

Malayalam gets global push, new status in Germany

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Hermann Gundert was a missionary scholar who lived and worked in Tellichery in the 19th century and did trailblazing work in codifying Malayalam grammar and writing its first dictionary.

Malayalam is set to get its first big global push. In October, the University of Tubingen in Germany will be setting up a chair dedicated to the teaching of and research in Malayalam. It is being named after Hermann Gundert, a missionary scholar who lived and worked in Tellichery in the 19th century and did trailblazing work in codifying Malayalam grammar and writing its first dictionary.

Gundert's India connection survived generations. His grandson was Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse, whose book Siddhartha, first published in the US in 1951, was easily among the most influential book of the 1960s. That's no all. Gundert (1814-1893) was contemporary of Max Muelle (1823-1900), the German Orientalist whose translations of th Upanishads and the Vedas not only led to the introduction of Indian culture to the West but also far-reaching exchanges between Indian an British intellectual life.

The University of Tubingen would henceforth be engaging a guest professor from the Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University at Vakkad, who will offer short courses, says K Jayakumar, vice chancellor at the Malayalam University. The project is being funded by the UGC.

Malayalam University is excited at the prospect of taking the language to the shores of countries that host large diasporic populations - the world currently has 33 million Malayalam speakers. "Our university has a responsibility to propagate Malayalam," says Jayakumar. The teachers will have access to the priceless monographs, books and palm leaf manuscripts that Gundert bequeathed the library at Tubingen university, his alma mater.

Tubingen is already a known learning hub for Malayalam enthusiasts in Europe. Scholars at the university's Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, such as ethnologist Gabriele Alex and Indologist Heike Oberlin, are already focused on southern India. An avid koodiyattam scholar and artiste herself, Oberlin is known among European students who are keen to study Kerala's history and culture. Her beginner classes in Malayalam have been attracting students from across Europe for nearly a decade.

Malayalam University will designate an eminent professor to the Gundert Chair who will spend a month at a time at Tubingen. During the project, scholars from Kerala will have the opportunity to research and translate Gundert's works, and draw up teaching modules for other foreign students. The Chair is expected to be inaugurated on October 9.

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