



## **THE SARASWATI MAHAL, TANJORE**

**Dr.Raghavan.**

**Professor of Sanskrit, (Retd)**

**University of Madras**

The history treasures of ancient India in Sanskrit and other Indian languages were written by hand varieties materials palm – leaves, paper, etc. They were preserved in the houses of Gurukules of Pandles and other scholars, in private possession and also in public institutions like Mutts, samples and last but not least, in the Palasm of kings who were patrons of arts and letters. Without exception, all kings had their manuscript collections in their libraries called Saraswal shindope, which varied from one another only in respect of size. One such collection is what forms the subject of this article, the Saraswati Mahal, in the palace at Tanjore in Tamilnadu.

The Saraswati Mahal had become a byword, atleast in the Tanjore District, and whenever any texts or authority were required for constitution, one always expected to find them in the Saraswati Mahal. It was a surprise saying current in Tanjore Districts that when discoveries of down surface and of ancient, made in the West, at this and contained in and the Germans and others took them away from Saraswathi Mahal! Such in the impression the Saraswathi Mahal had created in the minds of the people. This impression the Saraswathi Mahal had created in the minds of the people. This impression on the part of the common man is not totally baseless for one of the earliest foreigners engaged in the examination and

cataloguing of the manuscripts of the library, Mr. A.C. Burnell, then District and Sessions judge and a German, carried away a number of these manuscripts (mss). In Original and copies and deposited them in the India Office Library in London.

After the decline of the Vijayanagar empire, the Telugu Nayak Governors under that empire became Independent rulers, and Tanjore was the seat of a Telugu Nayak dynasty from A.D. 1535 to 1673. After them same the Maharasth and the brother of Shivaji the Great, founded the Tanjore Mahratha dynasty which ruled from A.D. 1676 to 1855, the descendants of this house will continue to say in a part of the Tanjore Palace. During the rule of these two dynaries. Tanjore which had already been famous during the Chola times at the Capitals and as a centre of art and literature, became more and more renowned or the patronage of arts and letters. It is no exaggeration to say that for a time in South India all roads led to Tanjore. During the Nayak period and till the final phase of the Maharastra Dynasty. Wave after wave of steal vares in the music field migrated from Andhra and settled in the Agraharas in the Cauvery delta and contributed to the development of the high classical style for which Tanjore has been famous in the arts to music and dance and for the manner in which this prepared for the appearance of the great Trinity of Carnatic music and the galaxy of other brilliant composers and performers on voice and instruments. The massing of Sanskrit scholars from different parts of eth country, particularly of the South and Deccan during these two periods in the Agraharas of the Cauvery delta was all the more remarkable. There were Telugu, Maharashtra, Kannadiges and Keralizes. In addition to those who belonged to all parts of Tamilnad. These Pandit represented every branch of Sanskrit learning – maters of the Vedas in their different recensions; experts in the Vedic sacrifices, rites and rituals, Srauta, as also the Grthya; exponents of all the six Dorsenes, Including the different schools of Vedanta: grammerlans (Valayakaranas), poets and playwrights, besides those who had specialized in the esoteric and mystic lore of Mantra and Tentra and Votarles

of the path of devotion to different duties (BHakti) and the cult of Bhajane and recitation of the Lord's name (Nomosiddhanta). One example is enough to show the great love and fair which the Tanjore Kings had for patronage of learning, particularly in Sanskrit. An old village named Tiruvallunallur in the district was renamed Shahjirajapuram and gifted in A.D. 1693 by the second Mahratha King, Shahaji, the foremost of this dynasty, to 45 families of Pandit representing different branches of Sanskrit learning some of them being masters of two or more Sastras. They were all from different parts of Deccan and South India, and the Agrahara was thus an open national university.

Apart from those who learnt and taught the different branches of Sanskrit, there were those who, with their creative gifts, contributed to the production of literature in the different branches of learning. The extent of these productions, their prolific nature and high quality, could be seen from the collection of mss of these works preserved by the rulers of these two dynasties in the Saraswati Mahal.

One of the Mahratha Rulers Serfoji II (1818-32), must be specially mentioned for the great additions that he made to the collection through his enthusiasm and the special steps that he took for the enrichment of the library; when he went on the pilgrimage to Banaras he employed Pandits to collect, buy or copy a vast number of works in Sanskrit from all the renowned centres of Sanskrit learning in the North and other areas. The present full name given to the Library by the Administrative committee appointed for the library in 1918. is the Maharaja Serfoji Saraswati Mahal Library" and it is a fitting tribute to the great collector, Serfoji, whose mss., bearing his name and legend, form the single largest section of the whole library. In addition to these central collections, the Library also came in possession of the private libraries of several Pandits and their patrons who were living in Tanjore and the neighbourhood; nearly a dozen of these came later into this library.

The Saraswati Mahal is not only famous for its Sanskrit collection but is also noted for the considerable Mahrathi mss. In Tanjore, there flourished during the 'Nayak rule, a southern School of Telugu literature which is considered by Telugu scholars as of distinct significance in the history of Telugu language and literature. The Andhra University recently evinced interest in this Telugu literature of Tanojre and sponsored a descriptive catalogue of the Telugu mss. of the Saraswati Mahal in two volumes. The Telugu mss. Of the Saraswati Mahal in two volumes. The Telugu mss. of the library mss. Of the library number 2,500. Similalry, that Marathi mss. of the Saraswathi Mahal carry a literature in Marathi which constitutes a distinct chapter in the history of Marathi which constitutes a distinct chapter in the history of Mahrathi literature in all its branches. The descriptive catalogue of the Marathi mss. and the books of the Saraswati Mahal which have been brought out by the Library extends to three volumes, the total number of mss. in this language being 5,000. Being in the heart of Tamil country, Tanjore, which had already carved its place in the history of Tamil literature, it has a similar valuable collection of Tamil mss, which represent all department of this literature and number 2,000. These have been catalogued by the Library in another set of three volumes.

The largest collection of the library relates to Sanskrit literature and the total number of mss. In Sanskrit since is in the neighbourhood of 30,000. It does not represent the total number of works because in each codex sometimes a number of works were written. In the Sixties of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the British Government came to realize the importance of the Saraswathi Mahal Library and the then Professor of Sanskirt and after him, Mr. A.C. Bernell, District and Sessions judge, already referred to, wee asked to examine and catalogue the mss. Mr. Burnell broughout his "Classified index to the Sanskirt mss. In the palace at Tanjore" in three pares between 1878-1880 published fro London, Mr Burnell

wrote to the Government that the Tanjore Library was established and on the basis of the costs and evaluations prevailing at that time, has estimated that such a collection could not be formed except at a cost of £ 50,000/-. After the death of the last member of the Mahratha dynasty, in whose custody the Library was, there was a short period of litigation and confusion when some of the treasures of the Library were lost.

We not only do not find any copies of works known to have been written in the Palace itself e.g. the epoch making Chatur description in music by Venkatamakhin son of Govinda Dikshits, the Nayak Minister, but we have also not come across mss. held by Mr. Burnell that went into private possession of Manuscript hunters and traders. Public interest was aroused in the value of the Library and through an approach to the then Subordinate judge of Tanjore it was decided to maintain Saraswati Mahal as a Public Library and to provide a fund of a lakh of rupees for its upkeep (G.O. 1306 of Government of Madras, Home (Education), dated 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1918. A scheme was framed for the management of the Library and an Administrative Committee was set up. This Committee also took up the question of examining the mss. more fully and prepare a more detailed catalogue of the whole collection.

It was not until the late twenties of the present century that the then Government of Madras showed interest in the Proposal to prepare a new descriptive catalogue of the entire collection of Sanskrit mss. of the Saraswati Mahal. The first volume of the new series of these catalogues of Sanskrit mss. started under this scheme, was issued in 1928 and the last volume, the 19<sup>th</sup>, in 1934, the whole series describing altogether about 25,000 works.

The present writer had his first assignment after he graduated in Sanskrit in this last mentioned project of preparing the new descriptive catalogue of the

Sanskrit mss of Saraswati Mahal. Owing to the exigencies of the grants and Government's patronage, a considerable number of mss. could not be properly examined and catalogued, towards the closing period of the scheme. The 20<sup>th</sup> volume devoting some attention to "Mantra Sastra was brought out by the Library in 1932. There is still scope to bring out Informative catalogues on a considerable section of the Sanskrit mss. like the Scocros which are especially rich in this Library, as also of some of the more recent accessions.

The Sanskrit collections of the Saraswati Mahal, which is the largest, contains not only the major works of Sanskrit literature beginning with the Vedas, but is also especially noteworthy for the history of later Sanskrit literature and copies of works which were produced directly under the patronage of the Telugu and Mahratha rajases of Tanjore. The mss are in palm leaf and paper and in Devanagiri, Nandinagari, Grantha and Telugu scripts. Their value for comparing and noting the readings has been recognized and for a long time the Critical Edition projects of the Mahabharata and Rigveda with Sayana's Commentary (of Poona), of the Ramayana (of Baroda) and of several other works have utilized the mss. material of Saraswati Mahal.

Mention may be made of a few outstanding works whose mss. are unique to the Saraswathi Mahal. Rare and short lexiscons, the grammar of the rare dialect called Phandira-bhasha, the play jambovatiperinaya of King Krishnadevaraya, Viveranadorpana of Rangaraja, Father of the great Appayya Dikshits, the prots work Krishnacherits of Agastyapandita, the allegorical play Bhavanapurushot flam eof Ratnakhata Srinivasa Dikshitar, some rare workes of the great Appayys Dikshitar, Tatta Chintamayakhya (logic) by Dharmarajadhavarin, poetess Ramabhadramba's biographical poem on her patron King Raghuratha nayak; Varttikabharana (mimamsa) of Venkatamakhin and works of Ramabhadra Dikshits and Sadasiva Brahmandra Saraswati, short Advolts prakarnas in a large

number are also a specialty of the Sarawathi Mahal, One branch of literature in which the Saraswati Mahal is especially rich must be mentioned, namely, the puranic accounts of the sanctity and legends of the great shrines and sacred villages and towns in which the Cauvery delta abounds; if these Kshortramahet myas are brought out, with the help of the Endowments Department, it will be a great service to the religious culture for which this region has been well-known. The oldest mss. in the library is perhaps the Adwalta work, Bhamoti (No, 7081) of Vathapatimitra which was copied in Banaras in A.D. 1458. There is a manuscript which belongs to the great Appayya Dikshitar. The post scripts in several mss. carry very interesting historical, biographical and other information relating to owners, copyists, date of copying, etc, one of these (No. 7685) contains precious information about the great Sadasiva Brahmandra Saraswati and his blessings to the king of Tanjore in the mss, which king Serfoji collected during his pilgrimage to Banaras are found some which originally belonged to the Library of the famous Kavindracharya Saraswati of Banaras who had held dialogues and discussion with Shajahan and Prince Dara Shikoh, as the super script on these mss. shows.

After the publication of the new descriptive catalogue of the Sanskrit mss. in 19 volumes, the Library was not active. Having been connected with the library, I, under an urge to be of some help to it, gave a start to the publication of rare works available in the Library and brought out a simple narrative resume of the famous Sanskrit drama Mudrarok shasa in a unique mss. in the library. Three editions of this work prescribed as a text book in several universities have come out.

It was after independence, when Shri Omandur Ramaswamy Reddiar was the Chief Minister, that interest in the publication of mss. In the Governemnt Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras and the Saraswati Mahal, Tanjore was

shown. Shri Reddiar called me one day to discuss this matter. The Government placed a grant at the disposal of these two libraries and a series of publications was begun. It cannot be said that except in rare cases, the books have been very carefully edited according to the standard of critical editions. But the more important thing is that a large number of works in the different languages and covering different branches of learning have been brought to light by the Library edited by different specialists in the field. I myself edited for them in this series, a work on the legendary account of the Cholas called the Chola Champu and a biographical poem on King Shahaji of the Mahratha dynasty called the Sahendra Vilas by one of the renowned religious men of the times, Sridhara Venkatesan Ayyaval. In the introduction to this I have given an exhaustive account of the rich Sanskrit literature produced in Tanjore during the times of Shahaji. Among the other important publications of the library may be mentioned works on Silpa Sastra with Tamil translation intended for the help of the traditional Stapathis of South India, Dharmakuta, a unique commentary on the Ramayana, written from the point of view of Dharma Sasta by a Minister of the Mahratha court, and the large Prapanchasara son graham in Mantra Sastra. As part of the scheme, the Madras Government also appointed a High Power Committee with Shri T.M. Narayanaswamy Pillai as Chairman and myself as a member of drawing up a plan to improve and upgrade the work of the Library and although we made comprehensive recommendations. It was difficult to pull the Library out of the grooves in which it had been running for a long time. After the Central Sanskrit Board came into being in the Ministry of Education, the publication work of the Library in the field of Sanskrit has been receiving assistance from it. The meager funds at the disposal of the Library or the grants which it is able to get which are also meager, would hardly be adequate to bring out a conspicuous number of the more important works in the library.



The library has been bringing out a journal for several years now in which there are short articles on important mss. and also editions of shorter works in the Library in Sanskrit and other languages.

Two other Mehals adjacent to and closely connected with the activities of the Saraswati Mahal should be mentioned, the Sangita Mahal - which still exists in tact and the Dhavantari Mahal. The importance of Tanjore and tis court for the arts of music and dance has already been mentioned. The mss in the Saraswathi Mahal, especially those in Sanskrit and Telugu, are very important for the history of music and dance. Apart from mss. of the standard works on these two arts there are some unique mss. here of works produced in Tanjore and of a few produced at other centres but not available at the places of their origin. The Sangitasudha of Govinda Dikshita, Minister of the Nayak Kings of Tanjore (published by the Music Academy, Madras); the Sangitasarmruta of King Tulaja of the Maharatha dynasty here, which is of greater value than even the previous, as I have shown in my detailed introduction to its edition by the Music Academy, Madras; collections of pedas, Svarojetis and other compositions of Kshetragna, Virabhadrayya, eetc. To some of which I have drawn attention elsewhere, the Nittarataveli of Jaya Senapati written underthe Kakatiyas in Warangal but available only in Tanjore and whch I have edited with an exhaustive study, the sangitanankarda of Shahaji, father of Sivaji, the Great; the Ragaalapas associated with Shahaji. The Bharataravana of Nandikesavara; the Abhinaya of Gita Govinda of Jayadeva; the Natayasamgraha in Sanskrit. Marati and Tamil containing many dance – competitions current during the Mahratha period may be mentioned.

During the time of Serfoji particularly, very active work seems to have been undertake in Ayurveda in the Dhanvantari Mahal, Recipes of Medicinal preparations were prepared and of the large volume of these in mss the Library has published some in a series of volumes called Sarabhendravaldyamuta. Realizing

the valuable storage of medical mss. here, the unit in the central Ministry of Health for preservation and promotion of indigenous medicine has established at Saraswati Mahal a literacy Research Unit for examination and publication of medical mss.

The Interest and importance of the collection in the Saraswati Mahal are varied and relate to literature other than those in Sanskrit, Telugu, Marathi, or Tamil. King Serfoji had a Christian missionary tutor named Schwartz and thanks to this association, a large number of books in European languages, including French, Latin, Italian and Greek, as also periodicals, were collected. This collection includes many European Classic in early editions. A catalogue of these was issued by the 'Library in 1920. An examination of this collection would be of much interest to a bibliographer interested in the history of publications and editions. For a casual and general visitor, the Library offers many mss. of pictorial interest. In the Vedic section of the library several paper mss. carry fine colour drawings in traditional style of Hindu Deities on the cover sheets; we have here scenes of Parvati-Parameśvara wedding. Siva Tandava, Tripurasamhara, a whole series of scenes from Tiruvilayadaipurānam and legends of important Kshetras and their temples in Tanjore District. There is a series of illustrated books among which may be mentioned the chapter dealing with elephants in the Manasollasa of King Someshvara of Kalyan, a treatise on horses and the Kama Sastra work known as Rati Rahasya. There are also independent drawings in colour of the Ramayana. For several pictorial and other forms of calligraphy also, one can see here several mss written in very minute script and some in which each letter is formed by a series of the sacred names of the Lord. Among the few Persian mss. must be mentioned one on the life of Muhamad Gazhi which has many colour miniatures. Among the European publications are large albums devoted to a comparative study of the physiognomy of man in which human faces are juxtaposed with the

faces of animals and birds. There are also similar volumes related to birds, sports and different nationalities and their costumes.

During the Maratha period, a fast script called Modi for writing government records was developed. Today those who can decipher this script are not many. The Tanjore Library has a large number of mss. of Modi documents which throw light on the history and the day-to-day administration and affairs of the Maratha period of Tanjore. There is a brief summary of some of the Modi documents published which itself carries a large amount of very interesting data. A special section for examining, cataloguing and research in the Modi documents and in the records of the place which have also been transferred to the Library, remains to be organized on a proper basis.

From time to time, the library, it may be said, has been attracting the attention of the central authorities and other VIPs. There has been a proposal with the Central Government to make it a National Library and a Committee has already gone into the question. There has been a proposal of the UNESCO to help the Library with scientific equipment for micro-filming, etc. Even a high official of the Ford Foundation visited the Library and struck by its materials and also by the inadequate maintenance, he, it is understood, has been favourably inclined to give a large grant for the improvement of the library. The requirements of the library are clear. It has need for increased specialist staff. The services of the Library to the world of scholars through transcriptions or micro-films or Photostats should be facilitated in a far greater measure and all up-to-date scientific equipment required for this purpose should be given to the Library. The Library should shed its medieval appearance and its fossil mediocrity and come in line with well-equipped institutions in metropolitan and University Centres. The series of publications should be strengthened and the Journal improved. The storage, air-conditioning for rare mss. mending, fumigation, binding, etc should be

provided for. The printed book section of the Library is very much behind the requirements for carrying on research and editorial work of the required standard. Reference books are hopelessly inadequate. The library should not only be a centre of consultation and service, but also a centre for research and there should be a team of research scholars who could deliver the goods on behalf of the different branches of knowledge represented by the large and varied collection in the Library.

A perusal of the collection reveals the great panorama of the incessant literary activity in all branches of learning that was fostered with utmost love and lavish patronage by the Telugu and Maharashtra Kings of Tanjore in the Cholas, of the Agraharas resounding with recitations of Vedas, of sacrifices and religious activities, of Mutts with the signing of Bhajans, of expositions of epics, of great Sannyasins and devotees spreading their benign blessings of village plays, of musicians' concerts and contests, of courtesans' dance and abhinaya and above all, of great temples and their festivals and music and pageants and processions.

## **OUR HANDICRAFTS**

For want of space, the regular feature "Our Handicrafts" has been held over.