

CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

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E P I L O G U E

The fertile region of Tanjore, located on the south-east coast between 10°-8' and 11°-25' north latitude and 78°-47' and 79°-52' east longitude,¹ due to its strategic importance, was coveted by various dynasties that ruled south India. As a result, this region also enjoyed a great cultural heritage, notwithstanding political vicissitude, arts, architecture, literature, dance, music, culture and fine-arts flourished in Tanjore. Great names in the history of South India, such as Karikal Chola (I.C.A.D.), Raja Raja Chola (AD 985-1016), Rajendra Chola (AD 1012-44) were linked with Tanjore. In medieval times, after the fall of Vijayanagar Empire, as an aftermath of Talikota battle in 1565, Tanjore regained its independent status under the Nayak rulers and was at its limelight under the greatest of the Nayak rulers. Raghunath Nayak (AD 1600-34). In third quarter of the seventeenth century, Tanjore passed into the hands of the Marathas; with Ekoji, Shivaji's half-brother, laying the dynastic foundation in 1676,² and it remained in Maratha hands for more than one and a half centuries. From its inception by Ekoji in 1676 until its fall under Raja Shivaji in 1855, the Maratha kingdom of Tanjore passed through the hands of a number of great rulers, such as Shahaji (AD 1684-1710-11), Sarfoji (AD 1712-1728); Tulaji (AD 1728-1736); Pratapsingh (AD 1739-1763), all of whom brought glory to Tanjore.

Of all these rulers, the reign of Shahaji was significant in many ways.

Shahaji was the eldest of the three sons of Ekoji and Dipamba, the other two being Sarfoji and Tulaji.³ Ekoji took great interest in the education of his sons and appointed scholars such as Raghunath Pandit, Tryambakray Makhin, Sridhar Venkatesa to teach them.⁴ Ekoji's career was overshadowed by his more illustrious half-brother, Shivaji the Great, and as such he often receives harsh criticism at the hands of certain historians, who portray him as a 'tyrant', 'vicious', 'dull', 'lazy', 'incompetent',⁵ etc. To do justice to him, it should not be overlooked that he had ensured smooth transition of political power in his own time by abdicating throne in favour of Shahaji in 1684,⁶ a fact not known to many. More important, Ekoji also avoided possible clashes among his sons by assigning them the territories of Tanjore, Sakkotai and Mahadevpatnam, respectively.⁷ In an age when disputed succession was rather common, which often resulted into chaos and disorder in the kingdom, Ekoji's Tanjore proved to be an exception.

Shahaji's reign lasted for twentyseven years (from AD 1684 to 1710-11). He ascended the throne at a very tender age of thirteen and also at a very crucial period in the history of south. The presence of the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb together with a considerably

bigger army in the Deccan from 1682 onwards, and the successful liquidation of 'Qutubshahi' and 'Adilshahi' respectively, had spread consternation in the south. Further, the tragic death of Sambhaji, son and the successor of Chhatrapati Shivaji in the year 1690⁸ had raised serious fears among the Hindu community regarding their very political and religious survival.⁹

The arrival of the Maratha ruler, Rajaram to Jinji in 1689 further brought the Mughal forces in closer vicinity of the Hindu power in the south. This, coupled with the traditional rivalry with Madura kingdom, seriously threatened the very survival of infant Tanjore, which, however, successfully sailed through the crisis under the leadership of young Shahaji. This tumultuous period also exposed his limitations as a ruler.

Shahaji is often compared with the Hindu warrior God 'Indra',¹⁰ in the contemporary literature. There is also reference to his being trained in martial arts in his childhood. But the course of events show him as less of a warrior and military general. He avoided physical confrontation as far as possible, offered an unconditional surrender in 1694 to Zulphikarkhan, the Mughal General, and subsequently became a Mughal feudatory.¹¹ His uncle Chhatrapati Shivaji, had also done it. But more as a tactical ploy rather than as an abject surrender, and had used the very first opportunity to reassert his sovereign independence.¹² Unfortunately, this was not the

case with Shahaji. Between force and diplomacy, he banked more upon the latter to wriggle himself out of the problems. Whenever he resorted to force, more than often, he suffered setbacks, which is quite evident from his tussle against Mughals or his glaring defeat with his allies, at the hands of the Mangammal and her ally Chokkanath, in 1700.¹³ More important, it is a rather sad commentary on him and his contemporary rulers of Madura, Trichinopoly, Ramnad, etc. that even when their own political survival was threatened, they failed to bury the hatchet and rise above their petty selfish interests so as to offer joint resistance to the Mughals. It seems, the Hindu rulers of south learnt nothing from their very first defeats at the hands of Alahuddin Khilaji in the 14th century.¹⁴ To the credit of Shahaji, it may be said that he did extend material and monetary help to his besieged cousin, Rajaram at Ginji and thus enabled him to resist the Mughals in the beginning.

As a ruler, he consulted his council of ministers on important issues from time to time and respected the advice rendered by them. Like his uncle, Chhatrapati Shivaji, he attended to the welfare of peasants. He also established hospitals and appointed the Hakims (doctors) from Arabastan.¹⁵ However, more than his military and administrative achievements, his achievement as a patron and a scholar stands out, for which he will be remembered for ever.

As a patron, he not only continued more liberally and generously the traditional modes of court patronage through land grants, honours etc. to the scholars, artists, men of letters but went a step ahead and created a residential colony of scholars and named it as 'Shahajiraj-puram'. He also invited some distinguished scholars to reside there and provided all facilities to them.¹⁶ Many scholars, on learning about his liberal patronage, visited his court on their own, and there are also instances of Shahaji inviting reputed scholars to his court. This reflects his genuine interest in literature and his respect for the scholars. His encouragement, inspiration and rich patronage to the scholars resulted into a voluminous growth of literature in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit etc. His court was adorned with reputed scholars such as Sridhar Venkatesh, Rambhadra Diksita, Dhundivyas, Bhaskar-rayar etc. who wrote a number of commentaries, plays, poems, works on grammar, music etc. Rambhadra Diksita was the celebrated poet of Shahaji's Court.¹⁷ Besides being a reputed poet, he was also a grammarian and was referred to as 'Prati Patanjali'. He had a number of disciples who later earned fame and prestige on their own.

Shahaji was a man of deep religious disposition, which is quite obvious from some of his titles such as 'Dharmashastra Sudhanidhe, Sadachardharmanitisthapak', 'Shivabhaktadurindhar'. As it was common to his age, he was a pantheist. Besides his family deity, Thyagaraj,¹⁸ he

worshipped many gods and goddesses. Religious consideration usually dominated his court patronage. Religious topics and themes dominated his dramas and poetry. The Hindus perceived threat to their religion and looked upon him as a kind of saviour.¹⁹ However, liberalism of some of the Vijayanagar rulers, such as Krishnadevaraya, Achutadevaraya etc. and of his own uncle Chhatrapati Shivaji was missing in Shahaji for he proved intolerant of Portuguese, Christians and insisted that they should worship the Hindu Gods.²⁰

However, the brightest and positive aspect of Shahaji is his literary career. In genuine appreciation and recognition of his rich and prolific literary attainments the contemporary scholars conferred upon him the title of 'Abhinav Bhoja'. He not only composed plays in all major languages in vogue in South but also wrote a play in mixed language comprising all these languages. This very fact shows his inhibitions as a ruler and a scholar. As the former, he did not favour any one particular language but encouraged and patronised all the major languages. As a scholar, he did not merely confine himself to one or two languages but he wrote in all of them with natural ease and high fluency. This would mean, besides being a prominent scholar, he was also a true lover of arts and literature. To him every language at his disposal seemed a natural gift of God and he excelled and expressed himself in each of them. Perhaps he had a strong, deep inner urge to express himself.

Fortunately, he had intellectual gifts, natural talents to warp those inner expressions in a powerful and beautiful manner.

As it is generally observed, a common language does create a strong bond of affinity. The subjects of Tanjore who belonged to different linguistic regions, could't have asked for a better ruler than Shahaji, who could communicate with them in their own languages. Shahaji not only wrote in different languages, but also produced a play 'Panchbhasha Vilas', using all the five languages - perhaps a sublime effort knowingly or unknowingly directed at thrashing out, evolving out something common from all diverse groups to inspire them alike. Perhaps, this also explains why he must have used Telugu script for non-Telugu works, so that majority of them could read his works. Similarly, in history of south, some of the kings did have literary achievements to their credit. Krishnadevaraya (1509-29), the Vijayanagar ruler, for instance, was not only a great king but also an equally great scholar.²¹ Raghunath Nayak (1600-1634) was also well-known scholar.²² However, most of those scholar kings confined their writing to their respective mother tongues.

In the case of Shahaji, this wasn't so. Maratha rulers of Tanjore were alien in a sense as their mother tongue Marathi did not belong to the Dravidian family of languages of South. Therefore, it was perhaps necessary for them to have at least cultivated court

language, Telugu to rule effectively. But Shahaji not only mastered just the court language but all other languages spoken in his court. Again, most of the Indian rulers in the past who ruled over multilingual regions just confined themselves to the court languages which happened to be their mother tongues. Whereas Shahaji literally mastered the languages other than his mother tongue and court language in vogue in his kingdom. None of his contemporaries, no Maratha ruler before him or after him and indeed very few rulers in the gamut of Indian history could be compared with Shahaji on this score. What Shahaji did was a rare thing indeed in a sense that not many scholars exhibited such a vast range, in history of literatures of this country and so far as the kings are concerned, he was the rarest one, or perhaps the only one, to have done so. A true multilingualist who came to be known as 'Panchbhashakavannirvahak'.

During his reign Tanjore court acquired a reputation of being a centre of learning. It was adorned with distinguished scholars, poets, musicians, philosophers, grammarians, musicologists, dramatists, exponents in the different languages and the best intellectual society. Voluminous literature was produced during his reign in all major languages. So much so that this period came to be regarded as golden age of history of Telugu literature.

His personal contribution to literature as a dramatist and

poet was both substantial and significant of the literary 'Prabandha' and 'Yakshagans' to create a fusion of the two in his wonderful 'drasyakavyas'.²³ A harmonious blending of Sanskrit and Telugu is witnessed in his fine 'Prabandhas'. His works reveal an extraordinary skill in weaving words, majesty of language, his polished imagery and his delicate touch.

More important, the origin of Marathi,²⁴ Hindi,²⁵ and Telugu dramas is traced to him. Thus, he emerges not only as a reputed dramatist but as the originator of dramas. Similarly, he tried other forms of literature too such as novels, which could not have been imagined in his times and came up 'Satidan suram' which became very famous.

Shahaji was also a musicologist and was fond of playing on 'Veena' (a stringed instrument). He composed beautiful 'Padas' in 'Rakti' and 'Ghana' ragas on Bhakti, Sringar and Vairagya themes, in three major languages - Marathi, Sanskrit and Telugu. His padas reveal his fluency and mastery over those languages and his profound scholarship in music and literature.

Shahaji was also a grammarian and wrote 'Shaharajlakshnam'. He was very particular about using the padas in prescribed standard fashion, i.e., in accordance with 'Chaturved Lakshana' - 'Madhur', 'Asu', 'Chitra', and 'Vistar'. He will always be remembered for his lucid, simple and typical pcams and songs dedicated to his presiding deity 'Thyagaraja' of Tiruvarur. Mainly, he used devotional

and Sringar themes in his 'Thyagesh Padas'.

Thus, it is observed that religious themes dominated his various types of literary works but he didn't indulge in any dry scholasticism. Simple, sincere, deep devotion was practised by him. His work carried a strong note of pessimism which reminds one of the first of four noble truth of Gautam the Buddha, that this world is full of miseries.²⁶ Strong moral overtones underlined his literary works. They were full of practical philosophy such as it is better, not to have a son at all rather than have stupid ones, as is clear from his 'Mrutyunjaya Chiranjiv' or power must not fall in wrong hands as happened in the case of 'Bhasmasur'. His literary works bear out a deep influence of various saint poets right from 'Basaveshwar' the founder of 'Virsaivism' in South, to the Maratha saint poet 'Ramdas'.

Thus, Shahaji, who died at a very young age of forty, ruled infant Tanjore for nearly twenty-seven years at very crucial period of its history. He not only ensured the consolidation of his kingdom that subsequently survived for a century and a half after him, but more important, he made Tanjore a culture centre of south and left behind him a rich treasury of literature which has really immortalized this little known Maratha ruler of Tanjore.

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