

The sovereigns of Travancore and their patronage of literature

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1. Introduction

The Sovereigns of Travancore, from the earliest times known to history, have been distinguished scholars, writers and patrons of fine arts.

The nature and extent of the patronage extended to poets by the ancient Chera kings may be judged from the "Patittupattu" or the "Ten Tens", one of the old poetical anthologies in Tamil literature. IlankoAtikal, the younger brother of CheraChenkuttuvan, the greatest of those ancient rulers, was the author no less a work than "Chilappatikaram", coming to the later Cheras, CheramanPerumalNayanar and KulasekharaAzhvar composed imperishable songs in Tamil, while Kulasekhara was also the author of the famous Sanskrit devotional poem "Mukundamala". KulasekharaVarma, another ruler, wrote two Sanskrit dramas of remarkable merit.

The earliest Malayalam poem extant, "Ramacharitam", is attributed to Rama Varma, a ruler of Travancore who lived in the 12th century A.D. Ravi VarmaKulasekhara of Quilon, the redoubtable conqueror of South India (1266 - 1316), was the author of another Sanskrit drama. He held the birudas 'Dakshinabhojaraja' and 'Chatushstikalavallabha.'

He was also a distinguished musician. Aditya Varma (14th century) and Ravi Varma (17th century) were very good Sanskrit scholars. Maharaja BalaMartandaVarma, the maker of modern Travancore (1729 - 58), patronized poets generously and the drama 'Balamartandavijayam', written by Devarajakavi, further shows that he could appreciate Sanskrit poetry. He conferred the title of 'Navinakalidasa' on Devaraja. Maharaja Bala Rama Varma, (1758 - 98), known as "Dharmaraj", was a distinguished poet in Sanskrit and Malayalam, and wrote the remarkable treatise 'Balaramabharatam' on dancing. Votaries of all varieties of fine art adorned his court. His nephew, AsvatiTirunal Rama Varma, was one of the greatest Sanskrit and Malayalam poets of Kerala. Coming to modern times the many sided literary activities of Maharaja SvatiTirunal Rama Varma, the remarkable poet and composer (1829 - 47), are too well known to need recounting.

His younger brother, UtramTirunalMartandaVarma (1847 - 61), was a scholar, poet and actor, and the patron of the Kathakali art par excellence. AyilamTirunal Maharaja Sri Rama Varma, (1861 - 78), was known throughout India as an eminent Sanskrit scholar and patron of literature and music. He could successfully compete with any musician of his age. He may also be acclaimed as the father of modern Malayalam prose. VisakhmTirunal Sri Rama Varma (1879 - 85) was a distinguished scholar in Sanskrit and English, became a publicist of note and wrote several pamphlets on topics of public interest in English and model essays in Malayalam as

also occasional verses in Sanskrit. He set the model for essay - writing in Malayalam, which holds the field even at the present day. In his pamphlet "Observations on Education", written in 1882, and addressed to Sir M.E. Grant Duff, the then Governor of Madras, he mercilessly exposed many of the fallacies underlying laissez - faire theory on higher education taken by the Government of India from the days of the Education Despatch of Lord Halifax in 1854. Among the many other pamphlets published by him was one on the educational value of Sanskrit literature. His Highness Sri MulamTirunal took special interest in the progress of education in the state.

Speaking on the occasion of the annual prize distribution in the college in 1068 M.E. (1892 - 93) His Highness observed :- "There is no doubt that education has made great strides in Travancore under the wise and liberal policy of my illustrious predecessors, a policy which it has been my earnest endeavour to foster and develop. But I conscious that what has been done in this direction is but very little compared with what has still to be accomplished ... A good elementary school in each village and at each centre of rural population would be a great consummation." His Highness lived long enough to see for himself the realization of this consummation. He established the Sanskrit College and the Department for the Publication of Oriental Manuscripts.

He also extended his patronage to literary men. Our Maharajas have at all times sedulously striven to increase their stock of knowledge. Most of them were students throughout their life. KulasekharaVarma, in his drama 'Subhadradhanunjam', has prayed to God for endowing him with the capacity for appreciating good music and the poetry of Kalidasa. Dharmaraja knew several languages. He studied Portuguese and English under a tutor named Pedro De Vegas and got a comparative grammar of Portuguese, English and Malayalam prepared by Fr. Paulinus, the Carmelite friar of Varapuzha, advising his ministers to study that grammar diligently, and pointing out how necessary it was that princes and statesmen, on account of their continual intercourse with Europeans, should make themselves acquainted with those two western languages. SvatiTirunal, according to contemporary writers, was proficient in as many as eighteen languages.

Even when he was only twelve years old, he was a prodigy of learning, and Colonel Welsh, in his Military Reminiscences, has recorded that he astonished him by observing that the word "geometry" in English was derived from "jyamatra" in Sanskrit meaning 'measurement of the earth'. Dr. W.H. Russel wrote about Maharaja AyilyamTirunal : "In addition to Marathi, Tamil, Hindustani and Telugu, he writes and speaks English with fluency; is a good Sanskrit scholar

and much given to literary discussion with pandits; is fond of music in which he excels; is an admirable man of business, very punctual and exact, fond of science and profoundly attached to his own faith. "Of VisakhhamTirunal, Lord Roberts said that "he was an unusually enlightened native. He spoke and wrote English fluently". Griffith, in his "Indian Princes" speaks of Sri MulamTirunal : "The Maharaja writes English with ease and with a very creditable knowledge of idioms. He has long shown a taste for music, including English instrumental music".

AsvatiTirunalMartandaVarma was a prince of outstanding merit. He passed the B.A. Degree Examination of the Madras University with History and Economics as his optional subject and studied for the M.A. Degree Examination for some time under Prof. K. SundararamaAiyar. Lord Curzon, when he visited Travancore, referred to his demise in the following touching terms in his banquet speech on the 21st November of that year :- "The sorrowful incident is the recent death of the First Prince of Travancore, an amiable and accomplished prince, a man of culture, of travel and of learning, the first graduate, I believe, among all the Indian Princes, who seemed

destined to cast a fresh lustre on the name of the famous ancestor which he bore. I deeply sympathize with His Highness and with his people upon the premature death of this gifted member of the Royal House".

2. Conclusion

So early as 1817, primary education was reorganized and brought under state control by a rescript of Rani GauriParvatiBayi. In 1854 the first Government English School was started at Trivandrum with eight Hindu boys.

Four District English Schools were opened in 1856. In 1864 the first batch of students for the Matriculation Examination of Madras University was presented from the Trivandrum School. A law class, out of which the present Law College developed, was opened in 1865. In 1866 the Trivandrum School became a College. In 1873 the main block of buildings in the University College was opened by Maharaja AyilyamTirunal, with a remarkable speech outlining future educational policy of the Government.

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