



Contribution of Maratha Rajas of Tanjore to Telugu Literature and Culture

Surendra Govindu

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of History, SKR. Govt Degree College, Gudur, Tirupathi Dist. Andhra Pradesh. E-mail: govindusurendra@gmail.com

Abstract: Tanjore, historically a heartland of Chola kingdom, came under the influence of the Vijayanagara rule, about the third quarter of the fourteenth century, after the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire, the Telugu Nayaka Governors under that empire became independent rulers, and Tanjore was the seat of a Telugu Nayaka dynasty from A.D. 1535 to 1673. After them same the Maratha and the brother of Shivaji the Great, founded the Tanjore Maratha dynasty which ruled from A.D. 1676 to 1855, which marked the beginning of cultural revival and blossoming of the artistic tradition. The Marathas of Tanjore maintained a separate identity from the date of its inception. In this paper an attempt has been made to deal with the contribution of Maratha Rajas of Tanjore to Telugu Literature and Culture. Telugu literature that flourished in their Maratha Raja's period ruled over a part of the country is considered as a separate school in Telugu literature with distinct characteristics of its own. It is a glorious chapter in the History of Telugu Literature. These cultural traditions flourished and attained zenith under the Marathas of Tanjore.

Keywords: Shivaji, Maratha Raja's, Tanjore Maratha dynasty, Telugu Literature, Vijayanagara Empire.

Received : 28 December 2021

Revised : 20 January 2022

Accepted : 24 January 2022

Published : 30 June 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Govindu, S. (2022). Contribution of Maratha Rajas of Tanjore to Telugu Literature and Culture, *Society and Culture Development in India*, 2: 1, pp. 211-219. <https://doi.org/10.47509/SCDI.2022.v02i01.14>

Origin of Maratha rule in Tanjore

Tanjore, historically a heartland of Chola Kingdom, came under the influence of the Vijayanagara rule, about the third quarter of the fourteenth century. Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529) the greatest ruler organized the Nayaka rule of Tanjore, Madura and Senji in the early decades of the sixteenth century.¹ (From the time of Kumara Kampana son of Bukka Raya and conqueror of the south up to the reign of Achyuta brother of Krishnadevaraya, the Tanjore country was under

governors appointed from time to time. Thus Madanna was the Chola governor under Devaraya II. Vira Narasimha the governor under Krishna rebelled against the emperor in collusion with the central general Nagama who usurped the Pandyan throne. After punishing the rebels, Achyuta appointed Viswanatha, whose loyalty overcame his filial love for Nagama, as viceroy of all South. Then, apportion of his viceroyalty, the Tanjore country, was sliced off and given to Sevappa the first Nayak ruler of Tanjore who had married the sister-in-law of the late emperor. After the battle of Tallikota, Tanjore was loyal to Venkata the viceroy of Chandragiri. When Venkata became emperor, Raghunatha, heir apparent and grandson of Sevappa, fought like a lion under his master's banner against the troublesome Madura Nayak. All the Nayak kings were, without exception, great men of letters. The *Tanjavuri Andhra Rajula charitra* speaks of the capture of Tanjore just after the death of the Bijapur Sultan, the overlord of Venkaji. By a reference to the genealogical list of the Adil Shahis, it can be seen that there was a new and young Sultan on the *gadi* in 1673 who continued to rule the country till its annexation by the Mughal rule. There is a grant of Ekoji dated 1676 A.D. confirming Vijayaraghava's grant of Nagapatnam to the Dutch and it is likely that the Dutch got their rights confirmed as soon as he became ruler.²

The rise and growth of the Maratha power is one of the wonderful chapters in the long history of India. Founded by Shivaji the great, son of Shahji Bhonsle, the Maratha state was a sharp thorn in the side of the Deccan Sultans and the great Mughal. After the conquest of Bijapur and Golkonda the Mughal came into closer grips with the Maratha. In 1676 A.D., the first Maratha ruler of Tanjore took the principality of the Nayaka Rajas who had ruled it for above 125 years.³ The Marathas of Tanjore maintained a separate identity from the date of its inception. The kingdom faced political opposition of various Hindu and Muslim rulers on one side and on the other side the trade concession of Western countries. The competition among them forced it to continue a balance from internal and external groups. It had no scope for any political expansion, but continued to amalgamate different cultures. Thus Tanjore became a centre of court culture.⁴ The Maratha kings followed the tradition set up by their predecessors in patronizing literatures flourished in a big way. Though they were Marathas adopted Telugu as their official language and ran the administration. They acquired scholarship both in Telugu and Sanskrit and themselves wrote many works of merit besides extending their patronage to poets and scholars. Telugu language attained an eminent and prestigious position in their times and it enjoyed the envious position of being the language of culture in that distant land. It was considered a fashion to write in Telugu, to speak in Telugu and

sing in Telugu. The following account will present the amount of literary activity that prevailed under the Maratha rule.⁵

Venkaji or Ekoji (1676-1683 A.D.)

In 1676 A.D., Ekoji founded Maratha kingdom and the Marathas rule continued for a century and a half which marked the beginning of cultural revival and blossoming of the artistic tradition. *Kamakalanidhi* author was Nellur Sivarama kavi son of Viraraghava Kavi. He dedicated the work to Jayasimha, grandson of Ekoji. The author praises the deeds of Shivaji and Venkaji in the usual style. "Shivaji conquered the Mughal and received the title of *Chatrapathi*. Venkaji defeated all the kings south of the Narmada, and set free the Pandya from the yoke of Mysore".⁶ Sanskrit and Telugu literatures had flourished splendidly under Nayaka patronage, and the new comer had only to keep up the tradition for an increase in their output. The Rajas' devotion to Brahmans led to the growth of Sanskrit and Telugu to the neglect of the indigenous language. Ekoji himself is said to have composed in Telugu *Dvipada Ramayana*, and several other works in Telugu were written in his reign.

Sahaji (1684-1712 A.D.)

Sahaji is the son of Ekjoi alias Venkaji who was the first Maratha ruler at Tanjore. Though Sahaji came to the throne at the early age of 12, the administration was carried on with great ability and success. He was precocious and brilliant. The reign of this king can be considered as the 'Golden age', as a vast literature both in Sanskrit and Telugu came into being in his times. He was hailed as '*Aparabhoja*' in his patronage of letters and had a comparison only in Sri Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara and Raghunadha of the Tanjore Nayaka dynasty. The rulers had been Telugu hence the prominence of Telugu poets even in the Maratha Court. His patronage to Telugu is no way less. The number of Telugu works that he himself had written and the number of poets he patronized will reveal the fact. Sahaji had written twenty works in Telugu among which "*Sankarapallaki sevaprabandhamu*" and "*Vishnupallaki seva prabandhamu*" are very well known to the literary world and appeared in print also with musical notations. "*Vishnu Saharaja Vilasam*" is a Tamil *koothu* in Telugu Script. All his twenty or above works were "*Yakshaganas*" named as *Natakas* and each of them was dedicated to one deity or the other. Sahaji had the titles of '*Sahitipumbhava sarada*' and '*Sakala bhasha caturvidha sahiti nirvahaka*'.⁷

In Sahaji's court, there were many poets and Seshachala kavi was considered the greatest among them. He was the *Guru* of one Nellore Sivarama kavi who was

the author of '*Kamakalanidhi*'. Through a reference about him in '*Kamakalanidhi*' we learn that he had a title of '*Andhra Panini*'. It appears that he was an author of a grammatical work in *sutras* for Telugu and also wrote a commentary on it and hence he was called '*Andhra Panini*'. Seshachala kavi had the honour of '*Kanakabbisheka*' by Sahaji and received from him many gifts. It appears that he could compose poems not only in Sanskrit and Telugu but in eight languages. Only three works of Seshachala kavi are available to us. They are '*Saharaja Vilasamu*', '*Saraswati kalyanam*' and '*Andhra vyakaranamu*'. Among these, while the first two are Telugu works, the third one is in Sanskrit. '*Natesa Vijayam*' was composed by Venkata Krishna Dikshitar who also adorned the court of Sahaji as a poet. In 1693 A.D., the king renamed '*Tiruvasanallu Sahajirajapuram*' and made a gift of the village to forty six scholars of his court of whom this author was one. This village was the seat of scholarship in languages, Literature, Philosophy and Medicine throughout the Maratha period and some of the most distinguished men were Telugus. Venkata Krishna wrote in addition '*Sri Ramachandrodayakaya*', '*Uttara Champu*' and '*Kusala vijaya nataka*'. He was an ornament of the courts of Trichinopoly and Gingee besides Tanjore.⁸

Giriraja kavi is one among the famous poets that adorned the court of Sahaji. He was proficient both in Music and Literature. He continued to live in the court of Sarabhoji, the brother of Sahaji. He is the author of a few works like '*Sahendra charitramu*', '*Rajamohana kuravamji*', '*Leelavathi kalyanam*', '*Vardajayamu*' and '*Sarvamgasundari Vilasamu*'. The theme of '*Sahendra charitramu*' tells that Sahaji falls in love with a girl and marries her. '*Rajamohana kuravamji*' is a one type of *Yakshagana* in which the soothsayer goes to the heroine by name Rajamohini and tells her that Saharaja would marry her and the work ends with their marriage. His '*Lilavathi kalyanam*' describes the marriage of Sarabhoji with Leelavathi, the daughter of Kirtichandra Raja of Maharastra. All these were dedicated to Saharaja.

Venkatagiri is the brother of Girirajakavi he too was well versed both in Music and Literature. He was the court-poet of one, Khandoji Rao who was related to Sahaji. He has to his credit a few works like '*Rukmangada charitra*' and '*Abhinaya darpana*'. His first work is a poem of three cantos in '*Dwipada padyam*' and deals with the story of the famous devotee, Rukmangada. His second work '*Abhinayadarpana*' is a poetic translation of the work of the same name by Nandikeswara in Sanskrit. The poem contains three chapters called '*anubimbas*' and was dedicated to his patron, Khandoji Rao. A work, by name '*Lilavathi Saharajeeyamu*' is said to be a composition of one, Balakavi Subbanna. It deals with the marriage of Sahaji with

Lilavathi and is in *Yakshagana* style. The aforesaid account reveals the extent of the literary activity that existed in the times of Saharaja. His service to Telugu on a different aspect is also to be noted here.

Sarabhoji I (1712-1728 A.D.)

Sarabhoji I ruled country after their elder brother and also patronised literature following his tradition. It appears that Telugu and Sanskrit enjoyed an eminent position under his patronage and there are several works written in his times in Sanskrit. Anandarayamakhi, who was a minister in the court from the times of his elder brother, wrote a work called '*Vidyaparinayamu*', which was staged on the occasion of a festival to the deity by name Anandavalli in the princes of the king. Sarabhoji himself wrote a work called '*Raghavacharitramu*' in Sanskrit which deals with the story of Ramayana in twelve sagas with the help of another poet by name Anantanarayana kavi who was famous by his title as '*Pancharatna kavi*'. Jagannadha kavi of his court poet was the author of a Sanskrit work called '*Ratimanmadha Nataka*'. Paramananda kavindra's '*Sivabharatam*' which deals with an account of Chatrapathi Shivaji is a poem in Sanskrit of historical importance. Thus only Sanskrit works were in good number and Telugu did not flourish much. But we have a few *padas* and *kirtanas* in praise of 'Sarabhoji' composed by Girirajakavi who continued to be in his court from the time of Sahaji. Though the present manuscripts' Library which is housed in the Saraswati Mahal at Tanjore is established in the times of Sarabhoji and is named after him, most of the manuscripts in it were ordered to be written and preserved by Sahaji only.⁹ The bulk of the manuscripts in the library contain mostly the copies of his various works.

Tukkoji (1728-1736 A.D.)

Tukkoji, who ruled the country after Sarabhoji I between 1728 A.D., and 1736 A.D., was also a patron of letters, he was a great linguist. He was proficient not only in literature but also in music. His '*Sangitasaramrita*' reveals his scholarship in Music and he was the person who first introduced the Hindustani tunes in Tanjore. He wrote a work in Telugu also by name '*Sivakama sundariparinayamu*'. Ekoji II was the son of Tukkoji and he ruled the country for one year. He also patronised Sanskrit and Telugu poets and himself composed a Ramayana in '*Dwipadamatra*'. All the six sagas are available in this work. His other work '*Vigneswara kalyananatakamu*' which is both in Sanskrit and Telugu is an adaptation of Sahaji's work by the same name.

Pratap Singh (1739-1763 A.D.)

Pratap Singh was born to a sword wife of Tukkoji named Annapurna. He was the last of the famous and popular Tanjore Maratha Rajas. Nelluri Sivaramakavi was a poet in the court of Pratap Singh who came to the throne after an interval of anarchy in the country and dedicated his work '*Kamakalanidhi*' to him. *Kamakalanidhi* is a poem in four cantos and strictly follows the '*Ratrirahasya*' by the famous Kokkoka kavi. He has also translated the '*Ramagita*' into Telugu at the instigation of one, Marri Krishnabhupala and dedicated it to Lord Rama, the presiding deity at Ramakrishnapura.

Muddupalani was a great poetess who lived in the court of Pratap Singh and she was his spouse also. Her '*Radhikasamtvanmu*' was a famous work, known to the literary world. Though she was born in a *devadasi* community, she was a great devotee of Lord Sri Krishna and identified herself with Radha, the heroine of her poem. Her work '*Radhikasamtvanmu*' is a poem in four cantos and contains 585 stanzas. As the poem was full of erotic sentiment, it has been very popular with youth. She was also author of '*Saptapadulu*'. Her guru was Viraraghava Deshika of Tirumala Tathacharya family.¹⁰

Tuljaji (1763-1787 A.D.)

Tuljaji had a sound education under his father. He was a linguist and could compose in Sanskrit. He patronized Telugu and Marathi writers. He conferred the worthy title of '*Andhra Kalidasa*' on Aluri Kuppana pupil of Kasturirangayyan head of the French peons in Trichinopoly and composer of many odes on his French masters. Besides *Acharyavijayamu* a translation of Anandagiri's '*Sankaravijaya*', Kuppana wrote many works of which may be mentioned '*Panchanada Sthalapurana*', '*Yakshaganas*' of the Ramayana and Bhagavata stories, '*Parama Bhagavatacharitra*', '*Indumati Parinaya*' and '*Karmavipaka*'.¹¹ Telugu literature which flourished so well under the Tanjore Rajas, reached its height of excellence in the post-Vijayanagara period on the banks of the Kaveri and originated its prose section in that fertile soil, ceased to grow after Tuljaji and fled back to its home-land. In fact, native literatures ceased to have life by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and had to be inoculated with the virus of western ideas before they showed signs of freshness and movement. Simple and direct expression and historical, comparative and critical methods are essentially modern features in which our literatures were wanting. Tulajaji offered his patronage to musicians from all parts of India and made his court a renowned centre of musical culture.

True to his ancestral traditions, the Raja was very tolerant in his religious views and had great confidence in the missionary Schwartz who had even hopes of converting him. The Tanjore Marathas from the time of Sahaji were devoted to a line of *Advaita Sanysis*, and traditions are extant in Tiruvisanallur the home of the learned at that time about some famous Telugu *Yatis* well-versed in *Vedanta* to whom the rulers rendered all assistance. The stream of culture and Philosophy flowed undiminished from the age of Raghunatha and Sudhindra to that of Tuljaji¹² and Sadguru Swamiji and was then dried up in the arid sands of the modern period.

Amar Singh (1787-1798 A.D.)

Amar Singh alias Ramaswamy was the son of a concubine of Pratap. Matrubbhutakavi who lived in about 1788 A.D. wrote a work by name '*Parijatapaharana*' and dedicated it to Amarasimha who ruled at Tanjore after Tulajaji II on the instigation of his minister, Sivaramaiah. He has also composed several *padas* and they are found published in '*Sangita sampradaya pradarsini*' as '*Matrubhutayya padamulu*'.

Sarabhoji II (1798-1833 A.D.)

Sarabhoji II was famous among Maratha kings who ruled at Tanjore. He knew several languages and was a patron of Literature and Arts. The Tanjore Saraswati Mahal library was organized and established by him and his statue in marble stone adorns the precincts of the *Mahal*. Among Telugu works, special mention may be made of Raghunatha *Nayakabhayudayamu* and Kattavaradaraju's '*Ramayanamu*'.¹³ Kattavaradaraja's '*Ramayanamu*' is to the Telugu what Kamba Ramayana is to the Tamils and Tulasidas Ramayana is to the Hindi-speaking world. The manuscripts of this work, by its remarkable author Kattavaradaraju is found only in this library. Thagarajaswami was a musician poet who lived in the times of Sarabhoji II and composed many *kirtanas* in Telugu in which only about 600 are now available.

Shivaji (1833-1855 A.D.)

Shivaji Maharaj was the last Maratha ruler at Tanjore, he was the only surviving son of Sarabhoji.¹⁴ He was also a patron of letters like his predecessors and was himself a poet. He was the author of a work '*Annapurnaparinayamu*' in which he describes the marriage of one, Konkaneswara with a girl by name '*Annapurna*'. The prologue to this work contains a detailed account of his ancestors in the family. Venkatakrishna

kavi was a poet who adorned the court of Sivaji Maharaj and wrote a work called '*Sivaparijatamu*'. He belonged to the *Mallu* (wrestler) community who were called *Jettis* in those days, his full name being Kanakajetti Venkatakrishna Jetti. He took pride in calling himself a '*Telugu kavi*' of Sivaji Maharaj. Pallavi Gopalayya is a name to be reckoned with in the Music world because of his skill in rendering *pallavi* in a superb manner. He is also called Rajagopala kavi which was his full name and was a contemporary to saint Tyagaraja. He wrote a poem by name '*Bhaktajanaparijata*' in four cantos which describes in detail the stories of great devotees. It appears that his ancestors came from Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh and settled down at Tanjore by the munificence of the Tanjore kings. The famous Meratturu Venkatrama Sastri belongs to the same family. He was not only a great musician but also a poet of great merit. He wrote 12 *Yakshaganas* in Telugu among which only 11 are available like '*Prahladacaritra*', '*Markandeyacaritra*', '*Rukmangada caritra*' etc. he was also well trained in the art of dance and he used to act himself in a role when his *Yakshaganas* were being staged. Besides the poets who wrote poems and *Yakshaganas* and who enjoyed the patronage of the rulers at Tanjore there were a few poets who visited their courts and composed poems in their praise. Among them the musician poet, Kshetrappa, is to be mentioned in the connection. He hails from the village 'Movva' in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh and visited many places in the south and composed '*padas*' on the deities of the local temples and the kings and benefactors from whom he received patronage.

Conclusion

The Maratharastrians, who ruled the Tamil land from Tanjore, adopted Telugu as their court language and themselves wrote many works by acquiring sufficient scholarship in the language that they loved most. On a close study of the Telugu literature and culture that flourished at Maratha rule in Tanjore, most of the poets selected stories from *Puranas* in which they can describe in full measure the erotic sentiment and adopted them as the themes of their works. A few poets attempted to render some of the old classics into prose in order to make common people of less scholarship understand the contents of the works and as a result a few prose works came into being for the first time in Telugu Literature. The kings too, besides patronizing letters, themselves composed works. There were poets not only from the privileged community but also from other communities as well. Many of the royal mistresses were accomplished ladies. They were noted not only for their beauty but also for their scholarship and skill in Music and Dancing. Mostly Telugu because

of the Nayaka legacy, some of these ladies have left us a large and rich treasure of sweet *Padhyas* in that languages which are widely sung even to-day in the Tamil and Telugu states.

Notes & References

1. A descriptive Catalogue of Telugu mss. In the Madras Oriental Library Vol.II, Part 3.
2. A trien. Cat. of mss.1913-14 to 1915 -16, Vol. 2, Part 3 No. 138.
3. B. S. Baliga, "*Tanjore District Handbook*," 1921, p. 127.
4. *Ibid*
5. *Ibid*. n.2, p. 75
6. *Ibid*., p. 20
7. Introduction to A Triennial Catalogue of Telugu Mss in the Madras Oriental Library, 1916-17 to 1918-19, Vol 3, Part 3.
8. J. Jayaraman, Saraswathi Mahal, Thanjavur, 2000, pp.110-120.
9. K.R. Subramanian, M.A., "*The Maratha Rajas of Tanjore*", Madras, 1928, p.17
10. K.Rajayyan, "*A History of British Diplomacy in Tanjore*" Mysore, 1969, p. 14-17.
11. Kodandaramaiah, T., "*The Telugu Poets of Madura and Tanjore*", Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, Hyderabad, 1975, p. 20
12. No.1 of 1909 is an ins. Of Tuljaji referring to Nana Gosavi, son of Setubavasvami, styled Advaitagresara, who was probably the spiritual Guru of the king.
13. T. K. Venkatasubramaniam, "*Morphology of culture and Evolution of Performing Arts, Tamil Nadu upto 1900 A.D.*" Endowment Lecture, Tamil Nadu History Congress 24-25 October 1998, Tirunelveli, p. 10-14.
14. V.Vridhagirisan, "*The Nayaks of Tanjore*", Asian Educational Services, Madras, 1995, p. 12.