

Vijayanagara in modern historiography: A survey

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What Sewell called the 'Forgotten Empire' once unified the larger part of South India, governing it from Vijayanagara for over 200 years. Once modern methods of research took root, the effort began to reconstruct its history. British historians saw in it a predecessor—an imperfect, but predecessor all the same. Indian historians tended to see in it good evidence of Indian capacity for military enterprise and efficient administration. Since Independence, the trend has continued, with Burton Stein on one side and T.V. Mahanlingam, on the other side. But a more objective trend is also noticeable now, in the work of Y. Subbarayalu and N. Karashima.

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Introduction

The Vijayanagara Empire was studied during the British rule by a series of historians including Mark Wilks, Robert Sewell, Krishnaswami Aiyangar, Suryanarayana Row, N. Venkataramanayya, Srikantayya and B.A. Saletore. They unravelled its political and cultural history, and economic and social institutions, by exploring its inscriptions, and different kinds of texts in various languages. The credit goes to the early British administrators for making the earliest effort at reconstructing Vijayanagara's history. They were generally interested in tracing the history of the rulers who were their precursors and in discovering how their current subjects were governed under earlier rulers.

Indian historians studied Vijayanagara partly from a nationalist point of view and partly concentrating on different regions such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, which composed the territory of the Vijayanagara Empire. They took pride in the simple fact that there had arisen a large empire like Vijayanagara in the past, while they greatly enlarged the store of sources of information about it such as inscriptions and texts in indigenous languages.

Colonial Historiography

The theory of Orientalism has been recently used to assess much of European historiography on Asia, including India.¹ It is not, of course, easy to generalise

¹ The main text in which an extensive range of English and French writing on the Islamic world and India is investigated is Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Indian Reprint, New Delhi, 2015.

about Orientalist scholarship. One category of scholars did criticise Indians in order to justify the dogma of White supremacy. However, another set of scholars wrote sympathetically about the subject population. Trautmann refers to 'Indo Phobia' and 'Indo Mania' to distinguish the two trends.² There is another approach which has been styled 'Beyond Orientalism', and which argues against holding all European writings on Asia to be classified under any one category.³ A similar position can be adopted concerning Indian historians, in relation to their nationalist bias, when one attempts to deal with the wide range of their writings.

Yet, classifications are not to be shunned. Burton Stein in his study of Vijayanagara historiography has argued that the British had a motive when they studied the history of the natives because knowledge was essential as a lever to better control their subjects. The British had one unspoken cause to pursue, that is, to suggest that their rule was essential since their subjects had failed to administer themselves well in the past.⁴

Among the British historians, one may mention W.W. Hunter⁵ and Vincent Smith⁶ for India as a whole, and Mark Wilks,⁷ H.H. Wilson⁸ and Robert Sewell⁹ especially for South India. Hunter stated that Vijayanagara was the most important Hindu empire that emerged after the twelfth century. The term Hindu, in this context, is important. He attempted to differentiate between Hindu and Muslim dynasties.¹⁰ It was argued that in north India, there was Muslim domination, while in the south, the Hindus still remained predominant. Mark Wilks considered both Hindu and Muslim kings of the Deccan to have been despotic.¹¹ On the other hand, H.H. Wilson presented a less partisan sketch of the history of Vijayanagara including its foundation and expansion.¹²

Some British historians tended to find fundamental differences between Muslim and Hindu kingdoms. According to Gribble, the Hindu kingdoms produced

He has, however, been criticised for being too sweeping in his judgement and inaccuracy in regard to individual scholars' opinions.

² T.R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 62–9.

³ This is the position of Rahul Sapra, *Limits of Orientalism: Seventeenth Century Representations of India*, MD, 2011.

⁴ Burton Stein, *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 3.

⁵ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, London, 1881.

⁶ Vincent Smith, *The Early History of India*, New Delhi, 1999.

⁷ Mark Wilks, *Historical Sketches of the South of India, in an Attempt to Trace the History of Mysore*, London, 1810.

⁸ H.H. Wilson, *The Mackenzie Collection. A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental Manuscripts, and Other Articles Illustrative of the Literature, History, Statistics and Antiquities of South India*, collected by the late Lieut. Col. Colin Mackenzie, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1828.

⁹ Robert Sewell, *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar, a Contribution to the History of India*, London, 1900, reprint: 1992. This is to be distinguished from the reprint published by Publication Division, Government of India, Delhi, 1962, which has a different numbering of pages.

¹⁰ Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹¹ Wilks, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹² Wilson, *op. cit.*

agricultural and other commodities, and they were capable of amassing a huge amount of wealth within short periods, while the Muslims depended on plunder and expropriation and did not believe in the development of their regions through patronising agriculture.¹³

Mark Wilks discussed the origin and expansion of the Vijayanagara Empire. He was an administrator and so naturally concerned himself especially with issues that concerned past administrations. His main source for this study was the set of literary works found in the Mackenzie collection. One cannot criticise Wilks for the selection of the sources, as a large number of epigraphic records were not yet available during his time.¹⁴ He traced the prevalence of despotism to religion. He believed that adherence to religious values compelled the people to subject themselves to absolute control by the king, since owing to their beliefs, oriental people did not have the concept of civil liberty, an important feature of Western society.¹⁵

Wilks presented a sketch of the dynasties of South India including Kannada, Telugu and Tamil regions. He was aware of the geographical and linguistic divisions of the Deccan. However, his main contribution lay in the field of the nature of land administration in South India. He stated that the King was the owner of the soil and did not recognise the zamindars as land owners.¹⁶ Yet, he did find references to claimants other than the King to rights over land such as village communities and peasant proprietors.¹⁷ With reference to Vijayanagara, he argued that the state increased the burden of the tax demand, possibly from 10 to 20 per cent of the gross produce.¹⁸

Robert Sewell was also an administrator, and his book on Vijayanagara was famously titled 'A Forgotten Empire'.¹⁹ His main sources were inscriptions, literature and more prominently, the Portuguese chronicles of Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz. In addition, he depended on Firishta, who wrote the history of India in Persian in the early seventeenth century. He used translations of the Portuguese sources available in the work of David Lopes.²⁰ The splendour of Vijayanagara was evident from the study of the Portuguese sources. Based on these works, he considered Vijayanagara to have been the Venice of India. He believed that a certain

¹³ J.D.B. Gribble, *A History of the Deccan*, Vol. I, London, 1896, p. 27.

¹⁴ On Mark Wilks see V. Raghottam, 'Soldier, Diplomat, Historian: Mark Wilks and the Representations of the Empire in the Early Nineteenth Century', *International Journal of South Asian Studies* 2(1) 2009, pp. 1–13.

¹⁵ Wilks, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁹ Making use of this title, S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar published a booklet, *The Yet-remembered Ruler of a Long-forgotten Empire: Krishnadeva Raya of Vijayanagara*, Allahabad, 1917 (reprinted from *Hindustan Review*, 1917).

²⁰ Sewell, *op. cit.*, pp. 279–376.

amount of modernity ('transition from the Old to the New') was involved in South India with the rise of the Vijayanagara Empire.²¹

Sewell underlined the depth of conflict between the Hindu and the Muslim kings in his writing as follows:

Without laying too much stress on conquests by force of arms, it seems certain that most if not all Southern India submitted to his (the Vijayanagara emperor's) rule, probably only too anxious to secure a continuance of Hindu domination in preference to the despotism of the hated followers of Islam.²²

The argument of Sewell is that the 'Hindu' chiefs preferred a strong Hindu kingdom that could resist Muslim domination. In this context, one can note the attempt of the British historians to emphasise the unremitting nature of differences between Hindus and Muslims.

It is apparent that Sewell was impressed by the size of the Vijayanagara Empire, for he makes the following statement:

Its rulers, however, in their day swayed the destinies of an empire far larger than Austria, and the city is declared by a succession of European visitors in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to have been marvellous for size and prosperity—a city with which for richness and magnificence no known western capital could compare. Its importance is shown by the fact that almost all struggles of the Portuguese on the western coast were carried for the purpose of securing its maritime trade²³

Interestingly, the rise and fall of the Portuguese are related by Sewell to the changing fortunes of Vijayanagara. In addition, he refers to the maritime trade of this kingdom, thereby showing that it controlled not only agriculture and irrigational activities but also had maritime ambitions.

Indeed, Sewell initiated a tradition of historical research in South India by studying inscriptions and other sources. Although the larger portion of his work concerned political history, he devoted one chapter to the monuments and irrigation works undertaken by Krishnadeva Rāya. Details about society were extracted from the works of Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz. Later, scholars built on this tradition as they explored new sources and published them.²⁴

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sewell, *op. cit.*, reprint: 1992, p. 27.

²³ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁴ Translations of several texts are contained in, Vasundhara Filliozat, ed., *Vijayanagar*, New Delhi, revised edition, 1999.

Nationalist Historiography

Indian historians, influenced by the spirit of nationalism, took to writing the history of Vijayanagara Empire, as an important Indian achievement and made significant contributions to the subject. Krishnaswami Aiyangar published *Sources of Vijayanagara History*.²⁵ This work mainly drew from Telugu literature. He was thus able to add information that Swell had missed having depended only on Portuguese sources. This was the case, for example, with Krishnadeva Raya's Orissa campaign. Aiyangar suggested that the indigenous text *Parijatabharanam* provides information regarding the capture of Shivasamudram.²⁶

Suryanarayana Row took issue with Sewell's reference to Vijayanagara as a 'forgotten' empire, by titling his own work as 'Never to be Forgotten Empire'.²⁷ Though his work was devoted to the dynastic history of Vijayanagara, he also attempted to glorify India. He argued that the Hindus had a sense of history and countered the argument of western scholars that Indians did not preserve historical records, by giving a list of inscriptions on the basis of which the history of India could be recovered.²⁸ He discussed the history of ancient India from the Mauryan period, but concentrated on the political history of South India. He used a variety of sources such as traditions including the *vamsavalis* (genealogies), inscriptions and accounts in Persian and European languages.

N. Venkataramanayya initiated the tradition of detailed research in different aspects of the political history and other aspects of life under Vijayanagara by his *Studies in Third Dynasty of Vijayanagara*, Madras, 1935. In a later work, he discussed the relations between the Vijayanagara and the Muslim kingdoms. He made a comparative analysis of Firistha and some other texts such as *Vidyaranya Vrittanta* and *Kalajnana*. Based on these sources, he traced the process of foundation of the Vijayanagara Empire.²⁹ He used a large number of Persian sources to trace political developments in South India in the medieval period. A major weakness of the Delhi Sultanate, according to him, was the lack of control of the king over the provincial governors who resisted the demands for larger payments of revenue collection by the central government. Further, the distribution of *iqta's* (land assignments) based on higher bids led to conflicts among the Muslim military leaders.³⁰ Discussing the revolt of the South Indian kingdoms against the Delhi Sultanate, he argued that the cause lay in the interference by the rulers in the

²⁵ S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, *Sources of Vijayanagar History*, Madras, 1919, reprint: New Delhi, 2003.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ B. Suryanarain Row, *A History of Vijayanagar: The Never to be Forgotten Empire*, Part I, Madras, 1905, reprint: New Delhi, 1993.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁹ N. Venkataramanayya, *The Early Muslim Expansion in South India*, Madras, 1942, p. 186.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

religious and social life of the people and denied the role of political factors in this development.³¹ Venkataramanayya also described in detail the political situation that prevailed in the Deccan during the fourteenth century preceding the emergence of the Vijayanagara Empire.

In 1930, S. Srikantayya, a Kannada historian, wrote on the early years of Vijayanagara. His writings exhibit a few features of the nationalist writings like comparing Vijayanagara with the largest empires of the world.³² He wrote as follows:

the Vijayanagara Emperors ruled over a country far larger than Austria and their capital was incomparable for wealth and magnificence. The trade of the Empire was sought after and coveted by the leading nations of the world and there are accounts left by ambassadors and travellers to the Court of Vijayanagara which are of surprising interest.³³

Srikantayya entered into a debate with Fr. Henry Heras who had argued that the inscriptions describing the connection between Shringeri, a Shaiva religious centre of Karnataka, and Vijayanagara were spurious. Srikantayya argued that the Shringeri Gurus should not be disbelieved on the matter, as they are not likely to have tampered with the records describing the relationship between the Shringeri matha and the Vijayanagara court.³⁴

According to him, Vijayanagara was established to fight against the Muslim invasion but he differentiates between the Delhi Sultanate and the Shia rulers of the Deccan. Srikantayya's argument is that after the Bahmanid Sultanate was established in the Deccan, the Delhi Sultans sought the assistance of Vijayanagara kings to neutralise the Bahmanis.³⁵ Srikantayya is quite objective in some matters, for example, when he brushes aside the myth regarding the foundation of the Vijayanagara Empire. He claims that this town existed even before the formation of this Empire and quotes several authorities to show that as early as the tenth century, there was a large settlement in this area. The sage Vidyananya, according to Srikantayya, revived the ancient glory of this place by encouraging Harihara to establish his kingdom with Hampi as the capital.³⁶

Srikantayya made a significant contribution to the study of Vijayanagara history by suggesting the need to look for the pre-Vijayanagara remains to make it possible to go beyond the myth concerning the foundation of this kingdom. He differentiated between different categories of Muslims but believed in the Hindu-Muslim

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³² S. Srikantayya, 'Foundation of the Vijayanagara Empire and Vidyananya's Part Therein', p. 187. Retrieved from <http://www.southasiaarchive.com/Content/sarf.120045/206806/005>

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 220–21.

dichotomy, even though, as he recognised, the Hindus continued to flourish under the Delhi Sultanate and the Bahamanis.

B.A. Saletore in tracing the origins of Vijayanagara stressed the Kannada connection. The Vijayanagara kings are represented as continuing the Hoysala tradition. He identified Harihara with Hariyappa.³⁷ Saletore's work comprises sections such as revenue administration, administration of the central government and local government. The most interesting part of this work is the section on 'Foreign Relations—Hindu-Muhammadan Amity'.³⁸ For him, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims was a very important element of the situation. A merit of Saletore's work is that it uses a large number of sources including inscriptions, traditions and European works.

A major contribution of Saletore lies in the field of revenue administration. He compared the pre-Vijayanagara and the Vijayanagara taxation systems. According to him, Vijayanagara administration, particularly in Karnataka, continued the policies of the Hoysalas. He also studied important aspects of the economy of the time such as land revenue, custom duties, additional taxes, land sale and other transactions, and land revenue administration generally. He discussed the revenue system of the whole of Vijayanagara Empire in all three main regions. He referred to the statement of Nuniz that the central government officials did not issue any receipt. However, one inscription refers to the temple officials being authorised to issue receipts to the merchants, an incidental statement, which casts doubt on Nuniz's assertion.³⁹

As for taxation, the traditional sources mention one-sixth of the produce as the general rate of taxation. However, Saletore found that Vijayanagara followed differential rates depending on the nature of the soil. There were different rates too for irrigated and non-irrigated lands.⁴⁰ Saletore challenged the argument of Wilks that under the Vijayanagara, the tax rate accounted for a high proportion of the rural surplus.

Saletore exhibited considerable knowledge not only of the Kannada sources but also of Tamil texts. To prove his arguments regarding taxation, he refers to Chola inscriptions. He noted the need to analyse the Vijayanagara taxation system based on a study of preceding conditions. In the case of Karnataka, for example, he analysed the Hoysala system of taxation. It is true that in some cases, the peasants and other taxpayers could not pay tax and so resorted to mass migration from the high-tax regions to low-tax areas. However, Saletore defended the Vijayanagara central government by stating that the government initiated an inquiry into such incidents and adopted measures to redress popular grievances.⁴¹ He also questioned

³⁷ B.A. Saletore, *Social and Political Life of Vijayanagara*, Vol. 1, Madras, 1934, p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

the argument of Ellis that revenue was paid in kind. Saletore argued that Ellis did not use authentic sources and he himself cited several instances where taxes were collected in cash.⁴²

Saletore also questioned Moreland's suggestion that the Muslim kingdoms of the North introduced the farming or the contract system in South India. He found that this system prevailed in the pre-Muslim period in the regions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.⁴³ However, he agreed that absolute despotism, as described by Nuniz, was an important feature of the Vijayanagara Empire. He argued that the kings did have the affection of the people, citing poems in the king's praise composed during the Vijayanagara period.⁴⁴

Saletore had access to several sources such as inscriptions and traditions. As a professional historian, when compared with his predecessors, his attempt was a better one at an objective history of the Vijayanagara Empire. He also understood the need to study the economic and social history of the region. This marks a major difference between him and earlier historians. Still, he tended to overlook the oppressive aspects of Vijayanagara administration, and in this respect belonged to the nationalist camp.

During the last phase of colonial rule, there was a spate of writings on the Vijayanagara Empire, in which the nationalist impulse was again noticeably prominent. In 1946, Nilakanta Sastri and N. Venkataramanayya published *Further Sources of Vijayanagara History*, 3 vols, Madras, 1946, greatly extending the ground covered by Krishnaswami Aiyangar's *Sources of Vijayanagara History* published in 1919. T.V. Mahalingam joined the ranks of major historians of Vijayanagara when, in 1940, he published his *Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagara*, Madras, 1940. He supplemented this with his *Economic life in the Vijayanagara Empire*, Madras, 1951. All these works had this 'nationalistic' characteristic that while using European sources, they also widely explored and used Indian texts.

Post-Independence Trends

The historiography of Vijayanagara has been affected by both 'neo-orientalist' trends from the West and by Marxism. The Western influence has been most apparent in the writings of Burton Stein, who, in effect, asserted that South Indian states, including the Vijayanagara Empire, exercised only limited sovereignty in the single person of the King. This thesis he developed in his *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, New Delhi, 1980, and then in his monograph exclusively devoted to the Vijayanagara Empire (1989).⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., p. 202.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 323–4.

⁴⁵ Stein, op. cit; Stein had also written on the economy of Vijayanagara in T. Raychaudhuri and I. Habib, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 102–4.

The Marxist trend has been reflected in the interest taken in the structure of agrarian society in Tamil Nadu under Vijayanagara especially investigated by Y. Subbarayalu and his Japanese collaborator Noburu Karashima. The results of these investigations were first published in *Socio-Cultural Change in Villages in Tiruchirapalli District, Tamil Nadu*, ed. N. Karashima, Tokyo, 1985, and then in N. Karashima, *Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society under Vijayanagara Rule*, Delhi, 1992. Karashima also published *A Concordance of Nayakas: The Vijayanagar Inscriptions in South India*, Delhi, 2002, an almost definitive work based on inscriptions, clarifying the much debated question of the position and entitlements of Nāyakas in the Vijayanagara Empire.

There has also been a major effort to publish primary source material on an extensive scale. T.V. Mahalingam compiled *A Topographical List of Inscriptions Tamil Nadu and Kerala States*, the three published volumes remaining confined to the Tamil Nadu districts (pub. 1985, 1988 and 1989). S. Ritti and B.R. Gopal have edited *Inscriptions of the Vijayanagara Rulers*, Vol. I (5 parts), New Delhi, 2004, and Vol. II, Bangalore, 2008.

The ground is thus hopefully being created for a more extensive and objective study of the Vijayanagara Empire leaving behind the prejudices and concerns of our colonial past.