



Serfoji Rajah's Contribution to the Sarasvati Mahal Library

by Shri.P.Perumal

Thanjavur has been renowned as a great center of Art, Culture and Literature for more than ten centuries. Successive generations of the Cholas, Nayaks and Marathas 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 medieval libraries that exist in the world. It is a treasure house of manuscripts formed during the Nayak Kingdom in Thanjavur (1535-1675) and developed by the Maratha Kings (1676-1855).

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

Serfoji's Early Education:

Raja Serfoji II was born on 24.09.1777. At the age of ten Thulaja Raja of Thanjavur adopted him as successor to the throne, while Thulaja Raja was in the deathbed, he placed his son Serfoji in the hands of Danish missionary father Rev.Schwartz to take care of his education. His early education at Civilian Orphan

Asylum now St. George School on Poonamalle High Road, Chennai between 1793-1797 under Rev. C.F. Schwartz helped in molding his character. He was a multi linguist.

He was a scholar in English, French, German, Sanskrit, Tamil and Marathi. In October 1798, he was declared as the ruler of Thanjavur. On 25.10.1799, he had a treaty with British administrators. Accordingly the first collector was appointed to look after the administration and he diverted his activities for the development of art and culture till his death on 8th March 1832.

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 Tippu's Library prepared by Charles Steuvert of Cambridge University and preserved in the library. It seems that Raja Sefoji's decision of making accord with British administrators helped to preserve this treasure house of knowledge.

Serfoji enriched the collection of this Library through various literary activities. He himself was the author of quite a number of works in Sanskrit and Marathi. Some of the notable works written by him are Kumarasambhava campu, Ganesavisvewara parinaya, Mohinimahesa Parinaya, Radhakrishna Vilasanataka, etc., The manuscripts of these works are preserved in this Library.

He encouraged great Pandits in all branches of learning. Some of his royal authors were 1) Kottaiyoor Sivakkolunthu Desikar 2) Rajagopala Kavi 3) Raganatha Kavi 4) Virubhakshi Kavi 5) Venkatesa Sastri 6) Narasimha Sastri 7)

Krishna Sastri 8) Krishna Swami 9) Tammacharya 10) Kuppuchari 11) Srinivasan 12) Chakravarthi 13) Sudraka 14) Kulasekara 15) Bhoja deva etc.

The pandits well versed in Dharmasastra were appointed as Judges in his courts of Justice, A legal vade macum entitled” Vyavahara Prakasa” was compiled from various smriti texts for daily use in the conduct of administration and justice by the Pandits.

A paper manuscripts of this work in available in this library. His Royal poet’s contribution such as Sudraka’s Mudrarakshasa Nataka, Kulasekara’s Mukundamala, Bhoja deva’s Bhoja Campu etc., are preserved in the library.

Raja Serfoji made a pilgrimage to Banaras in 1820. He took 300 people along with him, which included Pandits, copyists, 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 artists to draw the views of sixty –four bathing ghats of Bananas from East to West of the river Ganges in eight plates which are available in this Library.

The Maratha kings started Chattrams for catering and other physical needs of the pilgrims. Raja Serfoji started schools attached to most of the Chattrams under his control and imparted free education to village children. For the use of children, Serfoji ordered that the English books like Aesop’s fables be translated into simple Indian languages. He started the first printing press in 1805 in Thanjavur with Devanagari Script called “Navavidya KalasalaVarnayantra” for producing copies of all great works in languages for wider use and circulation among public. The Journal entitled “Indian Antiquary” Vol. 1 Published in 1872 mentions that the Serfoji’s printing press was the earliest printing press, which was

started for Devanagari script printing in whole of south India. The types and blocks were prepared using soft stone and hard wood. Even today the library preserve some of the books printed in that press. Some of the titles are Amarakosa, Annam Bhattas commentary on Tarkasangraha, Karikavali, Magha's Sisupala Vadha, Kumara campu, Muktavali, Balabhoda Muktavali, a Marathi translation of Aesop's fables etc.,

Raja Serfoji was running a medical institution in Thanjavur called Dhanvantri Mahal. He devoted himself for the progress of research in Ayurveda, 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 works named Sarabendra Vaidyamuraigal. Besides basic research on many ailments, excellent work had been done on diseases like Cancer, Polio, Diabetes and Tuberculosis by this institution in Ayurvedic and Siddha fields. The Library has published some in the Series. Even today the library possesses few tablets prepared in the Danvantri Mahal during Serfoji's time. The name and year of preparation is embossed on either side of these tablets.

There are on 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 being performed in Maharashtra.

Serfoji's Book Collection:

Raja Serfoji's 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 in European languages. Now this Library has 3830 English books, 421 French books, 108 German books 35 Danish books and few books in Dutch, Greek., Latin languages. Serfoji has autographed all the books in his collection. These books were mostly printed in London, Edinburgh, Paris and the year of printing 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, Encyclopedias etc., This collection has some rare and first editions of highly valued books.

Some of them are Dr. Johnson's Dictionary (5th Edition, 1784 A.D) in two volumes. A Pictorial Bible of 1791, Antoine Laurent Lavoisier's Elements of Chemistry, first Edition of Fourcroy's 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 the titles are arranged alphabetically.

Maps and Atlases:

The Atlases and Maps collected by Raja Serfoji are extra ordinarily important, which are preserved in the library. These maps dealt with ancient

history, geographical details, sea routes, political divisions and their boundaries. The maps were made with the compilation 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.

An interesting and rare map of India of size 112 x 106 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 Gazetteers (Vol III Pate 5) mentioned that the bridge was used for foot traffic till 1480 A.D. Later it was damaged by the breach. Some of the notable Atlas are Bengal Bihar Atlas, Geographical classica of Hermanmoll (1721) Atlas Coelets (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 are available in this library.

Pictures and Drawings:

Serfoji collected many pictorial books on the views of scenarios, towns, temples, country sides, forts and battles, rivers etc. Some of the notable pictorial books show costumes of various countries, view of Burma, view of Mysore, Himalayan views, Chinese punishments etc., A Notable and interesting pictorial book available in the Library is “Human Physiognomy Pictures”. It is a series of Lithographic drawings by Charles-Le-Brun, a noted French Artist, it is an

Illustrative drawing of the relation between human face with beasts and birds. Another 48 picture of Oriental Scenarios of Hindoostan by Daniel brothers are also available in the Library.

Paintings and Drawings:

Serfoji's court artists prepared some interesting colour drawings and paintings, which are in the form of illustrated manuscripts, pictorial books and other drawings. Some of the pictorial manuscripts are Aswasastra, Gajasastra, Rigveda Samhita, Ramyana 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 originated in 16th Century the earliest catalogue available in the Library belongs to Raja Serfoji's period. The catalogue for palm leaf manuscripts was prepared in palm leaf form and that of paper manuscripts in paper form. The palm leaf manuscript catalogues are three bundles in Telugu Scripts.

The first leaf of manuscript catalogue bears the information in Telugu as, "Saraboji Maharaja Varihi Pattamayetanuthuku munupu e Sarasvati Mahal pushtahalayaku Vivaramaina Jabitha lethu. 1720 Kalayukthi Samvathsaram Saraboji Maharaju Varihi pattamayee manyam pattuluyane Gangadhara Pattulu Sadasiva Pattuluku Thanathikaram echina Pimmde E Sarasvati Mahal Kakhitha Pusthakalu, Thatya Pushthakalukunnu Thakumaina varlunnu Niyaminchi perusalyana Jabitha Salivahana Saka Samvatsaramulu Veyeeadu Noodi eravai rendu, English Samvathsaramulu veye enimithi noodi vokadilu jabitha parisukaramuka kalisha seshinthe" which means that", there was no detailed catalogue for the manuscripts of Sarasvati Mahal, till the coronation of Serfoji II in 1798. After coronation in

1720 Kalayukki year, Serfoji ordered to Manyam pattulu, Gangadhara Pattulu, Sadasiva Pattlu to prepare a catalogue for paper manuscripts and palm leaf manuscripts by engaging eminent scholars. The work was started to prepare the catalogue of Palm leaf manuscripts in 1801. The catalogue of palm leaf manuscripts in palmleaf form and that of paper manuscripts in paper form”. The catalogue for paper manuscripts is in a bound volume. That is an alphabetic - classified catalogue for the Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts of Saravati Bhandar. It was prepared in 11-01-1807. It is found that Raja Serfoji was keen to form a Library in a Systematic manner. Now we can say that Serfoji’s catalogue is the earliest catalogue available in India.

Views of foreign dignitaries

Several distinguished Europeans such as the Governor of Madras, Captain chalminer, Commander Hessie, Captain John Fife, John Black Burn, Archdeacon Robinson, Mr. Kolhoff, Lord Valentia, Bishop Heber and Others have visited and recorded praise for the Rajah’s magnanimity, for sightedness, singular devotion to the welfare of his people and his scholarly attainments.

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 pillars, and handsomely furnished in the English style. On one side there are portraits of the Mahratta dynasty from Shahjee and Sivajee, ten bookcases containing a very fair collection of French, English, German, Greek, and Latin Books, and two others of Maharatta and Sanskrit Manuscripts. In the adjoining room is an air pump, an electrifying machine an ivory skeleton, astronomical instruments, and several cases of books, may of which are on the subject of medicine, which was for some

years his favorite 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 marble? Statue of the Rajah by Flaxman... 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 Mahratta in the Bishop's presence in honour of his visit".

The British has given high regard to King Serfoji II. He was included as an Honorary member of Royal Asiatic society of Great Britain and Iceland. In 1827 there were only four foreign dignitaries who were honorary members in the society, they are:

- 1. His royal highness the duke of Orleans.**
- 2. His majesty the king of oude**
- 3. His royal highness abbas mirza, Prince royal of Persia.**
- 4. His highness the rajah of Tanjore.**

It is a pride to note that Raja Serfoji had the opportunity to hold this High position in those days.

Raja Serfoji multi-focal knowledge, and recognition and good relationship with the British administrators helped him to collect more books and manuscripts. This library currently lists over 46,000 manuscripts and 52,000 printed books in which a good number of manuscripts and 4,500 rare books were collected in the 19th century especially by Rajah Serfoji II. This library's manuscripts and books are our nation's wealth. It is the duty of one and all to preserve this treasure for the use of posterity.

Written on the occasion of Serfoji's death reveals the great heights of humanism scaled by the king . He says 'nearly 90,000 people participated in the funeral procession. Nearly 60,000 men assembled without invitation during the collection of his sacred ashes. About 20,000 people fasted on the day of Serfoji's death.

At a time, when human beings are massacred and human life is considered a trivial thing, this article on Serfoji would be an inspiration for all, to emulate the greatest humanist of all times.

A foreign reporter once asked Kanchi Sri Paramacharya his views on nuclear disarmament. The wise sage replied that even if atomic weapons, war planes, ships, cannons, guns and swords are off the surface of this universe, people would still fight with the available sticks. Hence, more than disarmament, our religion aims at change of attitudes. If this article could chasten the minds of posterity, it would be a fitting tribute to the memory of Serfoji who was a humanist among kings and a king among humanists.

Let us perpetuate the memory of this great king whose charities exceeded the limits of his income, of the king who was a patron of art, culture, heritage and all the values that we cherish best in life.