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FOREIGN TRAVELLERS' VISIT TO TANJORE COURT OF SERFOJI –II AND THEIR MEMORABLE WRITINGS

R. Kumaran

Associate Professor in History , H.H. The Rajah's Government College , Pudukkottai , Tamil Nadu.

Abstract:-The accounts given by foreign travelers who visited Tanjore during the reign of Serfoji -II bear ample testimony to his culture and pleasant manners. Besides Schwartz, the Reverend Dr. Claudius Buchanan, Bishop Middleton, Bishop Heber and Lord Valentia visited Tanjore and were much impressed with the King Serfoji-II. Buchanan visited Tanjore eight years after the death of the venerable Schwartz, whose portrait was shown to him by Serfoji. He was shown round the college that he had started for the education of the Hindus , Muhammadans and Christians and was also presented with a catalogue containing the list of books available in the Saraswathi Mahal Library. He also listened to the King's bandsmen who played upon eight or more vinas with other instruments. Lord Valentina, a nobleman who visited the East in the years of 1803-1806, presented a most beautiful picture of Serfoji and the palace. Another remarkable traveller , Bishop Heber , with his Domestic Chaplain Robinson, visited Tanjore in 1806 and recorded his impressions of Serfoji-II.

Keywords: Maratha, Missionary, Bishop, Portrait, Hindoo, Vina.

INTRODUCTION

Serfoji-II

The political events of the Seventeenth Century paved the way for the establishment of a collateral family of Maratha dynasty in Tanjore. The Tanjore Maratha dynasty was founded by Ekoji, the son of Shaji Bhonsle in 1676. Tanjore witnessed a great political chaos in the Eighteenth Century. The cultural traditions flourished and attained zenith under the Marathas of Tanjore. It became a centre of court culture.¹ Serfoji –II, the King of Tanjore , was the adopted son of Tulaji, who died in 1786. Serfoji –II (1798-1832) was the most famous ruler of the Maratha dynasty of Tanjore. When he came to power in 1798, found there was nothing to attract him in his position as ruler and was therefore very willing to resign the administration of the Tanjore Kingdom into the hands of the English East India Company, himself content to live with an ample pension and a due recognition of his rank and dignity as a ruler , with jurisdiction over the Tanjore City and Vallam. To that effect, he entered into a treaty with the Company in October 1799.² Serfoji and his son Shivaji exercised their authority within the fort, and they were permitted 'to retain a number of villages and lands with the palaces situated in the different parts of the country'. On the request of Serfoji , the Madras Government gave him the title of 'His Highness', instead of 'His Excellency' which the King thought was degrading to his high lineage.³

He was carefully educated under a most respectable Danish Missionary, Schwartz, and among Christians, yet he was a staunch adherent to the Brahminical doctrines and superstitions. In other respects, he was a man with liberal sentiments, and particularly , indulgent to the Danish missionaries who lived in his Kingdom. Serfoji understood the English language perfectly well, and had a library of English books, in which he passed great part of the day, and he read the English newspapers. He had written many musical dance dramas, Devendra Kuravanji is the best example of his works.⁴ Frederick Schwartz who founded the Tiruchirappalli Mission came to Tanjore in 1769. He established many English schools in Tanjore Kingdom for the first time in the late Eighteenth Century.

Claudius Buchanan

In late August 1806, Claudius Buchanan (1766—1815) of the Fort William George, a gentleman of 'high reputation and learning', visited Tranquebar to participate in the celebrations of the second jubilee of the founding protestant Christianity in the settlement. It is during this occasion that he had the opportunity to visit the Tanjore Court. Accompanied by Resident Blackburne, Buchanan arrived at the palace.⁵ He described the visit thus: "The Rajah conducted us to the grand saloon which was adorned by the portraits of his ancestors; and immediately led me up to the portrait of Mr. Swartz. He then discoursed for a considerable time concerning that 'good man', who he ever revered as his father and guardian. The Rajah speaks and writes English very intelligibly. I smiled to see Swartz's picture amongst these Hindoo kings, and thought with myself that there are many who would think such a combination scarcely possible"⁶

Buchanan was elated to learn from the local missionaries that the Raja had erected a 'College for Hindoos, Mohamedans, and Christians' at Mooktambapoor, sixteen miles from the Tanjore fort, and provision had also been made for fifty Christian children (this one at Kanandagudy). Having heard of 'the fame of the ancient Shanscrit and Mahratta Library of the kings of Tanjore', Buchanan requested Serfoji for a catalogue of for the use of the College at Fort William; when he received it, he was struck by its sheer volume. Buchanan had the pleasure of meeting the Raja yet again, this time in the company of the Tranquebar missionary C. S. John. Serfoji presented Buchanan with 'a portrait of himself, a very striking likeness, painted by a Hindoo artist at the Tanjore Court'⁷ and a 'curious Ruler'.⁸ Buchanan, like Valentia, did not fail to view the great Black Bull in the Big Temple before he took leave of Tanjore.

Bishop Thomas Fanshawe Middleton

Ten years after Buchanan's visit, the Bishop Thomas Fanshawe Middleton (1769-1822), met with Serfoji at his court. Thomas Middleton, the first Bishop of Calcutta, known for his 'stiff' and pompous manner arrived in India in December 1814. A year later, he embarked on his first official 'visitation', accompanied by Archdeacon Loring, which included parts of South India. After a brief visit to Tranquebar, on 21 January 1816, the Bishop arrived in Tanjore.⁹ Two days later, Middleton was presented to Serfoji, who in 'full Durbar' received the Lord Bishop with all the Demonstration of public Respect which was due to the elevated Rank of His Lordship'. During the visit, the Bishop inspected the charity schools superintended by missionary John Kohlhoff, and found them well managed and very successful.¹⁰ On the eve of his departure, as always, Serfoji presented the Bishop with his painted portrait. In deep appreciation of this gesture, Middleton wrote: 'Invested with a character which is new in India, I cannot fail to be satisfied by the marked attention of a most accomplished Native Prince'.¹¹

Bishop Reginald Heber

One of the most eminent of the Christian visitors to the Tanjore Court was Bishop Reginald Heber (1783—1826). The Bishop arrived in Tanjore in March 1826, with the Archdeacon of Madras, Thomas Robinson (1790—1873). He visited Serfoji's Court, accompanied by the Resident Capt. John Fyfe (who had replaced Blackburne), and was attended by all the clergymen, including Robinson.¹² The Bishop found the Court 'imposing, and from the number of Christian Clergymen in the Court of a Hindoo Prince, somewhat singular: the address and manners of His Highness are in a remarkable degree dignified and pleasing'. Serfoji talked much about 'his dear Father Swartz', and 'three times Bishop he hoped his Lordship would resemble him [Schwartz] and Stand in his room'.¹³ Having, by this time, completed his epic pilgrimage to Benares, much of the conversation revolved around that event. Moreover, 'the Bishop's northern journey supplied him with many topics which were equally familiar to both'. Robinson notes that Serfoji 'showed considerable information on the subject of Architecture, and the comparative excellencies and peculiarities of the Hindoo and Mussalman styles'.¹⁴ Serfoji returned the Bishop's visit in all his state. This time he 'rode on a very noble elephant with a common hunting howdah, covered with tiger skins'. He was accompanied by his grandsons, who seemed 'great favourites at the Residency'. Serfoji appealed to the Bishop to let his son Sivaji, who was eighteen years old and his heir-apparent, to 'accompany him [the Bishop] in his journey through the provinces'.¹⁵ The Bishop was unable to answer in the affirmative immediately, but offered, in a letter to Resident Fyfe, to take care of Shivaji if he were sent to Calcutta: I shall, through life, continue to recollect with pleasure my introduction to the acquaintance of a Prince so much distinguished by his virtues and talents, as well as by his courteous and condescending manners, and the variety of his accomplishments. I feel much flattered by the manner in which His Highness has been pleased to speak of my offer to superintend the Education of the Prince Sewajee.¹⁶

Robinson

The Bishop visited Serfoji again and was led straight to the library, described by Robinson as: (a) noble room with 3 rows of pillars, and handsomely finished in the English style. On one side there are Portraits of the Mahratta dynasty, ten book cases containing a very fair collection of French, English, German, Greek and Latin Books, and two others of Mahratta and Sanscrit Manuscripts. In the adjoining room is an air-pump, an electrifying machine, an ivory skeleton, astronomical instruments, and several book cases of books, many of which are on the subject of medicine, which was for sometime his

favourite study. He showed us his valuable collection of coins, paintings of flowers and natural history, with each of which he seems to have considerable acquaintance, particularly with the medicinal virtues of the plants in his hortus siccus. His stable 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 Maharatta in the Bishop's presence in honor of his visit¹⁷

Besides the many errors in Robinson's narrative here,¹⁸ he refers to the things he saw (the air pump, astronomical instruments, books, paintings and so on) loosely as a 'museum'.¹⁹ In no correspondence, official records (reports from the Tranquebar missionaries to the Halle Mission or the Neue Haflesche Berichte, the Tanjore District Records, the Modi Palace records or the Company records) or visitor-narratives, however, does one come across any reference to a 'museum' at the Tanjore palace. Working from within a diffusionist framework, one recent scholar has claimed, providing no reliable evidence, that Serfoji established a 'cabinet of arts and sciences' at his palace, modelled after the Halle Kunstkammer, an idea 'transmitted to him by his missionary teachers'.²⁰ The Kunst-und Naturalien Kammer, of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries — a room set aside by wealthy Europeans for the exhibition of naturalia and artificialia — illustrated the mechanistic order of the universe. The presence of the air pump, the electrifying machine, the wooden skeleton, the astronomical instruments books found in Serfoji's library clearly indicate that it was dedicated to the study of Enlightenment sciences; but do these constitute a 'European style cabinet of science and art'? Serfoji was an avid collector of coins which he liked to exhibit to visitors, just as he did the natural history paintings, he frequently commissioned, but he hardly collected or exhibited fossils, shells, zoological specimens or objects found in most cabinets.²¹ Serfoji's relationship with natural knowledge was quite removed — the mechanistic philosophy that informed the Kunst-und Naturalien Kammern. His library might rather be described as a Baconian Studienkammer — a space set aside for an active engagement with the instruments of knowledge — and not as a microcosm, which a cabinet represents. In the 1820s, the Residency received far too many applications from visitors to see Serfoji's 'Durbars and the Statue [Serfoji's portrait statue]'. In fact, with the Raja's permission, Blackburne made it widely known to all those who applied that 'the Rajah has a very great dislike to make a Shew House of his Palace', It is in this difference, among many, that the distinctness of the Tanjore Enlightenment might be located and not in the straight forward translation of a European model to a non-Western setting.²²

In his own account of the visit to the Tanjore Court, Bishop Heber remarked that with 'less power than an English nobleman, he holds his head high, and appears contented':

I have been passing the last four days in the society of a Hindoo the Raja of Tanjore, who quotes Fourcroy, Lavoisier, Linnaeus and Buffon fluently, has formed a more accurate judgment of the poetical merits of Shakespeare than that so felicitously expressed by Lord Byron, actually emitted English poetry very superior indeed to Rousseau's epitaph on Shenstone, at the same time that he is much respected by the English officers in his neighbourhood as a real good judge of a horse, and a cool, bold, and deadly shot at a tiger. The truth is that he is an extra-ordinary man, who, having in early youth received such an education as old Schwatz, the celebrated Missionary, could give him, has ever since continued, in the midst of many disadvantages, to preserve his taste for, and extend his knowledge of European literature. He is a strong built and very handsome aged man, with eyes and nose like a fine hawk and very bushy gray mustache, generally splendidly dressed, but with no effeminacy of ornaments, and looking and talking like a French General officer, than any other ob comparison which occurs to me.

No doubt, Heber writing in a manner of rhetoric; Serfoji's library contained the works of Fourcroy, Lavoisier, Linnaeus and Buffon, and been familiar with these authors and their work, but whether he was able to quote fluently from these texts, or write poetry that could vie with the best of the enlightened English and French writers remains uncertain. In any case, that was hardly his intention, which had more to do with translating and assimilating all that was useful and relevant in the European arts and sciences, while remaining family rooted in his traditions.

Alexander Johnston

Alexander Johnston (1775—1849), Chief Justice of the island of Ceylon and of the Supreme Court of Judicature, arrived in Tanjore in late November 1816. Serfoji arranged to send 'his performers with the Vinas to attend to Lt Col Blackburne, agreeably to the Wish of the Honourable Sir A. Johnston to hear their performance on the Vina' and 'to see one or two of the beautiful Vinas which have been made upon the palace of his Highness'.²³ When Johnston visited Serfoji at his palace, in the company of the Resident Blackburne, he expressed a desire for the Raja's portrait, which was granted with pleasure. An was made for 'any Book or entire Work which may have issued from the press of His Highness which would be preserved by Sir A. Johnston as of His Highness's personal kindness and a proof Highly Satisfactory of His Highness's attention of to the promotion of the Arts and Sciences in his Dominions'.²⁴ In response, Serfoji sent Johnston the Marathi translation of the Aesop's Fables, printed at his Devanagari press.²⁵ Johnston reciprocated this by presenting Serfoji with a 'Dutch Map of the Coast of the Island of Ceylon, containing the Soundings of the whole Coast, and of the neighbouring continental Coast',²⁶ and by fulfilling the Raja's desire for horses from the Company's stud at Delft (Ceylon).²⁷ Blackburne reported on Johnston's visit to the Tanjore Court thus: His Highness on this occasion accompanied Sir Alexander through the palace, pointing out the improvements which had been made, and the objects which were worthy of attention or observations'.²⁸

Jean Baptiste Louis Leschenault de la Tour

On 17 March 1820, Blackburne announced to Serfoji the arrival of French botanist and ornithologist in Tanjore, Jean Baptiste Louis Leschenault de la Tour (1773—1826) thus : 'A French gentleman a man of science and high respectability who is recommended to my attention very particularly by the British Commissioner with Foreign European States in India, is arrived at my House and I shall be very glad to receive permission from your Highness to present him at the palace when it may be convenient to your Highness. His name is Monsieur Leshenault de La Tour.²⁹ Leschenault, a pupil of the great botanist Antoine Laurent de jussieu, was considered an 'acute observer' of nature. He distinguished himself as a naturalist, on the voyage of discovery to the southern hemisphere, commanded by Captain Nicola Baudin in 1800—1803. A decade later, in 1814, he received a passage to India, from the King of France on a salary of 6,000 francs per annum, in recognition of his services, 'past and future, to Natural Science & Botany'. The intention of his visit to India was to form a natural history collection, and to establish at Pondicherry a botanic garden 'for the purpose of receiving, preserving & distributing Plants likely to be useful to mankind for food or for Medicine'. Serfoji expressed great eagerness to meet Leschenault and arranged to meet him the very next morning. As per Blackburne's request, he showed the French naturalist his 'medals and other curiosities'.³⁰

To conclude, Serfoji's princely contemporaries, like the Nawab of Arcot and Setupati of Ramnad and Tondaiman of Pudukottai, with whom the relationship was always a very complex one on account of the long-standing political rivalry between these kingdoms. The Nawab of Arcot also visited the Tanjore Court. In early March 1823, the Nawab Azam Jah, Nawab Munawwar Khan (1819—1825), after offering prayers at the Nagoor dargah, arrived in Tanjore. Serfoji was initially unhappy to give the Nawab a royal salute, because the latter 'had no guns to return it' but when he was informed that the Nawab would return the 'civility when the Rajah passed Chepauk palace on his way to visit the Governor of Fort St George, he made no further objections'. During the visit, Nawab was shown the stable, 'where foreign horses were kept' the portrait sculpture by Flaxman at the Jirath Khana, the tiger cages, and that unmistakable symbol of enlightenment modernity — the printing press.³¹

END NOTES

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2 Aitichison, A.U., *Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*, Vol.X, Calcutta, 1864, pp.90-94.

3 Srinivasan, C.K., *Maratha Rule in the Carnatic*, Annamalai University, Annamalaiagar, 1944,, pp.329-330.

4 Seetha, S., *Tanjore as a seat of Music*, University of Madras, Madras, 1981, p.114.

5 Tanjore District Collectorate Records, (TDCR) Vol.3487B, 28 August 1806.

6 Buchanan, C., *The Works of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan comprising his Christian Researches in Asia*, New York, Whiting and Watson, 1812, pp. 46-47.

7 In his book, Buchanan states that the portrait was placed in the public library of the University of Cambridge. (Buchanan, C., op.cit., p. 53.

8 TDCR., Vol.3487B, 30 August 1806, p.371.

9 Gibbs, M.E., *The Anglican Church in India, 1600-1970*. Delhi, 1972, pp. 55-91. Gibbs, however, claims that Middleton arrived in Tanjore on 28 January 1816.

10 Savithri Preetha Nair, *Raja Serfoji II*, New Delhi, 2012, p.20.

11 TDCR., Vol.3520, 11 March 1816, p.107.

12 Bishop Heber was accompanied by John Kohlhoff, Sperschneider and the Tranquebar missionaries, Dr Camrnerer and Schreyvogel.

13 Robinson, *Last Days on Bishop Heber*, Madras, 1829, pp.159-160.

14 Ibid., p.161.

15 Ibid., pp.164-165.

16 Savithri Preetha Nair, op.cit., p.21.

17 Robinson, op.cit., p. 166; Peterson, I.V., 'The Cabinet of King Serfoji of Tanjore: A European Collection in Early Nineteenth Century India', in *Journal of the History of Collections*, Vol.2 (1), 1999, pp. 71-93.

18 Robinson claims Serfoji was Schwartz's pupil from twelve until twenty-four years old, when it should be twelve to twenty-one years; that he saw in his library an 'ivory skeleton', when it was actually a skeleton made of wood that resembled bone or ivory.

19 Ibid.

20 Peterson, I.V., loc.cit., pp. 72 and 76; besides the limitations of a diffusionist framework, the argument suffers from an uncritical response to Robinson's remarks, without corroboration with primary sources.

21 Impey, O., and A. MacGregor, (eds.), *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinets of(Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

22 TDCR., Vol. 4429B, 25 January 1822, pp.480-481.

23 TDCR., Vol. 3518, 29 November 1816, pp. 325 and 329.

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24 TDCR., Vol. 3520, 1 December 1816, p.345.

25 TDCR., Vol. 3421, pp. 146-148 and 155.

26 TDCR., Vol.3520, 1 December 1816, p.337.

27 In 1819, the Ceylon Governor Baronet Robert Brownrigg and his team Tanjore, three years after Johnston. Brownrigg visited the Court in the of Resident Blackburne, and several others including surgeon Thomas Sevestre and the missionaries John Kohlhoff and Sperschneider; Serfoji was presented with two horses from the Company's stud farm at Delft, probably on the orders of Alexander Johnston.

28 Savithri Preetha Nair, op.cit., p.24.

29 TDCR., Vol. 3539, 17 April 1820, p. 145.

30 TDCR., 3539, 17 April 1820, pp.147-148.

31 Savithri Preetha Nair, op.cit., p.24.



R. Kumaran

Associate Professor in History , H.H. The Rajah's Government College , Pudukkottai , Tamil Nadu.

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