



The Renaissance Man of Thanjavur: Rao Sahib Dr. Abraham Pandither – A Study

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Abstract:

Indian history hides in its forgotten corners, the stories of multi-faceted Indians who made an early start into a life of pioneering innovation. M. Abraham Pandither was a Renaissance Man whose achievements, whether in traditional medicine, education, music, agriculture, or photography, simply defy easy definition.

Recognition of true worth in a human being is not always forthcoming until the name of the person most concerned is nothing but a memory, fortunate is he who during his lifetime is in a position to lessen the burdens of others more unfavorably situated than himself; or to give pleasure to thousands through the instrumentality of soul-stirring music; or to relieve the suffering from painful and obscure diseases. Every civilized country in the world has had its physicians, scientists, philanthropists, musicians, artists, statesman, and other notabilities; some of these achieved enduring fame and lived to enjoy it: while sadly too many ended their days, “unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.” The people of India are anything but churlish in their acknowledgement of their fellow men who have gained distinction for themselves by their acts of munificence or skill, and these notes are contributed to show the high esteem in which held by Rao Sahib M. Abraham Pandither of Tanjore.

Key Words:

Abraham Pandither, Karunananda Rishi, Tamil Pandit, Sanjeevi Thylam, Samaya Sanjeevi, Dindigal Sadayandi Bhatlar, A.G Pichaimuthu Pillai, Jeeva Swara, Sangeeta Mahajana Sangam,

Karunamirdha Sagaram, Karunanandapuram experimental farm, Garden of Roses, Raja Karumbu, Science of the Raga.

INTRODUCTION

Abraham Pandither was born on August 2, 1859 to Muthusami Nadar and Annammal at Sambavar Vadakarai near Surandai in Tirunelveli district. In his early age itself he was a bright student. He passed his primary examination at C.M.S Mission School at Bungalow Surandai. When he was young, he was employed as a monitor, school assistant and as a school master. Then he studied at the C.V.E.S. Normal Training School (as teacher training institutes were known then) in Dindigul, he cleared the Special Upper Primary exams, and became a successful educator in the Model School. An avid collector of manuscripts on native Indian medicine, Abraham started contacting the yogis and travelling from Dindigul to Palani to learn more about Ayurvedic Medicines.

Abraham's grandparents on both sides were medical practitioners, and were well-versed in Tamil Medical Literature, so that it was no wonder that the natural proclivities of the youth inclined towards medicine. He wished to initiate himself into the order of the yogis on the Shuruli hills, near the sources of the Vaigai, in the district of Madurai. During the year 1877 he repaired the mountains of Shuruli. Abraham Pandither was very much impressed by the views and high ideals of Karunananda Rishi, who motivated him to serve humanity. Karunananda Rishi, immediately selected him for the work of alleviating suffering by the administration of the world famed Karunanda Medicines. He gave the necessary recipes to the student and list of ingredients and drugs. He has given directions for preparing the medicines. He taught him how to formulate range of Siddha medicines, which would ultimately make his name. In gratitude to his Siddha guru, he purified all his medical and allied ventures with the name Karuna.

In the year 1882, December 27, he married Gnavadivu Ponnammal of Nanjankulam and shifted to Thanjavur in 1883, where the couple was employed in Lady Napier's Girls School in the Fort area. Mrs. Gnavadivu was appointed as the headmistress while Abraham Pandither worked as a Tamil Pandit. They were in giving secular education, in teaching moral lessons, in shaping social conduct and in imparting elementary principles of hygiene, were so remarkable that they won the good opinion not only of pupils but of parents and neighbours, which endeared them more and more to the citizens of Tanjore.

Mr. Pandither devoted all his leisure hours to the study of the more abstruse Tamil literature bearing on medicine. He took great pain to understand the real, and often hidden, sense of the writers, and did not understand thoroughly, nor would he administer anything unless he had perfect reliance on its efficacy. The confidence of his patients made his practice so extensive and to do research on medicine full time in 1890 he was, with much reluctance, pressed to resign his teachership, for the more humanitarian work of alleviating pain and misery. He started a farm outside Tanjore for growing medicinal plant and named it Karunanandapuram after his teacher.

Among the special preparations for which Mr. Pandithers name has become famous are: Sanjeevi Pills useful in cases of cold, cough, dysentery, deafness, bowel and liver infection and other ailments. Sanjeevi thylam, or ointment, used with Sanjeevi pills for some of the complaints mentioned above, although it is recommended to be used alone for fits, convulsions, poisonous stings, skin diseases, rheumatism and dislocation of muscles. Maha 'Gorasanai' Pills – for indigestion, whooping – cough, giddiness, excessive heat, and as a mild aperient and still being used in native medicine, Samaya Sanjeevi resorted to for diarrhea, cholera and kindred complaints; Aghrana Sanjeevi is prepared for affections of the eye, ear, the nostrils and brain, while Jeevathara Sanjeevi Sethuram, and a dozen other medicines as efficacious as those specifically mentioned are prepared.

Hundreds of unsolicited testimonials referring to marvelous cures wrought by these medicines and further, testifying to the deep gratitude of patients have been received by Mr. Pandither.

Mr. T. Arunachalam Pillai, Manager, Senior Surgeon and Sanitary Commissioner's office, Bangalore, wrote : "I have much pleasure in testifying to the efficacy of Karunananda Sanjeevi Pills and Kora Mathirai (Pills) in the treatment of bubonic plague causes. I have tried the above medicines in 23 cases, of which 20 proved successful; My friends call these a sovereign remedy for bubonic plague".

Abraham Pandither's 'Science of the Raga'

In the year 1892, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer has published Silapathikaram and this made Abraham Pandither's interest in Tamil Music and he started studying it. He learnt traditional music from Dindigul Sadayandi Bhattar and western classical music from Tanjore A.G. Pichaimuthu Pillai. "Originally, Carnatic music used to be taught by a guru to students purely as an oral tradition. So only a guru could teach the full nuances of a raga. But Abraham Pandither decided to study this in greater depth, to find out the possible 'formulae' that defined a raga."

Pandither's research led him to identify the 'jeeva swara' (the actual soul of the raga), that eventually led to a codification of Carnatic music. So enthused was he by the subject, that Pandither invited music experts from all over the country to attend conferences on the subject in Thanjavur, at his own expense, he established the Tanjore Sangeeta Mahajana Sangam in 1912. Seven Carnatic music conferences were held at specially constructed building (Lawley Hall), from 1912 to 1916. Regarding this Mr.V.P. Madhava Row, C.I.E., Dewan of Baroda and chairman of the Fourth Conference said : "His first observation was that Mr. Pandither had laid the public under great indebtedness to him by organizing that Sangam and bringing together the pandits to lecture to them on the various aspects of Indian Music. He had thereby helped the revival of that fine art, which had, for several causes, dwindling in that city - once the home of music, encouragement to those who were still devoted to it. He had practically, created the opportunity and the means for the study and practice of the Indian system of music which in this country, was once the duty of

Kings to Patronize. Such, indeed, was the work Mr. Pandither had imposed upon himself, and it was extremely creditable to him that the work had been financed solely by him.”

The proceedings of the meeting were collated in Karunmirtha Sagaram, a 1346 page books which remains a masterpiece of seminal work to this day. Unable to constantly send page proofs to Bombay and back, Pandither setup a Printing Press at Lawley Hall. “ He sent his sons abroad, and purchased printing machines from Germany and Tamil fonts from Tarangabadi (Tranquebar). This book is completely manually composed by the people in Thanjavur, I think the printing itself, is a great achievement,”

Abraham Pandither also published Karunanamirdha Sagara Thirattu - a collection of Tamil Practice songs (musicians of that period trained using Telugu songs) besides this, he composed several Keerthanas in praise of Jesus Christ.

Mr. Pandither’s wife Gnana Vadivu Ponnammal, died on the 15th December, 1911, after a short illness and a few months later he married Bhagyammal. She manages all domestic affairs and assists Mr. Pandither in his enlightened supervision of the several branches of his business. She has displayed superior talents in music composition, and in correcting inaccuracies of some of the Ragams in vogue. Mr. Pandither’s views are cosmopolitan, seeing that he has helped the various religious communities, and his consideration for the poor and afflicted is shown by his readiness to help in the cause of charity.

New Age Farmer: Abraham Pandithar

Abraham Pandithar was very much inspired by herbal medicine studies. The business capacity of his enterprising gentleman was exemplified in the acquisition and improvement of the Karunanandapuram experimental farm, It was not far from the railway station of Thanjavur, there was a dreary and apparently unattractive piece of land. He keenly observed that there was a water in the depressions even in the driest summer, and he concluded that there must be perennial springs underground. He then purchased the 100 acre property on November 16,1899.

It was a Himalayan task for him to clean the prickly pear and bushes and to get rid of poisonous snakes and other reptiles. He was buoyed up by his determination to overcome all obstacles and to transform the existing wilderness in to a literal “garden of roses.” At first a few trees were planted on the Coronation Day of his Majesty King Edward VII on 9th August, 1902 and a board was fixed on the ground in commemoration of the occasion. Jack fruit trees and grafted mangoes were planted next in order and many different varieties of coconut plants, guavas, oranges, apples, figs, Kabul pomegranates, peaches, dates, palms, vines, plantains, cashew-nut trees, tamarinds, bamboos and teak have been successfully cultivated from time to time in small quantities as an experiment. Considered in its day to be a model farm, property had not just a vast array of medicinal plants, but also an orchard of fruit bearing trees. Water for these trees was a necessity and the first well to be sunk was 22 feet square and 40 feet in depth. In August

1904 a 9 ½ - HP Crossley oil engine and a 4 inch centrifugal pump were installed, and the well itself was completed at great cost. In the following year he was hired a boring apparatus from Pondicherry, and the bottom surface of the well was bored in four different places to the depths of 190, 108, 110 and 113 feet respectively. He has been purchased a hotwell turbine Worthington centrifugal pump to ensure a perpetual supply of water.

The most imposing sight on the grounds was a windmill imported from Liverpool, England, in 1905 to pump water with the help of wind power. A second well was sunk 8 feet square and 75 feet in depth. The reservoir has a capacity of 23,000 gallons. A third well- a circular one was 22 feet diameter and depths of 50 feet, as well as three other wells to irrigate the young seedlings, were sunk subsequently.

Many kinds of Sugar come from the government farms at Samalkotta and Palur have been successfully cultivated at Karunanadapuram, and while experimenting with these a new a sport-cane variety was discovered by Mr. Pandithar. He developed the high yield sugarcane graft called 'Raja Karumbu' which true to its regal label grew up to a height of 15 feet and had higher sugar content than traditional varieties. In the agricultural exhibitions of South India from 1907 to 1914 the sugar canes from Karunanandapuram have invariably been won 6 gold medals.

The Agricultural Journal of India October 1906, says: "Finally the striped cane growing in Mr. Abraham Pandithar's Garden at Tanjore, has been rise to a new ashy cane which appears to be well-worth a trial." The cultivation of Australian Golden maize and the Himalayan varieties has also been successful, and two new varieties have been formed by crossing the former with the country grown type. Arrow root has been grown with profit and roots such as King Yam Potatoes and other vegetables are also experimentally cultivated to a small extent. The family owned farm, which also had a small unit for sericulture, was functional until the 1970's During the course of the last seven years the produce from this Karunanandapuram farm has been shown at various agricultural exhibitions and 6 gold medals, 37 silver medals, 7 bronze medals and numerous first prizes and certificate of merit have been awarded. A Government medal and prize of Rs.100 have also been obtained for the exhibition of the best farm reared cattle.

Mr. Pandithar has been very much encouraged by visits from many influential persons to the farm among these being Their Excellencies Sir Arthur and Lady Lawley, the Lord Bishop of Madras , the French Governor of Pondicherry; the Hon. Sivasami Iyer C.I.E, C.S.I.; the Commissioner of Agriculture, The Rajah of Ramnad; Prince Sri Narayan Thambi of Travancore; Messers Benson , Sampson and Couchman, Government Agricultural Directors Mr. N. Kunjan Pillai, M.A. Director of Agriculture Travancore; Mr. R. Cecil Wood, principal of the Agricultural college, Coimbatore and others.

Their Excellencies Sir Arthur and Lady Lawley visited the farm on the 22nd of February 1908. In honour of the day, mango and jack-fruit trees had been planted in the farm. His Excellency wrote in the visitors book: “I have spent a thoroughly enjoyable morning at the farm of Abraham Pandither, who kindly invited me to see the various experiments which he is now conducting. Herein is a tale of a diligence, enterprise and skill in the field of agriculture which is unique in my Indian experience and therefore the more interesting. I carry away with me the most delightful memory of my visit the charm of which was embraced by the country of my host and hostess and the charming entertainment of which we were the recipients.”

The proprietor never loses sight of the fact that the farm is intended to be instructive as well as experimental and he has accordingly issued pamphlets in English and Tamil regarding the best method of cultivating maize, sugar cane and the new sport – cane. His main object in doing this is to induce cultivation of tilling the soil, and to show them that as agriculturists, they can have that independence which is rarely to be found in other occupations of life.

Mr. Pandither is an ardent agriculturist and he carries out important experiments in the great interest in the industrial and commercial movements of the country and by dint of his own perseverance he is one of the most capable, respected and influential landlords in Southern India.

In recognition of his public services the title of “Rao Sahib” was conferred upon him on the 25th of June, 1909. In presenting the Sanad of “Rao Sahib” to Mr. Pandither, Mr. J.P. Bedford, I.C.S., said that “he had much pleasure in handing to Mr. Abraham Pandither the Sanad conferred upon him by the Government of India. He was a man of exceptional Practical energy and ability, and his career had been a phenomenal success, his chief claim to distinction being his agricultural farm which bore witness to his industry and enterprise.”

Rao Sahib Abraham Pandither has rendered a tremendous service to Tamil music and composer of keerthanas. He has performed yeoman service to traditional Tamil medicine (Siddha) and it was beneficiary to the mass. He was celebrated for his patronage of numerous Tamil musicians and his influential studies concerning the origin and evolution of traditional Tamil music. The descendants continued the legacy of Abraham Pandither’s Christian sacred music, traditional medicine and printing press and Pandither’s family members have followed in the patriarch’s footsteps with a modern twist.

Abraham Pandither passed away at the age of 60 on August 31, 1919. The echoes of his stupendous achievements, though, linger, like the birdsong in the compound, invisible, but ever - present.

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