



Description of Vijayanagara Empire as described by foreign travellers

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Abstract

From Ancient to Modern Indian History, Indian subcontinent encountered by foreign travelers and some of them left valuable accounts of their travels. These foreign accounts gave us a valuable objective document that will help us to understand the social-political-economic condition of a particular era. These travelers account cannot be understood without knowing their perception of writing. Foreign travelers' who visited India during reign of different rulers of Vijayanagar Empire they have left vivid description of the Vijayanagara Empire in the socio-economic condition, trade, commerce and infrastructure of the kingdom. Vijayanagar is 'the best provided city in the world', wrote one traveler. It is of 'enormous magnitude and population', wrote another. Description of Vijayanagar empire comes from a range of sources, such as inscriptions on stone and copper plates, archaeology, literary works, temple land grants and trade records. A Persian chronicler in the employ of Deccan sultans, Muhammad Kasim Firishta, has left many details though he wrote a generation after the sacking of Vijayanagar, and his accounts often seem dubious and lurid, especially of war. At times, he seems partial to the perspective of his patrons and exaggerates their side's military exploits. Finally, a good chunk of what we know

about Vijayanagar comes from the eyewitness accounts of foreign travelers.

Keywords: *Vijayanagara Empire, Foreign travelers, Abdur Razzak, Durate Barbosa, Nicolo Conti, Fernao Nunes,*

Introduction

The Vijayanagar Empire was one of the richest state then known to the world. Several foreign travellers, who visited the empire during the 15th and 16th Centuries, have left glowing accounts of its splendour and wealth. In a time Vijayanagar became the greatest empire of southern India. By serving as a barrier against invasion by the Muslim sultanates of the north, it fostered the reconstruction of Hindu life and administration after the disorders and disunities of the 12th and 13th centuries.

- Nicholo de Conti visited Vijayanagar during times of Devaraya 1 and gave details about his personality.
- Abdul Razzaq from Persia visited during Devaraya 2. He described the beauty of capital city Hampi.
- Domingo Paes and Barbosa visited during Krishnadevaraya time.
- Nuniz visited during the times of achyuthdevaraya

Foreign travelers

Fernao Nunes,

Fernao Nunes, also known as Fernao Nuniz, was a Portuguese-Jewish traveler, chronicler and horse trader who spent three years in Vijayanagara, capital of the Vijayanagara Empire in the time period 1535-1537 CE. He was Portuguese traveler, chronicler and horse trader who visited India during reign of Achyutaraya and who spent three years in Vijayanagara. He gave detailed account on the history of Vijayanagar especially the foundation of the city, the subsequent careers of three dynasties of rulers, and the battles that they fought with the Deccan sultans and Orissan Rayas. He also mentions cultural aspects of the empire and admire the jewels worn of women as well as how women were appointed in the King's service. His writings have brought to light many interesting details about Vijayanagara at that time, including construction of massive fortification

works, watch towers and security walls. From his notes it is known that the expansion of the regal capital limits happened during the rule of King Bukka Raya II and Deva Raya I.

Niccolo de Conti

Years after visiting Vijayanagar in 1420, the Italian merchant Niccolo de Conti narrated stories from his Asian voyage to a scholarly scribe. Vijayanagar's circumference, Conti claims, is sixty miles and 'in this city there are estimated to be ninety thousand men fit to bear arms. Conti says about the king of Vijayanagar, Deva Raya I: Their king is more powerful than all the other kings of India and has twelve thousand wives, of whom four thousand follow him on foot wherever he may go, and are employed solely in the service of the kitchen. A like number, more handsomely equipped, ride on horseback. The remainder are carried by men in litters, of whom two thousand or three thousand are selected as his wives on condition that at his death they should voluntarily burn themselves with him, which is considered to be a great honour for them. Conti describes temple rituals that are still performed today, but also a chariot festival in which 'young women richly adorned, sing hymns to the god', while others, 'carried away by the fervor of their faith, cast themselves on the ground before the wheels, in order that they may be crushed to death a mode of death which they say is very acceptable to their god'. One practice Conti had observed in central India likely also existed in the Vijayanagar Empire: 'They have a vast number of slaves,' he claims, 'and the debtor who is insolvent is everywhere adjudged to be the property of his creditor'. This seems to describe bonded labour, then common in many parts of the world. Conti writes that the people of Vijayanagar celebrate their weddings 'with singing, feasting, and the sound of trumpets and flutes, for, with the exception of organs, all the other instruments in use among them for singing and playing are similar to our own'. He mentions a festival during which 'they fix up within their temples, and on the outside of the roofs, an innumerable number of lamps of oil', and another festival when 'they sprinkle all passers-by, even the king and queen themselves, with saffron water, placed for that purpose by the wayside. This is received by all with much laughter'.

- For Vijayanagara he described that it is covered with lofty and massive stone walls everywhere across the valleys and mounted over the hillsides.
- The stone-built dwellings of the nobles, merchants, and upper classes of the vast community; elaborately constructed water-channels of the Rayas for land irrigation.

- There were rich gardens and woods, and luxurious crops of rice and sugar-cane. Beautifully carved temples and fanes to Hindu deities. Brahmanical colleges and schools were also seen.
- Men in the region can have many wives and they voluntarily burn themselves on the death of their husband which they think is a great honour.
- Niccolo gave a detailed account of Maha Navami festival celebrated at the capital. The other festivals that were mentioned by him were, Deepawali, Holi, and Kanarese New Year Day.
- He also described the finding of diamonds on a mountain which he called “Albenigaras;”
- It was in India that he coined the phrase ‘Italian of the East’ to refer to the Telugu language, which he found had words ending with vowels,



Abdur Razzaq

In 1443, Abdur Razzaq visited from Persia and was very impressed by Vijayanagar’s ‘enormous magnitude and population’ and its seven concentric walled fortifications of stone. The outermost, writes Razzaq, had ‘strong gates, and the guards stand watch with the eye of caution for the slightest thing’. Inside are orchards, gardens, buildings, shops and bazaars. The king is Deva Raya II, ‘of perfect rule and hegemony’ with ‘around three hundred ports and an army of, Razzaq guesses, ‘more than a thousand elephants’ and 1.1 million men.

Razzaq is hosted in ‘extremely fine quarters’. When he meets the king, Razzaq offers him ‘five fine horses and two toque’s of damask silk and satin’. The youthful king, dressed in ‘a tunic of Zaytuni silk and a necklace of lustrous pearls’, receives him graciously and offers him the customary betel leaf and supari, thought to have amazing benefits for dental health and virility. He grants Razzaq a daily ration of ‘two sheep, four pairs of fowl, five maunds of rice, one maund of oil, one maund of sugar, and two gold varahas

The king has many wives, ‘seven hundred ladies and concubines’, and he keeps ‘strict control over the affairs of each one’. Male kids, writes Razzaq, could stay with their mothers in the harem only until ten. ‘Throughout his realm wherever there is a beautiful girl, he persuades the girl’s mother and father and has her brought with much celebration to his harem. Thereafter no one sees her, but she is kept in great honor and veneration.’

About the city's bazaars, he writes:

The bazaars are extremely broad and long. Flower sellers have tall platforms in front of the stalls, and on both sides, they sell flowers there are aromatic flowers continually in bloom, and as necessary as they deem food to be, they cannot bear without flowers. The practitioners of every craft have stalls adjacent to one another. The jewelers sell pearls, diamonds, rubies and emeralds openly in the bazaar. All nobles and commoners of the region, even the craftsmen of the bazaar, wear pearls and jewels in their ears, around their necks and on their arms, wrists and fingers.

- Persian diplomat and traveler, remarks: 'The tradesmen of each separate guild or craft have their shops close to another'. Trade There was flourishing inland, coastal, and overseas trade which was an important source of general prosperity. The kingdom, according to Abdur Razzak, had 300 seaports.
- The most important commercial area on the West coast was Malabar, with its important port of Cannanore. It had commercial relations with the islands of the Indian Ocean, Burma, the Malay Archipelago, and China in the East, and Arabia, Persia, South Africa, Abyssinia and Portugal on the West.
- Among the exports, the main items were cloth, spices, rice, iron, saltpeter, sugar, etc. The main imports consisted of horses, elephants, pearls, copper, coral, mercury, China silks and velvets.
- Ships were used for coastal and overseas trade. Vijayanagar had its own ships; the art of ship-building was known, but we do not know if ocean-going ships were built.
- Barbosa, another Portuguese traveler, says that South India got its ships built in the Maldives Islands.
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Domingo Paes

Was a traveller from Portuguese India, who visited the Vijayanagara Empire, in around 1520. He journeyed together with a group of traders from what was then Portuguese Goa, which was the capital of other territories such as Portuguese Bombay. His visit took place during the rule of King Krishnadevaraya, Paes recorded his impressions of Vijayanagara in his work *Chronica dos reis de Bisnaga* (Indo-Portuguese for "Chronicle of the kings of Vijayanagar"). His detailed account is one of the few known descriptions of that empire and of its capital, Vijayanagara (Hampi), by a chronicler from abroad.

Paes reported, "The kingdom has many places on the coast of India, which are seaports with whom we are at peace, and some of them have factories, in particular at *Amcola* (Ankola), *Mirgeo* (Mirjan, Honor, Batecalla, Mamgalor, Bracalor & Bacanor."

Paes also records that advanced irrigation technology allowed the kingdom to produce high yields of crops at very reasonable prices, and a wide variety of cultures. He also describes a busy market of precious stones, and that the city was prospering. Its size in the eyes of the narrator was comparable to Rome, with abundant vegetation, aqueducts & artificial lakes.

Duarte Barbosa

Duarte Barbosa was a Portuguese writer and Portuguese India officer between 1500 and 1516–1517. He was posted as a scrivener in Cannanore factory and occasionally served as an interpreter of the local language (Malayalam). His Book of Duarte Barbosa (*Livro de Duarte Barbosa*) is one of the earliest examples of Portuguese travel literature. After his arrival in Goa with the first Portuguese fleet in 1501, Barbosa made the journey to Vijayanagara soon after. His account mentions the king of Narsyngua, who is probably Vira Narasimha Tuluva. His writings give a detailed account of the layout, the inhabitants, the nature of trade conducted in Vijayanagara, the size of Kings army at the time and more. Barbosa account of the city's location and layout are quite accurate to what we know today from archaeological findings. The urban core is built on a flat plane surrounded by boulder hills, fortifications fill the gaps and the river Tungabhadra flowing provides natural defense along the entire northern stretch of the city. We also know about the numerous palaces, courts, water tanks within the Royal

area. Here, he makes an interesting observation of how equity and justice were observed by the citizens and the ruler. People of every creed & faith found shelter here and the Vijayanagara Kings were also known to have a diverse representation in their court and the military. The king patronised and built Jain, Vaishnava and Shaiva temples throughout his kingdom and capital city. All of this was a result of reforms that was brought in Military and Court life by Devaraya II, which his successors continued.

Here, Barbosa describes the riches that were traded in the markets of Vijayanagara in large quantities. There were several temporary and permanent markets throughout the city. The one he is referring to was likely located inside the Royal Urban Core. This is perhaps the most interesting description in Barbosa's work. He describes how men and women of Vijayanagara dress, including the perfumes they wear, jewelry. Very few Europeans in early 16th century would have come across an Indian native, and here he was surrounded by them wearing their native clothing, which he had never encountered in his life. He also talks about men having long black hair, which is confirmed by the several relief sculptures depicting men in the royal area. Men wore their long hair in a bun, so man buns were in vogue over 500 years ago! Also interesting is that men pierced their ears like the women. Here, Barbosa clearly is describing women of Vijayanagara wearing a saree. He observed women with nose piercing in addition to ears. Women wore long hair in a bun and decorated them with scented flowers (Gajra). Here, Barbosa makes a very critical observation about war horses. During this period in Indian history, warlords and Kings in India were obsessed with getting horses. To counter the quick moving cavalry forces of the Bahmani Sultanate, the Vijayanagara army needed its own cavalry force. Since the time of Devaraya II, Vijayanagara had established trade links with Persia through its ports on Konkan coast to ensure regular supply of war horses by paying huge premiums. Horses needed to be imported because they couldn't breed them locally, and in tropical climate they did not survive long. Duarte Barbosa's writing brings alive the medieval life of city's inhabitants. In this article we have tried to cover most interesting parts of his writing in a easy to understand way. I hope this has inspired you and your imagination.

Nikitin

Nikitin provides details of the army of the Bahmani and Vijayanagar kings. (He calls the latter as Indian Governor) They were at war frequently. He calls the Vijayanagar ruler very

powerful and the capital city lying in a beautiful valley surrounded by high mountains on one side, thick jungles at another side and three big moats on the third side. "Vijayanagara is good for everything!" he declared.

Conclusion

The accounts of foreign travellers speak of the high standards of living of the upper and middle classes. The splendour of the capital city bears testimony to the wealth which was, however, the monopoly of only a section of the population. But the prices of articles were low and the minimum necessities were probably not beyond the means of the common people. However, producers, mainly agricultural producers, apparently got inadequate prices for their produce. Their social life is vividly described. They described. "Vijayanagara is good for everything!"

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