

# NATURE OF THE VIJAYANAGARA STATE: WAS IT A MILITARY STATE?

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The administration of Vijayanagara resembled the administrative system of Hoysalas and Saunas. But the Vijayanagara emperors brought in timely changes and reforms to suit their administrative requirements. They had built a very strong army to realize their goals. The mighty army of the empire raised the stature of the king in the eyes of neighboring kings. But it was not completely a military state as the governance of the state was not completely under the control of the army. Moreover, the purpose of forming such an army was not just the security reasons. Along with the expansion of the empire, the army was entrusted upon the activities of carrying out reforms and maintaining peace and order. Welfare of the people was the first and foremost aim of their administrative system. The rulers responded to the needs and requirements of the various sections of the people.

Diverse opinions have been expressed by different scholars over the nature of Vijayanagar state. Various theories have been applied such as feudal structures, Segmentary state, military fiscalism etc. The system of administration in Karnataka evolved gradually, every succeeding dynasty retaining the system it inherited and making certain necessary changes suitable to the changing conditions. Robert Sewell interpreted the system as the changelessness of structure as part of the Vijayanagara polity. His notion is that the kingdom became the 'saviour' of the south for 250 years and the rise of Vijayanagar kingdom was 'no miracle' but, 'the natural result of the persistent efforts made by Muslims to conquer all India. But in reality, Vijayanagara was involved in war not solely with Islamic states but also with many Hindu states.

Continuous involvement in wars for offensive and defensive purposes of Vijayanagara magnified the royal power and gave the state, some extent, a military character. Historians like Nilakanta Sastri, viewed the later medieval period in South India, during which the Chola and Vijayanagara empires took shape, as a period of cultural resurgence, marked by the re-emergence of highly centralized and powerful polities, after a period of early medieval fragmentation and decline. For, Nilakanta Sastri, Vijayanagara was an exemplar of the *Hindu Culture*, whose task as to conserve Hindu society and save it from the dissolution which threatened it from several directions. Thus, Sastri, viewed Vijayanagara as a powerful and centralized military state that *because the focus of a resurgent Hindu culture*. This is because of the prevalence of *Nayankara system* and the prevalence of *Nayakas* as warrior chieftains. It is appropriate to note here that Nayakas were asked to assist

the Vijayanagara rulers at the time of war as royal subordinates, but military duty played only minor role in the selection of a *Nayaka* by the rulers. Therefore, the view that the state is based on military tenure may not hold true. D.C Sircar also supported the view of Nilakantha Sastri.

The entire political system was interpreted by T.V. Mahalingam as a bureaucratic set up with divisions like central, provincial, and local governments. This interpretation of Vijayanagara, as a highly centralized and effective military state, drew primarily on inscriptions and historical accounts and remained the dominant view of the empire. But it may be wrong to call Vijayanagara an essentially military state, because the administration was not completely in the hands of the military personnel nor was, war its sole purpose.

Burton Stein observes a new form of polity in the Vijayanagara period. He applied a radical new model to interpreting the polity of the Vijayanagara. His *Segmentary state* model adopted a perspective and overturned the long standing view of Vijayanagara as a strong and centralized empire. Burton Stein argued that, the kings under Vijayanagara were ritual figures, rather than like their contemporaries in Western Europe autocrats ruling bureaucratized absolute regimes. Outside the *core* territory of the empire, the Vijayanagara monarchs exercised only a *ritual sovereignty* and that even at the height of their power and the resources commanded were formidable, the Rayas were content with the homage and occasional tribute of distant chiefs. Moreover, they tolerated, if they did not actually foster, the creation by their nominal agents of compact territories – known as the *Nayaka states*, whose competition later contributed the decline of the empire. So Burton Stein rejects the centralized and feudal mode of the state polity during Vijayanagara. He not only applies it to Vijayanagar but to late medieval South India.

The Characteristics of *Segmentary State* are;

- A central government with absolute authority at the centre and ritual or nominal sovereignty over the similar and mutually exclusive peripheral constituencies.
- A specialized administrative staff for *centre* and its repetition on a small scale in the *peripheral* constituents organized into a hierarchy in relation to the centre.
- The power of the *centre* repeated at each level in a descending order and the flexibility of the political relations of the remote points of the territory to the centre.

Burton Stein adapted the *Segmentary state* model as an assemblage of numerous states of which one has primacy as a source of ritual sovereignty, but all exercise actual political control over a part, or segment, of the political system encompassed by the state, subordinate levels of *zones* of the Segmentary state may be distinguished and the organization of these if *pyramidal*. The relationship between the *centre* and the *peripheral* units of any single segment is the same-in reduced form-as the relationship between the prime centre and all peripheral focuses power. Burton Stein identified such state system under Vijayanagara.

Burton Stein adopted the African model of Aiden Southal. Southal adopted this to African tribal society. So severe theoretical objection came against the application of a model evolved out of the tribal society and polity in Africa to an advanced peasant polity and beyond. Historians of conservative methodology distanced themselves from this model, because it had weak empirical base.

But Japanese scholar Noboru Karashima rejected the *Segmentary State model* to the polity of Vijayanagara. The system of sub-infeudation was applied to Vijayanagar state by Karashima. He adopts feudal interpretation to the Vijayanagara polity, particularly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He observes a difference of grade among Nayakas in relation to the central power which may suggest the existence sub-infeudation. His model focused upon the relations between kings and local lordship and the appearance of complex land holding rights. Karashima has expanded the empirical ground of Nilakanta Sastri through exhaustive incorporation of new inscriptions and through analysis of the inscriptional contents by using the most sophisticated tools and able scholarship of historians like Subbarayalu.

But the argument, whether the Vijayanagara State was a feudal one or not assumes importance because of the existence of military tenures and the economic obligation involved. Though the king was at the apex of the administration, the presence of *Nayankara system* and the *Ayyagar system* at the provincial level weakened the authority of the king. Though, the feudatories seem to obey the king's orders at the initial stages, their hold over military troops and lands sustained their position. It ultimately loosened king's grip over administration and led to oppression at the lower levels of society.

### **NAYANKARA SYSTEM**

It was an important characteristic of the Vijayanagara political organization in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *Nayakas* ruled as feudal landlords and they controlled the production of their territories through a hierarchical network. Like association with temples, development of trade under *Nayaka* administration, rise of new land lords under *Nayaka* administration emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the north and south Arcot districts of Tamilnadu. The *Nayakas* were essentially a group who granted the territory and legitimacy of their rule by the king on the one hand, and who strengthened their power through the accumulation of certain rights over the management of production in local areas on the other. Thus, they may be regarded as feudal lords and 16<sup>th</sup> in South India can be held as the period when feudal relations developed to a certain degree at least in one region. In other words, according to this system the ruler was considered to be the owner of the land and he distributed the lands to his dependents. The Vijayanagara kingship in peripheral parts was a symbolic one and the rulers exercised their control through their military chiefs. The military chiefs or warriors held the title of *Nayaka* or *amara Nayaka*. These *Nayakas* possessed revenue rights over land or territory granted to them by the king, known as *Amaram*. In the enjoyment of this office, they were to perform two functions: i) They had to pay a fixed amount to the

imperial treasury and ii) In times of war, they were required to supply a sufficient number of troops to the king and lead them in the war. Besides these, they had certain obligations like giving gifts to temples, repair and building of tanks, reclamation of waste land and collection of dues from temples.

The constitution and political position of the *Nayakas* were however different from the provincial governors. The governors were the representatives of the king in a province and ruled on his behalf and were liable to be transferred from one province to another. The *Nayakas*, on the other hand, were military vassals holding military *Amaram*, with specific military and financial obligations to the king. The constitutional position of the *Nayakas* appears to have been different from that of the provincial governors. While the governor was the ruler's representative in a province but the *Nayaka* was a military vassal. *Nayakas* enjoyed comparatively greater freedom in his territory. The *Nayakas* of Keladi, Chitradurg and Yelahanka were the prominent among the numerous *Nayakas* of Vijayanagara. The importance of the *Nayakas* depends on the geographical importance and size of the territories under the control and their resource.

### Features

The most prominent feature of *Nayaka* administration was the *Nayakas* close relationship with the king, though this varied in degree. The requests to him for tax remissions or land grants are frequently referred to in the inscriptions, and many of them were agents working under the king at a certain period of their rule. Therefore, the legitimacy of their territorial rule was initially derived from the authority given to the king.

Another important factor shaping the characteristics of *Nayakas* of this period was the condition of the economy particularly trade, which had started probably in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, continued all through the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in this region.

*Nayakas* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century responded to this development by drawing artisans and merchants into the framework of their rule, giving encouragement and protection to them. The 16<sup>th</sup> century *Nayakas* displayed the characteristics of feudal lords. This feudal relationship was seen not only between the king and *Nayakas*, but also among *Nayakas* themselves, between superior and inferiors. At the bottom level this feudal hierarchy embraced the big landholders in a village. There was seen at this time the emergence of new landholders in terms of caste bound communities.

The *Nayakas* accumulated certain rights to land or village, as was shown by the *kani* right to land or the *talaiyarikkam* of temple villages. Many *Nayakas* seem to have been associated with the management of temples also, which enabled them to accumulate such rights. Their relationship with landlords and cultivators, and with artisans and merchants, was therefore not only as tax collectors or administrative agents of the king, but also as landlords who controlled production in the locality, directly or indirectly through the hierarchical network of land vassal relations, which reached down to the cultivators in the villages.

## Interpretations

The *Nayankara system* received a lot of attention of scholars to understand the process of consolidation, through which Vijayanagara State acquired the form of a complete empire. Though the *Nayaka* or *Nayankara system* was first described by N. Venkataramanayya in his *Studies in the History of the Third Dynasty of Vijayanagara*, but later many more traits were added to it. The system, in simplest terms, is understood as the king granting his rights of *superior* shares in tracts of land called *Amaram* to officials called *Nayakas*, in return for the provision of specified sum of money, men and horse. These *Nayakas* were more like land magnets and did not give any fixed revenue to the king.

*Nayankara system* was not just a part of agrarian set-up also the prime tool for carrying out centralization. It was a politico-military tenure seeking to increase centralized control over the agrarian revenue.

As a matter of fact, there is no consensus among the scholars over the nature of Vijayanagara State and hence, for each scholar the *Nayaka* system acquires a different meaning and position in the Vijayanagara State and Society. One has to reconstruct a holistic portray of the agrarian structure of this time by looking at it from pre-Vijayanagara times and the subsequent changes in the relations of production.

Vijayanagara empire's period spans from mid-14<sup>th</sup> to mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, in which new territories were conquered and many changes in administrative structure were introduced. We should keep in mind that as many as four dynasties ruled in this time and the heart land of the empire was the Kannada region. The *peripheral* areas i.e., the Telugu speaking areas and parts of Tamil country were annexed later on the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The early rulers tried to organize territory in administrative units called *rajyas* and placed under superior officer called *Durga Dannayaka*. These *rajyas* were fundamental managerial and revenue units but lost their original substance once the *Nayaka system* matured under Krishnadevaraya in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In his observations based on the literary source, *Rayavachakam*, N. Venkataramanayya affirms that most of the country was assigned by the king to *Nayaka* officers, who were obliged to render military service in lieu of their holdings. But Burton Stein prefers to call this tenure just a prebendal right for a lordship of authority. According to Burton-Stein, the Vijayanagara State was constituted by the recognition of a *sacred ruler who's over lordship is expressed in essentially ritual idiom*. Though Stein does not reject the military duties and traces the existence of *Nayaka* institution to the times of Devaraya II in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. He denounces the accounts of Nuniz and Domingo Paes when provide eyewitness accounts of the system, for they lacked linguistic skills.

Burton Stein, therefore, does not look upon *Nayakas* as agents of centralized control of the Vijayanagara Kings, as portrayed by Domingo Paes and Nunez. Instead, they are seen more as agents of conquest state, charged with extracting money revenue from the conquered Tamil areas and producing the peasant resistance against the extortionist demands of their land lords and Brahmin allies. Stein, by applying the *Segmentary State* model, points out that Cholas attempted to ensure the cohesion of their empire through an overarching ideology of ritualized kingship but the strategy for territorial integration adopted by the Vijayanagara rulers, however, placed greater emphasis on relatively uniform structures of control and surplus extraction, in the *peripheral* areas, which led to the gradual reconstructing of power relations in the medieval Tamil country. Central to this transformation was the precipitation of the decline of earlier assemblies like *ur*, *nadu*, *nagaram*, etc, of the micro – localities.

Nobaru Karashima after doing the thorough analysis of the inscriptional evidence estimates that there were nearly 500 *Nayaka* officials in the Tamil Country in 16<sup>th</sup> century and most of them held territory bestowed upon them by the king. These officials controlled production within territories by creation of commercial centers and markets, by encouraging settlement of cultivators and artisans with tax concessions and by creating and maintaining irrigation facilities. Their close association with local temples as donors and protectors provide them with social status and material benefits as well. For Karashima the *Nayaka system* functioned as the state ruling system in the *peripheral* areas of the Tamil country, essentially giving it a *feudal* dimension.

The agrarian system or structure of the Vijayanagara period came to witness many changes from the Chola times. N. Venkataramanayya classifies the tenurial system of the Vijayanagara period under three broad divisions. They were *bhandaravada*, *amara* and *manya*. The first kind of land was under the crown, territory directly managed by the king's officers; *amara* the most ubiquitous category, denoted the territory assigned to the *Nayaka* or *amaram* officials, who collected taxes; and *manya* was the tax-free category of land which was given to temples or endowed gifts etc. But Burton Stein stresses on the fact that, this tenurial system was complex and there was overlapping nature of land tenures, different from the concepts and the hypotheses formulated in the incipient stage of Vijayanagara State. Karashima though places relative importance on cultivation by tenant – cultivators and agrestic servitude in the discussion of production relations.

These *Nayakas* were also provincial administrators of the empire and were located in urban centers. N. Venkataramanayya also says that due to being urban officials, there emerged a hierarchy among the *Nayaka* officials. Venkataramanayya tries to look at the *Nayankara System* against the backdrop of important social and occupational changes in the society where non-Brahmin castes occupied a better position in controlling production system by commanding the services of lower agricultural castes, artisans and weavers. But they lost their superiority to the *Nayaka* official in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There was socio-economic confrontation

between the direct producers and land lord and ruling class. In this back ground, the advent, of *Nayaka* system is relevant as it presented the *Nayaka* officials as legitimate rulers by arbitrating the conflicts.

Tax assessment was generally commuted in money terms. Commercial taxes were also becoming important now as compared to the pre- Vijayanagara period. Nunez and Domingo Paes in their accounts state that, the Vijayanagara kings could command the resource of the entire country but it is not verifiable from any other sources. Also another problem related to their accounts is that they are virtually silent on the mode of collection the resources.

Ravi Aravind Palat, in the context of the *Nayaka System*, comments that it is difficult to determine with any degree of precision, that inscriptional evidence also suggests

Bbconsiderable spatial and temporal variations.

John M. Fritz while looking at the *Nayaka System* as a tool of urban administration and surplus appropriation comes to a conclusion that the imperial capital becomes the manifestation of the interplay of economic, political and administrative structures. Burton Stein also stresses on the fact that the *Nayaka system* got influenced when the Vijayanagara kings tried to conceptualize some changes resulting from the growing trade and commerce, especially maritime. Whereas Karashima is inclined to give Vijayanagara state and the *Nayaka system* a feudal interpretation cashing on the fact that around mid-16<sup>th</sup> century there emerged a long hierarchy among *Nayakas*, who by the 17<sup>th</sup> century became independent from the king.

But for Nilakanta Sastri, the characterization of *Nayakas* into two groups seems important because the first group before 1560's where military chiefs appointed by the kings, who held fiefs but the *Nayakas* after 1560's held more autonomous status, when the *central* authority started to corrode. In Sastri's views, Vijayanagara state was a military confederacy constituting many chieftains led by powerful lords.

But Krishnswami Aiyangar opines that the *Nayakas* were feudal lords as they held fiefs in a feudal setup of the state. To T.V. Mahalingam and D.C. Sircar it appeared as land lordism, a local variant of feudalism. But Venkataramanayya discarded the feudal interpretation on the basis that since homage did not exist, therefore, the *Nayaka system* should be characterized as a military system under a central power.

So there is no agreed conclusion neither on the nature of Vijayanagara State or on the role of *Nayaka system* in it. But, yes it certainly provided the kings with a potential tool for governing and pacifying the newly annexed *peripheral* territories and establishing a centralized-militarized administration by appropriating surplus. In terms of economy the strong presence of revenue farming should also be taken into account to comprehend the *Nayaka system*. Historians have largely come to view the system as a distinctive form of military land tenure

assigned to over lords, working well under the presence of central authority but sometimes the system led to centrifugal tendencies.

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