

THANJAVUR SARASWATHI MAHAL LIBRARY - THE TREASURE OF MANUSCRIPTS**Dr. N. Neela***Head and Associate Professor of History***Dr. G. Ambroshia***Assistant Professor of History, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College (W) (A), Madurai-2***Abstract**

Thanjavur District is one of the 32 districts of the state of Tamil Nadu, in south eastern India. It's headquarter is Thanjavur. Thanjavur is a famous historical city for a period of almost 1000 years. The earliest rulers of Thanjavur known to history are the Mutharayars, who ruled from their capital at Sendalai, a fertile village near Tirukattupalli in Thanjavur District. But few details of their times are available except that in the middle of the ninth century, they were a dependency under the Pallava rulers.¹ The great Chola king Vijayala founded the Chola empire Thanjavur with its capital. The period of the Cholas was productive of immortal works in Tamil Literature. After the Cholas, about the end of the 14th century the Vijayanagar Emperors annexed Chola mandalam to their kingdom. They ruled Thanjavur through their viceroys. One of the viceroys appointed in 1532 by king Achyuta was Sevappanayak and he founded the dynasty of Thanjavur.² All the Nayak kings were, without exception, great men of letters. The court was flourished with both Sanskrit and Telugu poets and dramatists. The Telugu and Sanskrit works produced during the rule of the Nayaks from 1532 to 1673 are in the archives of Saraswati Mahal Library.

Keywords: *Tamil Literature, Chola king, Saraswati Mahal Library, Vijayanagar Emperors, Nayaks, Chola mandalam*

From the Nayaks, Thanjavur passed on into the hands of the Marathas in the year 1674. Ekoji, the brother of Shivaji the Great became the ruler. On 22 January 1787, Tuljaji adopted Serfoji. In his letter to Archibald Campbell, Governor of Madras, he describes Serfoji as the son of Sahaji his near cousin by lineal descent that is ten years old and proper in all respects. Raja Tuljaji had requested Christian Frederick's schwarts, a Danish Missionary to take charge of the early education of Serfoji, the prince. He was nearly for four years the guardian and protector of Serfoji. Serfoji was taken to Madras and travelled extensively with his mentor schwarts. He received his early education from various scholars on multifarious subjects.³

Serfoji II was declared as Ruler in 1789, because of the favour of court of Directors of East India Company. Serfoji devoted his time in the pursuit of culture and learning. The court and palace records of Thanjavur Marathas are in Marathi language and Modi script. These records are kept in various bundles in the Library and generally known as Thanjavur Raj records. In these records reference has been made to Saraswathi Bhandara. Bhandara in Marathi means store house or Treasury.⁴ Therefore it is clear that this great Library during early stages was known as Saraswathi Bhandara.

It is clear from evidence that only during the period of Raja Serfoji II there was acquisition of books and very valuable manuscripts in large numbers.⁵ The Saraswathi Mahal Library in Thanjavur is one of the treasures of south India. It is more than a mere museum of antiquarian interest, a mere relic of the past or a mere repository of ancient knowledge or quaint wisdom. It is first and foremost an institution of vital interest of research in History. The Saraswathi Mahal Library was developed and equipped by the great Maratha king Serfoji.⁶

The Saraswathi Mahal Library is particularly important for the manuscripts⁷ the manuscripts in the Library are unique in their volume and the range of subjects they cover. Maratha Manuscripts, rare Telugu manuscripts, Tamil manuscripts, Modi Manuscripts and Rig Veda Manuscripts are of vital importance.⁸

Marathi Manuscripts

Marathi Manuscripts are wrapped in curious textile specimens of those days, especially the famous Karuppur clothes, the product of the now decadent craft of lac-dyeing.⁹ Marathi Manuscripts deals with subjects like philosophy, Literature, Music, Medicine and Science. In particular Marathi dramatic works composed by the kings including Serfoji himself. Devendra Koravanji, compiled in the form of songs sung by wandering gipsy about various places in the world.

Another remarkable series of Manuscripts in this section are the illustrated paper manuscripts in Marathi language deals with Mahabharata and Bhagavatam.¹⁰ The wrapper of each of the bundles in this series is beautifully illustrated. For instance, the wrapper of each of the Mahabharata bundles presents an important scene from the great story. These works are attributed to a great saint, called Madhavaswami, a disciple and descendant of Ekanath, who lived near Mayuram.¹¹ These illustrations were done nearly 250 years ago, but still we see the colour not only unfaded but fresh.

The Telugu Collections

The Telugu collections is important to remember that Telugu did not suffer an eclipse at the disappearance of the Nayaks. Many of the Maratha kings were great Telugu scholars and under them Telugu literature flourished. The result is that in this section the remarkable Telugu works not only left by the Nayaks, but also by the authors in the succeeding centuries. Telugu kings like Raghunatha Nayak and Vijayaraghava Nayak, their talented queens like Ramabhadramba and Rangajamma, and their gifted advisers and poets, have left in this section works of lasting importance.¹² Here are dramatic works which are famous as Yakshaganas and some of the operas of this period are even now staged in villages like Melattur in Thanjavur District. The linguistic experiments like Sanskrit works in Telugu scripts and Telugu works in Nagari and Tamil scripts, and Tamil works, in both Telugu and Nagari scripts. The Tamil school of Telugu literature, as it may

be called came into existence here and its contribution to Telugu has now come to be recognized.

Rare Telugu Works

Among Telugu works, special mention may be made of Ragnatha Nayakabhayudayamu and Kattavaradaraju's Ramaya Namu. In the former we get a glimpse of the Thanjavur palace buildings more than 400 years ago and we learn that the punnai tree, standing outside the palace gates and the Saraswathi Mahal, is nearly 400 years old, that the elephant stalls opposite the main entrance in the palace compound were there then, and that the sangita Mahal which is now an object of wonder in acoustics existed from the early part of the 16th century.¹³

Kattavaradaraju's Ramayanamu is to the Telugu what Kamba Ramayana is to the Tamils and Tulasidas Ramayana is to the Hindi-speaking world. The manuscripts of this work, by its remarkable author Kattavaradaraju is found only in this library. Kattavaradaraju claims to be descendent of the Cholas and it is an interesting fact that one of the greatest Telugu classics is by a Tamilian.¹⁴ It must be mentioned here that king Shahji, the second Maratha ruler of Thanjavur, was an inspired musician and anticipated the great Thyagia by his sweet devotional Telugu songs of which more than five hundred are available now.

Tamil Manuscripts

Tamil flourished not only under the Cholas but also under the succeeding kings and it is no wonder that we find in this section some of the richest literary legacies, like rare commentaries on Tiruchitrambala Kovayar, Tiruvaimozhi, Naladiar, Perundevanar Bharatam and rare readings of the kural. Each of them by itself is a literary find and the library has been able to publish a good many of them recently.¹⁵ Thiruvoimozhi Vachakamalai of Koneri Dasyai is a rare palm leaf manuscripts with illustrations. A miniature palm leaf manuscript on Panchapakshi Sastra will amuse and surprise the visitor. One of the oldest editions of Kamba Ramayana is also exhibited. Classics in Tamil both in paper and palm leaf are among the Tamil collections.

Science and Medicine

The Tamil section abounds in scientific and medical works like rare manuscripts on the methods of preparing chemicals, and Serfoji's medical manuscripts. The medical works of Serfoji now famous as Sarabendra Vaidya Muraigal, are in eighteen volumes. It is not as well known as it should be that Raja Serfoji was running an institution in Thanjavur called the Dhanvantari mahal.¹⁶ Here he assembled leading physicians who carried on researches in Ayurvedic, Unani, Allpathic and Siddha systems of medicine and left the results of their researches in eighteen volumes, containing prescriptions for all ailments, which anticipate

many of the modern discoveries relating to cures for such fell diseases as cancer, Tuberculosis, diabetes and some virulent forms of stomach ailments. Many of these recipes were tried in his time and found useful and today when the library published some of these series it was found that they were hailed as boons by physicians of all schools.

In this research centre several physicians worked and very rare formula in tabloid form were prepared for the first time. Some of them are, Vasantha Kusumakaram, Raja Mrugankam, Swarnamalya Vasantham, Triloka Chinthamani, Chandrakalarasam etc. He had also developed a herbarium in his palace. It is to be noted that patients were given free treatment and remedies were prescribed for various diseases in Dhanwantri Mahal. Case sheets were also maintained in English.¹⁷

Serfoji's Falcon

He was also interested in falconry, a rare sport among princes of the age. The birds of prey were trained in pursuit of game while hunting. It is in evidence that one Bhujanga Rao Hari Rao a courtier acquired the favourite bird of the Nawab of Udayagiri for Serfoji Raja. Serfoji had the Urdu book on Falconry 'Bajnamah', which deals with the treatment of diseases of birds, translated into Marathi. He also invited Europeans and other nobles to see his falcons' hunt.

Modi Manuscripts

In the library we also see big bundles containing paper manuscripts written in a strange script. It is known as the Modi script and it was the official script in which all accounts were written up in the days of the Maratha kings of Thanjavur. This script is still prevalent in Maharastra but the number of persons who know the scripts in the state of Madras in quite a handful. An account of the travels of serfoji, up to Bezwada, is found in this manuscripts.¹⁸ An interesting entry in the Modi records has to be mentioned. This is petition by one Babaji Pawar a servant of Raja Serfoji seeking certain favours with a prayer for preferential treatment. In the petition he mentions that he is one of the oldest servants. According to him Great Shivaji came to Thirumazhapadi on the northern side of coleroon river and halted. There he fell ill. This Babaji Pawar states that he carried Shivaji across the river coleroon and brought him safely to Thanjavur and that such an old and trusted servant is neglected by the palace administration.¹⁹

Then the Sanskrit manuscripts in the library attract our attention. This is the biggest section of the library. The variety and volume of them Sanskrit manuscripts make this library the biggest oriental manuscripts library in the world.²⁰ The Saraswathi Mahal is particularly important for the Sanskrit manuscripts it possesses. The Sanskrit manuscripts in the Library are unique in their volume and the range of subjects they cover. Rare works on Mantra Sastram and vedic scriptures, profound treatises on recondite and abstruse subjects, valuable works in medicine, music, science and fine arts enrich the archives of the library.

These Sanskrit manuscript are not merely by eminent classical authors but also by kings of the Nayak and Maratha dynasties and their distinguished subjects whose names are still remembered in these parts, like Govinda - Dishitar, Tryambakaraya Makhin and others. Those interested in medicine and science find here a rare field for research.²¹ To mention only one instance, Anandakandam is a rare Sanskrit treatise on medicine and alchemy which also deals with atomic physics and some of the processes given here for dealing with the atom and transmuting metals are of lasting importance.

Rig Veda Manuscripts

The illustrated Rig Veda bundles, each with a fascinating illustration from each of the sections of the Vedas and the fine specimen of handwriting they contain fill us with wonder. The title or cover page of these paper manuscripts contain pictorial representations of Gods and Goddesses in Hindu pantheon, or various scenes from puranic stories. Floral decorations also illustrate and decorate the title pages. The subject is Rig veda samhitha in Sanskrit.²² In similar paper manuscripts written in Marathi, scenes from Maha Bharatha, Bhagavatha and Ramayana are depicted in colour and gold. The miniature paintings on the cover pages are exquisite in the ornamental border designs. The features are very clear and lovely. The pictures are bright as if they were painted recently. It is said that rare vegetable pigments are mixed in the paints for drawing these pictures. Another important manuscripts in this series is prabodha Chandrodaya of Krishna Misra with pictorial representation of various ganas (i.e.) emotions and sentiments of a person as characters in the play. The water marks in some of the papers indicate the year of manufacture. The paper manufactured in India as well as imported papers are used in these manuscripts.²³

Aswa Sastra and Gaja Sastra

Special mention must be made of a few works which are seen and admired by scores of visitors everyday viz., the Aswa Sastram, Gaja Sastram and some microscopic writings. The first two are illustrated treaties on horses and elephants. The sages Salihotra, Susruta and Garga in that order, are the great authorities on Aswa Sasthra. This work on horses is said to have been written by Nakula, the fourth among the Panchapandavas based on the treatises of the sages in a lucid manner.²⁴

So also Gaja Sastra is another treatise on elephants by sage Palakapya. The manuscript also contains extracts from vyasa and Vysampayana. The text as compiled contains extracts from other works and also profusely illustrated. Both Aswa Sastra and Gaja Sastra deal with the capture. Maintenance, breeding, training and treatment of animals. It may be, that the works deal with the mythological origin of the animals. However, it should be considered as the earliest authentic treatise in veterinary science. Some of the illustrations in the introductory portions are pleasing and can be easily compared with the work of masters.²⁵

The above mentioned scripts are recognized as standard works on the subjects. In fact an American scholar has already made use of our manuscripts on elephants in his book entitled "Matanga Leela" of "Elephant lone of the Hindus". The Library has now printed the Aswasastram with selected illustrations. The beautiful pictures which these works contain are things of beauty and joy forever. It may be thought that winged horses, and elephants portrayed in these works are merely mythological and have no place in an scientific account about the animals. But it is interesting to know from scientists that biologically many big animals had wings in the beginning and came to shed them in course of time as the price of their evolution. It is equally, interesting to know that the elephants depicted in the Gaja Sastram with two and three pairs of tusks are not mythological as considered by many, but real, and that an elephant with two pairs of tusks was actually shot recently in Begain Congo.²⁶

Other important pictorial manuscripts displayed in the show cases are botanical drawings, various ghats on the holy river Ganges in Varanasi, Military costumes, miniature painting of Ramayana palanquins of various designs, Anatomical plates, old Atlases, costumes of India, textile designs, animals, both domestic and wild, fishes etc. Special mention may be made about the pictorial representation of various characters in the famous play of Krishna Misra, "prabodha Chandrodayam".

Conclusion

To conclude this, Saraswathi Mahal Library is a valued possession of the south India preserved in trust for the whole of India and ultimately for the benefit of the world.

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