

# LIBRARY AND MUSEUMS IN THANJAVUR - A HISTORICAL STUDY

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**Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvathi Mahal Library** (TMSSML) is one among the few medieval libraries that exists even now world.<sup>1</sup> It is a priceless repository of culture, and a time defying treasure house of knowledge, built by the successive dynasties of **Nayaks** and the **Marathas** of **Thanjavur**. The library houses a rich and rare collection of manuscripts on art, culture and literature.<sup>2</sup> Conceived and christened as the **Royal Palace Library**, the Nayak kings of Thanjavur (1535-1676 A.D) nourished it for intellectual enrichment. The development of the library into a monumental institution was due to the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur (1676-1855 A.D.) Maharaja **Serfoji II** (1798-1832 A.D.) was an intellectual genius, a most eminent scholar and versatile cognoscente, collect, buy and copy a vast number of books from all the renowned centres of Sanskrit learning in the North and other parts of India.<sup>3</sup> It is on account of his single devotion to this cause, that the library is called **Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvathi Mahal Library** (TMSSML).

## Manuscripts Collection

The Library has the richest collection of manuscripts, which are truly reflective of the culture of South India. In addition to the central collections, the manuscripts are available both in palm-leaf and paper on various forms on various subjects in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Sanskrit languages.<sup>4</sup>

The major parts of the manuscripts are in **Sanskrit language**,<sup>5</sup> which exceed **39,300** and written in **Grantha, Devanagari, Nandinagari, Telugu** scripts. The total number of Tamil manuscripts is 3780 comprising the titles of literature and medicine. The library has a collection of 3076 Marathi manuscripts of South Indian Maharastrians of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>6</sup> The Marathi manuscripts are mostly on paper and a few in the palm-leaf form, which are written in

Telugu script. There are 846 Telugu manuscripts in this library which are mostly on palm leaf and a few in paper form. Apart from these manuscripts, there are 1342 bundles of **Maratha Raj Records** available at the library. The Raj Records were written in the **Modi scripts**<sup>7</sup> of the Maratha language. These records encompass the information on the political, cultural and social administration of the Maratha kings of **Thanjavur**.<sup>8</sup>

### **Books Collection**

The Books Collection of the library exceeding 59000 is eclectic. **Maharaja Serfoji II** made the rare books collection during his life time. In his collection, there are more than 4500 books in French, English, German, and Danish Languages.<sup>9</sup>

### **Other Collections**

Besides manuscripts and books, the library possesses beautifully decorated **Thanjavur Style of Painting**<sup>10</sup> on Wood (33 Nos.) Canvass (2 Nos.) Glass (2 Nos.) and about 5000 folios of illustrated paper paintings such as **Gaja Sastra, Aswa Sastra, Mythological Paintings, Botanical Specimen Paintings, Military Costumes, Chitra Ramayana** etc. The Library has also 20 rare **Atlases**, comprising 500 maps and drawings.<sup>11</sup>

### **Thanjavur Royal Museum**

**Thanjavur Royal Museum** was founded in 1994 by **Matha Sri Vijaya Raja Bhonsle**, Princess of Thanjavur with the artefacts inherited from her in-laws, the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur. The Marathas ruled well this land (1676-1855 A.D.), starting from **Maharaja Venkoji** (1676-1684 A.D.), the brother of **Chatrapathy Shivaji, the Great**, dawn to **Maharaja Shivaji II** (1832 - 1855 A.D.).<sup>12</sup> Although Thanjavur Raj had vast collections of antiquities, most of them were acquired by various museums and house-holds in and outside the country from time to time. The princess became anxious at the gradual loss of the antiquities from the historic town of Thanjavur.

So as a remedy to this, she installed this museum with whatever artefacts remained with her personal possession in view to preserve them to posterity.<sup>13</sup> She even spared a portion which was under her personal dwelling for this noble purpose and also renovated this area with her own funds

which was in a highly dilapidated condition. The over-whelming response from the delightful visitors has indeed moved her to make this newly founded museum more informative, well displayed and also to plan for its expansion.

## END NOTES

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5. E. Hultzsch, **Report on Sanskrit Manuscripts in Southern India**, (Madras : Govt. Press, 1905), pp. 31-39.
6. A. Panchanathan, **Guide Book to Saraswathi Mahal**, (Thanjavur : TMSSML Publications, 2002), pp. 7-8.
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9. P.P.S. Sastri, **Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji's Saraswathi Mahal Library, Tanjore**, (Madras : Oriental Press, 1924), pp. 1-10.
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12. K.M. Venkataramaiah, **Politics and Social Life under the Marattas of Tanjore**, (Thanjavur : Tamil University Publications, 1984), pp. 5-9.
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