

Vijayanagara Empire: Role of the Women in Shaping Its History - A Critical Study in the Economic Sphere

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Abstract: In the medieval history of India an empire occupies a substantial position for its grandeur, richness, strength and beauty i.e., “THE VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE”. This was founded in 1336 C.E by the *Sangama* brothers on the bank of river Tungabhadra and it continued its legacy up to the mid 17th century. From the writings of the travelers, poets to the inscriptional and numismatic evidences we can understand about the pompous and greatness of the rulers and its capital “vijayanagara”.

One of the uniqueness of this empire was the role played by the women in empire’s economy. From the queens to the devadasi girls, from princess to the damsels everyone had profound effect in its journey. As warriors, writers, hunters, dancers, scribes, officials, poets and devotees their role was impeccable. As the Vijayanagar empire is renowned for its wealth it is not possible without the active role played by the women in their economic activities. When compared to their north Indian counterparts these women enjoyed a lot of freedom. Primary reason was north Indian women suffered from purdah system and mostly excluded from the fear of foreign invasions.

INTRODUCTION

The role and the position of the women in a society is usually regarded as the fair index of the excellence of the culture and character of its civilization. According to *kautilya* “gods roam in the country where women are honoured”. He advised protecting the honour of the women should be one of the chief responsibilities of the state. According to *manu* “Where women are treated with respect, gods are pleased”. Hence an exclusive study of the role of the women in the vijayanagara period is not only interesting but also instructive. As vijayanagara empire established under the special circumstances with the aim of protecting, propagating and promoting hindu dharma, with the advent of islam and Portuguese Christianity a new social formation developed in south India. All these developments influenced the role of the women in the socio-cultural aspects.

Four dynasties *sangama*, *saluva*, *tuluva* and *araveeti* given lot of freedom for the women to express themselves in different roles as queens, administrators, hunters, warriors, poets, writers, dancers, musicians, donors and agriculturists.

SOURCES:

By analyzing literary accounts, paintings, sculptures, archeological remains, coins, monuments, foreign accounts and modern writings we can understand women played a significant role during the vijayanagara period.

Literary sources:

Sanskrit works: *madhuravijayam* or *kamparayacharitam*, an outstanding work composed by *gangadevi* (wife of kumara kamparaya, the son of bukka-I). She narrates the successful expeditions of her husband kamparaya against the madhurai sultanate. This work throws enough light on the social life of the people such as the caste system, habits, occupation of women and games. Gangadevi was a poetess of very high order.

Tirumalamba’s *varadambikaparinayam* throws a good deal of light on the social life of the people. Rajanatha dindima’s “*achutarayabhyudayam*” is a *kavya* in twelve cantons. the ladies of the konkana desa were expert players of the *mridanga*. the kalinga country produced the best mixture of *kasturi* and the women of the *latadesa* in the preparation of sandal paste mixed with the *karpura*. the best designs of the *tambula karandakha* or beetle box were prepared by the women from the *virata* and *saurashtra* desas. the art of knitting garlands found its best exponents among the ladies of the countries of *avanti*, *kunti* and *andhra*. in hair dressing the *vidarbhas* excelled. these women were invited by *achutaraya* on various special occasions.

TELUGU WORKS: *amuktamalyada*, which has been regarded as one of the master pieces in the literary sources of vijayanagara history indirectly gives information about the participation of the

women in agricultural activities, religious and cultural ceremonies.

kreedabhiramama was a work done by vinukonda vallabhacharya, a governor of devaraya-ii. this work was a street drama which vividly discussed about the dancing girls, snake charmers and cock fights.

kannada works like basava purana, translated by *bhima* kavi, kallarasa was the author of mallikharjuna vijaya which amplified the teachings of mallikharjuna to his queen as to the way by which women could subdue men. kanakadasa wrote “*mohana tarangi* “. all their works throw light on social aspects prevailing vices, customs and manners of the people of vijayanagara.

Foreign accounts: *abdurazzak*, who visited vijayanagara empire during devarayaii witnessed the mahanavami festival praised the dancing skills of the devadasi women in his book “*malta –us-salatin* “. *nicolodeconti* a venitian trader came to the empire during devaraya i reign recorded about the custom of sati and polygamy. portuguese travelers *domingopaes* and *nuniz* mentioned about separate quarters for the vijayanagara queens where all the employees from guards to the accountants were all women. many travelers who visited vijayanagara kingdom wrote unique things about the social practices of the women.

SCULPTURES: vijayanagara sculpture was an excellent miniaturist in stone. By using granite stone sculptures of women hunters, dancers and erotic figures were erected. In kalyana mandapa of vithala swami temple, *Krishnadevaraya* was shown as witnessing a dance along with his queens.

At vijayanagara and srisailam women were shown as horse raiders.

on the temples many domestic activities of the women were erected like mother’s holds her child on her hips. women, who perished on the funeral pyres of their husbands, invariably of their own accord, were often commemorated by memorial stones which were known as *mahasati kallu*. sculpture during vijayanagara period depicts the costumes, cosmetics, ornaments, weapons, dancing, musical instruments and hunters etc.,

EPIGRAPHICAL EVIDENCES: some inscriptions issued by the vijayanagara kings and their vessels gave information about the women.

KAIFIYATS: col. Mackenzie recognized the importance of the old administrative records as source material for the history of medieval period. Karanams or village accountants maintained the records which gave information about the social and cultural life of vijayanagara period. Along with these sources monuments, buildings, paintings and archeological remains gave lot of information about the role played by the women in the political, economic and cultural and religious spheres during the vijayanagara period.

WOMEN IN ECONOMIC LIFE :

Women – Agriculture and Landed property: many epigraphic evidences given information about the active role played by the women in the agriculture production. Records shows women enjoyed landed property along with men.

An inscription in 1546 C.E refers to *baliyakka*, daughter of banasi was in possession of landed property worth 9 mudis in the place called *mavali*.

Italian traveler petre delvelle visited vijayanagara empire in 1620’s informed about women involved in seeding, planting, replanting and harvesting the crops in his writings.

srikrishnadevaraya in his *amukhtamalyada* gave information about various agricultural activities performed by the women and even mentioned snakes hanged around the legs are like ornaments for the formers when they are working in the field.

Women as Donors :

Tirumala tirupati inscriptions gave vast information about the donations made by the royal and ordinary women.

Govindi daughter of dasari timmayya who belongs to the shepherd rearing community gave 2180 fanas for srivenkateswara annual brahmotsavam in 1545.

An inscription of 1470 a.d. states that a grant made by *nancharamma* wife of timmanna dannayaka to the 52 sri vaishnavas of melkote.

Many tanks were built for the irrigation purpose by the donations of royal women, many women worked as regents and mahamandaleswaras, officers and administrators. Kambham tank in Prakasam district build by *tukkadevi* wife of *SriKrishnaDevaRaya*.

Women in different economic and productive positions:

Women as TRADERS: one of the epigraphical accounts belongs to 1433 A.D. mentions *ARAMA VALATTANACHAYAR*, the elder sister of kaikkolar interviewed *DEVARAYA II* and secured from him a copper plate grant embodying a sarva manya gift of a village and it was exempted from taxes.

Women as WRESTLERS: *Nuniz* in his writings mentioned about the women wrestlers and it was confirmed by an epigraphical record of 1446 a.d. hariyakka took revenge in the wrestling by killing the persons who killed her father. a veeragal was erected in her memory at shekarpur, shimoga.

Women as BODY-GUARDS: *Paes* speaks of women guards, eunuchs and attendants who supports queens and court ladies. These women guards handles swords and shields, blow trumpets and can wrestle.

One of the sculptures on the *maha navami* dibba depicts women bodyguards guarding the king by holding the swords.

Along with these activities women involved in basket making, pottery, tailoring, mat making and garland making Women as Queens: Queens were not limited their activities to the women's quarters or her men. There were many instances in south India, women along with their husbands actively participated in the administrative affairs.

In the vijayanagara empire, from the tuluva dynasty there were instances of queens actively involving in administration.

from the annals of *Handeananthapuram*, after the death of *krishnaraya* and *achutaraya*, salakam brothers (brother - in - laws of achuta raya) tried to wield the power. during this time queens of krishna raya requested the ministers and feudals to hand over the city to *aliya rama raya* and *Tirumala raya* (son- in-laws of krishna raya). queens orders were accepted by the ministers and salakam brothers were defeated and executed and *Aliya rama raya* became powerful. this shows queens not only passes orders but they were also executed.

Women as FIGHTERS : Inscriptions indicates about the braveness of the queens and their active participation in the wars along with their husbands.

Gangadevi, accompanied her husband *kamparaya* in *madhurai* expedition. In his expedition to kondaveedu Krishna raya was accompanied by *tirumala devi* and *chinna devi* in 1515 A.D.

Keen observations of the sculptures of the vijayanagara period shown women riding elephants and horses in the battle field.

EDUCATION: From the available evidences women of the upper classes, ruling classes and families of officials received education. Their education mainly consists of fine arts like playing musical instruments, painting, music and dancing. From the literary evidences lot of women can read and write. *gangadevi* and *tirumalamba* were poetesses who wrote in classical Sanskrit.

Godadevi, the Heroine of *SriKrishnaDevaRaya's Amukhthamalyada* was portrayed as painting her beloved Hari in the exact classical painting pattern which shows the skill of women in painting.

LITERATURE: some of the famous women scholars were *gangadevi*, *honnayi*, *jaganmohini* or *tukka*, *molla* or *abirama kamakshi*, *mohangi* and *tirumalamba* . all these women excelled in literature and their work gives lot of information about the social and economic conditions of the empire.

DEVADASIS : women who were married to idols in the temples were devadasis. they danced and sang before the deity at the specific hours. On special occasion like *maharnavami* and *kalyanas* they performed in front of the royal processions. temple girls became an inspiration for the sculptural representation of the dancing figures on the walls of the temples. devadasis received remunerations from the temple funds and separate grants made to them by the kings. devadasis used to teach dance and music in the temple premises. epigraphical records conform devadasis even donated to many temples from their income.

PROSTITUTION: vijayanagara kings recognized prostitution as a profession. *adbur razzak* says each prostitute pays 12000 fanas annually and *paes* informed entire police guards pay could be collected by taxing prostitutes. Prostitutes were held in high esteem in the society due to their artistic merits.

Along with these roles women played a key role in theatre arts like drama, music, dance, games and amusements like snake - charming, dommari-ata(acrobatic movements) and hunting where women actively participated.

CONCLUSION

Based on the available archeological, literary and sculptural evidences we can conclude women of the

vijayanagara kingdom enjoyed a fair degree of freedom and achieved remarkable progress in all the spheres compared to their contemporary women. When our present women are facing all kinds of difficulties they can get inspiration from the distant past particularly from the women of vijayanagara kingdom.

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