

## MAHARAJA SERFOJI II -THE FAMOUS THANJAVUR MARATHA KING

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### Abstract

*The place of Thanjavur in Tamilnadu (South India) has a long past history, fertile region and capital of many kingdoms. Thanjavur was a part of the kingdom of the Sangam Cholas. Later Thanjavur was ruled by the Kalabhras, the Pallavas and the Imperial Cholas. Then it was for a short period under the rule of the Pandyas and Vijayanagar Kings who appointed Sevappa Nayak as a viceroy of Thanjavur.*

**Keywords:** *Thanjavur, Sangam, Kalabhras, Pandyas, Vijayanagar, Pallavas, Marathas, Chattrapathy Shivaji*

### Establishment of Marathas power in Thanjavur

Sevappa Nayak (1532-1560) was the founder of Thanjavur Nayak dynasty.<sup>1</sup> Vijayaraghava (1634-1674) the last king of this dynasty, lost his life in a battle with Chokkanatha Nayak of Madurai in the year 1662. The Madurai Nayak appointed Alagiri, as the Governor of Thanjavur.

This was followed by a long civil war in the Thanjavur kingdom. Alagiri wanted to rule independently and it restrained the relationship between Alagiri and Chokkanatha Nayak. Sengamaladas was the infant son of Vijayaraghava. Venkanna the Rayasam of Vijayaraghava desired to make Sengamaladas as the Nayak of Thanjavur and sought the help of Bijapur Sultan who send Ekoji alias Venkogi to capture Thanjavur. He defeated Alagiri and crowned Sengamaladas. But, Venkanna did not get any benefit from Sengamaladas. So he induced Ekoji to usurp the power and got victory. Thus, in 1676 Ekoji established Maratha rule in the Tamil country. Ekoji (1676-1685) was the founder of the Marathas of Thanjavur kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

### Kings of Thanjavur Marathas:

After Ekoji, Shahji II (1685-1712), Serfoji I (1712-1728), Tukoji (1728-1736), Baba shahobu (1736-1737), Sujana Bai (1737-1738), Katturaja (1738), Saiyaji (1738-1739), Pratap Singh (1739-1763), Tulgaji (1763-1787), Serfoji II (1787-1793), Amar Singh (1793-1798), Serfoji II (1798-1832) and Shivaji II (1832-1855) ruled the Thanjavur.<sup>3</sup> Above mentioned Kings Serfoji II was the greatest king of Marathas of Thanjavur.

### Early life of Serfoji II

He was born on 24.09.1777 in the royal house of the Maratha King Chattrapathy Shivaji. He belonged to the Bhonsle clan of Marathas. His full name was Serfoji Raja Bhonsle Chattrapathy. Raja Tulgaji (1763-1787) had no heir. So, he adopted Serfoji II as his son on 23.01.1787, by duly performing all of the religious rites. The boy was entrusted to the care of Rev. Christian Freidrick Schwartz, a Danish Missionary.<sup>4</sup> After the death of

Tulgaji, he was coronated as the King of Thanjavur . At that time, his age was ten years and so Amar Singh, the brother of Tulgaji was appointed as regent of Boy King. This rule lasted from 1787-1793. Later on Amar Singh refused to handover the throne to Serfoji II and he usurped the throne in 1787. With the help of Archpalt Compell the Madras Governer of British East India Company. Amar Singh denied the young Prince the benefites of basic education.

At this juncture, Schwartz intervened to save the young prince and sent him to Madras where he was educated by Rev. Wilhelm Gericke of the Lutheran Mission. Soon, he became proficient in Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Sanskrit, French, German, Danish, Greek, Dutch and Latin.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Restoration to the throne**

Schwartz a Danish Bishop appealed Serfoji's matter to then Governor General of India and radical changes took place in the politics of Thanjavur. In 1798 Cornwallis deposed Amar Singh from the throne. Serfoji ascended the throne of Thanjavur on June 29, 1798. He ruled from 1798 -1832.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Sefiji II and Lord Wellesley**

With the aid of Britishers Serfoji II again ascended the throne of Thanjavur, and so he accepted the overlordship of British East India Company. He also accepted the provisions of the treaty of 1792 which was signed between Amar Singh and British East India Company. The main provisions were

1. Thanjavur Maratha King should give 4,00,000 pagodas to the Company.
2. If the King failed to give the 4,00,000 pagodas to them, the company directly would collect the Taxes from the common people.

The committee was made for the establishment of the welfare state in Thanjavur and that committee submitted its recommendations. On the basis of these recommendations the treaty of 1799 was framed. The treaty of 1799 was signed between Serfoji II and the British East India Company.<sup>7</sup> The main provisions were

1. Serfoji was forced to cede the administration of the Thanjavur Kingdom to the British.
2. He was granted an annual pension of 100,000 pagodas and one-fifth of the state's land revenue. Serfoji's sovereignty was restricted to the Fort of Thanjavur and its surrounding areas.

Thus he became a permanent pensioner and prisoner in the hands of the Britishers. He lost his kingdom, power and authority. He devoted his time in the pursuit of culture and learning. Therefore, Serfoji is remembered in history as the last sovereign ruler of Thanjavur.

**Reign and Administration**

During Serfoji's reign which lasted from 1798 until his death in 1832, for the first time, the proceedings of the Tanjavur durbar were recorded in paper. The Delta region was divided into five districts each under a Subedar.<sup>8</sup> Cultivable lands yielded good profits and the judiciary system was highly efficient and praiseworthy.

Serfoji is also credited with having built a lot of chattrams or rest houses for pilgrims. These pilgrims received free boarding and lodging and their needs were taken care of by the State. In all Serfoji built three important chattrams, including one at Orathanadu.

**Educational reforms**

Serfoji founded a school called Navavidhya Kalanidhi Sala where languages, literature, the sciences, arts and crafts were taught in addition to the Vedas and shastras.<sup>9</sup> Serfoji maintained close ties with the Danes at Tarangambadi and visited their schools quite often and appreciated their way of functioning. Impressed by it, he tried to implement European methods of teachings and education all over his Empire. He was a supporter of the emancipation of Indian women and revolutionized education by appointing women teachers.

Serfojis is also credited with installing a hand press with Devanagari type in 1805, the first of its kind in South India. He also established a stone type press called "Nava Vidhya Kalanidhi Varnayanthra Sala".

**Civic Amenities**

Serfoji constructed ten water tanks and a number of wells for civic use. He implemented an underground drainage system for the whole of Thanjavur city.

**Medicine**

Serfoji established the Dhanavantari Mahal, a research institution that produced herbal (Ayurvedic) medicine for human and animals.<sup>10</sup> The institution also treated sick people and maintained case-sheets which have become famous of late. Here, physicians of modern medicine, ayurveda, unani and siddha schools have performed research upon drugs and herbs for medical cure and had produced eighteen volumes of research material. Serfoji also had the important herbs studied and catalogued in the form of exquisite hand paintings.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the medical prescriptions stored at the Dhanvanthri Mahal, a set of poems were compiled detailing the procedures to cure various diseases. These poems were collected and published as a book, called Sarabhendra Vaidhya Muraigal.

**Shipping**

Serfoji erected a shipyard at Manora, around fifty kilometres from Thanjavur. Serfoji also established a meteorological station to facilitate trade. He had a gun factory, a naval library and a naval store with all kinds of navigational instruments.

Serfoji was also keenly interested in painting, gardening, coin-collecting, martial arts and patronized chariot-racing, hunting and bull-fighting.

**Contribution to Arts and music**

Serfoji was a patron of traditional Indian arts like dance and music. He authored famous works like "Kumarasambhava Champu", "Mudrarakshaschaya" and "Devendra Kuruvanji" and introduced western musical instruments like clarinet and violin in Carnatic Music. Tyararaja (1767-1847), Muthusamy Diksthar (1775-1835), Syama Sastri (1763-1827) were patronized by Serfoji II.<sup>12</sup>

**Construction and Renovation Activities**

The five storied Sarjah Mahadi in the Thanjavur palace and the Manora Fort Tower at Saluvanayakanpattinam were constructed in Serfoji's reign.<sup>13</sup> He installed lightning rods at the top of these monuments and had the history of the Bhonsle Dynasty inscribed on the south-western wall of the Brihadeeswara Temple. It is considered to be the lengthiest inscription in the world. Serfoji also renovated and reconstructed several existing temples like the Brihadeeswara Temple apart from building new ones. He was also an ardent philanthropist and a member of the Royal Asiatic Society.

**Manora**

Serfoji II built the famous fort. Which has historical importance. The most captivating fortress of the Tanjavur Marathas is the Manora located in a coastal site called by various names such as Manora, Saluvanayakapattinam, Sarabendirarajapattinam and Tulukkanvayal.<sup>14</sup> The site is located between Pattukkottai and Rameshwaram. This miniature fortress may be regarded as the masterpiece of Tanjavur Maratha architecture.

The fortress is an eight-storeyed hexagonal building built of bricks and stones. Narrow spiral stairways lead us from one floor to the other. The rooms have arched entrances with huge wooden doors. The interior wall originally exhibited a pearl-white lustrous finish obtained by a plaster of egg-shell, lime and other materials. The walls have, however, recently been crudely replastered and painted. Each storey is demarcated from the next by a thin narrow sunshade running along the exterior wall. The structure possesses double-walled enclosures and underground rooms. The building is surrounded by a moat. A drawbridge across the moat provided the sole direct access from outside to the interior of the fortress. The Manora could be compared, in its height and architectural splendour, to the Qutab Minar in New Delhi and the Char Minar in Hyderabad. Besides being architecturally unique, the Manora also has historical significance. Inscriptions on the

building reveal that it was erected to commemorate the triumphs of the British arms and the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1814. Most people wrongly believe that this monument celebrates Napoleon's historic defeat at Waterloo. But Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and his final exile to remote St. Helena took place in the year 1815. The year 1814 point out that Napoleon's abdication of the throne and exile to Elba. As the British had helped Sarfoji II to occupy the Tanjavur throne, he, in his enthusiasm to demonstrate his love and loyalty to victorious England, built the Manora in 1814 itself, much before the Waterloo.

Surprisingly, the Manora was hardly used as a defence establishment even once. Sarfoji II had a foundry within this fortress. The fortress was used, for sometime, as a lighthouse. The location of the fortress at a secluded spot, right on the seashore, amidst coconut palms and the cool sea breeze, makes it an ideal holiday resort. The building may have even been planned as a summer palace for the Maratha royal family. In fact, Sarfoji II and Shivaji II did occasionally use the building as their residence.

Manora is undoubtedly more a 'showpiece' of the Maratha period than an 'utility building'. Not many are aware that this is the only monument erected in honour of the English outside Europe. One wishes that more people visit the Manora not only to appreciate its architectural grandeur but also to enjoy its surroundings.

#### **Thanjavur Maharaja Sarasvati Mahal Library**

This certainly holds true for Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library - a conglomeration of different cultures and a treasure trove of knowledge put together by the successive dynasties of Nayaks and Marathas of Thanjavur. One among the few surviving medieval libraries of the world it has been mentioned as "the most remarkable library in India" in *Encyclopedia Britannica's* survey of Libraries of the World.

The name Maharaja Serfoji, which is part of the library's name, can be traced to the Maratha King **Maharaja Serfoji II**, an eminent scholar he had taken a special interest in developing the library.<sup>15</sup> It is said that he undertook a pilgrimage to Banares and employed many pandits (scholars) to buy and copy large number of works from all renowned centres of Sanskrit learning in North India. Thanks to his efforts the library boasts of an extensive Sanskrit manuscript collection of 36, 326 titles, a good part of which was collected by Maharaja Serfoji II.

The library's manuscript department has a rich collection of manuscripts in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi which were further bolstered when the library came into possession of the private libraries of several important scholars and personalities living in and around Thanjavur. Maharaja Serfoji himself started the reference books department of the library and nearly 4500 books in English, French, Latin, Italian and other language collected by him find place here. The library also has its own printing press to publish the rare and unpublished manuscripts into printed book form.

**Religious Tolerance**

Serfoji was open-minded and tolerant of other faiths. He liberally funded churches and schools run by Christian missionaries. He had good friendship with Father Schwarz who founded a church in his name near the Sivaganga Garden, Thanjavur in 1799 A.D.<sup>16</sup> He was also a patron of Thanjavur Bade Hussein Durgah.

**Death**

Serfoji II died on the 7th March 1832 after a reign of almost 40 years (His first reign was from 1787 to 1793 and his second reign was from 1798 to 1832). His death was mourned throughout the empire and his funeral procession was attended by over 90,000 people.

**Conclusion**

During his time, Thanjavur was one of the most developed princely states in the Indian subcontinent. While many Rajahs were engrossed in fighting and civil wars, Serfoji ushered in an era of peace, prosperity and scientific development and pioneered new administrative and educational reforms. His vision helped Thanjavur forge ahead of other princely states and advance into a new age and emerge as a fitting competitor to European nations. Above all, he was an enlightened and educated soul; the quintessential Indian Maharajah of the British colonial era who was at home with both Latin as well as Sanskrit and could converse and compile literary works in both Tamil as well as English. Raja Serfoji Government Arts College for men and Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library were established in Thanjavur by the Government of Tamilnadu to honour him. In shortly Serfoji II was the greatest Thanjavur Maratha king.

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