

THE SARASVATI MAHAL LIBRARY AND CONTRIBUTION OF RAJAH SERFOJI II

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ABSTRACT

Thanjavur has been renowned as a great centre of Art. Culture and literature for more than ten centuries. Successive generations of the Cholas, Nayaks and Maratha rulers have contributed and enriched the cultural greatness. Thanjavur is well known throughout the world for its Brahadeswar temple, magnificent Palace and the Sarasvati Mahal Library. The Sarasvati Mahal Library is one among the few mediaveall libraries that exists in the world. It is a treasure house of knowledge. It contains very rare and valuable collection of manuscripts, books, maps and paintings on all aspects of arts, culture and literature. The Encyclopaedia of Britannica in its survey of libraries of world mentions this as The most remarkable library in India.[1]

Keywords: *Thanjavur, Art, Culture, Sarasvati Mahal Libarary manuscripts, books, maps and paintings, Encyclopaedia of Britannica.*

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF LIBRARY

During the reign of Nayaks of Thanjavur (1535-1675), the library was formed and developed in the name of Sarasvati Bhandar. The Maratha rulers who ruled Thanjavur (1676-1832) has patronised and developed the royal palace library. After the death of last Maratha queen, the library was made as public library in 1918 under the charitable Endowment Act. After the visit of our former Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Government of India has constituted a three member committee under the

chairmanship of Dr.S.R.Ranganathan.[2] The committee report was implemented in 1979 with generous funds received from the Government of India. In 1986 the library was registered under the Tamilnadu Registered Societies Act 1975 with ex-officio members from State and Central Governments.[3]

The library receives funds from Government of Tamilnadu for Maintenance and from government of India for developmental activities. Among the Maratha Kings Raja Serfoji II (1798-1832) was an eminent scholar in many branches of learning. With great enthusiasm he took special steps for the enrichment of the library.[4]

All present it is living monument for our culture and reflects the glory of Raja Serfoji II. It is fitting tribute to the great collector Serfoji, that from 1918 the library is named as the Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library. At present it is a living monument for our culture and reflects the glory of Indian cultures.

RAJA SERFOJI II EARLY EDUCATION

Raja Serfoji II was born on 24.09.1777 and had his education under the guidance of Danish Missionary father Schwartz. He was a scholar in English, French, German, Sanskrit Tamil and Marathi languages. He came to power in 1798, but one year only he ruled Tanjore. In 1799, he had a treaty with the British. According to the treaty the British appointed Collector for administration. He diverted his activities for the development of art and culture till his death in 8th March 1832.[5]

CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBRARY

In India, most of the Palace Libraries were destroyed due to war. The famous king Tippu Sultan had a library in his palace. It was taken away by the British, after the war with Tippu in 1799. We can find some of those Library books in the Asiatic Society Library, Calcutta. Raja Serfoji collected the descriptive catalogue of that Library prepared by Charles Stewart of Cambridge University and preserved in the library. It seems that Raja Serfoji's decision of making accord with British administrators helped to preserve this treasure house of knowledge.[6]

Serfoji enriched the collection of this Library through various literary activities. He himself was author of quite a number of works in Sanskrit and Marathi. These

manuscripts are preserved in this library. He encouraged great pundits in all branches of learning.

The Pandits well versed in Dharmasastra were appointed as Judges in his courts of Justice. A legal vade mecum entitled Vyavahara prakasa was compiled from various Smiriti texts for daily use in the conduct of administration and justice by the Pandits.[7]

Raja Serfoji made a pilgrimage to Banaras in 1820. He took 300 people along with him, which included Pandits, copylists, artists and others. He employed Pandits to collect, buy and copy a vast number of works in Sanskrit from all the renowned centres of Sanskrit learning in the North and other areas. He commissioned his artist to draw the views of sixty four bathing ghats of Banaras from East to West of the river Ganges in eight plates which is available in this library.

The Maratha kings started Chattrams for catering and other physical needs of the pilgrims. Raja Serfoji started School attached to the most of the Chattrams under his control and imparted free education to village children. For the use of little children, Serfoji ordered to translate into simple Indian languages English printing press in 1805 in Thanjavur with Devanagari Script called Navavidya Kalasala Varnayantra for producing copies of all great works in languages for wider use and circulation among public. [8]

The journal entitled Indian Antiquary vol.1 published in 1872 mentions that the Serfojis printing press was the earliest printing press, which was started for Devanagari script printing in whole south India. The Types and blocks were prepared using soft stone and hard wood. Even today the library preserves some of the books printed in press.

Raja Serfoji was running an institution in Thanjavur called Dhavantri Mahal. He devoted himself for the progress of research in Ayurvedha, siddha and Unani in the Dhanvantri Mahal. Recipes of medicinal preparations were recorded in Manuscript form in 18 volumes. These manuscripts are embodied in the series of words named Sarabendra Vaidyamuraigal. Besides basic research in many ailments, excellent work had been done on disease like Cancer, Polio, Doabetes and Tuberculosis by this

institution in Ayurvedic and Siddha field. The library has published some in the series.[9]

There was an Ophthalmic section in that institution, which maintained the case history sheets for each patient with picture of the diseased eye, date of admission, types of treatment given and condition during discharge. The case history sheets reveal that free treatment was given to public and some amount was also given during discharge of the patients.

Raja Serfoji was a great composer and a musician and had left several musical compositions in Indian languages as well as in English. He collected nearly 150 musical notation books and more than thirty hand written Indian musical notation copies are preserved in the Library. Even now some of his compositions are performed in Maharashtra.

SERFOJI'S BOOK COLLECTION

Raja Serfoji enriched this library by collecting not only manuscripts but also Books, illustrated Manuscripts, Drawings, Atlases and Maps, Lithographic engravings etc. Because of his multi focal attraction he collected a large number of books has 3830 English books, 421 French books 108 German books, 35 Danish books and few books in Dutch, Greek and Latin languages.[10]

Serfoji has autographed all the books in his collection. These books are mostly printed in London, Edinburg and paris and the year of printing is spanned from 1696 to 1830. These books dealt with all disciplines.

It has the richest collection on European languages and literatures, Medical Sciences, chemistry, Astronomy, Geography, Explorations and Voyages, English Almanacs, Periodicals, Encyclopaedias etc. This collection has some rare and first editions of highly valued books.[11]

Some are Dr.Johnsons dictionary (5th edition 1784, A.D) in two volumes. A Pictorial Bible of 1791, Antoine Alaurent Lavoisiers Elements of Chemistry, first edition of Fourcroy a major work, the General system of Chemical Knowledge in eleven volumes, George Buffons 36 volumes of Natural History of the Earth (1749-

1785). A catalogue for his book collection was also prepared in 1830. Under 27 subject headings, titles are arranged alphabetically under each subjects.

MAPS AND ATLASES

The atlases and Maps collected by the Raja Serfoji are extraordinary important. Which are preserved in the library. These maps dealt with ancient history, geographical details, searoutes, political divisions and their boundaries. The maps were made with the completion of land survey. In the Maps printed in 18th and 19th century, we can see the name of India as “Hindoostan” or the “Mogul Empire” Australia as New Holland. Japan as Nippon etc., The Oldest Printed book available in this library is an Atlas, in which the maps were printed in the years 1692, 1693 and 1696[12].

An interesting and rare map of India of size 112x106 cms is available in the library. The title and other details are “A map of Hindoostan or the Moghul empire from the latest authority inscribed to Sir Joseph Banks Bart, president of Royal Society which was produced by Mr.J.Rennel, a pioneer in Map making on 1st Jan 1788. In this map, the coastal Tamilnadu and some portions extended up to Ongole in Andhra Pradesh are referred as the region of Carnatic.

Hence the music flourished in this area has been called as Carnatic music. It is significant to note that this map indicates Adams Bridge, which connects India and Ceylon. Maclean in his Glossary of Madras Presidency Gazettes (Vol III plate 5) mentions that the bridge was used for foot traffic till 1480 AD.[13]

Later it was damaged by the breach. Some of the notable Atlases are Bengal Bihar Atlas, Geographical classsica of Hermanmoli (1721) Atlas coeiets (1742) and other old and rare maps of arrow smith, Robert Orme, Tracks and discoveries of Captain Cook, James Rennel, Baker, R.Wilkinson, C.Mackenzie. They are available in this library.

PICTURES AND DRAWINGS

Serfoji collected many pictorial books on the views of Scenarios towns temples country sides, fort and battle rivers etc., Some of the notable pictorial books are

costumes of various countries view of Burma view of Mysore, Himalayas views Chines punishments etc.,[14]

A notable and interesting pictorial book available in the library is Human Physiognomy pictures. It is a series of Lithographic drawings by Charlies Le Brun ad hoted French Artist. It is an illustrative drawing of relation between human face with beast and birds face. Another 48 pictures of Oriental scenarios of Hindoostan by Daniel brothers is also available in the library.[15]

PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

Serfojis court artists prepared some interesting colour drawings and paintings. These paintings are in teh form of illustrated Manuscripts, Pictorial books and other drawings. Some of the pictorial manuscripts are Aswasastra, Gajasastra Rigveda Samhita, Ramayan etc. Some of the pictorial books are pictures of Ayurvedic plants, view of bathing ghats at Banares, Tanjore Military costumes, varieties of Palanquin, Pictures of birds etc., These paintings and drawings are available in the library.

CATALOGUE PREPARATION FOR MANUSCRIPTS

Even though the library is originated in 16th century, the earliest catalogue available in the library belongs to Raja Serfojis period. The catalogue of Palmleaf manuscripts was prepared in palmleaf form and that of paper manuscripts in paper form. The palmleaf manuscript catalogues are three bundles in Telugu script. The Palm leaf manuscript catalogue preparation work was stated in 1801. The paper manuscript catalogue was prepared in 1807. It is a alphabetic-classified order. Now we can say that Serfojis catalogue is the earliest catalogue available in India[16].

Thomas Robinson who accompanied Bishop Heber to meet Raja Serfoji on 30th March 1826 has written in the book the last days of Bishop Heber as. The Bishop paid a private visit to the Rajah, who received us in his library, a noble room with three rows of pilers and handsomely furnished in the English style. On one side there are portraits of the Maharatta dynasty from Shahjee and Sivajee, ten book cases containing a very fair collection of French, English, Gerhortus sicman, Greek, and Latin Books, and two others of Maharata and Sanskrit manuscripts.

In the adjoining room is an airpump an electrifying machine, an ivory skeleton, astronomical instruments and several cases of books many of which are on the subject of medicine, which was for some years his favourite study. He showed us his valuable collection of coins, paintings of flowers and natural history, with each of which he seemed to have considerable acquaintance, particularly with the medicinal virtues of plants in his hortus siccus.

When we took our leave his minister showed us a noble statue our leave his Minister showed us a noble statue of the Rajah by Flasmn. His stables contain several fine English horses but that of which he is most justly proud, as the rarest curiosity of an Indian court, is an English printing press, worked by native Christians in which they struck off a sentence in Maharatta in the Bishops presence in honour of his visit.[17]

The British has given high record to the King Serfoji II. He was included as a Honorary member of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1827 there were only four foreign dignitaries who were honorary members in the society. They are

1. His royal highness the Duke Oeorleans
2. His majesty the King of Oude
3. His Royal Highness Abas mirza, Prince Royal of Persia
4. His Highness the Rajah of Tanjore

CONCLUSION

Raja Serfojis multi focul knowledge recognition and good relationship with the British administrators caused him to collect more books and manuscripts. This library currently list over 46000 manuscripts and 58000 printed books, in which a good number of manuscripts and 4500 rare books of collection are the 19th century especially by Rajah Serfihi II. This library manuscripts and books are national wealth. It is our duty of one and all to preserve them for the use of future generaion.

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