

FROM FOUNDATION TO FALL: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE (14TH–16TH CENTURY)

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire in the 14th century marked a decisive turning point in the history of South India, unifying diverse linguistic and cultural regions under a centralized political authority. Emerging in response to the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate, particularly under rulers like Alauddin Khilji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the empire played a crucial role in resisting northern incursions and preserving indigenous traditions. Founded by Harihara I and guided by Vidyaranya, Vijayanagara evolved into a powerful political, economic, and cultural center. Successive dynasties—Sangama, Saluva, Tuluva, and Aravidu—contributed to its expansion, administrative innovations, and cultural renaissance. The reign of Krishnadevaraya is often regarded as its golden age. However, internal conflicts and external pressures culminated in the catastrophic Battle of Talikota, leading to the empire's gradual decline. This study examines the rise, development, and fall of the Vijayanagara Empire within a broader historical framework.

Keywords: Vijayanagara Empire, South Indian history, Talikota

INTRODUCTION

The Vijayanagara Empire represents one of the most significant phases in South Indian history, often described as a “Golden Age” comparable to the Gupta period in North India. It brought together regions inhabited by Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam-speaking populations under a unified administration, fostering political stability and cultural integration.

The rise of the empire must be understood in the context of the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate into the Deccan and South India. Military campaigns led by generals such as Malik Kafur disrupted established kingdoms like Warangal and Madurai, creating political instability. The decline of these regional powers and the oppressive administration of the Tughlaq rulers generated widespread resistance.

In this context, the foundation of the Vijayanagara Empire in 1336 by Harihara I and his brother Bukka Raya marked a significant political and cultural revival. The empire not only resisted further invasions but also reestablished indigenous traditions and institutions, shaping the trajectory of South Indian civilization for over three centuries.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical-analytical methodology, drawing upon a combination of primary and secondary sources. Literary works, inscriptions, and foreign travel accounts form the core primary sources, while modern historical interpretations provide critical perspectives. This multi-dimensional approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the empire's evolution and historical significance.

The Vijayanagara Empire: A Turning Point in South Indian History

The establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire marks a significant epoch in the history of South India, as it unified the regions inhabited by Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam-speaking peoples under a single administration. During the reign of the Vijayanagara kings, South India experienced profound transformations in both the political and cultural spheres. Often referred to as the "Golden Age of South India," the era of the Vijayanagara Rayas saw unprecedented growth and development across various sectors, paralleling the prosperity of the Gupta dynasty in North India. The Vijayanagara rulers were pioneers in introducing gold coins in multiple denominations, a testament to their economic strength and vision. Their rule shaped the destiny of South Indian civilization for over three centuries.

The foundations of the Vijayanagara Empire were laid in response to the onslaught of Muslim invasions. As the Sultans of Delhi extended their dominion over Northern India, they turned their ambitions southward, towards the regions beyond the Vindhya mountains. During the period from 1307 to 1311 A.D., Alauddin Khilji's general, Malik Kafur, led relentless campaigns that brought kingdoms like Devagiri, Warangal, Dwarasamudra, and Madurai under the sway of the Delhi Sultanate, reducing them to vassal states.

However, the death of Alauddin Khilji in January 1316 A.D. did not signal the end of Muslim incursions into Southern India. The Tughlaq dynasty, which succeeded the Khiljis, pursued an even more aggressive expansionist policy. In 1321 A.D., an expedition led by Juna Khan (later Muhammad bin Tughlaq) was launched against Warangal. The defeat and subsequent surrender of King Prataparudra marked the fall of the Kakatiya dynasty, with Warangal being renamed Sultanpur and incorporated into the Tughlaq Empire.

The reign of the Muslim rulers in South India was marked by despotic and oppressive governance, which sowed the seeds of deep-seated resentment and unrest among the local population. This growing animosity towards Muslim rule eventually culminated in a series of revolts across various provinces. Among these, the revolt led by Kapaya Nayaka of the Musunuri family in Warangal was particularly significant. Muhammad bin Tughlaq, preoccupied with other matters, failed to suppress this rebellion, ultimately losing control over Warangal.

The revolt led by Harihara I of the Sangama family in Kampili was a pivotal event that paved the way for the foundation of the Vijayanagara Kingdom in 1336 A.D. Under the guidance and counsel of the sage Vidyaranya Swamy, the city of Vijayanagara was strategically established on the banks of the Tungabhadra River. Following the establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire, its kings successfully thwarted the continued attempts of Muslim rulers to conquer the South. Simultaneously, the empire expanded its territory, gradually bringing all regions of South India under its control through a series of conquests.

The rulers of Vijayanagara not only restored the glory of the region but also played a crucial role in preserving and revitalizing the ancient Hindu culture and civilization. Their reign saw a renaissance in the arts, architecture, and religious practices, ensuring that the cultural heritage of South India continued to flourish in the face of external threats.

Dynasties and Rulers of the Vijayanagara Empire

The Vijayanagara Empire, one of the most significant empires in South Indian history, was ruled by four major dynasties: the Sangama, Saluva, Tuluva, and Aravidu. Each dynasty played a crucial role in shaping the empire's political, cultural, and economic landscape. Below is a detailed overview of the dynasties and their notable rulers.

The Sangama Dynasty (1336 to 1485)

The Sangama Dynasty, the founding dynasty of the Vijayanagara Empire, played a crucial role in establishing and consolidating the empire's dominance in South India. The dynasty is named after its patriarch, Sangama, and it produced some of the most significant rulers in the history of the region.

Harihara Raya I (1336-1356)

Harihara Raya I, the founder of the Vijayanagara Empire, established the Sangama Dynasty in 1336 A.D. Under his dynamic leadership, the city of Vijayanagara was developed into a thriving capital, supported by his capable brothers Bukka Raya I, Kampana, Marappa, and Muddappa. Their collective efforts laid a strong foundation for what would become one of the most powerful empires in South India.

Harihara I ascended the throne with Bukka Raya serving as his chief minister. Recognizing the threats posed by Muslim invasions, he took decisive steps to fortify the empire's defenses. He strengthened the fortifications of key strategic locations such as Badami, Udayagiri, Gutty, and Anegondi, ensuring that the kingdom was well-protected from external attacks. By 1339 A.D., Harihara I had successfully expanded the empire's territory from the banks of the Tungabhadra River to Badami. His military successes earned him the prestigious title of "Mahamandaleshwara," meaning "Lord of the Kingdom," and he was also revered as "Harirayavallabha." Inscriptions from the period reveal that Harihara I managed to capture significant territories, including Kaladi and Malaprabha, which were previously under the control of Muhammad bin Tughlaq.

With the timely guidance and assistance of his brother Bukka Raya, Harihara I further expanded his kingdom, extending its reach from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. To ensure efficient governance, he introduced several revolutionary administrative reforms. He reorganized the territorial subdivisions of the kingdom, elevated the status of Brahmins in society, and established the office of the *karanam* (village accountant). Additionally, he granted *kauls* (land grants) to encourage the conversion of forested areas into fertile lands for cultivation. These efforts not only expanded the empire but also promoted peace and prosperity, allowing the people to focus on the development of their society. During his reign, the arts began to flourish, reflecting the growing cultural richness of the empire.

Bukka Raya I (1356-1377)

Upon the death of Harihara I, his brother Bukka Raya I ascended the throne, as Harihara had no sons. Bukka Raya I proved to be an able ruler, successfully consolidating the empire and merging numerous small Hindu kingdoms into one vast and powerful realm. His most notable achievement was the subjugation of the Madurai Sultanate, a victory led by his son, Kampana. The conquest of Madurai remains one of the greatest military triumphs in the history of the Vijayanagara Empire, significantly enhancing its prestige and influence.

An inscription from the 14th century, located in Ramapuram village of Kadapa district, refers to Bukka Raya I as "PurvaPaschimaSamudradhipathi," indicating that the Vijayanagara Empire during his reign extended from the Bay of Bengal in the east to the Arabian Sea in the west. This vast expansion of territory underscored the empire's growing power and influence in the region.

Although Bukka Raya I was a devout follower of Shaivism, he was known for his religious tolerance. Under his rule, people of various religious beliefs enjoyed freedom and coexisted peacefully within the empire. His commitment to religious tolerance and his efforts to unify the diverse population under a single administration contributed to the stability and prosperity of the empire.

Devaraya II

Devaraya II, often regarded as one of the greatest rulers of the Sangama Dynasty, ascended the throne at a critical time and quickly took decisive measures to fortify and expand the Vijayanagara Empire. His reign is particularly noted for its progressive policies and significant cultural patronage.

One of Devaraya II's most remarkable initiatives was his policy of religious tolerance. Recognizing the importance of unity and the need for a strong military, he issued an ordinance that prohibited discrimination against Muslims. This policy not only promoted religious harmony within the empire but also allowed him to recruit skilled Muslim soldiers into his army, thereby enhancing the military strength of Vijayanagara. This inclusive approach laid the groundwork for a more integrated and robust society.

During Devaraya II's reign, the empire attracted the attention of foreign dignitaries, including the Persian ambassador Abdul Razzaq. Razzaq's visit to Vijayanagara provided a vivid account of the empire's topography, administration, and social conditions. His detailed observations highlight the prosperity and cultural richness of the Vijayanagara Empire during Devaraya II's rule.

Devaraya II was not only a capable ruler but also a patron of the arts and literature. Being a scholar himself, he supported poets and intellectuals across various languages, including Sanskrit and regional vernaculars. The Telugu poet Srinatha was among those honored in his court, receiving the title "KaviSarvabhauma" (Emperor of Poets) and the ceremonial "Kanakabhisheka" (anointment with gold), reflecting the high esteem in which he was held. Under Devaraya II's patronage, Vijayanagara became a hub of cultural and intellectual activity, further solidifying its reputation as a center of learning and the arts.

Unfortunately, the Sangama Dynasty began to decline after Devaraya II's death. His successors—Mallikarjuna, Virupaksha, and Praudhadevaraya—proved to be weak and inefficient rulers. Their inability to maintain the integrity of the empire led to internal strife and external challenges, weakening the dynasty and paving the way for its eventual downfall.

The Saluva Dynasty (1485-1505)

The transition from the Sangama to the Saluva Dynasty marked a significant shift in the history of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Saluva Dynasty's origins can be traced back to the Chalukya and Kalachuri kingdoms of Karnataka, with Kalyani as their capital. The earliest reference to the Saluvas is found in the Gorantla inscription, which reveals their lineage from the Kshatriya clan and their affiliation with the Arya gotra. They were devout followers of the Vaishnava teacher Thathacharya, which further influenced their governance and cultural policies.

SaluvaNarasimha Deva Raya, the founder of the Saluva Dynasty, initially ruled over the hereditary province of Chandragiri and later expanded his territory to include South Arcot. His reign, though brief, was marked by efforts to recover lost territories and strengthen the empire's defenses. However, his rule was challenged by internal dissent, as the nobles and chieftains who had supported his rise to power later withheld their cooperation. Much of his reign was spent in conflicts with these provincial chiefs, which distracted him from broader governance.

Despite these challenges, SaluvaNarasimha Deva Raya made significant contributions to the reorganization of the empire. His efforts to build a strong defense mechanism and his patronage of cultural and artistic traditions helped to stabilize the Vijayanagara Empire during a tumultuous period. His reign brought a measure of peace and prosperity, allowing the empire to remain a dominant force in South India.

Following SaluvaNarasimha Deva Raya's death, the empire was effectively controlled by Narasanayaka, a powerful military leader who served as the de facto ruler. Narasanayaka crowned SaluvaNarasimha's son, ThimmaBhupala, as the king, but ThimmaBhupala's lack of capability soon became apparent. Narasanayaka's growing influence led to tensions and eventually, a power struggle between him and ThimmaBhupala. To resolve the crisis and prevent further instability, Narasanayaka seized control of Vijayanagara and imposed his terms on the young king, ImmadiNarasimha, the younger son of SaluvaNarasimha.

The decline of the Saluva Dynasty set the stage for the emergence of the Tuluva Dynasty, marking the beginning of a new chapter in Vijayanagara's history. Despite the political turmoil, literature and the arts continued to thrive under Narasanayaka's patronage. Esteemed poets such as Nandi Timmana and RajanathaDindima were prominent figures in his court, contributing to the literary and cultural vibrancy of the empire.

The Tuluva Dynasty (1505-1570)

Viranarasimha (1505-1509)

Viranarasimha, the eldest son of Narasanayaka, ascended the throne in A.D. 1505, marking the end of the Saluva Dynasty and the beginning of the Tuluva Dynasty in the Vijayanagara Empire. His reign is noted for significant advancements in foreign trade, particularly in horse trading, which was crucial for strengthening the Vijayanagara army. The inclusion of horses in his military ranks greatly enhanced the empire's cavalry, contributing to its military prowess. Viranarasimha's rule laid the groundwork for the consolidation and expansion of the empire, setting the stage for his more illustrious successor.

Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529)

The reign of Krishnadevaraya is often hailed as the golden era in the history of the Vijayanagara Empire and South India as a whole. After Viranarasimha's death in A.D. 1509, Krishnadevaraya, who had been groomed under the careful guidance of SaluvaTimma, ascended the throne. His reign was characterized by remarkable achievements in administration, military conquests, and cultural patronage.

Krishnadevaraya was a strategic and visionary ruler who earned widespread acclaim, not only from his subjects but also from foreign visitors who documented his reign. His military campaigns were particularly noteworthy, including the successful invasion of Kalinga and the recovery of key territories such as Udayagiri and Kondavidu, which had been lost by his predecessors. These victories solidified his reputation as a powerful and capable monarch.

In addition to his military accomplishments, Krishnadevaraya was also a prolific writer and patron of literature. His magnum opus, *Amuktamalyada*, is a classic Telugu work that vividly describes the ideals of kingship, royal duties, and the administration of a prosperous kingdom. The text also reflects his deep concern for the welfare of his subjects and his hands-on approach to governance. Krishnadevaraya personally addressed the grievances of his people and maintained strict oversight of provincial governors and other officials, ensuring a well-managed empire.

Agriculture was a priority during his reign, and he took significant steps to improve irrigation and water management. Krishnadevaraya constructed a dam at Corangal and the Basavanna water channel, projects that were undertaken with assistance from Portuguese engineers. These initiatives boosted agricultural productivity and contributed to the overall prosperity of the empire.

Krishnadevaraya's patronage of the arts was unparalleled, earning him the title "Andhrabhoja" (the Bhoja of Andhra). The Prabandha literature genre reached its zenith during his rule, with

Krishnadevaraya himself contributing several works in both Sanskrit and Telugu. He also established the renowned literary assembly known as "BhuvanaVijayam," which was adorned by the *Ashtadiggajas*, eight eminent Telugu poets whose works have become legendary in South Indian literary history.

Religious tolerance was another hallmark of Krishnadevaraya's reign. He supported the peaceful coexistence of various religious communities within his empire, as evidenced by his generous patronage of the Tirumala temple and other religious institutions. Architecturally, his reign is remembered for the construction of magnificent temples and structures, including the Krishna temple, the Hazara Rama temple, and the Rayagopuram at Kanchipuram. These monuments stand as enduring symbols of his deep interest in art and architecture.

Achyuta Devaraya (1529-1542)

After the illustrious reign of Krishnadevaraya, AchyutaDevaraya ascended the throne amid considerable political tension. His succession was contested by Rama Raya, the son-in-law of Krishnadevaraya, who also laid claim to the throne. This conflict was eventually resolved through a compromise, with Rama Raya being granted control over a portion of the empire. The death of Krishnadevaraya had emboldened external forces such as PrataparudraGajapati of Odisha and Ismail Adil Shah of Bijapur to launch invasions against the Vijayanagara Kingdom, aiming to reclaim lost territories. However, these threats were met with a robust defense under AchyutaDevaraya's leadership.

AchyutaDevaraya's reign was marked by his efforts to maintain the territorial integrity of the Vijayanagara Empire. He successfully thwarted the invasions and also suppressed internal revolts, most notably the rebellion led by his minister Sellappa. To quell this uprising, AchyutaDevaraya dispatched his brother-in-law, SalakarajuChinna Tirumala, who managed to restore stability, thus reaffirming Vijayanagara's dominance over South India.

Following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Achyuta Devaraya was a devout Vaishnavite and a patron of the arts. His contributions to temple architecture are evident in the magnificent structures that were built or enhanced during his reign. The Lepakshi temple, with its intricate carvings and grand architecture, stands as a testament to the artistic excellence of his era. He also made significant contributions to the temples at Tirumala, Kalahasti, and the Vitthala temple in the capital city of Hampi. The musical pillars of these temples, in particular, showcase the advanced engineering and sculptural skills of the time. It was during AchyutaDevaraya's reign that the Portuguese traveler, Nuniz, visited Vijayanagara and documented the grandeur and history of the empire.

Rama Raya

Rama Raya, a shrewd and ambitious leader, played a pivotal role in the later years of the Vijayanagara Empire. He was the great-grandson of Bukka Raya and initially served as an officer during the reign of SaluvaNarasimha. After facing a significant defeat while serving the Nawab of Golconda in a war against Bijapur, he was dismissed from his position. Subsequently, Rama Raya joined the army of Krishnadevaraya, where he quickly rose through the ranks, eventually winning the emperor's confidence and securing his position by marrying Krishnadevaraya's daughter.

Rama Raya's primary objective was to restore the Vijayanagara Empire to its former glory, as seen during the reign of Krishnadevaraya. A master strategist and politician, he employed a divide-and-rule policy to manipulate the five Deccan Sultanates, playing them against each other to maintain his dominance. His diplomatic maneuvers successfully brought these sultans under his influence,

effectively making them vassals to Vijayanagara. However, Rama Raya's tactics eventually provoked the sultans, leading them to unite against him in a formidable alliance.

The culmination of these tensions was the Battle of Talikota in 1565, also known as the Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi. The *RamarayanaBakhar*, a contemporary record, details the events leading up to this catastrophic battle. Despite his advanced age—ninety-six years old—Rama Raya led his forces from the front, displaying remarkable courage and determination. However, the battle ended in disaster for Vijayanagara when Rama Raya was killed on the battlefield, leading to a rout of the Vijayanagara army.

In the aftermath of the battle, Rama Raya's brother, Tirumala, fled to Penukonda with the young ruler Sadasiva Raya, carrying as much of the royal treasury as possible. The victorious Muslim armies entered the capital city of Vijayanagara, unleashing six months of unrelenting plunder and destruction. The detailed accounts of this plundering by historians like Robert Sewell and Ferishta vividly depict the devastation that followed. Although the empire survived for another century, the Battle of Talikota marked the beginning of its irreversible decline. The city of Vijayanagara never regained its former glory and the empire ceased to be the dominant power in South India.

Aravidu Dynasty (1570-1680)

Tirumala Raya, Sriranga I, and Venkatapati Raya

Following the catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Talikota in 1565, the Vijayanagara Empire, now under the Aravidu dynasty, faced immense challenges in regaining its former glory. Tirumala Raya, who assumed power after fleeing to Penukonda, endeavored to restore the empire's strength and stability. Recognizing the importance of cultural revival in re-establishing the empire's prestige, Tirumala Raya set up a court at Penukonda, where he welcomed notable scholars and poets, including the esteemed poet Ramarajabhushana.

In an effort to streamline administration and maintain control over the fragmented territories of the empire, Tirumala Raya divided the kingdom into three parts, appointing his sons as viceroys over each region. Despite these efforts, the decline of Vijayanagara continued, particularly under the reign of Tirumala Raya's son, Sriranga I.

After Sriranga I's short and ineffective rule, his brother, Venkatapati Raya, ascended to the throne. Among the rulers of the Aravidu dynasty, Venkatapati Raya stands out as one of the most capable and effective leaders after Rama Raya. He worked diligently to restore order and strengthen the empire, extending his patronage to renowned scholars and poets such as TarigopulaMallanna, MatiaAnantha, and Tathacharya, who graced his court. Venkatapati Raya's administrative skills earned him the respect and satisfaction of his subjects, and his reign marked a brief period of stability and prosperity within the otherwise declining empire.

Succession Crisis and the Decline of the Aravidu Dynasty

The death of Venkatapati Raya, however, plunged the empire into chaos. A fierce war of succession ensued, as various factions within the royal family vied for power. Sriranga II, the son of Sriranga I, initially succeeded the throne but soon faced challenges to his authority. Bayamma, the widow of Venkatapati Raya, supported by her brother Jaggaraya of the Gobburi family, sought to secure the throne for her own son, leading to a bitter conflict. Though Sriranga II emerged victorious in this struggle, his triumph was short-lived; he was assassinated by his own vassals, further destabilizing the kingdom.

Taking advantage of the internal strife, the Sultan of Bijapur launched repeated attacks on the weakened empire. The last ruler of the Aravidu dynasty, Sriranga III, struggled to defend the remaining territories. He ultimately lost the capital of Vellore and was forced to retreat to Belur, where he was reduced to the status of a powerless ruler without an empire. The death of Sriranga III around 1678 marked the definitive end of the Vijayanagara Empire, closing a chapter in South Indian history that had once been filled with immense power, cultural brilliance, and military might.

DISCUSSION

The Vijayanagara Empire emerged as a powerful response to political fragmentation and external invasions. The Sangama dynasty laid a strong foundation under Harihara I and Bukka Raya I, consolidating territories and establishing administrative frameworks. The empire expanded significantly, stretching from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal.

Under rulers like Devaraya II, Vijayanagara adopted progressive policies, including religious tolerance and military inclusivity. The recruitment of Muslim soldiers and the patronage of diverse cultural traditions reflect a pragmatic approach to governance.

The Tuluva dynasty, particularly under Krishnadevaraya, marked the zenith of the empire. His reign witnessed remarkable achievements in military conquests, administration, irrigation, literature, and temple architecture. The flourishing of Telugu literature, the establishment of literary assemblies, and the construction of monumental temples highlight the cultural renaissance of this period.

However, the later phase of the empire was marked by internal instability and external threats. The rise of Aliya Rama Raya introduced a new phase of political diplomacy, characterized by manipulation of the Deccan Sultanates. While initially successful, this strategy ultimately led to the formation of a united front against Vijayanagara. The decisive moment came with the Battle of Talikota, which resulted in the defeat of Vijayanagara forces and the death of Rama Raya. The subsequent sack of the capital city, Hampi, marked a catastrophic turning point. Although the Aravidu dynasty attempted to sustain the empire, internal conflicts and external invasions led to its gradual disintegration.

CONCLUSION

The Vijayanagara Empire stands as a landmark in the history of South India, representing a period of political unity, economic prosperity, and cultural brilliance. Its rise was a response to external threats and internal disintegration, while its success lay in effective governance, military strength, and cultural patronage.

The contributions of rulers such as Harihara I and Krishnadevaraya underscore the empire's enduring legacy. However, the empire's decline, culminating in the Battle of Talikota, highlights the impact of internal divisions and external alliances. Despite its fall, the Vijayanagara Empire left a lasting imprint on South Indian history. Its contributions to administration, culture, literature, and architecture continue to influence the region, making it a pivotal chapter in the broader narrative of Indian civilization.

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