

*A worth remembering Pepper Queen:
Chēnnabhairādēvi*

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Received: 24-11-2023 ; Accepted: 24-03-2024 ; Published: 13-08-2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13294420>

ABSTRACT:

This research article aims to highlight the achievements of Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi who is unfamiliar to most people but worth remembering, ruled a small principality for a long time in a very commendable manner. She ruled the Sāḷuvas of Nagire (Honnāvar taluk in Uttara Kannada district) and Hāḍuvallī (taluk in Uttara Kannada district) principalities unitedly. Her achievements have been assessed by examining primary sources such as inscriptions, Portuguese accounts, works of court poets, and secondary sources. Examined sources show that her political struggles, commercial policies, cultural advancements, and conflict with the Portuguese made her one of the finest queens of Karnataka and India has ever seen. Portuguese addressed her “Reyna da Pimenta”, the pepper queen.

KEYWORDS:

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi, pepper trade, Gērusoppa, Hāḍuvallī, Bhaṭkaḷ ‘Reyna da Pimenta’.

INTRODUCTION:

During the rule of the Hoysala dynasty, around the late 13th century CE, the Sāḷuva chiefs of Nagire rose with their capital at Gērusoppa, presently in the Honnāvar taluk of Uttara Kannada district. However, separating from them, in about 1408 CE Saṅgīrāya founded a collateral branch with the capital Hāḍuvallī also called Saṅgītapura presently a village in Bhaṭkaḷ taluk in Uttara Kannada district. Before Bhaṭkaḷ existence as a taluk¹, it was a town in the south of Honnāvar taluk.

But during the time of Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi, both these fami-

lies were united. She ruled these united principalities from two capitals, managed the entire Honnāvar i.e., the Koṅkan region from Gērusoppa, and managed the Haive and northern parts of Tuḷunādu region from Hāḍuvaḷḷi.²

Accession to the throne

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi belongs to the Sāḷuva family, the daughter of Bhairādēvi and Vira Odeya.³ The inscription⁴ at Muḍbidre (Dakshina Kannada District) indicates the genealogy of rulers of Nagire who followed the peculiar tradition of aḷiya-Santāna succession in which the throne was passed on to the nephew or niece of the ruler. Therefore, Saṅgirāya son of King Haiva of Nagire had to establish himself as an independent ruler at Hāḍuvaḷḷi (Bhaṭkaḷ taluk). Hence, there was a conflict between these two principalities. But Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi united both these principalities.

Kṛishṇadēvarasa was ruling the Nagire before it acceded to Chēnnabhairādēvi. Chēnnabhairādēvi was the niece of Kṛishṇadēvarasa.⁵ After the death of Sāḷuva Kṛishṇadēvarasa in 1553 CE, his sose (daughter-in-law/niece) Chēnnabhairādēvi succeeded to the Nagire according to the aḷiya santana succession. Queen Chennādēvi, sister of Chēnnabhairādēvi was ruling in Hāḍuvaḷḷi before it acceded to Chēnnabhairādēvi. Since there was no issue for Chennādēvi the throne of Saṅgītapura passed to Chēnnabhairādēvi after 1550 CE. The Sāḷuvas of Hāḍuvaḷḷi did not follow the aḷiya-Santāna tradition. Thus, queen Chēnnabhairādēvi was the rightful claimant of both Nagire and Saṅgītapura principalities. She ruled for nearly 50 years until her principality was annexed to the Keladi kingdom.⁶

Achievements

Aware of the actions of her enemies, she had built forts at strategic locations in her state and garrisoned them with a well-equipped army.⁷ She strengthened the infantry and cavalry which effectively served her.

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi and Portuguese

Whether it was the conflict or the trade with the Portuguese, it brought profit, name, and fame to Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi. Her trade with the Portuguese, especially the pepper trade made her as 'Reyna da

Pimenta', pepper queen.⁸

The Portuguese had attacked and set the Bhaṭkaḷ on fire in 1542 CE during the time of Chēnnādēvi, as she stopped paying tribute to them.⁹ When Chēnnabhairādēvi came to power at Hāḍuvaḷḷi she made a treaty with Garcia de Sa, the governor of Goa by sending Poca Naique (Poka Nāyaka) on 17th September 1547 CE as she learned that her position was weak. According to this treaty, the Queen of Batecala (Bhaṭkaḷ) paid two thousand pounds of rice every year and she would not entertain any thieves (pirates) against the Portuguese.¹⁰

After the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire when Adil Shah of the Bijapur, the enemies of the Portuguese became powerful, the Queen found the weak position of the Portuguese and refused to pay the promised tribute.¹¹ Hence the angered Viceroy Dom Luis de Ataide attacked Honnāvar in November 1569 CE. She resisted bravely but had to surrender the Honnāvar.¹² But the queen attacked Honnavar with her 3000 soldiers and Adil Shah's 2000 soldiers in July 1570 CE to free Honnavar from Portuguese control. But she failed.¹³

A letter¹⁴ dated 6th February 1589 CE of the Portugal king to his governor Manoel de Souza Coutinho and another letter¹⁵ dated January 12, 1591, CE of the Portugal king to the same governor show that the queen's position was strong and the Portuguese were pursuing the queen for the export of pepper.

The letter¹⁶ of the king to the Viceroy, Dom Francisco da Gama, Conde da Vidigueira, dated November 21, 1598, C.E., says that the queen was not paying the tribute under the pressure of one Nāyaka (Veṅkaṭappa Nāyaka of Ikkeri kingdom) who became another troublesome for the Portuguese. It shows Veṅkaṭappa Nāyaka was tightening his grip on the kingdom of Chēnnabhairādēvi.

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi and Biḷigi chiefs

Since the Siddapur (a taluk of Uttara Kannada) ghat region was the eastern and the western border of the principalities of the Queen's and the Biḷigi Chiefs respectively, a conflict was inevitable. Biḷigi king Raṅgarāja

(1570-73) also known as Narasappa, reached up to Haḷḍipura near Honnāvar to annex her territory but was beaten back by the queen's force.¹⁷ Ghaṇṭēndra II, the son and successor of Raṅgarāja too attacked and troubled her.¹⁸

Diplomatic relationship

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi maintained a good relationship with Vijayanagara, Zamorin of Calicut, and Adilshahis of Bijapur, Tolāh rulers of Suralu, Ballālas of Padubidre. Sadāshivarāya, the Vijayanagara king used to import horses from Arabia and Persia through the ports of the Bhaṭkaḷ and the Honnāvar of the queen's principality.¹⁹ She always recognized herself as the Mahāmandalēshwara despite the decline of the Vijayanagara empire.²⁰ Adil Shah of Bijapur and Zamorin of Calicut helped the queen against the Portuguese.²¹ She helped the Tolāh rulers of Suralu by sending three hundred soldiers when the Portuguese attacked their port of Basruru (Udupi district).²² She cooperated with the Padumaladevi, the queen of Ballālas of Paḍubidre to construct the Munīśvara basadi at Paḍubidre.²³

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi and Nāyakas of Keladi

But Nāyakas of Ikkeri/Keladi proved fatal to the queen's kingdom. A poet Liṅgaṇṇa in his work Keladi Nripavijaya mentioned that Doḍḍa Saṅkaṇṇa Nāyaka (1566-70) brought destruction to her region.²⁴ It was just an exaggeration. Poet Liṅgaṇṇa in his same work²⁵ mentioned that Chikka Saṅkaṇṇa Nāyaka (1570-1580 CE), the successor of Doḍḍa Saṅkaṇṇa Nāyaka broke the pride of Bhairādēvi who was sulking with obstinacy. After defeating the queen, he captured all the territories, and property and held her captive.²⁶ A letter²⁷ dated January 16, 1607, from the Portuguese king to Viceroy Dom Martim Afonso de Caṣtro indicates that the kingdom of Gērusoppa was completely under the control of Keladi Veṅkaṭappa Nāyaka by 1607 CE. It shows that the battle must have taken place before 1607 CE.

Cultural works

The queen was also a champion in the religious and welfare matters. Narana Nāyaka constructed Vardhamana basadi in Bhaṭkaḷ town during her

reign.²⁸ The queen also constructed a north-facing Chaityalaya towards the east of Chaturmukha Basadi in Gerusoppe, installed Shanti Tirthankara, and granted land.²⁹ Even though the queen was a Jain, treated all religions equally. She sheltered the Gouda Saraswat Brahmins who had migrated from Gōverājya (Goa) due to Portuguese conversion activities and even granted the land to build temples in Mūḍabhaṭkaḷ in Bhaṭkaḷ.³⁰ She granted tax-free land to Khētapayya of Bhaṭkaḷ for worship in the temple of Nārāyaṇadēva, built by Khētapayya in Bhaṭkaḷ.³¹ The Tiruvengalanatha temple was also constructed at Gerusoppe by Vaduga Tammappa Senabova during her time.³² Besides these, she made several grants to different temples and basadis.

CONCLUSION

Queen Chēnnabhairādēvi ruled the Sāḷuvas of Nagire and Hāḍuvaḷḷi principalities unitedly. Even though she was a queen of a small principality the way she handled all the affairs of the state in a great manner is praiseworthy. She safeguarded her principality Her conflict and profitable pepper trade with the Portuguese made her name immortal and earned the title 'Reyna da Pimenta', the pepper queen. Her diplomatic policy shows her statesmanship and establishes her as a visionary leader. Her religious tolerance is exemplary. Unfortunately, fewer people knew about this queen who ruled her kingdom for a long time with her abilities, intelligence, and diplomacy. She has been lost somewhere in the pages of history. Hence, in today's situation, it is significant to remember the ideal and worth-remembering queen.

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22. B. S. Shastry, The Portuguese in Kanara, p. 100.
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25. Ibid, fourth Sandhi, poem 9, p. 67.
26. Ibid, fifth Sandhi, poem 41-42 p. 78; S. Krishna Swamy Aiyangar, Sources of Vijayanagar History, p. 344.
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Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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