Gundert and his closest colleagues were also added,” says Oberlin.