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Vijayanagara Empire: A Forgotten Powerhouse of Southern India

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Abstract

The Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1646 CE) stands as a monumental yet underrepresented chapter in South Indian and broader Indian history. Established as a cultural and military response to northern invasions, the empire developed a unique administrative model that combined centralized ritual kingship with regional governance by Nayakas. This research paper explores the empire's foundation, political and economic infrastructure, cultural and religious synthesis, and eventual decline, while also examining the historiographical neglect that has overshadowed its legacy. Drawing on a wide range of scholarly sources, the study illustrates how Vijayanagara's agrarian economy, bio-resource management, and expansive trade networks fueled its prosperity and longevity. The cultural landscape, defined by Dravidian temple architecture, Bhakti devotionism, and religious pluralism, positioned Vijayanagara as a spiritual and artistic nucleus in South India.

However, post-Talikota interpretations and colonial-era historiography contributed to its marginalization in mainstream narratives. The paper argues for a reevaluation of Vijayanagara's significance, advocating for deeper academic engagement, heritage preservation, and curriculum reforms. In highlighting both the grandeur and the historical erasure of the empire, the study calls for an inclusive retelling of Indian history that accounts for regional powers and their contributions to cultural identity and political imagination. The legacy of Vijayanagara persists not only in ruins and rituals but also in the evolving narrative of South Indian history.

Keywords- Vijayanagara Empire, Southern India, Nayaka system, Hampi, Temple architecture, Decentralization, Colonial narratives.

1. Introduction

The Vijayanagara Empire, one of South India's most formidable and culturally rich imperial formations, emerged in the early 14th century during a period of political fragmentation and external threat. Founded in 1336 CE by Harihara I and Bukka Raya I of the Sangama dynasty, the empire was a strategic response to the growing incursions by northern

Sultanates, particularly the Delhi Sultanate, which had destabilized older Hindu kingdoms such as the Hoysalas and Kakatiyas. In this context, the establishment of Vijayanagara was both a political and cultural assertion, aiming to restore Indic sovereignty and protect the socio-religious fabric of the southern peninsula (Bridges, 2016).

At its height, the empire spanned vast territories across modern-day Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and parts of Kerala. Its military and administrative strength enabled it to dominate the Deccan Plateau and resist the expansion of Islamic polities to the north. Politically, the state was structured around a strong monarchic core, with delegated local governance under powerful feudal chieftains known as *Nayakas*. The ruling dynasties—Sangama, Saluva, Tuluva, and Aravidu—ensured continuity over three centuries, even as the capital shifted from Hampi to Penukonda and Chandragiri (Bridges, 2016).

The symbolic power of kingship was a central feature of Vijayanagara's early consolidation. As Sinopoli (2000) notes, the image of the king was deliberately cultivated as both divine and martial—protector of dharma and conqueror of enemies. These ideological roles were reinforced through ritual performances, temple patronage, and public ceremonies (p. 388). The monarch's association with Hindu deities, particularly Vishnu and Virupaksha (a form of Shiva), enabled the integration of political authority with religious legitimacy. This was a critical feature in the wake of invasions that threatened to dismantle temple-based social systems.

Yet, the grandeur of Vijayanagara was not limited to political might. The empire became a crucible of cultural renaissance, fostering temple architecture, music, painting, and literature in multiple languages, including Kannada, Telugu, and Sanskrit. Its capital city, Hampi, evolved into a cosmopolitan urban center, with sprawling markets, massive temples, and infrastructure for irrigation and urban planning. The empire's economic strength derived from agricultural productivity, trade with Persia, Arabia, and later Portugal, and an organized tax system that funded both administration and religious institutions (Sinopoli, 2000).

Modern interpretations of Vijayanagara's origins and development have evolved considerably. Early colonial historians, such as Robert Sewell, described it as a "Forgotten Empire," emphasizing its ruins and aesthetic grandeur but offering limited analysis of its deeper historical significance. Indian historians during the nationalist period countered this view, highlighting the empire's role as a bulwark of Hindu resilience and effective governance (Rao, 2019, pp. 83). Since the late 20th century, historians like Burton Stein have shifted focus toward understanding Vijayanagara as a "segmentary state," where symbolic kingship and localized power coexisted in a mutually sustaining framework. Meanwhile, inscription-based research by scholars such as Y. Subbarayalu and N. Karashima has refined the understanding of land tenure, taxation, and social mobility in the empire (Rao, 2019, pp. 85).

Despite its historical importance, Vijayanagara often remains sidelined in broader Indian historiography, especially in school textbooks and public discourse, which tend to focus on northern empires such as the Mughals and Mauryas. This neglect stems partly from colonial-era narratives that privileged centralized models of governance and viewed southern polities

as peripheral or transitional (Talbot, 2020). Contemporary scholarship, however, increasingly acknowledges the Vijayanagara Empire as a sophisticated and integrative power that shaped the sociopolitical and cultural contours of South India.

Section 2: Political and Administrative Framework

The political and administrative structure of the Vijayanagara Empire was among its most defining characteristics, enabling it to govern vast and culturally diverse territories across South India for over three centuries. At the heart of this system was a dual-tiered structure that combined central authority with regional autonomy, allowing for both symbolic control by the emperor and practical governance by local elites. The empire's administrative framework evolved continuously, adapting to regional dynamics and social complexities, particularly through the empowerment of Nayakas—a class of military elites and governors who played a pivotal role in sustaining imperial stability.

The concept of Nayamkara, or the grant of land and authority to a Nayaka, was central to this administrative model. As Chekuri (2012) argues, the Nayaka system embodied a form of “shared sovereignty,” wherein Nayakas exercised considerable autonomy over their designated regions while remaining ideologically subordinate to the emperor. These officials were responsible for collecting taxes, maintaining military contingents, constructing temples, and even minting inscriptions in their own names. Drawing from over 300 Telugu inscriptions, Chekuri demonstrates that this delegation of power was not a mere extension of central rule but a negotiated model of decentralized authority—a hallmark of what scholars often describe as a “segmentary state” (Chekuri, 2012).

The Vijayanagara state's reliance on symbolic forms of power, including court rituals and temple patronage, was essential in legitimizing both central and regional rule. Morrison (2001) emphasizes that while the empire maintained an image of divine kingship and ritual sovereignty, real power was often exercised through strategic alliances with local chieftains and village institutions. The empire's political stability was not maintained solely through coercion, but through a sophisticated balancing act that combined reward systems (titles, land grants) with ritual co-optation. For example, Nayakas were granted ritual titles and recognition in return for loyalty, allowing them to maintain a degree of independence without overtly challenging imperial authority (Morrison, 2001).

This arrangement extended into the agrarian and revenue systems, where Nayakas and subordinate village heads functioned as intermediaries between the state and the peasantry. According to Rao (2022), peasants under the Vijayanagara system were not passive subjects but participants in a complex web of agrarian relations. While they did not hold land outright, they had conditional usage rights, and local disputes over taxation and labor often reflect a negotiated mode of governance rather than absolute control. Rao also highlights that many inscriptions from Karnataka point to agrarian unrest and localized resistance, which were met with administrative reforms or symbolic appeasement rather than pure suppression (Rao, 2022).

The evolution of the Nayaka system into the Palayakkarar system during

the latter stages of the empire, particularly under Visvanatha Nayaka in the Madurai region, further demonstrates the flexible and adaptive nature of Vijayanagara's administrative model. As Rajagopal (2019) outlines, Visvanatha Nayaka institutionalized the hereditary rights of local governors, formalizing their control over land, military, and temple administration. This transformation effectively laid the groundwork for successor states such as the Nayaka kingdoms of Madurai, Thanjavur, and Gingee, which retained the structural DNA of Vijayanagara governance while asserting increasing independence (Rajagopal, 2019, p. 270).

Through this multi-layered political order, Vijayanagara succeeded in managing a heterogeneous empire without the need for rigid bureaucratic centralization. The administration was inherently flexible, relying on ritual legitimacy, localized alliances, and adaptable authority structures to maintain cohesion. While the emperor projected a divine and unifying image from the capital, actual governance was rooted in regional negotiation and pragmatic delegation of power.

In sum, the Vijayanagara Empire presents a model of governance that was decentralized in practice but centralized in ideology. The Nayaka and Palayakaras systems were not deviations but essential mechanisms of rule, enabling the empire to persist across diverse terrains and social contexts. Modern scholarship rightly emphasizes the importance of these systems in understanding Vijayanagara not just as a military empire but as a complex and resilient political organism that thrived on negotiated sovereignty and regional adaptability.

Section 3: Economic Infrastructure and Trade Networks

The economic framework of the Vijayanagara Empire was both expansive and resilient, reflecting a sophisticated integration of agriculture, local and international trade, and resource management. At its core, the empire's economy drew strength from an ecologically diverse region and an administration capable of channeling that potential into sustainable prosperity. The rulers of Vijayanagara transformed their natural and human landscapes through irrigation networks, organized market systems, and the strategic mobilization of bio-resources. These efforts contributed significantly to the empire's longevity and its ability to support a dynamic and multi-layered society.

Agriculture served as the foundation of the empire's economic strength, and the state invested heavily in enhancing land productivity. As Morrison (2005) highlights in her archaeological and landscape studies of the Vijayanagara metropolitan region, the empire implemented an extensive network of irrigation tanks, canals, and sluices, particularly in semi-arid zones like the Tungabhadra basin. These systems allowed farmers to cultivate paddy rice, pulses, and millets year-round, contributing not only to subsistence but also to marketable surpluses (Morrison, 2005). The layout of the capital at Hampi, with its clearly demarcated agricultural zones, reflects the deliberate planning that underpinned the empire's agrarian economy. In their broader environmental study, Krishna and Morrison (2009) provide further evidence of the Vijayanagara rulers' deep engagement with agroecological systems. They note that rulers incentivized agricultural expansion through land grants (*inam*) to temples

and elites, facilitating large-scale deforestation and transformation of the dry deciduous forests into cultivated landscapes. This not only secured food supplies but also created a rural production base to support urban centers, military campaigns, and religious institutions. Agroecosystems were designed with resilience in mind, allowing adaptation to fluctuating monsoons and climatic stress—an early model of ecological sustainability in imperial contexts.

Beyond agriculture, the Vijayanagara Empire benefitted immensely from the bio-resources of the Western Ghats and Deccan plateau, including spices, medicinal plants, and timber. According to Shaanker et al. (2007), these bio-resources played a pivotal role in supporting the empire's economic and military ambitions. The abundance of endemic and high-value plant species allowed Vijayanagara to engage in long-distance trade with Arabia, Southeast Asia, and later, European powers like the Portuguese. Timber from the Ghats was used to construct war equipment and naval vessels, while spices and medicinal plants were in high demand in foreign markets. The authors suggest that access to diverse bio-resources was as critical to Vijayanagara's success as its political and military strategies (Shaanker et al., 2007).

Trade within the empire was facilitated through an intricate network of markets, merchant guilds, and caravan routes. The capital city of Hampi, situated on the banks of the Tungabhadra River, was not only a religious and political center but also a major commercial hub. Jyothi (2019) details the structure of Vijayanagara's trade economy, noting that the state actively promoted trade through tax exemptions, security guarantees, and the construction of market infrastructure. Inland trade connected village economies with urban centers, while maritime trade was conducted via ports like Bhatkal and Goa. The presence of guilds such as the Ayyavole and Manigramam ensured the regulation of trade practices and standardization of weights, measures, and ethical conduct in commercial transactions (Jyothi, 2019).

Additionally, the empire collected customs duties and levies from both domestic and foreign traders, contributing to a stable revenue stream. Portuguese traveler Domingo Paes described Hampi as a bustling marketplace where precious stones, textiles, horses, and spices were freely traded. Horses, in particular, were a key military asset imported via the western ports and distributed to regional Nayakas, reinforcing both economic and political bonds across the empire. The temples of Vijayanagara also functioned as economic institutions. Beyond their religious roles, they operated as landholders, employers, and financiers, with their own treasuries and donation systems. Donations from kings, merchants, and artisans supported temple festivals, construction projects, and feeding programs. These institutions thereby integrated spiritual devotion with material redistribution, ensuring that religious life was deeply embedded in economic practice.

In conclusion, the Vijayanagara Empire developed a multi-faceted and regionally integrated economy that combined agrarian productivity with local and international trade. It strategically exploited bio-resources, organized its labor and production systems, and promoted commerce through regulatory and infrastructural support. This robust economic base

not only supported its monumental architecture and military endeavors but also facilitated a high degree of social complexity and urbanization. As such, the empire's economic system was not just a backdrop to its power—it was one of its primary engines.

Section 4: Cultural and Religious Landscape

The cultural and religious fabric of the Vijayanagara Empire was among the most intricate and influential in pre-modern South Asia. Not only did the empire provide political unity, but it also acted as a powerful cultural crucible that fostered a unique synthesis of architectural brilliance, religious diversity, and literary expression. The court and its elite circles promoted both Shaivism and Vaishnavism, while maintaining a relatively pluralistic environment that accommodated other traditions like Jainism and Islam. Through temple patronage, festivals, sculpture, and textual production, the empire articulated a vibrant civilizational ethos rooted in sacred geography and divine kingship.

One of the most striking aspects of Vijayanagara's religious identity was the central role of temples—not only as places of worship but as focal points for economic, artistic, and political activity. Kaligotla (2022) explores this dynamic in her examination of temple architecture during the period, particularly in the context of waterfront temples. She argues that temples were more than static symbols of devotion; they were performative spaces where architecture was deliberately designed to engage worshippers, kings, and artisans. At sites like Hampi, the interweaving of ritual pathways, water features, and sacred architecture created a “landscape of power,” linking divine authority with terrestrial kingship (Kaligotla, 2022, pp. 46–49). The placement of temples along rivers and reservoirs further embedded nature into the sacred, reinforcing the empire's metaphysical and material dominion.

Temple construction during this period followed the Dravidian style, marked by towering *gopurams* (gateway towers), elaborately carved mandapas (halls), and intricate iconography. Dallapiccola and Verghese (1998) provide a comprehensive study of Vijayanagara sculptures, highlighting their stylistic evolution and symbolic depth. The sculptures, often commissioned by royal patrons or influential Nayakas, depict gods, dancers, court scenes, and mythological narratives, emphasizing both the spiritual and the worldly aspects of life. Particularly notable are depictions of Shiva in various forms, including the cosmic dancer (Nataraja), as well as Vishnu in his ten avatars. These visual narratives reflect the religious dualism of the period—Shaiva and Vaishnava sects enjoying near-equal patronage, often in shared urban and ritual spaces (Dallapiccola & Verghese, 1998).

The empire's religious culture was further enriched by the Bhakti movement, which found fertile ground in the courts and countryside alike. Poets like Purandara Dasa and Kanaka Dasa composed devotional songs in Kannada that emphasized personal connection with the divine, often challenging caste hierarchies and priestly orthodoxy. Leela Prasad (2015) points out that this period saw a flourishing of vernacular religious expression in South India, making Hinduism more accessible and emotionally resonant. She emphasizes how temples and public rituals served as platforms for social integration, where rituals, music, and

storytelling blurred the lines between caste, language, and sect (Prasad, 2015). This inclusive cultural climate was crucial in stabilizing a linguistically and socially diverse empire.

The Vijayanagara rulers strategically used religious patronage to reinforce their political legitimacy. Kings were often portrayed as divine agents or as ideal devotees. Rituals such as Mahanavami, the grand festival celebrated at Hampi, were staged not only as religious observances but also as imperial spectacles where military strength, royal generosity, and divine favor were on full display. The emperors sponsored temples across linguistic regions and caste boundaries, ensuring ideological cohesion across their territories. In this sense, religion served as both a spiritual guide and a political technology.

Moreover, while the empire was predominantly Hindu, there is ample evidence of inter-religious interactions, particularly with Muslim merchants and administrators. Some temples incorporated Islamic architectural motifs, and Sufi shrines existed peacefully within urban centers like Hampi. This reflects not only religious tolerance, but also a pragmatic approach to governance and commerce in a pluralistic society.

In conclusion, the cultural and religious landscape of Vijayanagara was not monolithic but dynamic, inclusive, and strategic. Temples functioned as the spiritual, economic, and symbolic heart of the empire, while devotional movements and artistic patronage created a deep reservoir of cultural capital. Through sculpture, architecture, music, and ritual, the empire constructed a cohesive religious identity that both unified and celebrated diversity. These contributions endure today in the living traditions of South India and in the ruins of Hampi, which continue to echo the sacred rhythms of a once-mighty empire.

Section 5: Decline, Erasure, and Historiographical Neglect

The decline of the Vijayanagara Empire has long been portrayed in conventional historiography as a sudden collapse following the Battle of Talikota in 1565, often described as a catastrophic and irreversible end to a once-flourishing polity. While this narrative persists in popular and even academic discourse, recent scholarship has challenged this simplistic version of history, arguing instead for a more nuanced, layered, and historically grounded understanding of the empire's fall and its subsequent marginalization in colonial and postcolonial historiography.

The Battle of Talikota, fought between the Vijayanagara forces and an alliance of Deccan Sultanates (Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Golconda, and Bidar), indeed resulted in the destruction of the capital city of Hampi and marked a turning point in the empire's history. However, Singh and Singh (2022) argue that reducing the fall of Vijayanagara to a single battle overlooks the complex political, economic, and military shifts already underway. They critique this "decisive-battle" narrative and propose a re-historicization that acknowledges the continuities in the empire's institutions, the survival of the Aravidu dynasty, and the regional resilience of Nayaka governors (p. 48). This interpretive shift challenges colonial frameworks that emphasized civilizational decline as a moral and cultural failing. Hegde and Sandeepkumar (2008) also offer a revisionist view of the empire's demise, suggesting that the empire persisted in fragmented but active forms in Penukonda, Chandragiri, and

Vellore. These successor capitals, while militarily weaker, maintained political and religious traditions of the original court. They argue that the historiographical focus on Hampi's ruin has overshadowed the legacy of the empire's later phases, thereby contributing to a distorted image of finality and collapse. The decline, in this view, was gradual and uneven, rather than immediate and absolute.

From a historiographical perspective, Talbot (2020) highlights how colonial historians and British administrators contributed to a North-centric narrative of Indian history, with Mughal and Mauryan empires receiving significantly more attention than Southern counterparts like Vijayanagara. She notes that early British scholars either exoticized Vijayanagara (e.g., Robert Sewell's romantic depiction of a "forgotten empire") or dismissed it as a regional aberration, lacking in centralized administration or political sophistication (Talbot, 2020). This erasure was compounded by the use of Persian chronicles and European travelogues as primary sources, many of which viewed Vijayanagara through the lens of cultural otherness or religious antagonism.

Rubiés (2000), in his study of European ethnographic accounts, shows how early travelers like Domingo Paes and Fernão Nunes portrayed Vijayanagara with both fascination and condescension. While they marveled at the city's grandeur, wealth, and order, their accounts also exoticized the culture, often misrepresenting social hierarchies and religious practices. These narratives shaped early European conceptions of Indian civilization, reinforcing orientalist binaries of East vs. West, and further distancing Vijayanagara from rational political discourse (Rubiés, 2000, pp. 15).

Interestingly, Jayanthi Nair (2006) demonstrates how visual historiography—including colonial-era paintings and textbooks—further solidified the erasure of Southern narratives. Using the case of Tipu Sultan, Nair shows how the South was either demonized or sentimentalized in visual culture, leaving little room for balanced representation. Her arguments are applicable to Vijayanagara, whose rich material culture and military history were often excluded from mainstream historical canons (Nair, 2006).

In postcolonial India, the neglect of Vijayanagara continues in school curricula and popular discourse, despite growing archaeological and historiographical interest. Modern textbook narratives often give disproportionate attention to Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rule, with Vijayanagara relegated to a brief footnote. This oversight has contemporary implications, particularly for cultural identity and regional pride in South India.

However, there has been a recent resurgence in scholarly attention, driven by archaeologists, historians, and literary scholars who are revisiting inscriptions, architecture, and vernacular records. Works such as Singh and Singh's historiographic reading of Girish Karnad's *Crossing to Talikota* signal an interdisciplinary revival that seeks to correct colonial and nationalist biases, and place Vijayanagara within a broader, more inclusive historical framework.

In conclusion, the decline of Vijayanagara must be understood not as a sudden implosion, but as a gradual transformation shaped by internal

dynamics and external pressures. Moreover, the historiographical neglect of this empire reflects broader biases in the construction of Indian history. Reclaiming Vijayanagara's rightful place requires dismantling outdated paradigms and embracing a more layered, multi-source approach that honors its enduring legacy.

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