A Royal Library
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HERITAGE

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The Thanjavur kings created one of India's greatest palm-leaf manuscript collections

The Sarasvati Mahal Library is a cavernous building not far from Thanjavur's famous Brihadisvara Temple, with its 200-foot central tower built by Raja-raja Chola in the 11th century. Now nestled in a warren of narrow streets, the library was established by Raghunatha Nayak in the early 17th century and maintained by successive kings over the years. Serfoji II ceded the kingdom to the British East India Company in 1799, but his far-reaching cultural contributions to Thanjavur included a major expansion of the library.

Under British rule, Serfoji retained the right to manage the temples and related activities, including this library. Serfoji knew Sanskrit, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and English. He had a particular interest in medicine, specifically ophthalmology, and was an accomplished eye surgeon. Through his patronage from 1798 to 1832, Thanjavur became a major scientific, literary and cultural center. The Thanjavur school of painting, for example, remains influential to this day.

The main library is housed in an immense L-shaped room several hundred feet long, with a 20-foot ceiling. Here 46,000 manuscripts, both palm leaf and paper, are kept in tall cabinets and on long shelves. In addition to scripture, the collection contains documentation of the kingdom, such as land transactions recorded on narrow leaves three to four feet long. One huge section is devoted to medical texts. Most of the works--36,923 manuscripts, including some not available anywhere else--are in Sanskrit. There are 3,780 texts in Tamil and 3,060 in Marathi.

Four dozen workers scattered throughout the library are involved in preservation

and cataloging. A visitor is struck with the enormity of their task and the vulnerability of the collection. The leaves are perfect tinder--moreover, they are treated with lemon oil as a preservative, which is flammable. The fire response system comprises just a few stations, each with a single extinguisher and two buckets of sand. Also, as the palm leaves are organic, they are in a continuing process of decomposition. Under the kings, the bundles were regularly recopied every hundred years or so. In the 19th century, that process ceased. Paper manuscripts, created since that time, are even less durable.

The library has been microfilming the collection since 1980, and has plans for full digitization. One method is to use the new high-megapixel digital cameras to photograph the leaves. A study (http:/www.ias.ac.in/currsci/may25/articles12.htm) by Sangeetha Menon and George Williams of the National Institute of Advanced Studies concluded, "Digital camera technology is far cheaper than conventional preservation methods (microfilm), and the learning time is minimal." The government of India and a number of private institutions are devising projects to use this technology (see http:/www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/agamas/palm-leaf-demo) to preserve these ancient, fragile and priceless collections.