

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19500273>

ABSTRACT

The Vijayanagara Empire, which thrived from the 14th to the 17th centuries in South India, had a vibrant trade and economy that played a crucial role in its prosperity and cultural exchange. In terms of trade, the Vijayanagara Empire enjoyed strategic geographical advantages. The aim of this paper is to explore the political structure and cultural legacy of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Vijayanagara Empire, spanning the 14th to 17th centuries in South India, was characterized by a robust political structure and a rich cultural legacy that profoundly influenced the region's history and heritage. Politically, the empire was centralized under a monarchy that wielded supreme authority over its vast territories. Governed from its capital at Hampi, the empire's rulers, supported by a council of ministers known as the Mahapradhana, maintained a sophisticated administrative system. Provinces, known as Nadus or Rajyas, were governed by appointed Nayakas who managed local affairs under the oversight of provincial and central authorities. Commerce was inland, coastal and overseas. Calicut was the most important port on the Malabar coast. If Abdul Razak is to be believed, there were as many as 300 sea-ports in the Vijayanagara empire. There are commercial relations with the islands in the Indian Ocean, the Malaya archipelago, Burma, China, Arabia, Persia, South Africa, Abyssinia and Portugal. The exports from the

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Vijayanagara empire were cloth, rice, iron, salt, petrel, sugar and spices. The imports were horses, elephants, pearls, copper, coral, mercury, China silk and velvet. The coins of the empire were those of Gold, copper and silver. There were emblems of different gods and animals on them. Import was very much less than export during the Vijayanagara times, for the kingdom was autonomous.

KEYWORDS: *Prosperity, Imports, Emblems, Strategic.*

Introduction:

The Vijayanagara Empire, which thrived from the 14th to the 17th centuries in South India, was one of the most significant and prosperous kingdoms in the region's history. The empire's rise to power marked a golden age of political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural brilliance. Founded by Harihara I and Bukka Raya, two brothers who were military commanders in the Kakatiya dynasty, the Vijayanagara Empire emerged as a powerful force in response to the invasions and political turmoil that plagued the Deccan region. The empire's capital, Hampi, situated on the banks of the Tungabhadra River, became a magnificent city adorned with splendid temples, palaces, and marketplaces. The Vijayanagara Empire's political strength lay in its ability to unite the fragmented states of South India under a centralized administration. The empire expanded its territory through military conquests and strategic alliances, establishing a vast dominion that extended from present-day Karnataka to Tamil Nadu and parts of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. The empire's economy flourished due to its strategic location and well-developed trade networks. Hampi, the capital city, became a bustling center of trade and commerce, attracting merchants from far and wide. The empire had access to important trade routes that connected it with regions such as the Deccan, the Tamil kingdoms, the Malabar Coast, and the ports of the Arabian Sea. Inland trade routes facilitated the exchange of goods, while overseas trade routes allowed the empire to engage in maritime commerce with foreign countries. The Vijayanagara Empire referred to as the Kingdom of Bisnaga by the Portuguese, was a South Indian empire based in the Deccan Plateau it was established in 1336 by Harihara I and Bukka belonged to a family of five brothers. The economy of

the Vijayanagara empire was essentially unchanged from that of the Chola period. The economic power of merchants' guilds was considerable and they began commanding political influence as well. Any taxation policy would first have to be cleared with the guild leaders, who were also to some extent representatives of public opinion. Archaeological excavations at Vijayanagara have revealed the empire's power and wealth. The rulers of the Vijayanagara empire maintained the well-functioning administrative methods developed by their predecessors, the Hoysala, Kakatiya and Pandya kingdom, to govern their territories and made changes only where necessary. The King was the ultimate authority, assisted by a cabinet of ministers. Kannada, Telugu and Tamil were used in their respective regions of the empire. The empire's temples, with their magnificent architecture and intricate sculptures, stand as a testament to the empire's artistic brilliance. Religion played a significant role in the Vijayanagara Empire's society and governance. The empire embraced Hinduism as its predominant religion, and its rulers were staunch patrons of Hindu temples and traditions. The empire's temples, such as the Virupaksha Temple and the Vittala Temple, became centers of religious and cultural activities. The Vijayanagara Empire's political, economic, and cultural achievements left an indelible mark on South Indian history. Its legacy continues to be celebrated, with Hampi, the empire's capital, being recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The empire's contributions to trade, architecture, literature, and the arts have had a lasting impact on the cultural fabric of the region. The Vijayanagara Empire stands as a testament to the grandeur and magnificence of medieval South India.

Objective of the Study:

- To study the comparative perspective on the trade and economy of the Vijayanagara Empire.
- To study the political structure of the Vijayanagara Empire.

Research Methodology:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

Results and Discussion:

Political Structure of the Vijayanagara Empire: The

Vijayanagara Empire, spanning from the mid-14th to the mid-17th century in South India, was renowned for its robust political organization under a centralized monarchy. At its peak, the empire covered much of present-day Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, with its capital at Hampi.

Centralized Monarchy: At the heart of the Vijayanagara political structure was a powerful monarchy. The king, or emperor, wielded supreme authority over both political and religious matters. Known titles such as “Harihara I” and “Bukka Raya I” prove their legacy and served as symbols of divine sanction, emphasizing their role as not just political leaders but also spiritual figures responsible for upholding dharma (righteousness) and protecting their subjects.

Council of Ministers (Mahapradhana): Supporting the king was a council of ministers known as the Mahapradhana. This council included high-ranking officials such as the Prime Minister (Maha-mandaleshwara), the Commander-in-Chief (Senadhipati), and other noble advisors. The Mahapradhana played a crucial role in advising the king on matters of governance, military strategy, and administration of the empire. Their collective expertise ensured the smooth functioning of the imperial machinery and contributed to the stability of the realm.

Provincial Administration: The Vijayanagara Empire was administratively divided into several provinces known as Nadus or Rajyas. Each province was governed by a Nayaka or governor appointed by the king. These governors were responsible for overseeing local administration, maintaining law and order, and collecting taxes. The administrative hierarchy extended downwards through smaller units called Sthalas and Kottams, which were managed by local chieftains or subordinate officials. This decentralized administrative structure allowed for efficient governance across a vast and diverse territory, ensuring that the empire’s policies were effectively implemented at the grassroots level.

Military Organization: The Vijayanagara Empire maintained a formidable military force that played a pivotal role in its political strength and territorial expansion. The army consisted of infantry, cavalry, and elephant corps, equipped to defend the empire’s borders

and maintain internal security. Military commanders, known as Nayakas, held significant authority both in provincial administration and within the central government. These commanders were granted land (Amaram) in return for their military services, following a system akin to feudalism where loyalty and military prowess were rewarded with land and status.

Revenue System: Economically, the Vijayanagara Empire operated a well-organized revenue system that served as a crucial source of income for the imperial treasury. Land revenue, based on the fertility and productivity of agricultural land, was a primary source of revenue. The empire also levied taxes on trade, industries, and commercial activities. Customs duties and tributes from subordinate states further contributed to the empire's financial resources. This systematic approach to revenue collection provided the necessary funds to support the military, infrastructure development, and patronage of arts and culture, thereby fostering economic stability and prosperity within the empire. Foreigners might not have paid any attention to the life of the common man. The sources of revenue were land tax, professional tax, fines booty brought during the times of war, tributes from the Governors, house taxes on the factories, commercial tax, taxes on imports and exports. Some of the collections were spent on religious, military and public welfare affairs. The land tax could be paid either in kind or cash. Payment in the form of money came into practice during the time of Harihara I. The tax was fixed, depending upon the fertility of the land. The land lords had to pay grass field tax and marriage tax to the government. Nearly 16% to 50% of the yield was collected as the land tax.

Economic Life:

Economically the Vijayanagara empire was prosperous. It clears from the writings of foreign travellers and the availability of the gold coins. The economy of the Vijayanagara empire was essentially unchanged from that of the Chola period. Blacksmiths and carpenters were now in great demand and hence occupied a higher social scale. Meanwhile the guilds continued to have a considerable influence on the economy. The guilds themselves were hierarchical with artists guilds working under merchant guilds, who were now powerful distributors who could influence the artists guilds

considerably. The temple was often the single largest land owner and consumer of a village, the hub of village economic activity, providing various employment opportunities. Their economic influence forged a closer link between them and the monarchy. Trade continued to remain an important part of the economy, with both foreign and domestic trade doing extremely well. In fact, so important was trade to the economy, and consequently to the stability of the empire, that one of the major concerns of all kings was to control as much of the trade as possible. The constant competition amongst the kingdom led to many incentives given to early Europeans traders who began establishing themselves in the country. They charged lower duties and provided various facilities. The general prevailing customs duties at that time were subjected to higher duties to discourage their import so to boost the local industries in these sectors. The main imports were gold, silver, elephants, horses, spices and certain types of textiles. The main exports were rice, sugar, coconut, millet, dyes, sandalwood, teak, pepper, cloves and cotton textiles. However, the South was no longer the facilitator of Asian-European trade, with the Portuguese and Arabs controlling most of this trade. Sea trade was active with ships visiting Indian ports regularly. The Indian shipping industry did not command as much of an influence in trade as it once did, with countries like China now leading with some of the finest and reliable vessels.

Agriculture:

The people's primary occupation was agriculture. Every ruler in Vijayanagara had enacted laws to promote agriculture in various regions. The agricultural industry was also further helped by prudent and effective irrigation plans. A Portuguese traveler named Nuniz once made reference to the existence of dams and canals as well as their continuous building. As a result, the area became self-sufficient and experienced agricultural prosperity. The nation's economic development was attributed to it. The King's main responsibility was to oversee agriculture. Wells and tanks were dug by the kings, governors, wealthy merchants, peasants, and temple caretakers. Irrigation received particular attention from the Vijayanagara Kings. This issue has been covered by Krishnadevaraya in his book "Amukta-Malyada." Cotton, ragi, jowar, and saje were the main agricultural crops along with pearl millet, sugarcane, wheat, paddy

and dhals.

Trade: Trade was a crucial aspect of the Vijayanagara Empire's economy, contributing to its prosperity and cultural exchange. The empire's strategic location, well-established trade routes, and flourishing markets facilitated both inland and overseas trade. This study delves deeper into the trade practices, commodities, trade routes, and maritime connections of the Vijayanagara Empire, providing a comprehensive understanding of its trade and economic activities. The Vijayanagara Empire, which spanned from the 14th to the 17th centuries in South India, was strategically located in the Deccan region. This advantageous position allowed the empire to benefit from trade routes that connected it with various regions in the subcontinent. The empire's capital, Hampi, was situated on the banks of the Tungabhadra River, providing access to inland waterways that facilitated trade.

The Irrigation System:

The irrigation system had been given priority. The Thungabhadra water was passed through canals to Raichur and Bellary districts and the agriculture was rendered easier. Embankments were built here and there. When the new Thungabhadra reservoir was built, old dams and old embankments at Hospet, Vallabhapura and Koregal were submerged in it. The canals of Vijayanagara times – Koregala canal, Bellanaale, Raya canal, Basavanna canal, Shivapura canal, Anegondi canal, Kalagatta canal, Siraguppa canal, Ramasagara canal, Kampli canal, Belgodu, Halenaale, Siraguppa canal, Ramasagara canal, Ganagavati upper canal, Gangavathi lower canal and bijal canal. These seventeen canals are in Karnataka. The rest are in Andhra state. Nearly 20,000 acres of Hospet and Siraguppa in Bellary district in total about 30,000 acres are brought under cultivation through the Vijayanagara canals.

Industry (Workshops): Import was much less than export during Vijayanagara times, for the Kingdom was autonomous. Suitable measures were taken for the production of necessary things. Many types of industries had come into being under the patronage of the kings. The chief ones among them were sugar, jaggery, oil, coir industry, liquor, charcoal, cotton industry, production of arms, aromatic industry, tanning and pottery, fishery and mining. Many

small handicrafts were also being practiced. Guilds were accountable for regulating industries and crafts. People involved in the same trade commonly lived in the city or an area. Barboza, Abdul Razak and Petro and Deltaville speak of the efficiency of the jewellers in making ornaments. Kan-p-mai (Koimuttur) was famous for its cotton and silk. Emeralds were found in the mines at Vajrakarur near Gutti (Ananthapura Dist.) in Bhatkal iron ores were found in plenty.

Mining of Coins: Lakkanna Dandanayaka, Governor of Devaraya II had issued own coins. As Fredrik Caesar, the traveller says money often proved to be a source of hindrance and trouble while one travelled from one province to another. Even though all the governors of these provinces were subordinate to the Vijayanagara empire, the money in one area had no values in the other province. Krishnadevaraya minted gold coins called Varahas, Gadyanas, Panas, at the time of his coronation figures of Balakrishna, Venkateshwara were engraved on gold coins along with shaka, chakra, Makaratorana, Abhayahasta, and other symbols. The names like Sri Pratapa Krishnaraya, Sri Krishnaraya are found on the coins in Sanskrit script called Devanagari. The biggest coin is more than 7 grams. The smallest gold coin is 0.3 gram. It has the figure of Durga and Krishnadevaraya. He offered 30,000 gold coins for the Kanakaabhisheka of Lord Venkateshwara after the conquest of Orissa. Achutharaya and later rulers also issued gold, silver coins.

Conclusion:

The Vijayanagara Empire, which thrived from the 14th to the 17th centuries in South India, left an indelible mark on the region's history. Its trade and economy played a vital role in its prosperity, cultural exchange, and political stability. The Vijayanagara Empire stands as a testament to the heights of cultural achievement and political organization in medieval South India. From its humble beginnings in the 14th century to its zenith under illustrious rulers like Krishnadevaraya, the empire's centralized monarchy and sophisticated administrative structure ensured stability and prosperity across its vast territories. The empire's strategic location, well-developed trade networks, and vibrant economic activities contributed to its economic growth and influence. The empire's trade routes, both inland and overseas, connected it with various regions in

the subcontinent and beyond. Hampi, the capital city of the empire, emerged as a bustling trading center, attracting merchants from far and wide. The empire's ports on the western coast facilitated overseas trade, connecting it with the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. The empire's trade activities involved the exchange of a wide range of commodities, including textiles, spices, precious stones, and luxury items. The empire's textile industry, mining and metallurgical activities, and handicrafts were significant contributors to its economic prosperity. Agriculture formed the backbone of the empire's economy.

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