

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Role of Women in Vijayanagara Kingdom, Karnataka, India

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### **Abstract:**

*Women and their role is a prominent and predominant factor in all ages with little variation. The role and status of women during Vijayanagara period is laudable. It occupies a unique place in the social and cultural history of South India figuring in all walks of life. Women had constructive role in administrative, political, economic, agricultural, social, cultural, art and paintings. Women had material wealth and good social status. They were liberal donors too. Women of different ranks made endowments to various institutions.*

*However, Devadasi system or temple prostitution a socio religious institution was in vogue with divine sanction. Hindu society at that time considered it as a lawful and honorable position. Child marriage was in practice. Dowry system was prevalent and became a great burden on many families. Sati system also prevailed in Vijayanagara period and was confined to upper class of Hindu society.*

*Women had active role in celebration of festivals. Dance and music was performed by princess and common people were in receipt of patronage from rulers. To certain extent people gave equal status to women in society and in government appointments. Women were treated with respect as daughters, wives and mothers. With the exception of evil cultures of sati and prostitution which had state sanction, the role and status of women during Vijayanagara period was laudable.*

**Keywords:** *Women, constructive role, social position, endowments, devadasi system, prostitution, child marriage, dowry, sati system, dance and music, ornaments and garments.*

### **1. Introduction**

Women empowerment is the present-day mantra. It denotes that women do well in all fields equal to men, and even excel men in certain fields. The Centre and State governments are taking numerous measures to safe guard the Girl Child. The government is concerned to maintain sex ratio by protecting girl child. Education is the main weapon for women's progress. The women and child development ministry of Government of India firmly envisaged – "Beti Bachao (save daughter) and Beti Padao (educate daughter)" schemes in order to protect the girl child birth and her upbringing. The Sukanya Samridhi Yojana scheme is also introduced by the Prime Minister for the benefit of girl child. All these would go a long way only if the awareness and confidence among the masses that they no longer feel the birth of a girl child is a curse or a burden to them. We are still witnessing day to day happenings around us, and the valiant struggles waged by women to achieve social equality along with men.

With these present scenarios in mind, we peep back into the medieval period in general and Vijayanagara period in particular, in order to know the role of women and their condition. Vijayanagara period occupies a unique place in the social and cultural history of South India. The immense contribution of women to the cause of social & cultural development of Vijayanagara period was outstanding. Women figured prominently in different walks of life. The position of women in a society is usually regarded as a fair index of its excellence, of its culture, and character of its civilization. Indian tradition generally respects womanhood. According to Kautilya "Gods roam in the country where women are honored", according to Manu "where women are treated with respect, Gods are pleased".

### **2. Sources**

The role of women in Vijayanagara period is analyzed based on foreign accounts, archeological, epigraphic and contemporary sources. In addition to archeological evidence, literary sources also are very useful to know the depth of the subject. It enables to reveal many social and religious activities in which the historical characters moved<sup>1</sup>. Literature affords valuable glimpses of the social and economic life of the people, though often in a more idealistic than realistic manner<sup>2</sup>. In this direction Sanskrit works, Telugu and Kannada works are a great help to study the role of women in Vijayanagara period.

### **3. Women in Vijayanagara Period**

In ancient times the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event almost everywhere, as son was valued more than a daughter<sup>3</sup>. Though the birth of daughter was seen with disdain initially, later on she was given equal rights with men. During the days of

Hoysalas, women had equal right with men regarding ancestral property. Inscriptions state that the head of a family could not make grants without the consent of his sons and daughters<sup>4</sup>.

### 3.1. Political Power of Women

From the available sources, such as inscriptions, monuments, literary works, foreign accounts etc., we are able to find that the women played a constructive role in administrative, political, economic, agricultural, social, cultural, art and paintings. Like Gangas, Rastrakutas, Chalukyas and Hoysala queens, Vijayanagara queens too had administrative powers. Jaganmohini, queen of Krishnadevaraya was administering Kambam near Kadapa in Andhra Pradesh and served the common people in different ways<sup>5</sup>. On the death of Krishnadevaraya, his queens Chinnadevi and Tirumaladevi, ordered the ministers to hand over the city to Ramaraya and Tirumalaraya and the order was accordingly carried out<sup>6</sup>. Vijayanagara queens as well as common women folk were accompanying their husbands into military expeditions. They knew elephant riding, horse riding and camel riding, and actively participated in the battle fields. As per E.C., VI, Kp. 47, pp.19-21, Kaladevi, sister of Imadi Bhairarasa Wodeyar, the ruler of Kalasa Karkala kingdom governed the Vegunj region as governor. Queen Varadambika, the pattamahishi of Achyutaraya, after the death of Achyutaraya requested Bijapur Sultan to come to her aid to secure the Vijayanagara throne for her son Venkatadri as she sensed the evil intentions of her brother Salaka Chinna Tirumaladeva in whose charge king Achyutaraya had left his son Venkatadri before he died in 1542 A. D.<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.2. Wealth and Social Position of Women

Inscriptions of Vijayanagara period and other literary sources indicate that the women of Vijayanagara period were with material wealth and social position, and were also generous donors of land, money, villages, ornaments, cloth, articles etc. These donations were made to deities of temples by queens as well as common women. The Tirumala Tirupati temple, the premiere temple of Vijayanagara received the largest royal benefactions and public donations. Tirumala Devasthanam Inscription III pp 168-171 reveals that Tirumaladeviamman, senior queen of Krishnadevaraya donated a gold cup to Sri Venkateshwara for offering milk during night worship. Inscriptions of 1513 A.D, 1514 A.D, 1515 A.D, and 1517 A.D, reveal that Chinnadevi, Junior queen of Krishnadevaraya donated gold vessels to God Tiruvengalanatha, donated padakam and kantha mala and a village by name Mudiayar to Sri Venkateshwara of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam. She paid one thousand varahas as kaanika to God Varadaraju at Vishnu Kanchi. Queen Varadambika, wife of Achyutaraya gifted one thousand cows and also assigned the income from 17 villages to Arulala Perumal temple (epigraph of 1533 A.D), she also granted the income from 6 villages to Tirumala temple treasury for making offerings in her name. There are instances which show that not only royal women made donations, but also ordinary women too. In 1390 A.D Padumaladevi gifted land to the temple of Amritanathadeva. An inscription records that on January 19, A.D 1458, Honnamavva, the lady reader in the palace of Pradhana Devaraya Maharaya gifted land to God Mallikarjuna. It is clearly evident that the women of different ranks made endowments either to temples, choultries, or other public utility works, or to Brahmins. Women were highly religious during the Vijayanagara period and played a dominant role. The royal women, queens and ordinary women were temple donors, and women musicians served the temples. Thus, religion affected women in every aspect of life.

### 3.3. Prevalence of Devadasi System

Devadasi system, an early medieval institution gained considerable popularity during the Vijayanagara period. Devadasi means servants of God meant for the services of the almighty. The Bhavishya Purana notes that the individual who dedicated girls to sun temple would gain a place in Suryaloka<sup>8</sup>. Devadasi system is a socio religious institution “where in religion conspires with sex immorality to give divine sanction”<sup>9</sup>. This institution was also called the temple prostitution, it originated in the custom of dedicating female children to temples. These girls were entrusted with certain duties such as cleaning the temples, lighting the lamps, decorating the temples, and also singing and dancing on festival days and on ceremonial occasions. Devadasis are unmarried literate accomplished in music and dance, and majority of them earned their livelihood through prostitution which was being sanctified and tolerated. Hindu society also considered it as a lawful and honorable position. Temple girls become an inspiration for the sculptural representation of the dancing figures on the walls of the temples<sup>10</sup>. Some of the enlightened women too became devadasis on their own will. During the reign of Harihara; Vambiyakka, an admirer of Harihara’s poetry on her own free will became a devadasi. During the reign of Krishnadevaraya, Chinnadevi was a famous dancer in the temple of Virupaksha at Hampi. She was a devadasi and famous in music, singing, dancing and also very beautiful. Krishnadevaraya was attracted by the beauty and married Chinnadevi and she became the favorite queen. All the devadasis were prostitutes, but not all prostitutes were devadasis. The government was deriving income from prostitutes by levying taxes on their profession. Devadasis were encouraged by Kings, Brahmins, Provincial, Military, Town officials, Merchants and Traders. “The girls were of low moral character but were all the same held in high esteem even by the royalty”<sup>11</sup>.

### 3.4. Child Marriage & Dowry System

Child marriage was in vogue during Vijayanagara period. Linschoten during his visit says, “When the women in seven years old and men nine years they do marry but they come not together before to bare children”<sup>12</sup>. Barbosa says about the people of Vijayanagara, the king and the country people marry almost in our way and have a marriage law, yet they marry several wives, especially the rich who are able to maintain them<sup>13</sup>. While describing the customs and the practice of the Lingayats, he says “they marry only one wife and one of them died she buries herself alive”<sup>14</sup>. During the reign of Devaraya, Kanyadhana type of marriage prevailed. Kanyadhana

means giving in marriage a virgin to a man. Kanyadhana was also considered as an act of punya or merit. This practice is evident from the numerous inscriptions.

The dowry system was prevalent in the Vijayanagara days. The problem of vadu shulka or brides price was a serious menace in those days and was a great burden on many families. Taxes on marriages was prevalent. Devaraya II granted the remission of taxes on marriages of all classes in Ballapura in 1432 A.D, perhaps just to discourage the dowry system<sup>15</sup>. The ratio of men and women was main cause for dowry. The male population was lower than the female population, and hence there was demand for men and led to dowry.

### 3.5. Evils of Sati System

In addition to dowry system another evil practice Sati system was also prevalent in Vijayanagara period. Sati or Sahagamana was social institution which permitted burning of Hindu widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands, the custom was confined to the upper class of the Hindu society. This did not apply for men whose wife died earlier. All foreign travelers like Nicolo Conti, Barbosa, Nuniz Caesar Frederick, Linschoten etc., gave us vivid and real picture of how Sati was performed. There was strong belief that act of self-immolation (Sati) always forced open the gates of heaven to receive the performers. Those women who did not perform Sahagamana were held in great dishonor and their kindred shaved their heads and turned them away as disgraced and a shame to the families<sup>16</sup>. It is difficult to conclude that the Sati system was voluntary or obligatory, i.e., the wives willingly sacrifice their life or were forced to do it. However, it is observed that some who out of sheer love for husbands consigned themselves to be burnt, some were swayed by family consideration and customs, and finally extreme misery of widow life in the society too forced to perform Sati. When husband's body was burning, the wife throws herself into the fire and consumed both bodies into the ashes.

Women of high rank did not burn herself immediately but performed certain ceremonies before she fell into the flames. She spent some time in festivities, music, singing, dancing, and in holding banquets after which she dressed herself very richly with all the jewelry she possessed and distributed the remaining property to her sons, relatives and friends, after this she mounted on a high grey or white horse and went thru the streets till she reached the burning ghat where a fire was lit for her. Husband having multiple wives, all the wives performed Sati. The wife who was the dearest and the mother of the child favorite of the deceased placed her arm around his neck and burnt herself with him. The other wives cast herself into the flames<sup>17</sup>. The Sati entered into art and sculpture field. Stones erected in memory of virtuous women who performed Sati were called Mastikals or Satikals. These Mastikals or Satikals give an insight of social customs of those times. Sati stones were erected by their children, father, brother and relatives for the love and faith they bore. Sometimes after committing Sati their family members donate money or grant land to the temple so that she attains Swarga. Sati stones are examples of what an Indian woman can do for her husband. In his life time, she tends to his comfort and at the end follows him to the other world, which is the greatness of Satis some of whom are worshiped even today.

### 3.6. Practice of Women Slavery

Women slavery was in practice during Vijayanagara period. Women declared inconstant by the samayacharyas or religious leaders were liable to be sold in public. Brahmin and Komati females were out casted and branded on the arm as prostitutes. Females of other Hindu castes were sold without any compunction. Slaves were receiving presents in the form of cloth and money on festive occasions. Slaves were treated well.

### 3.7. Women and Festivities

During Vijayanagara period festivals like Sankranti, Yugadi, Dasara, Holi, Deepavali and New Year day were celebrated in grand manner. Women's role in these festivals was really great. They dressed up grandly and danced before God. They accompanied the processions. They gave contributions to the temples for celebrating festivals.

#### 3.7.1. Dance & Music

Dance and music assumed great popularity and received patronage from the rulers and people of Vijayanagara. Dance and music was practiced by princess and the common people as revealed by sculptures, epigraphers and literary works. Vijayanagara paintings indicate that dance was held in great esteem. Dancing girls and art of dancing were inseparable in the cultural life of Vijayanagara. Dancing girls were attached to temples and when food was offered to God they danced before the Idol, and themselves gave food to God. According to Nuniz, every Saturday the palace dancers were obliged to dance and posture before the Kings idol kept in the interior of the palace. In addition to the service rendered by the dancing girls in the cause of religion, Achutaraya also sent a number of dancers to Tirupati from his capital city of Vijayanagara to serve God Venkateshwara.

#### 3.7.2. Ornaments

Vijayanagara paintings and sculptures depict costumes, cosmetics, ornaments and hair styles used and adopted by royal women and common women. Members of royal and aristocracy wore ornaments made of gold and silver often inlaid with precious stones. The poor wore copper or bronze ornaments and the poorest wore strings of glass beads, tinted palm tree leaves etc. "All the inhabitants of this country both those of the exalted rank and an inferior class down to the artisans of the bazaars wore pearls or rings adorned with precious stones in their ears, on their necks, on their arms, on the upper part of the hand, and on fingers<sup>18</sup>". "Each one of the queens during this period had a very large sum of money, treasury and personal ornaments namely armlets, bracelets, seed pearls and diamonds in large quantity and they also say that each of them has sixty maids adorned as richly as could possibly be with many

jewels, rubies, diamonds, pearls and seed pearls”<sup>19</sup>. Paes says “these women are so richly bedecked with gold and precious stones that they are hardly able to move”. During the reign of Krishnadevaraya the Vijayanagara jewelry reached its zenith.

### 3.7.3. Garments

Women of Vijayanagara adorned themselves with beautiful garments. Paes has given an account of the women in Vijayanagara in glowing terms, he remarks that “they have very rich and fine clothes, on the head they wear high caps, which they call collaves and on these caps, they wore flowers made of large pearls, collars on the neck”<sup>20</sup>. There were different types of costumes worn by queens, wives of nobles, common women and dancing girls. Cosmetics were greatly used by Vijayanagara women; women of the richer classes used costly perfumes like panniru and sampangi oil. Women anointed their body with sandal wood aloes, camphor, and musk after bath<sup>21</sup>.

## 4. Conclusion

The contribution of women to social and cultural development of Vijayanagara period was outstanding, women figured prominently in different walks of life. A careful study of the sculptures and painting reveals that women contributed their share to the progress of culture; highest proportion of Amman Shrines came into prominence<sup>22</sup>. This indicates people gave equal status to women, women enjoyed high position in society and were given government appointments by Kings on par with men. Nachana Soma distinctly refers in his “Uttara Harivarma” to the talent of women in several fields. Women as mother, the symbol of devotion responsible for the family, highly respectable and deserved for good treatment by their children.

Finally, with a bird’s view comparison on present day women with that of Vijayanagara period we find not much of a difference except for the evil custom of Sati and Prostitution, which two had the state sanction due to non-difference between immorality and spirituality. Modern women are relatively on higher platform due to the influence of social forces and government policies, majority of the women of Vijayanagara period did not receive education and were in utter ignorance, there was no planned move on the part of the state or the society to ameliorate the general condition of women folk. At the same time, there was no conscious and systematic effort on the part of the women to fight for their rights and privileges, whereas the modern women have many social organizations and statutory bodies to fight for their cause.

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