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Other titles

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CHAPTER 2

PALMYRA'S USES ENQUIRY

(*Case Study 159*)

21 Exact Enunciation

Some years ago, the American mail brought us a query from the Library of the University of Manitoba. One of its clientele wanted to know about a Tamil poem enumerating 801 uses of the palm tree. He would like to have a copy of the poem if it was a short one. He would also like to have a reference to an English translation of it. He would like to buy a copy of it. The American library had exhausted all its resources. It did not succeed. Therefore, the Manitoba Library naturally thought about some library in the Tamil country as the most hopeful collaborator in the pursuit of this problem. It therefore wrote to the Madras University Library. Here the enunciation of the problem was exact. It gave us no difficulty.

22 Path of Pursuit

221 INSIDE CATALOGUES OF LIBRARIES

Our catalogue was first examined, then the catalogues of the other local libraries, and lastly the fairly exhaustive catalogue of the Tamil books and manuscripts of the British Museum. None of these threw any light on the problem.

222 AMONG MANUSCRIPTS

As the next step, we addressed the Manuscripts Library at Tanjore Palace. That too gave a negative reply. Then we approached some Tamil scholars, and in particular Mahamahopadhaya Dakshinatya Kalanidhi Dr V Swaminatha Iyer, the septagenarian doyen of Tamil scholarship. He had brought into print for the first time nearly a hundred classics and other pieces in Tamil. He still had many unpublished manuscripts; and he knew them all. But he too could not give us any help.

223 INSIDE SECOND-HAND BOOK SHOPS

Then personal visits were made by members of the staff to second-hand book-shops and to pedlars of ballad songs to try the

off-chance of picking up an old copy of the poem. But here too no success.

224 INSIDE PRINTED BOOKS

The botanical and agricultural books dealing with palms were searched. But no clue could be found.

2241 WATT'S DICTIONARY

Almost in despair we tried our luck in Watt's *Dictionary of economic products of India*. Page 495 of volume 1 contained a small light. It illuminated a certain angle immediately in front of it:

"Every part of this plant is made use of in some way or other. A tamil poem enumerates some 800 uses to which the various parts are put. The *Tropical agriculturist* (June 1884) publishes a list of the more important of these uses."

2242 TROPICAL AGRICULTURIST

Then we looked up the *Tropical agriculturist*. We found in page 913 of volume 3 the following encouraging piece of information:

"From the *Tala vilasam*, a Tamil poem describing 'in brief an account of one (?) out of the 800 items of things connected with the palmyra tree, which is emphatically the Kalpa tree of the Earth' given in the appendix to a *Description of the palmyra palm of Ceylon* by William Ferguson, printed at the *Observer Press* in 1850, we extract the following. . . . Mr. William Ferguson's account of the palmyra palm has been so long out of print that we intend publishing a new edition of it. . . . We regret that we are not in a position to spare a copy."

225 OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY INTO VILLAGES

The foreign inquirer had mentioned Kumbakonam as the home of the author of the poem. We, therefore, took to the desperate last recourse of writing to the Tahsildar (Revenue official) of Kumbakonam taluk. He zealously unwound his red-tape and transmitted the inquiry through his revenue inspectors to the headmen of hundreds of villages in his taluk. But to our disappointment the return was 'nil' from everywhere.

23 Persistence in Hope

We were at our wit's end. Still we were too reluctant to give

a negative reply to our foreign correspondent. For, our ideal in long-range reference service is, in the words of Hanuman the arch-priest of service:

“Hope is the root of all service. Search again, I will, wherever I have not yet searched. Hope is the greatest happiness. It is hope that always directs us in all our endeavours. It is that which brings all the efforts of beings to fruition. Therefore, I shall continue my hopeful attempts.” [V6]:

अनिर्वेदः श्रियो मूलमनिर्वेदः परं सुखम् ।
 भूयस्तत्र विचेष्यामि न यत्र विचयः कृतः ॥
 अनिर्वेदो हि सततं सवार्थेषु प्रवर्तकः ॥
 करोति सफलं जन्तोः कर्म यत्तत्करोति सः ।
 तस्मादनिर्वेदकरं यत्नं चेष्टेऽहमुत्तमम् ॥

In hope therefore we were biding our time. We were keeping the problem open. The life of the file was kept on. The problem was kept ever alive in the minds of all our reference librarians. At long last hope did materialise. Delight did come.

24 Ultimate Location

Ethelbert Blatter's *Palms of British India and Ceylon* arrived at the 'recent additions shelf'. The title was tempting. But the epithets added to the author's name sent a wave of cold shiver through us. For, the author was put down as a professor of Botany and that too in Bombay, far from the Tamil country. The first reference librarian, perusing it, put it aside with a sigh of disappointment. For, most of the pages, dipped into by him, confirmed the book to be a dry-as-dust systematic one. Still another reference librarian took it up with higher hopes. He too dropped it in disappointment. And yet another said "I have a lucky hand" and opened the book. His hand was lucky indeed. For the page opened by him — page 203 — contained in its middle the word *Talavilasam*. But the page-heading was made up of the forbidding Latin term 'Borassinae.' This was probably the reason for the others missing it.

241 TRIUMPH OF SUCCESS

At the announcement of *Talavilasam*, all the other reference librarians rushed for the book. Their colleague was holding it out

triumphantly in his hand. The first words of Blatter were very consoling.

“I searched a long time for that poem, of which nothing but the title seemed to be known, and when I found it at last I was astonished that I had not discovered it sooner.”

A few lines further down we read,

“The poem was written by ‘Arunachalam, a poet of Terrukku-dantei, the same with Combaconam in the province of Tanjore.”

But our delight reached its climax when we read in the next page,

“We trust that our readers will not object to our reproducing the poem *in extenso*.”

Object! Surely it was a mockery to us. We would have objected if he had not reproduced the poem *in extenso*! We were thankful that he gave us at least an English translation. It extended to nine pages.

25 Happy Popular Saying

Our minds began to sing in unison the words of Sita [V7] and Bharata [V8] exclaiming the old saw:

कल्याणी वत गाथेयं लौकिकी प्रतिभाति मे ।
एति जीवन्तमानन्दो नरं वर्षशतादपि ॥

“Happy seems to me the popular saying ‘If only one would keep on to life, delight is assured even though it may take a hundred years in coming’.”

Immediately steamed forth our epistle carrying the glad tidings to the sister library in the New World.