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IIC

India's Best-Kept Secret: The Sarasvati Mahal

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India's Best-Kept Secret: The Sarasvati Mahal*

IIC has a very special place in my heart because when I was a student in JNU in 1996-98, almost every Friday or Saturday I used to come here and listen to lectures or concerts. Those two years made me understand our heritage not just from an artistic point of view but also from a cross-disciplinary point of view, bringing my academic learning in JNU and my understanding of culture here together. Although I must confess that I had never thought when I sat here as a member of the audience that I would actually one day come up here and speak.

I gave a very provocative title to this lecture about the Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library partly for raising your curiosity but as I list some of its treasures, you will understand how perfectly apt it is that I should call it India's best-kept secret.

In my hands is a classic example of the proverb that asks us not to judge a book by the covers. Look at this publication from the Library of one of its shorter literary texts. If we see this in a bookshop we would not even open it and see it because it is such a drab book cover, but I think this little volume, called the *Thanjai Vellai Pillayar Kuravanji*, is a great way to realize why this library is indeed a well-kept secret. Reading the verses will make the reader aware that this is a classic example of the

* This talk was delivered at the IIC on April 30 by Mr. Pradeep Chakravarthy

secularism of our country in general and of Thanjavur in particular. The *Kuravanji* is a very ancient genre in Tamil culture and Tamil literature. We have references to the *Kurati* or the gypsy woman who tells a fortune in Tamil literature as early as the first century of the Christian era.

This is a *Kuravanji* written in Tamil. It is dedicated to a Ganesha temple in Thanjavur that still stands there. However, this is not what makes it unique. The beauty of this volume is that in the last verse, where it praises several important people in Thanjavur, it also praises somebody called Poomal Rowthar, saying: 'Poomal Rowthar be praised!'. What makes this benediction unique is the fact that this person is a Muslim. What is a Muslim doing being praised in a *Kuravanji*, or a dance drama, which was to be enacted in a Hindu temple is a mystery. The other interesting fact is that this was authored and sponsored at a time when the Thanjavur Nayaks were ruling Thanjavur. The Thanjavur Nayaks were rulers who came from Karnataka, and they spoke Telugu. So this was composed at a time when a ruler from Karnataka, speaking Telugu and living in a Tamil country promoted a Tamil work. To my mind, this is the second unique aspect of this work. And the third is that today if we know of it and this book is available to us, it is because of the Maratha kings. The

What makes this benediction unique is the fact that this person is a Muslim. What is a Muslim doing being praised in a *Kuravanji*, or a dance drama, which was to be enacted in a Hindu temple is a mystery

Marathas were again rulers who came to Tamil Nadu from outside, yet they not only preserved the library but also added substantially to it. Hinduism, Islam, the Nayaks, Kannadigas, the Tamils, the Marathas and again all of this exists in Thanjavur. So if this slim volume doesn't speak of secularism, I don't know what else will.

If all this wasn't enough, one of the key characters of the *Kuravanji* is a gypsy woman and many verses are on her community, which forms the lowest caste in society even today. Yet here is a work that is about them and meant to be danced in temples or, like other *Kuravanjis*, written by kings for staging in the palace.

The story is very simple. There is a lady who pines away for her husband for he is having an affair with another woman. She sees a *Kurati*, or gypsy fortune teller, walking on the road and she calls her and asks her, whether her husband will return. The *Kurati* talks of her life and her community and then predicts the fortune with the help of rice

grains. As in every other *Kuravanji*, this too has a happy ending. The *Kurati* predicts that she will indeed be united with her husband and, just as surely as Ganesha will wed his wife in the Vellai Pulaiyar temple.

Here is one verse where the *Kurati* talks of her own life –

My bride price was ten donkeys that my husband paid my father
His second wife he got for four and the third for free.
From the grains of rice I see he is indeed with a woman
One who is as pretty as a painted picture.
But do not worry: as sure as Pillayar weds his bride in the temple,
Your husband shall return to you!

It is believed that this dance drama would have been staged in the temple but sadly—as with many countless other manuscripts in the library—we have no evidence or any current traditions of such dramas being staged in temples. Hardly any such songs are found in the repertoires of musicians today.

When we talk about this library, there are four kings that we need to particularly remember and keep in mind: two from the Nayak dynasty and two from the Maratha dynasty.

Raghunatha Nayak (1600-1634) and Vijayaraghava Nayak (1633-1673), were both important kings in the Nayak period. The first ruler, Sevappa, was a confidante of the Vijayanagara king and the one who bore the betel nut and the betel leaves, the *paan* as it were. This was no sinecure post because such a bearer was always behind the king and was the king's confidante. He was so trusted by the king that he was asked to rule Thanjavur, pay a stipulated sum and promise military assistance if the Vijayanagara emperor needed it. Although Sevappa does not seem to have been very literary, both his descendants were. Raghunatha and Vijayaraghava are very important for us because we believe that the core of the library started during one of their reigns. And, interestingly, a fair amount of manuscripts that we have are also from the time of these two kings, especially the songs that they wrote. Many of you who are familiar with the Veena would probably know that the Veena as we know it today was a musical instrument created by Vijayaraghava Nayak, and some of the ragas that we know today reached their level of perfection also during the reign of

these two kings. In fact, Carnatic music as we know of it today was codified in the reign of these two kings.

After the Nayak dynasty come the Marathas. Ekoji, the first ruler of Thanjavur, was actually the half-brother of Shivaji the Great. While Shivaji was fighting against the Muslims, Ekoji was also fighting for the Bijapur Sultans as a mercenary, and helped them in defeating the Nayak kings of Thanjavur. The Bijapur Sultans allowed Ekoji to rule the kingdom and, as a means of consolidating his empire, he sold away another important part of his kingdom to the Mysore kingdom—Bangalore. Ekoji seems to have been a very military-minded general, and so I cannot say whether he contributed to the library, but his brother Shahaji (1684-1712) was a phenomenal composer, and contributed many manuscripts to the library. I think it is a great tragedy today that we have completely forgotten Shahaji as a musical composer. He has written so many works that I think we can do a whole concert series for the entire year and not even repeat one song! Many are available with the library but, sadly, he has been almost completely forgotten by most musicians.

I think it is a great tragedy today that we have completely forgotten Shahaji as a musical composer. He has written so many works that I think we can do a whole concert series for the entire year and not even repeat one song!

The next king to influence the library was Serfoji II (1798-1833). By the time Serfoji II came to power, Thanjavur was pretty much a puppet in the hands of the British. Most of Thanjavur had been taken away, and Serfoji was a king only of the Tanjore fort which is spread over a few 100 sq. kms. Like many other maharajahs of his time, Serfoji II could have easily spent his time on wine and women, but he did not. He was a true scholar prince and appears to have been an extraordinary man. He performed eye surgeries himself, read widely and his library was one of the best in the world; he was a member of several associations in the UK, was a linguist and a music composer as well. He was a bibliophile and many of his books, still available in the library, have careful, handwritten notes on the margins. He established his own printing press as well. A significant trip for the library was Serfoji's long pilgrimage to Kashi because it resulted in the addition of a substantial number of manuscripts to its collection.

After his death, Serfoji's successor was not allowed to rule by the British. That is why the library has not had a very substantial

addition to its collection after him. However, from then on till the 1980s, it became involved in publishing several rare manuscripts into very drab looking but extremely valuable books. In the next part of this lecture, I shall look at many of the summaries of these books, so that you will have a better understanding of certain unique manuscripts of this library, most of which you cannot find in any other library.

The library—and indeed the prosperity of Thanjavur—is a gift of the Cauvery river. Abundant harvests ensured that Thanjavureans knew how to spend their money and patronize art. Thanjavur, like other parts of India, is renowned for her hospitality.

Texts related to food

There are two kinds of food related books—one set contains recipes and the other relates to food for medicinal uses.

The first book, is neither! Titled *Raghunatha Nayakabhyudayamu*, this book was written by Vijayaraghava Nayak on one day in the life of his father, Raghunatha Nayak. What the king attempts to do in this book is to enhance the stature of Raghunatha Nayak and tell us the role and responsibilities of a ruler. It is a tragedy that this book is not known today except for a few historians who specialize in Telugu culture. If I had my way, I would prescribe a substantial part of these books within our history syllabus because they give us an accurate and extremely elaborate picture of what it was like in the court of one of India's most opulent kingdoms in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. There are many things worth talking about—the king's daily routine, costume, jewellery, processions and dancers.

The part that I am going to talk about is a royal feast.

The King sits down for a meal in the afternoon. He, and all the male courtiers, sit on one side of the hall while the women sit on the other side. The King and the Queen had a *jarigai teralu* in front of them. This was a shimmering silk screen that ensured that nobody could see what they were eating. The text also describes the cutlery and crockery. There were large banana leaves, cups and plates of gold,

silver, copper and cups made out of leaves. Rice dishes were served in winnows, while sweets and liquids were served in large silver or bronze utensils.

This is a list of dishes in the feast –

1. Appalam (paapad) and sesame seeds flavoured chicken
2. Coconut and curry leaves stuffed red chicken
3. Black gram and bengal gram Chanagi choornam stuffed chicken
4. Sugar, butter-stuffed milk chicken
5. Kattuk kozhi (a wild fowl?) – onions and garlic
6. Nuluva kozhi (a fowl of some sort)
7. Fish fries
8. Cluster beans (kothavarai) poriyal
9. Several vegetable dishes
10. Beeranji (Biryani) with many fragrant spices
11. Podimas with crushed vadam
12. Appalam and vadam (deep fried snacks)
13. Lemon rasam and salted rasam
14. Sweets –
 - a. Peni
 - b. Mande
 - c. Laddu
 - d. Purnakalasam
 - e. Gajjeyam made of semiya
 - f. Adhirasam
 - g. Modak with pulses
 - h. Sarathulu
 - i. Managupoolu – mul murrukku
 - j. Therattipaal
 - k. Coconut milk
 - l. Paneer payasam
 - m. Jeera payasam
 - n. Cold payasam
 - o. Sooji payasam

- p. Ceekarani – sugar rice
 - q. Basundi
 - r. Fruits with or without honey
 - s. Dates from the islands(Maldives?)
15. Many types of mixed rice
 16. Kari vadai, curd vadai and Aamai vadai (vada without a hole in it)
 17. Roti - Crisp, coconut, sambar
 18. Water with spices

Another list that we have is from the time of Shahaji. Shahaji was very fond of the Tiruvarur temple, and he was a genius at picking a very small incident from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* or the *Shiva Purana* and converting it into a full blown opera. One such opera is called the *Shiva Pallaki seva prabandhamu*. It is a very simple story: Parvati wants to meet Shiva, she is shy of going and saying so to him. So she sends a few messengers. The messengers debate as to who is the best qualified to pass the message. They consider one of the many weapons and attributes of Shiva and finally decide to pass the message themselves. Shiva agrees to meet her and they both meet together and retire to the bed chamber. Each stage of the development in the plot, as well as dialogue, is in the form of a Carnatic song. One of the songs is about the dishes that were placed in front of the divine couple when they united with each other. This is a shorter list but, nevertheless, makes an interesting menu card:

Shahaji was very fond of the Tiruvarur temple, and he was a genius at picking a very small incident from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* or the *Shiva Purana* and converting it into a full blown opera

Topping the list is a list of 'appropriate drinks'! Then follows the feast:

1. Pongal, Morekuzzhambu,
2. Vadam, Poori's fried in ghee,
3. Dosa, idlis, pickle, pulses without their skin,
4. Fruits, sweets made of sugar, honey, different varieties of mixed rice,
5. Tamarind rice, Thirattipal (Khoa), white coloured curd rice,
6. Curds with cream and buttermilk with crushed dry ginger
7. Spicy gruel
8. All of this is washed down with pure water from the Ganges,
9. Thamboolam, or paan, that is 'fragrant with the smell of camphor'.

I suppose the Maratha kings realized that if they composed music on food they

Two important books in the collection are the *Bhojna Kuttukalam* and the *Sarabhendra Phakshastram*. Both are recipe books from the Maratha court and were authored sometime in the seventeenth century

must teach people how to prepare it! This is why two important books in the collection are the *Bhojna Kuttukalam* and the *Sarabhendra Phakshastram*. Both are recipe books from the Maratha court and were authored sometime in the seventeenth century. Fortunately, both of them have been published and—even more fortunately—they have an English translation as well. Interestingly, the Maratha court is credited with the creation of Sambhar, when a Maratha cook added tamarind (a Tamil staple not used in Maharashtra) to dal. The Marathas were also fond of kebabs (more like our cutlets) and Biranji, or Biryani.

Some of the food treatises authored in Serfoji's time (apparently he had several types of kitchen) document English recipes as well. In the same book, the authors give the reader detailed instructions on how to make *biranjis* and all such complicated dishes, and also teach us how to toast bread, make cheese and scrambled eggs!

The following is an interesting recipe for anyone who is interested enough to want to sample it.

Egg pickle

25 hard boiled eggs, 53gms roasted fenugreek seeds, roasted mustard seeds 53gms (with bran removed), 11gms fried asafoetida, 6gms turmeric powder, 11gms powdered cumin seeds, 11gms red chilli powder, 10gms salt, 20 gms garlic and the juice of 10 lemons.

Mix the turmeric, red chilli, asafoetida and mustard powder. Cut the garlic into thin slices. In a frying pan, heat groundnut oil and when warm, add the powders and the lemon juice. Bring the mixture to boil. Hard boil the eggs, remove the shell and slit the eggs carefully. The slit must reach till the hardened yolk but not cut through it.

Fry the eggs separately till they reach a golden colour. Add the previously cooked masala. Close and cook till steam comes out of the lid. Remove from fire and cool. This will keep for 3-4 days.

Astrology and Astronomy

Countless books in the Sarasvati Mahal library deal with astrology and some of them are unique. The first one is called the *Pakshishastra*. There are different versions of this but the basic principles are the same. All of us, depending on the star that we were born under and the lunar phase that we were born under, are assigned to one of these five birds: the owl, crow, peacock, cock or vulture. Based on several complex permutations and combinations, depending on the month and the lunar phase and the star that is on the ascent, it will give you the horoscope for that particular bird. The reader has to calculate which bird is 'his' and then figure out what his horoscope predicts for the day.

The *Jinendramala* is a very interesting work on astrology because it was authored by a set of Jain monks. It also tells the fortune for animals. Naturally, most of the animals are those that are domesticated.

Reading another very interesting manuscript—the *Shakunashastra*—is like playing 'book cricket'. This is a book that you open randomly and—depending on the painting on that page—you know whether it is a good omen or not and whether you should undertake a particular action or not. So, before leaving for a long tour or something, one needs to open the book and if it is an auspicious picture or an inauspicious one, one can decide whether to start or defer the time of departure.

The *Ramachintamani Prasnam* is another very interesting volume. The text gives direction to create a large board with each of the many squares standing for an episode from the *Ramayana*. There are also instructions on how to make a pair of dice. Roll the dice, find out which square is referred to and the verse on the square tells your fortune! Like so many other books in the Sarasvati Mahal library, this one is in Sanskrit.

The *Kalaprakashika* is again a work on astrology in Sanskrit. This is not meant for fairly wealthy people like us but for farmers. So it talks about when to start sowing and reaping, what to do when the farmer ploughing in the field hits a piece of human bone. The *Kalaprakashika* tells the farmer how to ensure that nothing untoward happens to him. I wanted to specifically highlight this because the uniqueness of the library is that even though it was sponsored and funded by the king,

The Jinendramala is a very interesting work on astrology because it was authored by a set of Jain monks

There are as many different versions of *Vaastu Shastra* as there are of the *Kamasutra*

many texts in the library have a strong folk influence. This was truly a people's library, not just a palace library.

There are not many books on astronomy. A very interesting book called the *Inakula Raja Tejo Nidhi* is one that has not been published yet. *Inakula* means the family of the Sun, while *Tejo Nidhi* denotes that the volume is about learning the ways of the family of the sun. The book has several tips on telling time by looking at the sky and on the various constellations. Again, it is in Sanskrit and I hope in another couple of years the library will get around to publishing it.

Vaastu and Kama Shastra

There are several versions of *Vaastu Shastra* in the library. If a *vaastu* consultant believes that there is only one version, you can straightaway tell him that he is mistaken because there are as many different versions of *Vaastu Shastra* as there are of the *Kamasutra*. These texts are in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu and the various versions deal with construction and planning of houses, palaces, cities and temples. Most of the advice is very practical. Some of the texts also deal with sculpture. Here are some simple suggestions: the bed chamber in the house should always be on the east side and it is sheer common sense because the sun rises in the east, you want to have fresh sunlight in the morning so that you wake up cheerfully and in the evening when the sun sets it is in the west, which means that the east side is much cooler than the west side.

The second one is that when constructing a kitchen, ensure that it is constructed in a way that the person who is cooking faces the east while cooking. This is again common sense because you have fresh sunlight in the morning, it is easy to cook, you feel a lot more fresh and therefore you have the window in the kitchen facing the east side.

Vimanarchana is a text in the library devoted to the construction of temples.

Jewellery

The material life is taken care of in many books, one is called the *Ratnaprakashika*. This Sanskrit text deals with different kinds of gemstones. The book tells one how to find them and where not to find them, and convert them into saleable gemstones. It

also tells one how to take care of them and ensure that one gets the best quality gemstones. All these details make it a guideline book for the jewellers. Fortunately, it has been published.

In some of these books - especially the *Ratnaprakashika* for example – some mythology is also woven into the text. For example, it holds that blue sapphires came from the crown of Indra and the finest is found only in Indraloka. After discounting such non-factual information, the remaining text can still be relevant today.

Sanskrit Literature

There are also some books that are just meant for the poet to show off his skill and mastery of the language. Two examples are: *Shabdarthchintamani* and *Kathathreya*. Both are in Sanskrit, and were authored by a poet called Chidambara Kavi sometime in the fifteenth or the sixteenth century. We do not know anything else about this person, but he must have been one of the greatest experts in Sanskrit across India because what he has done is truly remarkable.

The *Shabdarthchintamani* is a collection of several verses of two lines each. If you read the verse from the left to the right, you read the *Ramayana*. If you read the same verse in reverse, you would read the *Mahabharata*. The same verse, the same set of words offers the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, depending on whether you read it right to left or left to right!

He went one step further and he composed the *Kathathreya*: here, in the same two line verse in Sanskrit, depending on where you split the words, you either read the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* or the *Bhagavatha*! Needless to say, someone who has learnt Sanskrit for five years or six years cannot understand these because they are an extremely complex use of words and the reader needs to understand grammar very well. Each of these two lines of verse, have at least two pages of commentary that can help the reader to understand these verses. Sadly, these volumes have not been published.

Music, Dance and Drama

There cannot be another place in India that has done as much as Thanjavur did, in such a short period for dance, music and drama. *Bharatanatyam*, the way we

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know it, was codified in Thanjavur. Carnatic music the way we know it today—the structure and classification of the ragas—is again from Thanjavur. One of the most important drama traditions that continue even today is the Melatur Bhagavata mela. Thanjavur was so rich culturally that in summer when the harvest was done and people were free to do what they wanted, many villages would have impromptu dance dramas staged. Then, anyone who was a farmer or landowner, would don the roles that had to be played in the theatre and the entire village would come and watch their performance. Most of these would go on all throughout the night and finish at around 3 in the morning. The dialogue in the drama was in the form of songs, so these were in many ways like European operas.

Needless to say—except for a handful—most of the villages have given up this tradition today. In Melatur, there are some families that have ‘owned’ these roles and performed them from generation to generation and it is a great festive occasion

In fact on the day the person who plays the role of Narasimha, it is believed that he becomes possessed and even for a few days before he plays the role he goes into seclusion, not talking to anybody. Thus the event is a form of ritual worship

when everybody in the village participates. Melatur is also very important because it also has a very beautifully staged drama for their patron god: Narasimha. The Narasimha Jayanti festival takes place sometime in May and is a serious five day affair in Melatur. In fact on the day the person who plays the role of Narasimha, it is believed that he becomes possessed and even for a few days before he plays the role he goes into seclusion, not talking to anybody. Thus the event is a form of ritual worship. Once the dramas are over, then the villagers go back to becoming whatever they are in their ordinary lives: working in a bank, teaching in a school, working in an IT company etc. The Melatur village itself was granted to the villagers and the grant deed is present in the Sarasvati Mahal library as a beautiful, long scroll believed to be one of the longest scrolls in India.

The *Ragalakshanimu* is one of the many many treatises that classify different forms of raga. In Indian literature, descriptions of beauty are often comparisons with female beauty. In the *Ragalakshanimu*, each of the ragas in the Carnatic system is identified or given the form of a beautiful woman. Often the poets get very imaginative, so there is one raga where the woman has long hair, is fair-skinned and she is always dancing about in a swing in the forest with birds, bees and deer sitting

around her. There are several texts codifying *Bharatanatyam* and the different parts of the dance: the *alarippu* and the *tanam* and so on. How it should be done, what are the different permutations and combinations and so on. A significant portion of the library manuscripts are on dance dramas that were performed as well. The *Nritya-ratnavalli* is an example of a *Bharatanatyam* text that goes into a lot of detail into the permutations and combinations of body movements and the kind of exercises that dancers should perform to keep themselves fit. Also in this group are the *Kuravanjis*.

When the *Kuravanji* starts, the *Kurati* usually talks about all the different places that she has seen across the world. One of the *Kuravanjis* is called the *Devendra Kuravanji*. Since it is in Marathi and I do not understand Marathi, I quickly went to the back pages and it had a list of places that are mentioned in the *Kuravanji*. Usually one finds a mention of Tirupati, Kalahasti, Chidambaram, Srirangam, Varanasi or some important pilgrimage centre in India. This one was different. It had Paris, St. Louis, London, Scotland, Cape Town, Moscow and other such foreign locations. What were all these places doing in a *Kuravanji*? I then went to the foreword and it turned out that the *Devendra Kuravanji* was authored by King Serfoji to teach children how to learn geography and map reading in the schools that he had established. So what the *Kurati* was doing was instead of saying that she went to Srirangam and Tirupati and Kashi and Varanasi and all those places, she was talking about each of these individual places across the world. It is not a surprise that Serfoji knew something about it because he was one of the first Indian members of the Royal Asiatic Society. He used literature and a form of dance drama to actually teach children geography and he mentions many of the famous towns and places that we know today, except Australia. Why he does not talk about Australia is because Australia had not been discovered till then!

Illustrated texts

There are countless other rare works but I will go through a few very quickly. One is a set of four or five paintings called the *Chitra Ramayana*. These are fairly large and they just give us the story of the *Ramayana* in tiny, beautifully rendered, miniature paintings.

Then there is a very rare text of the *Purushshuktha*, an important Vedic hymn where the page is black in colour and the text is white in colour. This is quite the reverse of

what we usually see. Then we have something called the *Balabodh mukhtavali*. This is a beautifully illustrated Marathi storybook for children. Interestingly, it is not about any Indian stories but a Marathi version of Aesop's fables. Serfoji dreamt up this idea of translating Aesop's fables into Marathi and he had them illustrated as well.

One of the few palm leaf manuscripts that have been engraved with a painting is the commentary on the *Tiruvaimozhi* by Koneri Dasayi. It must have been extraordinarily difficult for that artist to engrave a painting on the leaf, as they are brittle and likely to tear if the stylus is strongly applied while writing. However, the artist has been able to execute beautiful pictures, such as one of Vishnu reclining on the Adishesha, and the saint Namazhvar (c sixth or seventh century) with a dancer close to him. Now the reason this is there is very interesting. This is how Vishnu looks in a temple for him in Kumbakonam called the Sarangapani temple. And this comes exactly in the part of the

Serfoji II himself is said to have been a very accomplished eye surgeon and there are case sheets of the surgeries that he handled in the form of beautifully painted pictures of how the eyes looked before and after the surgery

Tiruvaimozhi where the Saint Namazhvar sings a hymn about this particular temple. More than that, we also have a clue of the identity of the dancing lady, it could have probably been Koneri Dasayi who wrote the commentary on the saint's verses and lived in Kumbakonam.

So this was a commentary for one of Vaishnavism's most complicated text authored in the seventh century written by a woman devadasi in Kumbakonam in the sixteenth or the seventeenth century and the remarkable woman she is, she has probably drawn herself into the manuscript.

Medicine

Many books in the library are about medicine. There are also books about how to eat well and look after yourself and how to create your own remedies for common illnesses. There are also books about how to treat animals. Serfoji II himself is said to have been a very accomplished eye surgeon and there are case sheets of the surgeries that he handled in the form of beautifully painted pictures of how the eyes looked before and after the surgery,

and how they looked six or seven months after the surgery. The library also has several volumes on various Ayurveda texts.

Horses and Elephants

The *Ashwashastra* and the *Gajashastra* are two beautifully illustrated works both in Sanskrit and Marathi that tell you everything that you need to know about horses and elephants. They talk about how you should capture them, how you should train them, how you should identify their sicknesses, how you should take care of them, how you should tell their age, all sorts of other facts and then—just in case if you are very religious inclined—they also give you some mythical information about horses and elephants.

Eighteenth Century European books

The Sarasvati Mahal library also has a lot of coffee table books published in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of them is on forms of Chinese torture. Another one is on costumes in China, costumes in Turkey, scenes of the English countryside, books like this that were purchased from the UK.

Incomplete texts

Several texts in the Sarasvati Mahal library are sadly incomplete. Perhaps they were not finished or perhaps some of the pages have been torn away. One of these is on how to perform magic tricks. There are one or two books on horticulture, how to improve crop yields, how to improve fruit tree yields in Marathi.

Modi documents

The last one that I shall talk about is very important and probably deserves a separate lecture by itself. The Maratha kings spoke in Marathi, which was also their court language, and used the Modi script. This script looks deceptively like Devanagari, but was written in such a way that the person never had to remove the pen from the page unless he had finished that entire page. So we can perhaps call it a form of Marathi short hand.

These Modi documents are very important and—sadly—one of the least recognized. I hope people here who have connections in the education ministry

or in the culture ministry, should do something about this. There are several thousand bundles of Modi documents in the Sarasvati Mahal library as well as in the Tamil University in Thanjavur. The great tragedy today is that we do not have experts in this script. The greater tragedy is that Modi documents have a bewildering array of subjects. Believe me, if we had bestselling authors who wrote historical fiction, they can spin out at least a thousand best selling historical fiction based on just these Modi documents because they give you every conceivable kind of information that you want about life in the Maratha times. So there are Modi documents that talk about trade negotiations between the French and the Tanjore kings. They also talk about simple things, such as the prices of groceries at that point of time. What kind of vegetables were ordered in the kitchen? A Modi document would be created when a consignment of vegetables came into the palace kitchen, and the courier was given a receipt for the vegetables. Such a Modi document was then filed in the archives of the palace and has survived till today. So the library has details about vegetables as well as details about legal rulings. They can tell you that if

A Modi document would be created when a consignment of vegetables came into the palace kitchen, and the courier was given a receipt for the vegetables. Such a Modi document was then filed in the archives of the palace and has survived till today

a policeman was caught having a drink while on duty, how was he punished. The Modi document would also tell us how much various devadasis or servants were paid. When the king bought paintings from artists, how much were these artists paid, what were the raw materials they needed – all such minute details are available in these Modi documents.

Sadly, one needs to know a form of Marathi spoken in Thanjavur that is different from the Marathi that is spoken in Maharashtra. More importantly, one needs to know the script as well. If this becomes possible, there is a mountain of information in these Modi documents that can enrich Indian literature.

I must also mention a time tested recipe that the Sarasvati Mahal library uses to ensure that its manuscripts do not get eaten away by bugs and insects. In Madras, all of these ingredients are available in native medicine shops and I am sure there must be equivalents elsewhere as well. *Vashambh* (acorus calamus), *Karun jeeragam* (caraway seed), *lavangam* (cinnamon): these are taken in equal parts and are powdered. To this powder is added one-fourth of pepper

corns, and one-fourth of cloves also finely powdered. This becomes a greyish yellow whitish powdered mixture and is set to dry in the sun for a few days so that the moisture evaporates. Then this is mixed with *poo choodam*, which is the unprocessed camphor to which wax has not been added. So if the camphor burns and has a black smoke, then that is not the camphor that I am talking about. This camphor burns very purely and is available in lumps. All this is packed into very delicate *khadi gada* cloth as little balls and left in the shelves (roughly two for each shelf in each of the corners) and changed every six months. This is an extremely bio-degradable, very environmentally friendly recipe and it works like a charm. Perhaps you can try it for your books as well.

For the palm leaf manuscripts, they apply a routine coat of a very diluted mixture of citronella oil. So every visit to the library is not just a feast for the mind, it is also a feast for the nose because both the citronella oil and the camphor and other preservative spices used have a very fragrant aroma.

What can you do for the library?

The greatest favour we can do to the library is to popularize its collection of manuscripts. The best fact about the library is that it is not a museum which one needs to physically visit to see the treasures. Most of these books have been published, although often in the language of the original manuscript. If some of you know translators or projects that are involved in translation, we must do something to bring these books into English. Then we can probably put them up on websites so that scholars across the world can read them. I am sure this is easier said (or thought) than done, but that should not be an excuse for us to let Sarasvati Mahal remain as one of India's best kept secrets.

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Pradeep is passionate about writing and heritage. He has published two books, and has three more in press. He writes regularly on Leadership and Heritage for a variety of national and regional dailies. Pradeep's series on the library in *The Hindu* spurred him to write *Cultural History of Thanjavur*, a lavishly illustrated book launched in 2011 in Delhi.



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