

# Rare pictures from the Thanjavur Saraswati Mahal Library now in a book



Deepa Alexander

JUNE 23, 2021 16:27 IST

UPDATED: JUNE 23, 2021 18:42 IST



Author of the book *Rare Prints*, Pratap Singh Serfoji Raje Bhosle | Photo Credit: [Special arrangement](#)

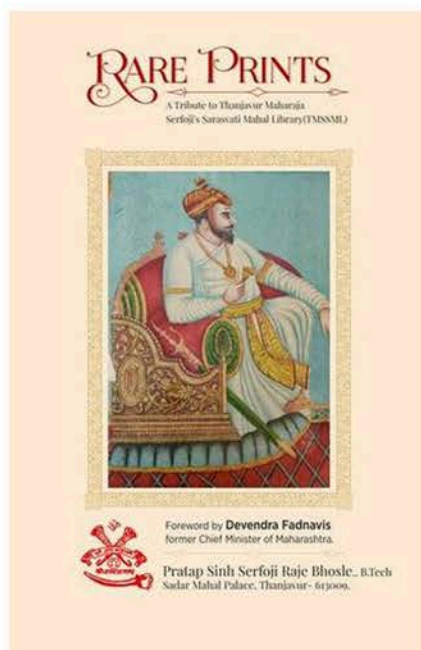
## Pratap Singh Bhosle of the erstwhile royal family of Tanjore unearths uncommon pictures from the archives of the library for 'Rare Prints'

In Tamil Nadu's most famous delta town stands the Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Saraswathi Mahal Library (TMSSML), a building that holds in its enfilade of historical layers cabinets and vitrines filled with literary treasures.

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Considered among Asia's oldest libraries, it was founded by the Nayaks in the 16th Century and fortified as a cultural citadel by the Marathas who captured the town in 1675, giving rise to the Tanjore Bhosle dynasty and the unique Tanjore Marathi community.

Under the rule of Serfoji II a century later, the library became a treasure house of palm manuscripts and, today, holds nearly 40,000 volumes primarily in Tamil, Sanskrit, Marathi and Telugu. Art and rare photographs also reside in the bowels of the library, with only a miniscule collection, mostly digitised, on display.



The book cover | Photo Credit: [Special arrangement](#)

With the COVID-19 pandemic barring entry to most physical museums, it has been left to curators and connoisseurs of art to keep alive interest in these places. Pratap Singh Serfoji Raje Bhosle, 27, tries to draw the visitor into the annals of Tanjore history with his fourth book *Rare Prints* that brings alive 129 uncommon pictures from the library.

“I was fascinated with the pictures of Indian kings, princes and British officials in bound albums from the 20th Century. These were stuck on rich handmade paper for reference, and the albums were made in Kot Radha Kishen (presently in Pakistan). I wanted to throw light on these pictures,” says Pratap Singh, the sixth descendant of Serfoji II and grandson of Tulajendra Bhosle, who founded the Maharaja Serfoji II Memorial Hall, a museum in Sadar Mahal Palace, Thanjavur.



Surjit Singh Barnala, former Governor of Tamil Nadu at the TMSSML | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Rare Prints

Pratap Singh is an Electronics and Communication Engineering graduate, but it is as the social media manager of the family museum and an author of three books, including *Contributions of Thanjavur Maratha Kings*, that he has come into his own.

### From the family album

“I am interested in old photographs – both as markers of history and for restoration. I have posted many related to Thanjavur on my blog and Facebook and Instagram pages,” he says.

“While going through the digital photo albums of the library’s programmes which my grandfather, Tulajendra Bhosle attended as a guest of honour, I recollected seeing pictures of dignitaries such as Indira Gandhi, Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar, Sarojini Naidu, Sharad Pawar, PV Narasimha Rao, Rajendra Prasad and Kamaraj. I requested the librarian for these photos and a search through many almirahs resulted in finding these albums that had been locked away for years,” says Pratap Singh adding how he stumbled upon some of these pictures not published to date or not found on the Internet. “I’m grateful to Govinda Rao, IAS, former Director of TMSSML, for the permission to use them and I dedicate the book to journalists for their unending zeal.”



Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, maharaja of Mysore | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Rare Prints

Edited by educator and researcher Jeetendra Hirschfeld, *Rare Prints* is a tribute to the library. With forewords from political stalwarts and cultural aficionados, the first few pictures in the book are from an album of the 1900s.

The first is a tribute to the great Maratha warrior, Chattrapati Shivaji, who sits astride a horse in black and white splendour. Colour pictures with added pigments give a real feel to the book. Each is accompanied by a brief text describing the mood and the moment. Pictures of two unique manuscripts also feature.

Some of the pictures such as that of Venkoji, founder of the Bhosle dynasty of Tanjore, seated on a throne, jewelled scabbard by his side, and Sujan Bai Sahib, a queen, with bow grasped in hand and a quiver full of arrows on her back, offer an exhaustive tour of the centuries.

Pictures published by the Chitrashala Press, Pune, have reproduced well, retaining the jewel-like tones. This is followed by digital prints of pictures from the early 20th

Century, logo of the press established by Serfoji II, among the earliest to print the Devanagari script in South India, a case sheet of eye treatment given by Serfoji who is also credited with having performed cataract surgeries, paintings from the Aswa Sastra manuscript, sketches of the famed temples of Thanjavur by English landscape artists the Daniells, and visitors and celebrations at the museum.

The e-book is a light ride through the socio-cultural history of the kingdom and the city it now is, but mostly it is a journey through Saraswathi Mahal Library, one that former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi describes in the visitor’s book as “a brief moment in this house of treasures”.

*The e-book is available on [bookganga.com](http://bookganga.com).*