



# Review Of Research



## WOMEN IN VIJAYANAGARA SOCIETY- A STUDY

I. Nageswara Reddy

Lecturer in History , Govt. Degree College , Mydukur Town, YSR Dist, A.P. India.

### ABSTRACT :

*The Vijayanagara Empire emerged as one of the most powerful kingdoms in the Peninsular India and ruled there for 200 years. The empire was so strong that four Muslim kingdoms had to come together to destroy this strong kingdom. The empire was visited by many foreigners who left descriptions about the prosperity, army and trade. During this period several foreign traders visited and engaged in trade with them. Their main trade items were pearls, coral, elephants, horses, camphor, pepper, sandalwood and musk. They have trade and diplomatic relations with countries such as China, Burma, Malaysia, Persia, and Portugal.*

*The paper highlights the position of women in the vijayanagara society focusing on the divisions of women into classes and their conditions.*

**KEYWORDS :** strong kingdom , horses, camphor, pepper.



### INTRODUCTION :

Vijayanagara society was still a caste oriented one. The population comprised of organised castes. The castes were based on occupations. With the continuation of old traditional castes new castes also emerged. It was mainly due to the schism between the Hindus and Muslims. The wars economic priorities and other casues led to the migration of the people from one region to the other. When they adjusted themselves with the new situation new ideas came into vogue. The movement of the Telugus, Kannadigas were mainly responsible for social changes. The attitude and behaviour of the Vijayanagar rulers also were responsible for social changes. The rulers were not interested in overruling the majority views of the people. Importance was also assigned to public opinion.

### MARRIAGE

It was the principal institution in the society. It enjoyed both religious sanctity and social approval. The old eight fold customary marriages did not exist in the Vijayanagar

period. Kanyadhana was a familiar marriage ritual. Dowry system was in vogue. Kanya sulka or birde price payment affected the Brahmins to a large extent. Child marriage was popular among the Brahmins. Sati or Sahagamana was also prevalent. In the Kannada districts the availability of Satikkal or mastikkal with inscriptions testify to the existence of Sati. The execution of Sati was commemorated by Satikal or mastikkal.

## POSITION OF WOMEN

Many historians have not really focused on women who in any society can, according to a Chinese proverb, hold up half the sky. Many historians though agree that women's role in society was a time less one, but confined to the private life unworthy of study. Men's history has been presented as universally human. The framework, concepts and priorities of these universal histories reflect male interests, concerns and experiences. Activities which are mainly female like child bearing, cooking, women's work in agriculture, husbandry, magic, folk art and traditions have been generally regarded as unimportant and unworthy of study and as such outside the purview of the academic discipline of history. Traditional historiography has thus either ignored the positive role of women or portrayed it is insignificant. In many of the undergraduate books earlier we often had a chapter at the end of, let us say Vedic period, later Vedic period, Vijayanagara period, entitled women, and this has a discussion of dress, jewellery, festivals and pastimes. While this may be important it in no ways does justice in the role of women, rather it reinforces the prevailing prejudices of representing women and also serves to divert the focus from the millions of toiling women who have contributed to the making of history as much as men. In any case the contributions of women to the past and in shaping its religion, politics and society have not been fully brought out. Recently there have been attempts to rehabilitate the many aspects of women's lives particularly the royal women. Anila Verghese links up the dress and other aspects of women's lives. She links this to the architecture of the zenana and since women in the Vijayanagara Empire lived in separate spaces they set up new styles which were not under patriarchal control.

## THE ELITE WOMEN OF VIJAYANAGARA

Most of the information that we have about women in the Tuluva dynasty is that of the elite women. Tin-women of the nobility were taught to read and write and they were also familiar with Sanskrit. They were also taught music and dance and were accompanied by their maid servants whenever they went out. Frequent references to elite women mean that their presence is noticeable and that they were also numerous. The rising economic conditions and prosperity of the Vijayanagara made this possible as there was a general increase in prosperity. Leisure was earlier seen as an elitist activity only and this prevented many from looking at the contribution of leisure class to the cultural milieu.<sup>1</sup>

The wives of the king each had a house to herself, women guards and a large number of servants. The women generally remained indoors and were never seen participating in public functions where other men also participated. They were mostly surrounded by women guards and eunuchs. No man was allowed to see them unless he was an old man of high rank and had the permission of the King to interact with the royal women. The wives of the King were carried in closed litters and were closely followed by the eunuchs when they went out. The harem had principal wives, lawful wives and many other inmates who served these. Krishnadeva Raya had twelve lawful wives and among these three were the principal wives and only their sons could be the heirs to the throne. If the other principal wives had many sons and one had one son, he would be the heir. Of these three principal wives, one was the daughter of the King of Oriya ie. Gajapathi Kings, the second was the daughter of king of Srerangapatnam a vassal of the king, and the third was a courtesan. Evidently, this courtesan was the mistress of the King in his youth before he became the king and she made him promise that if he became a king he would take her as his wife and he did so. In some contemporary works the daughter of the King of Orissa whom Krishnadeva Raya married is mentioned as Jagan Mohini, who is said to have not been faithful to the king and tried to take his life. Nuniz says that Jaganmohini was the Principal wife of Krishna devaraya, though many inscriptions only mention two queens, Chinnadevi and Thirumla devi.

Many foreign travelers point out to the fact that the Principal wives of Krishnadeva Raya lived in great harmony. They had a very large sum of money, personal ornaments such as armlets, bracelets and were richly adorned. Thirty six of the most beautiful of the Kings wives covered themselves from head to toe with gold and pearls and they would welcome the King with a vessel of gold with a lamp of oil burning in it. In fact they wore so much gold that sometimes it was difficult for them to move. One of the aspects of representation that we see here is that one side the foreigners are awestruck at the amount of gold and

prosperity and at the same time they are also predisposed to some image of the orient. In this particular case we see this imagery being replicated many times in the representation of royalty and elite in south India. One of the points that are missed is that these are the scenes that are the contexts for the ceremonial.

The women of royalty enjoyed the same privileges as enjoyed by the king. Nandi Timmayya in a verse in *Parijatapahranam* mentions that Krishnadeva Raya heard along with his queens the works composed by poets and all were assembled at the court during the spring festival. Many times the queens also accompanied the King in his various campaigns. Krishnadeva Raya campaigned in Kalinga along with his queens. They visited Ahobalam and made some gifts to the temple. In 1515 when the King conducted the siege of Kondaveedu, Chinnadevi amma and Tirumala devi amma were with him. It was in the company of these two queens that Krishnadeva Raya visited the temple of Amareswara near Dharnikota and bestowed magnificent gifts known as *Tulapurusha*, *Saptasagara* and also donated some villages. Inscriptional Records also show us that Krishnadeva Raya visited Lord Venkateswara at Tirumala along with his wives. Many of these women were economically self sufficient and we have mention of some of these women giving donations also. An inscription dt. 1540 mentions that a tank was constructed by Chinnamamba , the wife of Pratap Yalla and sister of Ramaya Mantri Bacha , the Chief Minister of King Achyuta Raya.

The women of this class wore garments made of silk or cotton and also used bright colors. This was a five yard long piece one part of which was girt around the waist and the other part was thrown around the shoulders and across the breasts in such a way that one arm and shoulder remained uncovered. The queens wore a separate upper garment as is discernable from the bronze sculptures of Chinnadevi and Tirumaladevi at Tirumala. Both the queens covered their shoulders with a piece of cloth. Hence they used both sewn and unsewn upper garment. Women of the elite class also wore leather shoes well embroidered in silk and their hair was tightly gathered into a knot at the top of their head. Many writings by the travelers and depictions in the iconographic tradition have brought about this image of the Vijayanagar women. Though there is a critique that this refers only to the women of the upper strata as opposed to the representation of tribal women, we get some important gleanings. Most important is the fact that the upper class elite women were considered as the ideal and hence this move towards the ideal was seen as reference point worth emulating. The break in sculptural tradition from the earlier Hoyasala style to the more voluminous body and freer postures of the Vijayanagara icons and their similar eulogies in literature and performative traditions like the *Sangatias* show that the new ideal of the women had arrived. Thus when we talk of the elite women of Vijayanagara we see the emergence of a personality reflecting the cultural ethos of the period. This is different from the early Hoyasala and Nayaka period. The images of the deities also mirror this aspect where the chief consorts of the Puranic deity are shown in a way similar to the King and his consorts mirroring the relationship between the temple and the court.<sup>2</sup>

The elite women lived in the palace and they were surrounded by a large number of women who served them. All these women had their houses with in the precincts of the palace. There were twelve thousand women in Krishnadeva Raya's harem. They numbered over four thousand in the reign of Achyuta Raya.

The elite women were taught to read and write and some of them became prolific writers. One of the wives or sub wives of Achyut Raya was, Tirumalamba and she wrote, *Varadambika parinayam*, which describes the marriage of Achyut Raya with Varadamba. Varadamba the heroine of this Kavya is described as a diplomat and an intelligent women who handled state matters very efficiently. She built the Vardarajammampeta, near Vidya nagar. Along with her husband and son she donated large amount of treasure equal to their weight of the temple of Vardaraja swami at Kanchi. Mohanangi, the daughter of Krishnadeva Raya and the wife of Aliya Rama Raya wrote a love poem, *Marichiparinayam*. Tukka devi another wife of Krishnadeva Raya wrote, *Tukka Panchakam*, where she described the campaign of Krishnadeva Raya in Cuttuck to defeat the King Gajapathi and marry his beautiful daughter Tukkamba. Many believe this was Chinnadevi.<sup>3</sup>

### MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN

Between the nobility and the working class women were the middle class women, the wives of traders, business men, teachers and officials in the court. We do not have much information on this class of women. Many Europeans had entered India by this time and among them the Portuguese who came first came to settle in India with little expectation of returning home. The original purpose of their long journey was to proselytize or to act as spice merchants. But many of them were lured by India. Over several decades they found life in India offered them much more than what they could expect at home. Many of them entered into servitude with the many kings, especially in Deccan. They served as soldiers, advisors or mercenaries. Some of them were completely Indianized' wearing Indian clothes and eating Indian food. Many of them married Indian girls and even converted to Islam. The *Sukasaptati*, of Kidiripati, *Sringara Sakuntalam* by Pillalamarri *Pinaveerabhadru* and *Kalapurnodayam* of *Pingali Surana* give us some information about this class of women, their dress, ornaments and their daily life styles. During the Vijayanagara period we see the proliferation of the new castes and sub castes with a result that Andhra Desa has one of the largest number of castes and sub-castes. Each of them have their unique identities there were not discernable to the European travelers. According to the Kula Puranas that mention the origin of these groups we can locate them during the Vijayanagara period where material prosperity led to craft specialization and proliferation of newer Jatis. Even today's worlds each cast has a different *Tali* that signifies the identity of the wearer, with a result that there was diversity of identity and one of the ways in which the transmission took place was the dress and ritual observed by women.

### THE WORKING CLASS WOMEN

It is this class of women about whom we have a lot of information during the Vijayanagara period. The palace consisted of a large number of women who served the elite women. Some of these women maids, servants, wrestlers, astrologers and sooth Sayers. They maintained accounts of expenditure within the harem. There were women who were proficient in music and played the musical instrument. A large number of women were employed by the king to cook when he gave banquets. The king had ten personal maids to cook and serve him food personally. There were many women who were employed as guards and handled swords and shields. Besides these there was a large number of washing women who carried out the laundry.

When the King was in his apartments, there were a large number of women who stood outside and had to perform certain special duties. Each of them held a casket of musk, the white cowry, the spittoon, the sword, the perfume casket, the mirror, the fan, the golden pitcher, the beetle pouch and the camphor box. Most of these were insignias of royalty and whether the king needed them or not court etiquette demanded that women stand holding these items in hand. Many of the women accompanied the king during his wars or when he toured round the empire. Barbosa also refers to the fact that the King had thousand of women reserved to accompany him during his travels and they had great riches and travelled with the King in style. Some of the foreign travelers also mention about female door keepers. Immediately after the *Dasara* festivities were over, twenty to thirty female door keepers came from inside the palace with canes in their hands and whips on their shoulders. We also have some information on female porters.' The employment of women in many capacities is however not looked at in the larger production of wealth and ideas. However, a cursory at Telugu literature and proverbs show an abundance of words that are far removed from the Sanskritic Telugu but are derived from the production oriented language of the man and women. Many professions had large number of women and this can be historically traced such as farm labourers, weavers, potters and pastoralists. The last mentioned are very numerous since the Kurubas and cognate castes predominate in die semi arid districts of Deccan, till they were peasantiscd during the British period.

We get some information on the dress of this class from sculptural panels. The women attendants in the royal household like the Chauri bearers, attendants, and women musicians wore their lower garments in, 'Sakaccha' style down to their anklets. In many figures the plates in the front are arranged in decorative style with fan shaped ends. This pattern seems to be very popular during the Vijayanagara times.

### THE TEMPLE DANCING GIRLS

During the medieval period there was a total institutionalization of the temple because both the temple and the ruling groups complimented each other. These temples flourished because the ruling warrior groups provided them with support and protection. A vast range of officials and warlords came to exercise a lot of control over the temple functioning. Besides these functionaries there was also a substantial participation by pilgrims.

With an increase in the number of temples there was a growth in the number of rituals performed in them. It now became necessary to employ a number of specialized priests to perform the daily rituals. They were supported by a large group of people belonging to various professions. These included weavers, potters, carpenters, musicians and a large number of girls. The temple girls were thus a very necessary and integral part of the socio- economic and political set up of medieval times.

The temple firmly established the agrarian feudal order. The rise of the devotional bhakti literature also suggests this. There are a number of attempts to authenticate and legitimize the new feudal polity of the period through a parallelism between the deity and the king. In fact the deity in the temple is equated with the king and a parallel world of authority is reconstructed on the spiritual plane. Ritual worship in the temple is conceived on the same lines as ritual services offered to the king.

Since the temple and the God were homologous with the royal court and the king respectively, the *Devasthanas* had to maintain the same bureaucracy as that of the *Rajsthana*. Elaborate temple rituals were developed. These were of two kinds, Angabhoga- the general worship services and Rangabhoga, which were special services performed at the Rangamantapa, either daily or on festive occasions and constructed for this purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore the temple girls were the link between the God and the king and served to establish the power of the lord and give it legitimacy in the eyes of the people. In this background of medieval times it was these girls who crossed from one boundary to another with ease and were the objects of ritual exchange between the king's court and the temple. These girls could also with ease cross another boundary set up by our traditional scriptures that of an ideal traditional women, who is a pativrata and tied to the home, by not being tied to one man but to an immortal god and the temple. All these girls were regarded as "Nityasumangali", women who were auspicious because since these women were married to God an immortal, there was no chance of their ever becoming a widow and being deprived of their marital status and the toe ring which was a symbol of this status.

The elaboration of temple ritual and homologisation of God and the Lord necessitated the expansion of the temple hierarchy, especially the sanis or dancing girls. All the temples in medieval times had anywhere between 300 to 500 of these girls depending on the location and importance of the temple. These girls were employed to perform dance and play music before the deity, sing mangalgitas and namasankirtanas, wave fly whisks in the presence of the God, carry on administrative responsibilities and clean and decorate the temple premises.

Many temple dancers in the Vijayanagara period were proficient dancers and they were trained for this purpose. In some of the temples dance masters were appointed to train them. Some of the temple dancers were also known for their acting skills. Many of them staged dramas in the temple precincts. A temple record of Krishnadeva Rayas period from the village Cheruvu Belagallu (Kurnool District), refers to the gift of some land to a Patri (temple dancer) a daughter of Nattuva Timmayya and another male dancer Nattavu Nagayya both of whom were connected with the drama Tayaikunda Nataka. Another inscription of 1531 from Tirupati states that Muddu Kuppaiyi was originally attached to the palace of Achyutta Raya and was ordered by the King to proceed to a temple. Hence there was an exchange between the court and the temple and the temple girls could be placed anywhere.

Many inscriptions tell us that many temple dancing girls donated money for the sake of the temples. Govindsani deposited 30 panams in the temple treasury for the improvement of irrigation tanks and channels. Lingasani and Tiruvenkata manikkam daughters of tappasani donated money to the temple of Tirumala. Peruchchi, daughter of Nalaghana Venkatatturiyar Sevvu also paid 230 panams for the purpose of propitiating Sri Govindaperumal. Nachchimar and Senai Mudaliya during Achyut Rayas reign.



Paes, mentions the term 'Bayaders' (bayhadeiras) as the dancing girls of the temple and palace. He differentiates between the courtesans and the bayaders who remained dancing in front of the temple for a long time. We also come across the term basavi's for few temple girls, besides patri and devara sule (Sule, means prostitute in Kannada language. In fact in most of the Karnataka inscriptions the Devdasis of the Saivite shrines are denoted as basavis.<sup>5</sup>

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