Thanjavur Library as a Realm of Knowledge
Dominik Wujastyk

A visitor to the Indian city of Thanjavur finds two great cultural monuments. The first is the Temple of Brihadisvara, one of the most magnificent temples in India. The temple was founded almost one thousand years ago by King Rajarajeswara of the Chola dynasty (985-1016).

The second is a library, called The Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji’s Sarasvati Mahal Library. The library is four hundred and fifty years old, and has functioned as a repository for the literature, music and paintings of many generations of south Indian scholars and artists, and as a focus for the intellectual and social world that surrounded and supported this activity. The Brihdisvara temple - primarily, of course, a religious space - functioned in cooperation with the library as a performance space in which new devotional music could be sung, or newly composed plays be performed.

Local Literary Culture
It was the kings of the Chola dynasty who initiated the building of the great Temple, and moulded Thanjavur into a religious and cultural centre. It was the kings and ministers of their successors, the Nayakas, who encouraged Sanskrit learning, and who began to collect the manuscripts that would form the nucleus of the great Library. King Sevappa Nayaka (1532 - 1580) who founded the Nayaka dynasty in Thanjavur in 1532 had a long, predominantly peaceful and prosperous reign. He is remembered for his generosity, his building and upkeep of temples and his gift of tax-free land to Brahmin communities. In the latter years of his rule, or perhaps after his retirement from the throne, Sevappa engaged the services of a learned Brahmin, Govinda Dikshita, as priest and advisor. King Sevappa and Govinda Dikshita embarked on an ambitious programme of cultural renewal and development. Sevappa’s son Achyutappa began his rule of Thanjavur in 1580. Like his father he also patronized learning and devoted substantial resources to the repair and development of many temples in the Kaveri river delta.

Achyutappa appointed his son Raghunatha as regent quite early in his reign. The young prince
Kriti Rakshana

entirely new set of cultural opportunities. Under the Maratha king Ekoji and his influential and cultured wife Dipamba, Thanjavur once again became a vibrant centre of Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Maratha culture. Dance, music and painting flourished, and scholars from all over south India began to migrate to Thanjavur to participate in the new court.

By the end of the seventeenth century, when Thanjavur was under the rule of Ekoji’s eldest son, who transformed the palace library from a modest royal collection into a major cultural centre. Through king Sahaji’s patronage, encouraged by his mother Dipamba, a new surge of scholarship delivered a new cache of manuscripts to the Thanjavur library. King Sahaji himself was a prolific author, composing no less than twenty five works in Telugu. The subsequent rulers of the Thanjavur Maratha dynasty also contributed many of their scholarly works to the library collections. For example, king Tulaji, Sahaji’s youngest brother, wrote several interesting and original treatises on medicine, astrology and music.

The Foundation of a New College

In or just before 1693, in south India, king Sahaji founded an academic community in the village of Tiruvisainallur, on the bank of the river Kaveri. He arranged for homes and land in the village to be donated tax-free and in perpetuity to a group of forty six scholars and their descendants. Some of these scholars settled in the village itself, while others made Thanjavur their base. But they formed a single intellectual community, networked not only through their academic work but in many cases, through ties of family and origin. In the years to come, the scholars of this college would produce a flood of literature on all aspects of the arts and sciences, including linguistics, theology, philosophy, law and ethics, drama and medicine. The manuscripts of all this work are housed in the Thanjavur library.

A vibrant network of Sankrit and Telugu scholars, and a library to support their productivity, was established in Thanjavur from the start of the seventeenth century, and this cultural formation continued until the 1670s under Vijayaraghava Nayaka. But the dynasty was entering its last years. A disastrous series of events was about to destroy the Nayakas of Thanjavur, but the same events were to open an entirely new set of cultural opportunities.

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One of the first scholars to arrive in Tiruvisainallur was the great Ramabhadr Dikshita who was a pivotal intellectual figure of the period. Through his education, he was in receipt of scholarly influences from some of the
Following Serfoji’s death, his son King Shivaji (reign 1832-1855), the last king of Thanjavur, continued to add manuscripts and printed books imported from England. By the nineteen eighties, the total number of manuscripts in the Sarasvati Mahal Library had risen to forty four thousand, of which thirty seven thousand were in Sanskrit. In the twentieth century, the library has adopted a policy of receiving collections from the families of noted scholars.

Reflections

Through approximately twenty generations, the multiple intersecting lines of family, teachers, pupils and patrons have created incredibly complex networks of high knowledge in the Kaveri delta. In many cases these lines are still traceable in the twentieth century and some even to the present day. At the political heart of the region stands the temple city of Thanjavur, with its great library, filled with thousands of quiet manuscripts that preserve the thoughts of scholars from Thanjavur, the surrounding villages, from south India and from the whole Indian subcontinent.