

Sarasvathi Mahal Library - Centre Of Learning

Dr. V. Seethalakshmi, Associate Professor (Rtd.)

Seethalakshmi Ramaswami College, Thiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu
Corresponding Author: Dr. V. Seethalakshmi

Abstract: Sarasvathi Mahal Library is one of the oldest library in India. It is situated in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. The Sarasvathi mahal library had its origin as a palace library for the private use of the Nayaks of Thanjavur who rule Tanjore from C.E. 1535-1675. The Marathas captured Thanjavur in C.E. 1675 and ruled till C.E. 1855. The Marathas promoted the local culture and tradition and developed the library. The most noted Maratha ruler who concentrated on the development of the Library was Serfoji II C.E. 1798-1832, an eminent scholar in many branches of learning and enriched the library. This article brings to limelight the history of one of the oldest library in India.

Key words: Library, Sarasvati Mahal Library, Thanjavur, Nayaks, Marathas, Serfoji Introduction

Date of Submission: 29-04-2019

Date of acceptance: 13-05-2019

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarasvathi Mahal Library is one of the oldest library in India. It is situated in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. The Sarasvathi mahal library had its origin as a palace library for the private use of the Nayaks of Thanjavur who rule Tanjore from C.E. 1535-1675. The Marathas captured Thanjavur in C.E. 1675 and ruled till C.E. 1855. The Marathas promoted the local culture and tradition and developed the library. The most noted Maratha ruler who concentrated on the development of the Library was Serfoji II C.E. 1798-1832, an eminent scholar in many branches of learning and enriched the library. This article brings to limelight the history of one of the oldest library in India.

THANJAVUR – AN OVERVIEW

Thanjavur is a city in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Thanjavur is an important center of South Indian religion, art, and architecture. Most of the Great Living Chola Temples, which are UNESCO World Heritage Monuments, are located in and around Thanjavur. The foremost among these, the Brihadeeswara Temple, is located in the centre of the city. Thanjavur is also home to Tanjore painting, a painting style unique to the region. Thanjavur is the headquarters of the Thanjavur District. The city is an important agricultural centre located in the Cauvery Delta and is known as the "Rice bowl of Tamil Nadu".

In this region, river Cauvery flows and branches into numerous tributaries which enrich the fertility of the land and brings prosperity to the people. River Cauvery is one of the major rivers of India and is considered sacred by Hindus. It is known as the southern Ganges, has a course of four hundred and seventy five miles and is equally famous for its sanctity, its picturesque scenery and its usefulness for irrigation. Tamil literature cherishes many tradition of its origin and is replete with expressions of pious and fervent admiration for the life giving properties of its water. The river is the source for an extensive irrigation system. The river has supported agriculture for centuries and served as the life blood of the ancient kingdoms and modern cities of South India.

As one crosses the river Cauveri at Tiruchirappalli and enters Thanjavur the majestic Vimana of Rajarajesvarnam (Big temple) invites the person to Thanjavur. As we see this grand edifice it looks as though Rajaraja I the Chola king, the architect of this grand structure is welcoming us to Thanjavur. Such is the glory created by the Cholas. From here as we proceed to the Maratha Palace and go inside the SarasvathiMahal library the monumental work of Serfoji II that stores manuscripts of varied knowledge in different languages both Indian and foreign and which has an international reputation can be located without having a grand, decorated look to the outside world. While standing at the entrance of this temple of learning the immediate thought that comes to mind is the fact that knowledge needs no publicity. Those who seek knowledge flock to this temple of knowledge for learning. SarasvathiMahal library needs no publicity and this seat of Sarasvathi, the goddess of learning is in place for knowledge seeking people. The origin, existence and collections of this library itself could be a deep research study.

KING SERFOJI II

Serfoji II was an enlightened and learned monarch who valued education. He was a multi-linguist and was proficient in Sanskrit, Telugu, Maratha, English, German and French. Benefits of English education made him to appreciate English classical literature. It is in this background he thought about developing SarasvathiMahal Library as a centre of learning. Serfoji was knowledge seeking and was a peace loving monarch. He willingly undertook a life of pension and was free from political pre occupations. This enabled him to concentrate on the development of the library.

Concept of library exists in very early times. Alexandria, the city founded by Alexander, the great in 332 B.C. was the capital of Egypt from 332 B.C to 642 C.E. It was a centre for not only Hellenism but also of semitic learning. Alexandria library is the focal point of highest development of Greek scholarship and science containing great research Institute and museum.¹ This library had five lakh Volumes and septuagint translation of the old Testament in Greek, library was destroyed during civil war in Greece and a subsidiary library was burnt by Christians in 391 C.E.² Then we hear about library of congress in U.S.A. which came into existence in 1814 C.E.³ This library became an outstanding institution among the learned institutions of the world in the collection of books, manuscripts, music, prints and maps. As a service to the learners who have lost vision there were books in Braille. This library which was in the capital Washington D.C was burnt by the British troops and was shifted to another place. The SarasvathiMahal library has the reputation of the above said libraries. The library existed as a learning centre in the C.E. 12th century.

THE SARASVATI MAHAL LIBRARY

The Sarasvati Mahal Library was founded as a Palace Library by the Nayak kings of Thanjavur (1535–1675). The Nayaks of Thanjavur had a considerable contribution in the development of the library. It was however Serfoji who enriched it with priceless works, maps, dictionaries, coins and artwork. Library emerged as a big learning and research centre only through the unstinted support that was given by Serfoji and his hard labour to collect manuscripts through various sources. It is possible that his exposure to the western thoughts and ideas had made him to seek knowledge from everywhere beyond all types of regional and other barriers. India is known for big ancient educational centres like Kanchi, Taxila and Nalanda. But concept of library was envisaged by western educated Serfoji and Sarasvathi Mahal library became a study centre that stores all sorts of knowledge.

Dr. A.C. Burnell describes this library as 'to be perhaps the largest and most important in the world'. This library is one among the few medieval libraries that exists in the world. Dr. Buhler says, it contains a great many useful and number of very rare or nearly unique books, many of which are quite unknown or procurable only with great many trouble and expense'.⁴ The manuscripts and yester year books that are available are a source of meaningful material for research as they are considered as primary source. The information found in the records is quite new and unique to the quest of historians, artists and orientalis. The Encyclopedia Britannica in its survey of libraries of the world mentioned the library as the most remarkable in the history in India.

The library contains very rare and valuable collection of the manuscripts, books, maps and painting in all aspects of art, culture and literature. Serfoji had a passion for books, and collection of books was considered by him as the sacred duty. He had spent lavishly to collect the manuscripts. It was the encomiums of western scholars and critics. Serfoji collected many manuscripts and books from Varanasi when he visited the place along with his royal Officials, Staff and Pandits. He sent the Pandits far and wide and collected quite big number of books and manuscripts for the library He had spent a lot of money to buy the manuscripts for the library.⁵ He enlarged the library at Thanjavur with printed books and materials which were in different languages.

According to Dr. A. C. Burnell who had catalogued the books⁶ it is one of the largest libraries with twenty-two volumes mostly in Sanskrit. The manuscripts that are found in the library covers the fields of Vedanta, Literature, Grammar, Kavya, Music, Architecture, Medicine, Astronomy, etc. He made all the infrastructural facilities for the preservation of the manuscripts and books for the benefit of the posterity. Manuscripts in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Modi are some of the very notable collections of the library. Medical books collected are displayed in a show case. They were printed in the Eighteenth century in London.⁷ The anatomical structure of human physique is a source of knowledge to the preset anatomist.

Panchapachi Sastram is one of the smallest palm leaf manuscripts available in the library. It is a pocket size edition of palm leaves dealing with astrological facts predictable through five birds.⁸ At present, astrology is given the status of a science and not totally ignored as superstition. Bhagavad Gita is another smallest pocket size paper manuscript in Sanskrit language written in Devanagiri script. Valmiki Ramayana is a bundle of palm leaf manuscripts in Grantha script.⁹

Kamba Ramayana in Tamil is one of the biggest palm leaf manuscript bundles which are written by Vasudeva pillai.¹⁰ It consists of seven Kandas in five hundred and thirty seven palm leaves. Thiruvaimozhi Vachakamalai is a palm leaf manuscript which is written in manipravala style.¹¹ Bhamati is a

commentary on Sri Sankara's bhashyam of the Advaitic School of philosophy.¹² Tattva Chitamani is a Sanskrit work in Bengali script.¹³ A palm-leaf manuscript of Pali language in Burmese script deals with Buddhist philosophy.¹⁴ Phalavati is one of the oldest palm leaf manuscripts in the library. It is a glossary of Purvamimamsa and sutras of Jaimini Rishi.¹⁵ Serfoji's medical tablets namely KangasundaramChintamani, Rasabhupati and PanchamritaParpadi supplies recipes in the medical unit that was established by Serfoji.¹⁶ Chitra Ramayana is a technique in storytelling. The first three Kandas of Ramayana Bala, Ayodhya and Arankyaka are painted and every picture has an explanation in Telugu.

Charles Le Brun's Human physiognomy charts are an important collection of the library. They are interesting lithographic pictures drawn by Charles Le Brun, the French physiognomist.¹⁷ It should be particularly mentioned here that there are materials related to animal husbandry like GajaSastram and AswaSastram. Gajasastram, it is the science of elephants, the authorship of this work is attributed to palakapyamuni who is said to be the offspring of Samagayamuni. They have an album with illustrations and coloured pictures of elephants. In these pictures winged elephants are also portrayed.¹⁸

Aswasastram is about the treatment of horses. It is a treatise by Nakula on the science of healing horses as expounded by Salihotra, Susrutha, Garga and Surya the classical ancestors. The treatise on horses is the quintessence of the works of these great authorities.¹⁹ This describes the chief characteristics of horse such as cast of the body, natural disposition, color, motion, smell, brilliance and curl of hair. There is also PakshiSastra (book on birds). Falcon is a book containing many pictures of birds painted in colours. Serfoji had a Urdu collection on Falcony called 'Bajinamah' which deals with treatment of the ailments of birds. It was translated into Marathi.²⁰

Bhagavan Veda is a single Volume of all the four Vedas brought out by Swamy Gangesvarananda.²¹ Art of printing was known and books were printed in the king's press named 'Nava VidhyaKalanidhiyanthrasala'. The works like Megamala, Kumara Sambhavam and Annapathiyam were printed in Devanagiri. PrabodhaChandrodayam is a paper manuscript with painted pictures of the characters of allegorical drama 'PrabodhaChandrodaya' in Sanskrit.²² The author of this allegorical drama is Krishna Misra of C.E. 12th century. Rig Veda illustrations are depicted in fast colouring in each of the title sheet of Rig Veda Samhita in Sanskrit. A number of pictures are available in this section that describes more than twenty Purana stories.

Dasabodham is a philosophical work by Samartha Ramadas Swami. This was translated into Tamil and delivered as lecture by Madhoba Ratnakaran. Sivapancharatnaslokas by Kavi Gurudas in praise of Lord Panchanatheesvara in Thiruvaiyaru is also got from the library. PurshaSuktam is a manuscript containing four sheets written on black sheets with white letters. It should be particularly mentioned here that education crossed the borders of caste, religion and language. Amber Hussain, a Muslim poet has written a commentary on Bhagavat Gita in Marathi language.²³

Some of the drawings and paintings by Serfoji are preserved in India office library in London and are also found in Victoria Albert Museum in London. Serfoji started on a pilgrimage to North India with his security, royal officials and more than fifty scholars and artists and nearly three people accompanied him. While staying in Kasi he had collected manuscripts of Sanskrit workers to be preserved in library. Since use of hand made paper was in vogue the Taj Mahal and Jumma Masjid were painted.²⁴

From Kasi Serfoji with his band reached Calcutta, Marquis of Hastings, the Governor General of Calcutta came to know about the Sojourn of Serfoji through Thomas Munroe, the governor of Madras. Serfoji was received with state honour by the Governor-General and Hasting expressed his desire to know about Thirukkural since they were from the land of Thirukkural.²⁵ Governor General had asked with all humility and like a sincere student. Unfortunately nobody in the big group to say about it and Serfoji had no answer.

On his return to Thanjavur he had asked for Thirukkural in the library and to his dismay he had found that there was no copy.²⁶ It is surprising to note that the library has stored so many manuscripts in Sanskrit, Telugu and Marathi had only very few Tamil works. Serfoji summoned Tamil scholars and through them learnt the language. He had become proficient in the language to read the onethousand three hundred and thirty couplets in Thirukkural. He came to know the wisdom found in each couplet of Thirukkural. It is interesting to note here that Thirukkural was first published in 1812 C.E. in Thanjavur by Gnanaprakasam, son of Malaiyathuvasan. He was able to understand the richness of Tamil language and literature through his untiring efforts. Through his untiring efforts he was able to collect innumerable Tamil manuscripts.²⁷ He did have the mind to spend money for the collection of Tamil manuscripts. He went further to announce honours and prizes to those who were able to collect Tamil manuscripts and hand it over to the library. The Tamil manuscripts that were collected were rewritten on paper and preserved in the library.²⁸

The library has more than forty six thousand manuscripts both in palm leaf and paper form that are in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Maratha. It has fifty thousand books that include Serfoji's personal collections. Along with the manuscripts and books the library possesses rich source materials for history and science. Modi documents are very rich source to build Thanjavur Maratha History. Apart from these, there are paintings on

wood and Canvass, paintings on paper in book forms, illustrated manuscripts, western musical notation books, plans of Thanjavur, revenue villages, pictures and engravings and atlases.²⁹

The library has very rare source materials to do research and also for knowledge in varied subjects. It has attracted scholars far and wide. Academicians and scholars of repute were associated with the library. K.C. Menon (1966 – 1967 C.E.) one of the pioneers in starting Kerala veterinary college and who was the vice-principal of the institution had contacted the library concerning treatment for certain ailments of elephants.³⁰ He came to know about the manuscripts in Gajasastra preserved by the library and had done research work in the library. Knowledge gained by him has served a functional purpose. Thus the priceless materials lying unpublished in the library offers perennial inspiration to scholars widening the depth and profundity of knowledge.

A remarkable development of the age is the use of colloquial Tamil in most of the inscriptions and copper plates and manuscripts of the period.

Few examples can be sighted here.³¹

Writing Language	Colloquial language
Nilam(epyk;)	Nelam(neyk;) - Land
Aindu(le;J)	Anju(mQ;R) – Five
Varthu(itj;J)	Vachchu(tr;R) – To keep
Kondra(nfhz;w)	Konna(nfhz;z) – To kill
Erandu(,uz;L)	Rendu(nuz;L) – Two
Peyar(ngah;)	Per (Ngh;) – Name

The social background of this change is not clearly known and it is difficult to reach at suppositions. Another finding is Sanskrit words are used while writing the manuscripts, Copper plate and inscriptions. Some common Sanskrit words used are utsavam, yadastu, Jeeranam, Bhojanam, Aswini, Pathi, Barya, Pouthran and Agna. An attempt had been made to write Sanskrit words in Tamil form in which case for Sanskrit letters like a corresponding Tamil letters are used. Few examples can be noted here.

Sanskrit	Tamil
rh ;jphp	rhj;jphp
g\k;	gl;rk;
Hp\gk;	Hplgk;
y\;kp	nyl;Rkp

A Sanskrit sloka in the Chidambaram epigraph in South Arcot is written in Telugu script. The Muslims were migrating to the Cauvery region from the time of the Nayak rule. Muslim soldiers were also present in the region of Thanjavur. Thanjavur was besieged by the Nawab of Arcot and it came under them for a short while. In such a situation the Urdu language was also prevalent in the age. Tamil epigraphs have Urdu words like Amina, Kajam, Mahal, Yadastu, Gajana, Rastha and Kavil.

II. CONCLUSION

Since Nayaks were the rulers of Thanjavur before the Marathas, Telugu became the court language and was also a spoken language of a section of people. Telugu was patronized by the Maratha rulers and some of the rulers like Sahaji was very proficient in Telugu and had authored works in Telugu. Maratha Kings had Matrimonial relations with the Telugu Nayaks. Hence Telugu language became popular, Telugu manuscripts are available in the Sarasvathi Mahal library of Thanjavur. Telugu inscriptions are seen near the Marathi epigraphs of Vithobha temple and Pattukkottai, Vallam, Manora tower.

Marathi letters in inscriptions and copper plates are in Nagari script. One can find Tamil words in the inscriptions. Some of them are Anganam, Ellai, Kuttai, Kuzhi, Gopuram, Thingal, Thiruppani, Thermutti, Nanjai, Paditturai, Pattiram, Punjai and Madappalli. Another big change in the epigraph is along with Hindu date the Muslim calendar and to Gregorian calendar dates are also seen.

Influence of English language is also seen. English words are also familiar and are found in the inscriptions and copper plates of the period. There are English words like Deputy Sarkar, Her Highness, His Highness, Trustee, Agent, English and Manager.³² Most of the manuscripts, inscriptions and copper plates have the words of the different languages and Tamil language became colloquial in writing in the 17th and 18th centuries and these can be the source to study the concordance of the languages. Tamil writing takes the form of Manipravala that is the use of other languages in writing. This is a major change that was seen in the 18th century.

Endnotes :

- [1]. N. Subramanian,, *History of Tamilnadu 1565-1956*, Koodal Publishers, Madurai, 1977, p.301.,
- [2]. Encyclopaedia Britanica, Vol. I, p. 497.
- [3]. Ibid.
- [4]. Encyclopaedia Britanica, Vol. II, pp. 200-201.
- [5]. The Journal of the SarasvathiMahal Library, Vol. XXI, 1967, p. 2.
- [6]. Ibid, pp. 1-2.
- [7]. K.M. Venkataramayya, , *Administratin and social life under the Maratharulers of Thanjavur*, TamilUniversity, Thanjavur, 1984, p. 262.
- [8]. The Journal of the SarasvathiMahal library, op.cit.,Vol.LIII, 2011,p. 3.
- [9]. Ibid.
- [10]. Ibid-It contains 24 bundles thousand slokas of ValmikiRamayna is a unique features to the skill of the ancient sribers. Each palm-leaf measures 3' x9'.Both sides of all these leaves bears thirty lines with micro grantha letter which is impossible even to read with naked eyes. This is a Sanskrit work in grantha.
- [11]. It is one of the biggest palm leaf manuscript bundles in this Library.
- [12]. Like gem and coral intermixed with the commentary by KoneriDasyai, the servant of Koneri. It is a rare commentary of Thirvaimozhi of Nammalvar. The picture of Lord Ranganatha reclining on serpant couch and Lakshmi seated by his side are drawn on it with the styles itself. There is no other manuscript of the work available except the one in SarasvathiMahal Library.
- [13]. The Journal of SarasvathiMahal library, Rare manuscripts and curious, Vol. XXXIII, 1983, p. 4
- [14]. Ibid.
- [15]. Ibid.
- [16]. Mimamsa means a reverant study leading to a scientific guest of truth and it was this search after truth leading to the solution of the great problem of life that engaged the attention of the ancient in the past. The Mimamsa occupies the most important place not only among the six systems of Indian philosophy, sankiyagnayaya, vaiseshika, mimamsa, yoga and vedhanta- but all ancient and sacred literature.
- [17]. The Journal of the SarasvathiMahal library, Vol. LIII, 2011, p. 12.
- [18]. Ibid.A comparative study of human faces with those of relevant birds and beasts are wonderfully dealt with.
- [19]. It describes the biological origin of elephant, their peculiar physiological needs, their meaning, ailments and treatment.
- [20]. It is a rare illustrated manuscript available in this library. Horses are useful mainly for warfare physically and psychologically uniquely fitted for this purpose.
- [21]. The Journal of the SarasvathiMahal library, rare manuscripts and curious, Vol. XXXIII, 1983, p. 6.
- [22]. Ibid.
- [23]. The Journal of the SarasvathiMahal library, Vol. LIII, 2011, p. 9.
- [24]. Ibid, p. 11.
- [25]. The Hindu, Tamil supplement-vetrikodi, MannarvaralatrtuMakkalNoolagam, dated 14th April 2015, p. 3.
- [26]. Ibid.
- [27]. Ibid.
- [28]. Ibid.
- [29]. Ibid.
- [30]. The Journal of the SarasvathiMahal library, Vol. XLIII, No. 1 & 2, 1997, p. 9.
- [31]. Mathrubhumi, Malayalam daily, special issue on the inauguration of the Nutrition Lab of Kerala Veterinary College and Research Institute, Trichur, Mrigasamrakshanam Paripadigail, Gaveshanam, NangalkullaPangu, article by Dr. K.V.Menon, dated 31st December, 1966.
- [32]. ThanjaiMarathiyarKalvettugal

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. V. Seethalakshmi. "Sarasvathi Mahal Library - Centre Of Learning." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 05, 2019, pp. 56-60.