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Resources for Spiritual Questers

## *Swedenborgianism in India: D. Gopaul Chetty and the Marriage of Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*

*~Eleanor Schnarr*

*Like the sand which unites with the wax when it is melted  
[Śiva] being closely joined to the world (of souls) is in inseparable union with it.  
Because He enters my solitary soul, I can now say 'I am the world'.<sup>1</sup>  
~Meikanda Deva*



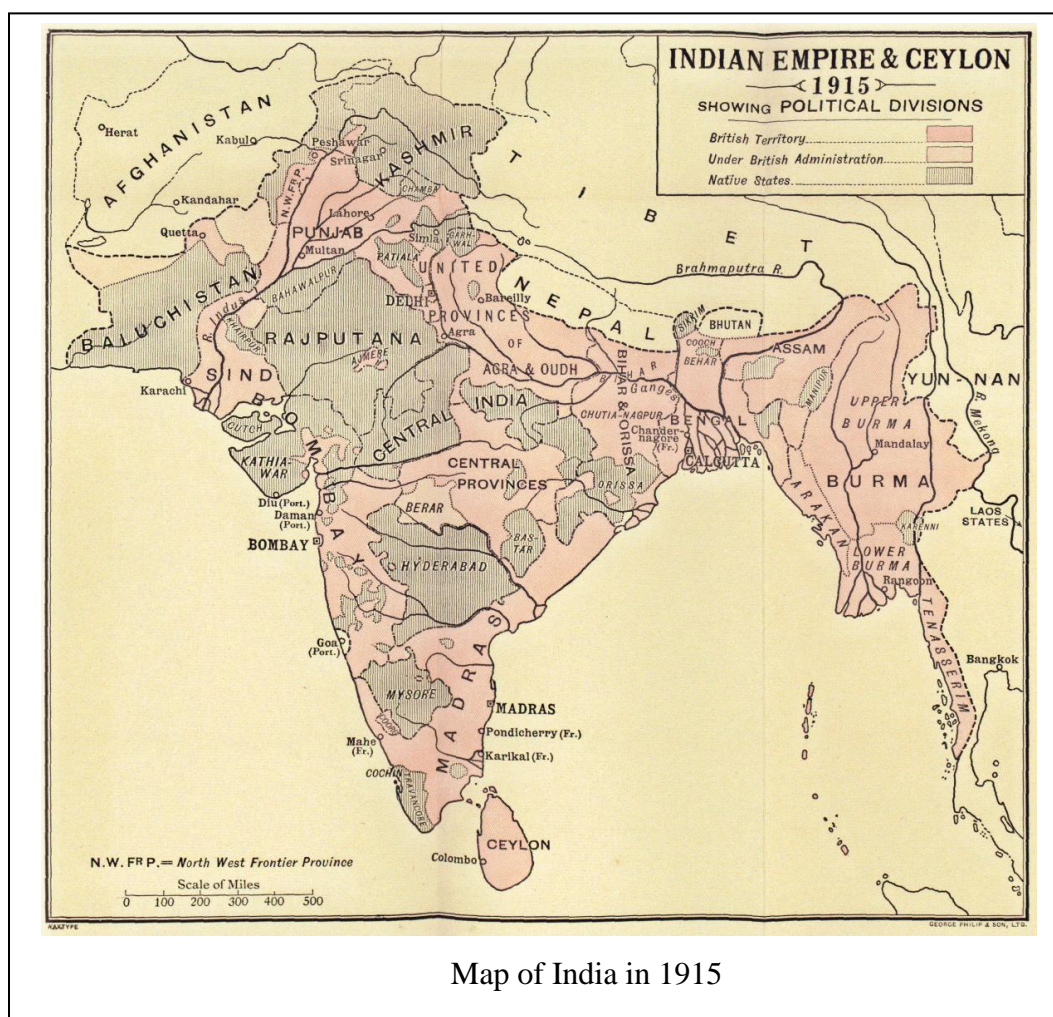
**250th Anniversary of the Birth of Emanuel Swedenborg Madras Celebration  
29th January 1938**

Gopaul Chetty, *Report of Gopaul Chetty's New Church Work in India*, 44 1933, 2, Swedenborg Society

<sup>1</sup> Meykanda Devar, "Śiva-Ñana-Bodham: A Manual of Saiva Religious Doctrine," trans. Gordon Matthews (Oxford University Press, 1948). Sutra 2, 2, d

## Abstract

This paper will explore D. Gopaul. Chetty's (1867-1953) unique contribution to Swedenborgian thought and his historical role as an evangelist and social reformer. This emic study into the author's own tradition was done using the methodology of historical research from primary sources secured from online archives from a variety of New Church institutions. In addition, the author has chosen to employ a critical discourse analysis to question the profound implications of the near total erasure of D. Gopaul Chetty and his life's work from the consciousness of Western Swedenborgians. It is my hope that this story can serve as an instructive parable for those who desire to see Swedenborgian thought spread throughout the world, and that going forward we can embrace the pluralistic diversity of our tradition's rich history beyond the bounds of Western Christianity. The New Church is for the whole world.



Map of India in 1915

## ***A Brief History of the New Church in India***

*People can realize that non-Christians as well as Christians are saved if they know what constitutes heaven in us; for heaven is within us, and people who have heaven within them come into heaven. The heaven within us is our acknowledgment of the Divine and our being led by the Divine. The beginning and foundation of every religion is its acknowledgment of the Divine Being; a religion that does not acknowledge the Divine Being is not a religion at all. The precepts of every religion focus on worship, that is, on how the Divine is to be honored so that we will be acceptable in its sight; and when this fully occupies the mind (or, to the extent that we intend this or love this) we are being led by the Lord.<sup>2</sup>*

Swedenborgianism was introduced to India in the nineteenth century through the effort of British missionaries.<sup>3</sup> The British Conference had a significant presence in the Indian Subcontinent as early as 1850 when a society was formed in Chumar, and later in Madras and Allahabad. It is likely that the first native religious community to be influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg's philosophy as a source of spiritual wisdom was a break-off from the *Bramo Somaj* called *The Church of the New Dispensation (Nava Vidhana)*<sup>4</sup> which was established in Calcutta by Bengali social reformer Keshab Chunder Sen (1838-1884) founded in 1870.<sup>5</sup> In the same year<sup>6</sup> Sen had traveled to England where he spoke with universalist Christian groups including the Swedenborgians, denouncing mainstream Christianity and returning to Calcutta with a strong

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<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. George F Dole (New York, NY, USA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000). §319

<sup>3</sup> Maeve, "Brief Details of the History of the New Church in India," n.d., General Conference Library archives.

<sup>4</sup> "List of Colonial and Foreign Addresses in the General Conference Year Books India/British India, 1876-1910," n.d., General Conference Library Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Maeve, "Brief Details of the History of the New Church in India."

<sup>6</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Keshab Chunder Sen: Hindu Philosopher and Social Reformer," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, November 15, 2020, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Keshab-Chunder-Sen>.

Swedenborgian influence on his ideas of the “New Dispensation” and a trunk full of Swedenborg’s books.<sup>7</sup>

With support from the British Conference, the native run Hindi Swedenborg Society opened its doors in 1914 on the other side of the country in Bombay.<sup>8</sup> In 1925, ex-minister Sir T. N. Sivagnanam Pillay announced at a public meeting in Madras that Emanuel Swedenborg was the reincarnation of Thirteenth century Tamil saint Meikanda Devar.<sup>9</sup> By 1943 Erik Hjerpe, at the Swedenborg *Bokförlaget* (publisher) in Stockholm, reported at a press interview that he believed there were “ten million” Hindu followers of Swedenborg in southern India.<sup>10</sup>

This explosive growth of Indian Swedenborgianism at the beginning of the twentieth century was mainly possible due to the lifelong work of a man who has been largely forgotten by both Swedenborgian and Śaivite communities, an ex-barrister, theologian and celebrated social reformer by the name of D. Gopaul Chetty. Chetty saw in Swedenborg’s work a universalist message which so perfectly aligned with that of his own upbringing that he would spend nearly thirty years working tirelessly to share it with his countrymen and establish a thriving Swedenborgian community in South India.

Chetty was far from the first Swedenborgian evangelist in India. In fact some believe that there was a Swedenborgian presence in the subcontinent as early as 1820.<sup>11</sup> In the eighteen sixties a copy of Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* (1758) was purchased by a Hindu linguist, social reformer and self-identified “heathen”<sup>12</sup> by the name of Dadoba Pandurang (1819–1882),

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; New Church Messenger Editor, “The Church in Asia.,” *New Church Messenger*, 1909, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ed Gyllenhaal and Kirsten Gyllenhaal, “The Hindi Swedenborg Society (India, 1914),” *New Church History*, <http://newchurchhistory.org/funfacts/index5295.html?p=270>.

<sup>9</sup> Goupal Chetty, “Indian Tributes to Swedenborg,” n.d., 6.

<sup>10</sup> Alec McQueen, “Notes and Reviews,” *New Church Life* (1943).

<sup>11</sup> New Church Life Editor, “From Our Correspondents” (1912): 5.

<sup>12</sup> Dadoba Pandurang, *A Hindu Gentleman’s Reflections Respecting the Works of Swedenborg and the Doctrines of the New Jerusalem Church* (London: James Speirs, 1878), 6.

Pandurang would write a small book titled *A Hindu Gentleman's Reflections respecting the works of Swedenborg and the Doctrines of the New Jerusalem Church*, in 1878.<sup>13</sup>

Gopaul Chetty was also preceded by Mr. M. Behramji Malabari (1853 –1912), a Zoroastrian, “of humble birth, who early won distinction as a native and English poet, who is in touch with the foremost men of England, and who has won fame as a social reformer in India, especially in the matter of infant marriages.”<sup>14</sup> And Sadhu Sundar Singh (1189-c.1929), a holy man born into a Sikh family who was described by *New Church Life* as: “a Sadhu in the Hindu sense, but claims to be a Christian Sadhu, that is, one who has accepted Christianity, and who goes about proclaiming faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup> There are others who should be mentioned such as Professor Manishankar R. Bhatt (1867-1923), a Gujarati poet who became better known under his pen name Kavi Kant,<sup>16</sup> who started the *Hindi Swedenborg Society* in Bombay in 1914<sup>17</sup> and Mr. A. E. Penn, long time secretary of the Hindi Swedenborg Society and primary manager of the bookroom in Bombay<sup>18</sup> after Bhatt’s death in 1923.

The effort was also aided by Westerners such as Rev. John McGowan who was given the title of "Bishop of the Lord’s New Church in India" in 1890,<sup>19</sup> Rev. Frederick E. Gyllenhaal, an American minister who spent months in India and South Africa,<sup>20</sup> and Mr. H. N. Morris, a long-time friend of Gopaul Chetty’s and a fervent supporter of his work. There are certainly others who we could add to this list, but among his contemporaries Chetty stands out as a theologian and spiritual leader of the highest order, his mastery of both Swedenborgianism and Śaiva

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<sup>13</sup> Pandurang, *A Hindu Gentleman’s Reflections Respecting the Works of Swedenborg and the Doctrines of the New Jerusalem Church*.

<sup>14</sup> Dayaram Gidumal, “India and the New Church: A Biographical Sketch of Mr. M. Behramji Malabari,” *New Church Life* (1896).

<sup>15</sup> Rev W H Alden, “Sadhu Sundar Singh” (1922): 6.

<sup>16</sup> Jayant Kothari, “Bhatt Manishankar Ratnji,” *Gujarati Sahityakosh (Encyclopedia of Gujarati Literature) (in Gujarati)* (Ahmenabad, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Gyllenhaal and Gyllenhaal, “The Hindi Swedenborg Society (India, 1914).”

<sup>18</sup> G. Rajamanikkam Chetty, *The Souvenir of the Swedenborg Society of South India* (Katpadi, South India: Swedenborg Society and Book Depot, 1967).

<sup>19</sup> Samuel F. Dike, D. D., “New Church in India,” *New Church Life* (1891).

<sup>20</sup> Gyllenhaal and Gyllenhaal, “The Hindi Swedenborg Society (India, 1914).”



Siddhanta allow them to have a profound and meaningful conversation within his writing which serves to uplift both traditions.

In his seminal work *New light on Indian Philosophy or Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta* (1923), Chetty shares both a glowing pride in his own tradition and a profound sadness over what he perceives as an externalization of religious practices in both Śaivism and Christianity.<sup>21</sup> In Swedenborgian theology Chetty sees a way towards a deeper appreciation of both traditions. This book, which was (for the most part) met with widespread acclaim by both communities when it was published, somehow does the baffling work of aligning both the revolutionary pride of a people in the throes of the fight for independence, and an enthusiastic embrace of Emanuel Swedenborg as the prophet of the New Age. Chetty worked all his life to cast off the “crown” of earthly empire and raise up the universalist theology of the New Church as “the crown of all the churches” an enduring vision that the world might find ecumenical peace and harmony through the vision of God as Love itself. What’s more, this book is a rare example of scholarly Swedenborgian theology from a perspective far outside the theatre of Western Christianity and originally intended for a Hindu audience. This makes Chetty’s writing an utterly unique gem in the “crown” of New Church theology. In this paper we will examine Gopaul Chetty’s life story, his contribution to the history of interfaith theology and the revolutionary legacy of Śaivite Swedenborgianism.

This research project is not one of syncretism but one of marriage. It is not an attempt to blend two separate traditions, but an attempt to show that, when viewed from what Emanuel Swedenborg would call “the *internal sense*”, and Meikanda Devar would call “inner faculties”<sup>22</sup> that they were never really separate. When two pluralistic belief systems meet one another there is a certain kind of chemistry that occurs, an open-hearted joyful acceptance which can serve to uplift the whole world. “The New Church” from this perspective can be thought of as neither a triumphalist project of conversion nor a denomination with membership rolls and clergy, but an inner acknowledgement that the essential nature of Divine Love both transcends

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<sup>21</sup> Goupal Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & sons Ltd., 1923). P.xxiii

<sup>22</sup> Meykanda Devar, “Śiva-Ñana-Bodham: A Manual of Saiva Religious Doctrine.” Sutra 4

and infills the vast population of practices and deities from all around the world. As was beautifully stated by renowned Śaiva Siddhanta scholar Dr. T. N. Ganapathy: “That religion is true, which, not contradicting this or that one, embraces every one of them reasonably within its fold.”<sup>23</sup>

## *Śaiva Siddhanta*



Lord Śiva with two female attendants, Wall painting in Brihadeshwara temple, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu  
Jha Meenketan, “Tamil Nadu Has so Much to Offer--from Sculpture to Saris,” Outlook Traveller.

*The ignorant say, Love and God are different.  
None know that Love and God are the same.  
When they know that Love and God are the same,  
They rest in God as Love<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> T. N. Ganapathy, “Tirumandiram: Selections from the General Preface,” <http://www.thirumandiram.net/selections-from-general-preface.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*, 21. (Quotation from Thirumoolar)

Śaivism is one of the oldest religions of the world, a literal “Ancient Church”, brought down into India in the form of fire rituals and traditional poetry by Aryan tribes during the Vedic period (~1500 – c. 500 BCE). Largely through the work of saint Thirumoolar, (quoted above) the Śaivism of the Himalayas merged with indigenous belief systems and became Śaiva Siddhanta.<sup>25</sup> Chetty begins

Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta with the most ancient history of the Dravidian people. He references several Western ethnologists who describe the indigenous people of South India as, “early advanced in civilization,” that they “were great maritime traders and carried on their trade with Asiatic and European countries



Kripa Pureeswarar Temple complex at Thiruvannamalai

long before the time of King Solomon,” and “that they had a polished Tamil literature by the first century AD” Doubtless a reference to *Thirumanthiram*, the second century BCE classic written by Saint Thirumoolar.<sup>26</sup> Chetty tells us how a Pandiyan king “sent an embassy to Rome.” And how another had Grecian soldiers as a bodyguard. In this way Chetty puts forward an image of the Tamil people as globally connected powerful and culturally independent.

He then turns toward the history of Śaiva Siddhanta itself as a movement, listing off the most important saints and scholars both in India and Europe who had worked to preserve the vast libraries of Tamil spiritual literature. Chief among these is Meikanda Devar, who Chetty favors (among others) for his quotations throughout the book. In his introduction Chetty tells the story of the low-born foundling child who was raised at the *Kripa Pureeswarar* Temple complex in

<sup>25</sup> Marshall Govindan, “Tirumantiram: About the Book,” <http://www.thirumandiram.net/>.

<sup>26</sup> Saint Tirumular, *Tirumantiram: English Translation of the Tamil Spiritual Classic*, trans. Balasurbramanya Natarajan (Madras, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2009).





Illustration of the Śiva Lingam at the temple of Lord Mahalingam at Thiruvidadaimarudur, one of the seven major Śiva temples in Tamil Nadu

the city of Thiruvannainallur. The child was known to form *Śiva Lingam* from the sand and “become absorbed in contemplation”.<sup>27</sup> It was in this state that he was found by a passing Sadhu who gave him the name Meikanda Devar (truth finder). Soon afterward the child began to preach the doctrine contained in *Sivajnanabotham*, and to attract disciples. Meikanda Devar and his disciples produced the fourteen works which became the Śaiva Siddhanta Shastras.<sup>28</sup> The clearest distinction between Śaiva Siddhanta and other forms of Śaivism is the relative absence of the grim imagery associated with more Northern traditions, the image of Lord Śiva as an ashen sadhu contemplating skulls in the cremation grounds is largely replaced by the cosmic primacy of love, here we see an image of Śiva

both as a translucent, luminous human form and as an embodiment of the formless qualities of love and wisdom.

In Chetty’s long form eulogy, published in *The New Church Messenger* in 1954, H. N. Morris (a longtime friend of the Church in India)<sup>29</sup> describes Śaiva Siddhanta to his readers, “The religion of his childhood was Śaiva Siddhanta which differs in some respects from the Hinduism of the Northern provinces, both being Hindu as distinct from Moslem and Buddhist, but both based upon very ancient writings and mythologies, which they look upon as divine revelations, and both being undoubtedly taken at least partly from what the New Church knows

<sup>27</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*. p. xvii

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah Tansley, “The New Church in India and the English Conference,” *New Church Life* (1914).

as the Ancient Word, survivals of which, Swedenborg says, prevailed over a large part of central and Western Asia.”

This interpretation of Swedenborg’s frequently mentioned, pre-Mosaic “Ancient Word” as a potentially Vedic scripture has been widely held throughout the history of the Swedenborgian movement.<sup>30</sup> Since as early as 1798 and as late as the Twenty First century Swedenborgians have been looking towards the Himalayas as the potential repository of these ancient scriptures.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of the veracity of the actual existence of these texts, this narrative has, for the most part,<sup>33</sup> given the Swedenborgian movement a positive reception of Vedic spirituality and vice versa. An interest which bloomed at the end of the nineteenth century.

The most important of the many striking parallels between Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta is the cosmic significance of Divine Love. In Chetty’s interpretation the relationship between Divine Love and Wisdom becomes the relationship between Śiva and Shakti and the blissful union of space and time, stillness and energy, of center and circumference, which underlies every moment of waking consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Chetty concisely describes the appeal of Swedenborgian theology from this perspective in his introduction saying:

*In nos. 40-46, Divine Love and Wisdom, [Swedenborg] identifies substance with love. In other words, we are not to identify love with the abstract conceptual identity ordinarily termed substance, but rather we are to take the word “substance” with its whole meaning and apply it to that concrete living experience which we know directly, immediately and intimately as love. This doctrine so interpreted constitutes a new epoch in the history of philosophy, for according to it we turn in our search for reality from the world of abstract conceptions at once to the actual concrete world of living experience, in all its fullness and variety, we*

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<sup>30</sup> Dr. Rev. James Brush, Christopher Brown, and Huiling Sun, “In Search of the Ancient Word,” *New Church Life* (2002).

<sup>31</sup> John Mill dr., “The Doctrines and Scriptures of the Ancient Curch,” *Intellectual Repository* (1873).

<sup>32</sup> New Church life Editor, “(Untitled) In Answer to the Question of Your Correspondent in Regard to “Whether There Be Any Distinctive New Church Interpretation of the Vedic Belief in God or in Gods,” 1885.

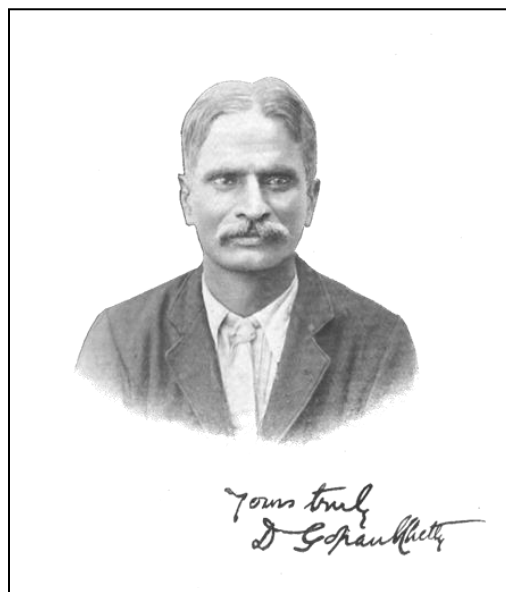
<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, “Theosophical Attack on the New Church (A Critical Review of Swedenborg the Buddhist),” *New Church Life* (1888).

<sup>34</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*, 39.

*now call love. The whole body of Swedenborg's doctrine, and the philosophy contained in it, is literally an exposition of this nature of love.*

The powerful thing about this argument is that it embraces both divine immanence and transcendence. The “love” which Swedenborg and Thirumoolar speak of is not only cosmic and infinite, it is also profoundly *human*. This means that there is very little room for the rejection or trivialization of worldly suffering and the highest transcendental state occurs through direct, useful action in the world.<sup>35</sup> This expression of divinity is equally compatible with many of the world's spiritual traditions and becomes a bridge from the most ancient forms of worship and the newest. As Chetty quotes Swedenborg (DLW-398) on page 103, “The love or will strives continually after the human form, and all the things pertaining to the human form.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***The Early Life of D. Gopaul Chetty***



Gopaul Chetty was born in 1867 in the town of Dharmapuri in the Salem district of the Madras Presidency during the height of the British Raj.<sup>37</sup> His father was a well-to-do land owner who died when Gopaul was only three years old, leaving his wife to raise two boys by herself.<sup>38</sup> Chetty excelled in his English studies and was sent to Madras Christian

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>37</sup> H. N. Morris, “The Passing of an Indian Reformer,” *The New Church Messenger*, June 12, 1954, 217.

<sup>38</sup> Morris, “The Passing of an Indian Reformer.”

College to finish his education.<sup>39</sup> With his background in English literature and poetry Gopaul quickly found employment, first as a school headmaster at his old grade school at Dharmapuri and later (after passing his law exams) as a Barrister for the local government. Chetty was soon happily married to a woman named Pachiammat with whom he would have two children, a son and a daughter. They would be together until her death in 1918.<sup>40</sup>

During Chetty's time as headmaster at the school in Dharmapuri he led study groups which were focused on the teachings of Swami Vivekananda (1863 –1902) and the *Brahmo Somaj*, founded by Mammohun Roy (1774-1833) in 1828.<sup>41</sup> Swedenborgian thought had already influenced the unique brand of Christian universalism promoted by the movement through Keshab Chundra Sen. Morris says (speaking of the Brahmo Somaj) "It is not what we call "the New Church" (an external organization), but seems to be the beginning of that universal religious reform, which has taken place in different parts of the world, since, and as a direct result of the Last Judgment prophesied in the Christian Scriptures."<sup>42</sup>

While studying for his law degree and Inspired by the example of the Brahmo Somaj, Chetty and his acquaintance G. Subramania Iyer editor of *The Hindu* newspaper (which is still in production) formed the *Madras Social Reform Association in 1892*.<sup>43</sup><sup>44</sup> Upon passing his law exams Chetty took a job as a lawyer at the Tirapatur Courts in the Arcot District. There he befriended the Rev. R. C. Porter of the London Mission and began an earnest study of the Bible. Even so, Chetty did not neglect the indigenous traditions of his upbringing which he felt were both deeply sacred and poorly understood by modern Hindus, he frequently hosted study groups

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Rita DasGupta Sherma, ed., *Swami Vivekananda: His Life, Legacy, and Liberative Ethics*, Explorations in Indic traditions: theological, ethical, and philosophical (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 93.

<sup>42</sup> Morris, "The Passing of an Indian Reformer," 217.

<sup>43</sup> .B Sathyanarayanan, "Congress And Socio Economic Issues In Tamilnadu 1920 1939" (University of Madras, n.d.), <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/278315>.

<sup>44</sup> Morris, "The Passing of an Indian Reformer," 218.



in his home where a small group of government officials would gather to study *Sivajnanabotham*.<sup>45</sup>

## *The New Reformer*

Chetty worked as a lawyer for twelve years from 1895 to 1907 when, with the encouragement of many friends he retired to work full time on *The New Reformer*, a magazine devoted to social, religious and economic reform.<sup>46</sup> On the front cover of every issue were emblazoned the words: “oh if you could dethrone the brute God Mammon and put a Spirit God in his place”<sup>47</sup>

*“[The New Reformer] claimed to be devoted to Reason, Justice and Love, and the application of these three principles to the discussion of all problems, religious, political, philosophical and social.”*<sup>48</sup>

The magazine was widely popular and received submissions from everyone from Leo Tolstoy, to Abdul Baha, Persian martyr and social reformer, Unitarians from America and Europe and members of the Brahmo Somaj and other *sampradayas*.<sup>49</sup> In 1910 an Englishman submitted an



Front cover of The New reformer, May 1915

The poem reads:

Man is his own star, and the soul that can  
Render an honest and perfect man  
Commands all light, all influence, all fate,  
Nothing to him falls early or too late;  
Our acts, our angels are, or good or ill,  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still-  
(Beaumont and Fletcher)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

article to *The New Reformer* titled *Swedenborg Seer of the North*.<sup>50</sup>

The first Hindi translation of *Heaven and Hell* was published in 1894<sup>51</sup> and twenty years later in 1914 the Hindi Swedenborg Society was formed under Professor Bhatt with long standing bookrooms in Madras and Bombay.<sup>52</sup> Although Gopaul Chetty was among the first members of this organization, he did not have time to devote to a serious study of Swedenborg's writings, until a few years later when World War One caused a paper shortage and *the New Reformer* was forced to close down in 1917.<sup>53</sup> Around the same time Chetty became an important part of the "non-Brahmin" movement which would become *the South Indian Liberal Federation*, a political movement devoted to the liberation of the lower castes which aimed to "work for the gradual reform of India and acquisition of freedom by stages with the assistance of and the closest cooperation with the government."<sup>54</sup>

## *India Discovers Swedenborg*

In 1918, soon after the death of his wife Chetty traveled to the Swedenborg society in Bombay where he purchased Swedenborg's major works and began a careful study of them. He said, "My Study of Swedenborg led to the discovery that his teachings bore great resemblance to Śaiva Siddhanta. I discovered that Swedenborg's philosophy threw a flood of light upon the darker places in Śaiva Siddhanta and that his teachings contained many things which Śaiva Siddhanta did not know."<sup>55</sup>

Inspired by his discovery of the Swedish mystic Chetty opened a Bookroom in Madras and translated and published a short selection of passages from *Intercourse of the Soul and Body* (a title which seems very Tantric in this context) with a traditional Hindu *pashya* (commentary)

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<sup>50</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*. p.xix

<sup>51</sup> "Notes and Reviews," *New Church Life* (1894).

<sup>52</sup> H. N. Morris, "New Church Propaganda in India," *New Church Herald* (October 17, 1931).

<sup>53</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*. p.xix

<sup>54</sup> Morris, "New Church Propaganda in India."

<sup>55</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta*. p.xx

and within a few years there was a second community thriving in Vellore.<sup>56</sup> He distributed copies to leading Tamil scholars and theologians who received it with “great rejoicings”.<sup>57</sup> Mr. V. M. Kalyanasundram Pillay, the secretary of the *Śaiva Sabah* of Palamkotta the largest Śaiva Siddhanta society in India at the time was among the chorus of voices praising the new book saying:

*”Indeed the treatment of the subject is, to say the least of it, masterly and is but in consonance with the highly philosophic atmosphere in which you are moving and having your existence. Your attempt at giving a relief to our Śaiva Siddhanta philosophy by the analogy of the European system is quite modern, and has proved a veritable success as it ought to. And I may add without hesitation that the best tribute we can give to the author of the treatise is, and can be only spreading the same far and wide.”*

Other notable readers of this text were Mr. V. P. Kanthimathinatha Pillay, writer of a popular commentary on Sivajnanabotham, well known Śaiva Siddhanta scholar Mr. T. Ramalinjam Pillay and the popular Indian magazine *Justice*.<sup>58</sup> Encouraged by this reception, Chetty turned his attention to a more ambitious project and published *New light on Indian Philosophy or Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta* in 1923. In the same year, M. Bhatt, who had converted to Swedenborgian Christianity in 1898 after the death of his wife and had been president of the Hindi Swedenborg society since its conception in 1914, died at only 55 en-route from Lahore from Rawalpindi.<sup>59</sup> Chetty was the natural inheritor of his position.

But Swedenborgian thought was not always so well received.<sup>60</sup> Both Professor Bhatt<sup>61</sup> and Sadhu Sundar Singh<sup>62</sup> were ostracized from their families and communities for their beliefs.

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<sup>56</sup> Goupal Chetty, *Report of Goupal Chetty's New Church Work in India*, 44 1933, 2, Swedenborg Society Library.

<sup>57</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Saiva Siddhanta*. p.xx

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.xxi

<sup>59</sup> Kothari, “Bhatt Manishankar Ratnji.”

<sup>60</sup> Morris, “New Church Propaganda in India.”

<sup>61</sup> Kothari, “Bhatt Manishankar Ratnji.”

<sup>62</sup> Alden, “Sadhu Sundar Singh.”

The reception from the Śaivite community was initially one of trepidation, Chetty wrote in a report to *New Church Life* how:

*In 1925, when I went on a missionary tour lecturing on 'Swedenborg and his Teachings' in southern India, I met with a good deal of opposition. In one place it even became impossible to deliver a lecture on Swedenborg. The leading man of the place, President of the Tamil Sangam there, gave me a very cold reception, and thought that the people had nothing to learn from a Christian Swedenborg. But last year the same gentleman, of his own accord, purchased a copy of *Divine Love and Wisdom*, **being unable to bear the pressure of the popularity of Swedenborg's teachings**. This is like the return of the prodigal son to his father's house!<sup>63</sup>*

This statement (written in 1934) implies an explosive growth in the popularity of Swedenborgian ideas and a quickly evolving attitude as their message of universalism and the cosmic unity of love met an audience which saw in the Swedish mystic an affirmation of their own ancient spirituality. The introduction of Swedenborg was not an attempt to replace Śaivism, but to raise a tradition that had been a rather insular Indian phenomenon for thousands of years into a global conversation. But this perspective was not initially shared by Hindus who felt that this was threatening to their spirituality. Chetty goes on in the same account:

*In 1923, I was selected to deliver a lecture on Swedenborg's Teachings at the Universal Religious Congress held in Madras. When I came out after the lecture, I was beset with some orthodox Hindus and nearly insulted for speaking so highly of Swedenborg's teachings. But now the conditions have become entirely changed. People now appreciate the greatness of Swedenborg and his teachings. **His name has become a household word**, and is now uttered with great reverence. Hindu scholars are most heartily appreciative. The orthodox Hindu center, the Tirupanandal Mutt, has purchased a copy of the work on *Divine Providence*. All this is the result of my ten years' hard work at a considerable self-sacrifice, after giving up my profession of lawyer.<sup>64</sup>*

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<sup>63</sup> *New Church Life* Editor, "Church News," *New Church Life* (1934).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*



Chetty found that the group of people who were most hostile to his evangelism were Catholics and Protestants. In a letter to H. N. Morris Chetty explained his difficulty:

*“As for Christians and orthodox churches in India, I find there is some difficulty in making them read Swedenborg. One Roman Catholic paper in Madras went to the length of prohibiting the reading of Swedenborg’s works by the Roman Catholics. The protestant missionaries are equally opposed. Some time ago I issued an appeal to the missionaries of the Protestant Churches for encouragement, but met with no response. Many of the Christians who earn their livelihood by the mere fact of their being Christians find it difficult to read Swedenborg’s works in opposition to the wishes of the missionaries. And those who are not so bound are equally afraid. Hence my work amongst the Christians is not so very encouraging. From the beginning of this month I have started a new method of work among the Indian Christians in Madras. There are several Christian Churches in Madras, to each of which I go on Sundays with my assistant, at the time the services end and then offer translations of Swedenborg for sale at a cheaper rate. I am glad to say that some books are in this way bought by Christians.”<sup>65</sup>*

One must appreciate the audacity of selling pamphlets at a Church which had recently banned the reading of their author. Chetty’s difficulty with the Christians was actually one which went back much further with mainstream Christianity’s rejection of Swedenborg in Europe.<sup>66</sup> Because of this dynamic, the spread of Swedenborgian thought in India was almost entirely within Śaivite communities, and spread it did. Chetty worked tirelessly over the next thirty years from 1923 to his death in 1953, giving everything that he possessed to the cause of the Church. He distributed hundreds of copies of Swedenborg’s writings in English and Tamil every year,<sup>67</sup> writing, printing and distributing thousands of original pamphlets, lecturing at colleges, temples and festivals sometimes to audiences of thousands.<sup>68</sup> Chetty courted the interest

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<sup>65</sup> Morris, “New Church Propaganda in India,” 627.

<sup>66</sup> Swedenborg Foundation, “The Life of Emanuel Swedenborg,” *Swedenborg Foundation*, <https://swedenborg.com/emanuel-swedenborg/about-life/>.

<sup>67</sup> “Notes and Reviews,” *New Church Life* (1936).

<sup>68</sup> Chetty, *Report of Gopaul Chetty’s New Church Work in India*, 5.

of Śaivite spiritual leaders and donating copies of his books to libraries all across Southern India.<sup>69</sup> The reception of his ideas was exponential and electric.

In a short pamphlet entitled “Indian Tributes to Swedenborg” Chetty gathered the names of those who had praised his work.<sup>70</sup> Mr. T. S. Ponnambalal Pillay, a Śaiva Siddhanta leader said that, “it is the duty of all patriotic Saivites to make much of the discovery made by Mr. Gopaul Chetty and appreciate the work that he has done for us.” Mr, T. Ramalingam Pillay, M.A. head Tamil translator to the Travancore Government, writing to Chetty said, “you have done a real service to the cause of our sacred religion by interpreting to them the great Swedish savant’s teachings in the relationship that subsists among the three eternal verities, God, Soul and Body.” Rao Saheb Ramachandra Row said of Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta that, “no Hindu house would be full without it.” I could list more.<sup>71</sup>

Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta gained enough popularity that it was reviewed by the major newspapers of the day. *Bharata Dharma*, a renowned religious journal wrote that, “In this age of science, religion has to be presented in a scientific garb, so that the facts of Science may lead to the confirmation of the claims of faith. Emanuel Swedenborg, both a deep scholar in the sciences and a devoted student of faith attempted this task in his several works. A particular sanction which this great author claims for his conclusions is his own personal realization of spiritual truths.” *The Hindu Organ* the primary Śaiva Siddhanta publication in Ceylon said, “Though it is difficult to believe and paradoxical though it may seem to be, yet Swedenborg is one of those rare mortals who saw a heaven on earth and an earth in heaven.” *The Daily Express* of Madras said, “although these attributes of the Creator are dealt with exhaustively in the Hindu scriptures, yet Swedenborg’s interpretation of the same is well worth studying.” *The Hindu* called Swedenborg’s Science of Correspondences “the key that unlocks

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<sup>69</sup> “Notes and Reviews.”

<sup>70</sup> Chetty, “Indian Tributes to Swedenborg.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

the mystic lore of the Tamilians.” The editor of *The Śaiva* newspaper said that Chetty “had done a great service to Śaivism by writing this book.”<sup>72</sup>

Gopaul Chetty was able to publish and translate Tamil editions of a number of Swedenborg’s works including the *Doctrine of Life, Divine Love and Wisdom, Divine Providence, The Heavenly Doctrine*, and excerpts from *Heaven and Hell*. As well as collateral literature in English including Rev. A. Wildes *New Light on the Hereafter* and Hellen Keller’s *My Religion* a copy of which Morris sent to Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>73</sup>

At the time the Indian independence movement was beginning to gain steam. Chetty, a lifelong opponent of British Rule whose dates and professional career align closely with Mahatma Gandhi’s (1868-1948) had little desire to yolk his growing movement with a British authority. According to a blistering editorial written by Morris in 1931, Chetty’s work was “not acknowledged by or supported in any way by the Conference”<sup>74</sup> the funding (which came mostly from private sources)<sup>75</sup> was only enough to cover translation and publication. Although Chetty held the title of “president” it was for the most part a symbolic title, according to Morris, who reported that the Conference refused to fund a society which was not an “ecclesiastical body”.<sup>76</sup>

This restriction and overt Christianization of the movement was not something that Chetty would agree to, and indeed, much of the potency of the spread of Swedenborgian thought had been in its comfortability with absorption into the Śaivite tradition. “To be successful,” Chetty said in a letter to Morris “the New Church must liberalize its teachings. Swedenborg did not come to add another Church to the numerous Churches of Christianity already existing. His church is to be universal. I am fully convinced that if his teachings are correctly interpreted and proclaimed to the world, men of all the waring creeds of the world can unite in one universal

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Morris, “New Church Propaganda in India,” 627.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 625.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

church. I am of the opinion that the East and West can thus be brought together under the banner of one religion based on the teachings of Swedenborg.”<sup>77</sup>

In the introduction to Swedenborg and Śaiva Siddhanta Chetty estimates that the population of the Madras Presidency is about 113 million people,<sup>78</sup> of these he estimates that 20 million of these were followers of Śaiva Siddhanta. If we consider the assertion from the Swedish publisher from our introduction that there were ten million Hindu followers of Swedenborg in South India in 1943,<sup>79</sup> that would mean about half of the followers of Śaiva Siddhanta at the time were in some way exposed to Swedenborgian thought. Given the breadth and dedication of Gopaul Chetty’s work, that number becomes a little bit more believable. Even if his reach was a tenth of that estimate, he was the most successful Swedenborgian evangelist in history. So why is he virtually unknown in the West? Perhaps this failure is best explained by Swedenborg himself:

*At this day it is not known that the love of dominion derived from the love of self and the love of ruling derived from the pride of self-intelligence are the heads of all the loves of hell, and thus the heads of all the evils and consequent untruths in the Church*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 626.

<sup>78</sup> Chetty, *New Light upon Indian Philosophy : Swedenborg and Saiva Siddhanta*. xii

<sup>79</sup> McQueen, “Notes and Reviews.”

<sup>80</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Revealed*, trans. Coulson (swedenborg society, 1970). §502



## *The Christo Somaj*



**250th Anniversary of the Birth of Emanuel Swedenborg Madras Celebration  
29th January 1938**

Goupal Chetty, *Report of Goupal Chetty's New Church Work in India*, 44 1933, 2, Swedenborg Society Library.

In 1947 India Gained independence, in 1948 Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated and Chetty, blind sick and destitute, retired from his work for the Church, he would die a few years later in December of 1953.<sup>81</sup>

Chetty's last work, and the one he personally considered the most important was written at the beginning of World War Two and sent to Britain for the Conference to consider publication.<sup>82</sup> The title of this work was *Jesus is God*, although it was positively received, like

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<sup>81</sup> Morris, "The Passing of an Indian Reformer," 217.

<sup>82</sup> Morris, "The Passing of an Indian Reformer."

his previous book, it was written for a Śaivite audience and the language proved challenging to the British reviewers.<sup>83</sup> Chetty predicted it to be, “one of the most valuable publications in the interest of the New Church. I am quite sure it will create a good deal of sensation at first, and finally meet with great approval in this country, owing to my presentation of the subject in an acceptable and convincing form, quite different from the incorrect and unacceptable way in which it was done by the Protestant and Roman Catholic Missionaries.”<sup>84</sup> Chetty believed that this book would have a lasting impact and that it would inspire the creation of what he called the Christo Somaj, a play off the Brahmo Somaj, that is, a universalist, service oriented organization that could bring together the warring religious factions under the banner of Divine Love.

*It is my earnest desire that Christo-Somajes may be started throughout India, free from all defects and inconsistencies. Not only of the orthodox Christian Churches, but also of other religions of the world, for the purpose of studying the new Revelation (through Swedenborg) in its religious aspect (as distinct for philosophical) and adopting it afterwards, so that there may be a really living universal religion in India.*<sup>85</sup>

*Jesus is God* was never published; I have traced what remains of the manuscript to the archives of the Swedenborg Library in Bryn Athyn to whom it was given in 1981. Chetty earnestly wished that his son, G. Rajamanikkam Chetty, would take up the banner but he, like his father, was working full time for the government and would not be able to devote considerable attention to the cause of Swedenborgian thought until his retirement a decade later in 1963. By that time Anti-Western sentiments and the trauma of partition had set in and the inclusion of Swedenborg in Śaivite theology fell dramatically in popularity, by 1970 the Swedenborgian communities in South India had largely gone quiet.

It seems, in our age of a dozen flavors of extremism of protection and polarization where post-modernity breaks down all our deepest ideologies into a shallow tableaux critical irony, that

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> “Notes and Reviews.”

<sup>85</sup> Morris, “The Passing of an Indian Reformer,” 219.

the dream of harmony and cooperation between the religions of the world is threatened, if not impossible. Swedenborgianism as a movement has been declining in numbers for decades and Chetty's assertion that the Swedish mystic's name was at one-point common knowledge to millions of people on the far side of the world seems almost absurd.

### *Swedenborgianism in India Today*

Today there are seven Swedenborgian reading groups in the whole subcontinent.<sup>86</sup> The Church in India was reorganized under the General Church in Kerala 2007 lead by Reverend Peter Devassy who was kind enough to answer a few of my questions.<sup>87</sup> The announcement of this new organization was heralded in *New Church Life* as “the First Official Meeting of the New Church in India.”<sup>88</sup> A title which sharply illustrates the near total erasure of Gopaul Chetty's life's work in the eyes of the West. I personally know at least one person who was led into the Church after finding one of his Tamil translations at a local library and apparently there are still thousands of individuals in South India who know his name.

I believe that this erasure does a profound disservice to the Church, and I believe it to be based in some degree of ignorance and racism. The New Church is not White. The New Church is bigger than Christianity. The New Church might not be under control, it might not be familiar or expected, it might be better than we can possibly imagine. It may be that just as Swedenborg warns, our desire to rule and dominate those who we perceive as “other” is the greatest possible threat to the Church.

Gopaul Chetty was an innovator and a leader who was able to create a tidal wave of a religious movement because he met people in a way which affirmed their identities as sacred and valuable, because he recognized the liberative potential in the simple teaching of Love, in that sense his work was not in vain. For wherever divine Love is felt and divine Wisdom is known, there the Church is.

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<sup>86</sup> Rev. Peter Devassy, “Email Interview with Rev. Peter Devassy,” Email, October 13, 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Editor, “The First Official Meeting of the New Church in India,” *New Church Life* (2008).

I asked Rev. Devassy what his spiritual philosophy was, and his answer perfectly expresses that idea of Divine Love as both cosmic and personal which first inspired Gopaul Chetty's work. I pray that this may become an enduring vision which, even today, has the potential to transform the world:

*My spiritual philosophy is my internal world was totally awakened to see the reality of my existence in Nature which sustains me materially and spiritually. There is no end of this reality. It is the place where I am looking for my entire destiny to accomplish my birthright. The birthrights of my life not only meet my ends and pleasures but those of my fellow beings. I believe very strongly that to meet both of my ends God who lives forever is my refuge and shelter in this world.*

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