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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE ECONOMIC PROSPERITY OF THE MARATHAS OF THANJAVUR
REVEALED BY THE MONUMENTS**

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Abstract

The Marathas ruled Thanjavur district between 17th to 19th centuries. They built many religious monuments like temples, forts and palaces to show their economic wealth and prosperity. In this article I described about the monuments which was been revealed by Marathas in Thanjavur district.

Key words: Economic prosperity, Forts, Thanjavur

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Introduction

The Marathas not only built religious monuments like temples but also built forts and palaces to show their economic wealth and prosperity. The site of the Maratha palace in Thanjavur was originally the royal residence of the Nayaks. The Marathas re - modelled and rebuilt this old palace complex to suit their needs and to show their economic prosperity. The Marathas built most of the buildings in the palace campus. They do not seem to have followed any settled plan or to have been guided by anything more definite than the

whim of a particular ruler or the testimonials of their attainment of economic prosperity and the need of the moment. Hence, the palace presents a picture of their economic wealth through their several large buildings, randomly scattered. But the beauty and majesty of each of the structures reflects their economic condition more than compensates for the haphazard plan. This paper mainly concentrated on the economic condition of the Marathas through their massive structures of their place and forts.

The Thanjavur Palace

The enclosure-wall of the palace was originally pierced by big gateways in the north and east and a small postern in the north-west corner. On date, the entrance for the tourists is on the eastern side. Large quadrangular courtyards and narrow and frighteningly dark corridors lead us from the main

entrance to the important royal buildings in the campus. The most important Maratha building in the campus is the Maratha Durbar Hall situated to the east of the Saraswathi Mahal Library built by Shahji II in 1684. This hall, originally called Shiva sword, consists of two smaller halls or Mandapams. The front Mandapam has an inclined wooden roof covered with tiles and supported by wooden pillars. These tall cylindrical pillars were originally painted in red and decorated with entwined garlands of grapes and vine leaves painted in white. The rear Mandapam is raised and can be approached by six brilliantly hewn steps. It has a smooth vault roof supported by pillars built of granite and plastered with lime and bricks. A glittering canopy made of wood decorated with glass pieces and supported by four wooden pillars was placed on a rectangular granite stone almost at the centre of this Mandapam. The throne of the Maratha king stood under this canopy. The entire ceiling and upper sections of the walls and the octagonal pillars of this Mandapam are covered with exquisite paintings. The portrait murals on the east wall of this Mandapam are supposed to be the masterpieces of the Maratha period. The capital and the upper sections of the pillars here are also elaborately decorated with bead-like patterns, leaves, flowers and peacocks, all painted in bright colours. The complex ornamentation on these pillars, though distinct in style, somewhat resembles the heavily sculpted and plastered pillars in the Nayak palaces. It strikes the attention of every one for their economic growth.

The Maratha Durbar Hall, apart from being the formal court of the Maratha kings, was also the place where the common people could meet the ruler. The hall overlooks a squarish open courtyard that was once used as an arena for bull-fights and wrestling matches. Dancers and musicians regularly performed on a platform located in one end of the courtyard. While the king and the nobles witnessed the performances from the Durbar, the queens viewed the same from the screened upper storey of the building (now dilapidated) adjoining the Durbar. The common folks, when invited for the functions here, squatted in a corner of the courtyard. Thus the plan of the various structures here displays an optimum use of every inch of the available space and their economic development.

Among the other Maratha buildings in the palace campus, the Sadri Mahadi (or Sadar Madi) is an outstanding one. This building, till date, houses the residences of the descendants of the Maratha kings. It was built by Sarfoji II in the year 1800 and is believed to have been designed by a British architect named Philips. The building is a tall majestic five-storeyed structure with profuse ornamentation. The architect appears to have paid special attention to the minutest details of the building. The windows and balconies on each floor have been graded in size and given different but harmonious detailing. The building is a fine example of perfect architectural symmetry. Each floor is slightly smaller in area and in height than the floor below it. It reveals the economic status of the Marathas.

The building of the Saraswathi Mahal Library was also built by Sarfoji II around the year 1801. It consists of spacious pillared halls. The library was actually started in another building of the palace by Raghunatha, a Tanjavur Nayak king, in the first half of the seventeenth century. The library was then called Saraswathi Bhandar. Sarfoji II refurbished the library, adding to it several paintings and manuscripts that he procured from distant places including Banaras (Varanasi) in North India. The library contains thousands of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts and books in different languages such as Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi. The library also has a valuable collection of archival records pertaining to Tanjavur Maratha Administration. These records are mostly in Marathi language written in a rare script called Modi. The library is thus a treasure-house of information about the history and art of Tanjavur, mainly the Maratha period. The library has a small museum attached to it. Some rare books, paintings and painted manuscripts are exhibited here. Some years ago, archaeologists discovered an underground passage in the middle of the palace. It is believed that the passage linked the Maratha king's living quarters with the Durbar Hall. It reveals that they were very generous and attained very high economic status by their endowments.

Apart from these Maratha buildings, the Tanjavur palace has several Nayak buildings that

were extensively renovated and used by the Marathas. The Nayak Durbar Hall is one such building. It is also called the Telugu Durbar Hall because the Nayak kings hailed from the Telugu-speaking Andhra region. On the exterior, the building is decorated with plaster figures. Within the hall, there is a fine white marble statue of Sarfoji II standing with the palms of his hands joined as if in prayer. He wears a triangular turban typical of Maratha kings. The statue has been sculpted by Chantrey. The statue has been erected exactly at the spot where, centuries ago, the throne of the Nayak rulers stood. Close to the Nayak Durbar Hall, is the Gudagopuram or the armory tower. It consists of eight storeys and rises to a height of 190 feet. Each of the stories is characterized by a domed central chamber encircled by arched and pillared corridors. Sculptures of cupid-like figures blowing bugles adorn the second floor while horses are represented on the third floor and the sacred Garuda (eagle) on the fourth floor. The dumpy pilasters and fat balusters vaguely resemble those on medieval Italian buildings. The Gudagopuram which housed the armoury of the Nayaks and the Marathas was deliberately built to resemble a temple vimana (tower) so that the foreigners attacking the city might leave the arsenal untouched in the belief that it was a religious monument. Soon after the death of Shivaji II, the last Tanjavur Maratha ruler, the British Government dismantled the armory, selected a few weapons for the museum and disposed off the rest as scrap iron.

Close to the Gudagopuram is another Nayak period tower called the Madamaligai or the Bell Tower. It is six storeys high and possesses more than a hundred very narrow steps. It was built by a Nayak king to enable him to have a clear glimpse of the sacred Ranganatha Temple at Srirangam (near Tiruchi) each day at noon. According to the local people, initially, the tower was several storeys higher than the present structure and many of the upper storeys were struck down by lightning. It is said that this tower was named Bell Tower because, at one time, the tower was crowned by a giant clock with a figure of a monkey suitably installed such that it would strike the bell at the top of the tower every hour. The clock and the bell no longer exist. Yet another Nayak period building in the campus is the Sangeeta Mahal

or Music Hall. It is a miniature replica of the court of Tirumala Nayak's (1623-59) palace in Madurai. It is approached by a low portico. The sunken floor of the hall makes one infer that it could have been a swimming pool or an indoor stadium with a covered gallery alongside the wall above. Royal ladies watched the games being played below from here. The palace is so vast and confusing that even after several visits, one may not be able to understand its precise plan and layout. Chatrapati Shivaji who visited the palace in disguise has described it to be in the shape of a flying eagle. But the palace has undergone innumerable structural changes since his days and now, one cannot find any eagle-shaped plan or building here.

Forts

The Marathas were excellent fort builders. History books inform us that Chatrapati Shivaji made the Marathas into a powerful force by erecting a series of impregnable fortifications in Maharashtra, the Maratha homeland through their economic wealth Central and Western India's vast expanses of rocky terrain proved most ideal for building rock forts atop mountains. In fact, the forts constitute the most impressive and enduring specimens of Maratha architecture of Maharashtra. The Tanjavur Marathas too continued this tradition of fort-building. The important forts built by the Tanjavur Marathas are at Pattukkottai, Mahadevapattinam and Manora.

Pattukkottai Fort

Pattukkottai is a town between Tanjavur and Rameshwaram. Shahji II, the Tanjavur Maratha ruler, built a small fort here in the year 1686-87. The fort appears to have been occupied by the British in 1781 and captured by Hyder Ali during his invasion of the region in the same year.

Mahadevapattinam Fort

Mahadevapattinam is located around 13km from the town of Mannargudi. The fort here was constructed by the Maratha king, Tuljaji. This is a fairly large brick fort. Marks of cannon balls are seen on the fort walls. This fort also appears to have been

captured by Hyder Ali and later, by the English. The fort is not visited by many tourists.

Manora Fortress

The most captivating fortress of the Tanjavur Marathas is the Manora located in a coastal site called by various names such as Manora, Saluvanayakapattinam, Sarabendirarajapattinam and Tulukkanvayal. The site is located between Pattukkottai and Rameshwaram. This miniature fortress may be regarded as the masterpiece of Tanjavur Maratha architecture. The fortress is an eight-storeyed hexagonal building built of bricks and stones. Slender-twisting flights of stairs lead us from one story to the next. The rooms have curved passageways with enormous wooden entryways. The interior wall originally exhibited a pearl-white lustrous finish obtained by a plaster of egg-shell, lime and other materials. The walls have, however, recently been crudely replastered and painted. Each storey is demarcated from the next by a thin narrow sunshade running along the exterior wall. The structure possesses double-walled enclosures and underground rooms. The building is surrounded by a moat. A drawbridge across the moat provided the sole direct access from outside to the interior of the fortress. The Manora could be compared, in its height and architectural splendour, to the Qutab Minar in New Delhi and the Char Minar in Hyderabad. Besides being architecturally unique, the Manora also has historical significance. Inscriptions on the building reveal that it was erected to commemorate the triumphs of the British arms and the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1814. Most people wrongly believe that this monument celebrates Napoleon's historic defeat at Waterloo. But Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and his final exile to remote St. Helena took place in the year 1815. The year 1814 saw Napoleon's abdication of the throne and exile to Elba. As the English had assisted Sarfoji II with possessing the Tanjavur seat, he, in his energy to exhibit his adoration and faithfulness to triumphant Britain, assembled the Manora in 1814 itself, much before the Waterloo. Surprisingly, the Manora was hardly used as a defence establishment even once. Sarfoji II had a foundry within this fortress. The fortress was used, for some time, as a lighthouse. The location of the fortress at a secluded

spot, right on the seashore, amidst coconut palms and the cool sea breeze, makes it an ideal holiday resort. The building may have even been planned as a summer palace for the Maratha royal family. In fact, Sarfoji II and Shivaji II did occasionally use the building as their residence. Manora is undoubtedly more a 'showpiece' of the Maratha period than an 'utility building'. Not many are aware that this is the only monument erected in honour of the English outside Europe. One wishes that more people visit the Manora not only to appreciate its architectural grandeur but also to enjoy its sylvan surroundings.

Other forts used by the Marathas

The Marathas not only built new forts but also laboriously repaired and rebuilt the forts of earlier periods. Shahji II repaired and strengthened the two Nayak forts in Tanjavur- the smaller fort called the Sivaganga Little Fort surrounding the Brhadisvara Temple and the bigger fort enclosing the old city. While the Sivaganga Little Fort is well-preserved to this day, the bigger fort of Tanjavur is in ruins that can be seen at specific spots in the periphery of the city. The Marathas, at different times, controlled the forts at Arantangi, Vallam, Tirukkattupalli, Sakkottai, Devikottai and Pandanallur. Although the precise date of erection of many of these forts is not known, it appears that many of them were built before the Maratha rule. The Marathas may have remodelled and strengthened these forts. Thus the Marathas were very generous and endowed liberally. They also built huge Palaces, Forts, Fortress and Library. These architectural monuments and their liberal endowments clearly show their economic prosperity and wealth.

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