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SOCIO AND CULTURAL LIFE UNDER VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

The different aspects of social life of the people of Vijayanagara Empire are contained in narratives of foreign travelers, inscriptions, and literature.

In this paper, I examine the instances of the active part of women, who generally occupied a high position in society, Apart from being trained in handling swords and shield, wrestling, music and other fine arts, some of them, without any doubt, got fair amount of literary education. The State, generally, did not interfere in social issue or affairs to settle disputes among various communities. The Sati Pratha freely

sanctioned by Brahmanas, was very common in Vijayanagara Empire.

KEYWORDS : *social life , of foreign travelers, inscriptions, and literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Founded after the down of muslim expansion in South India, the Vijayanagara Empire had Served to be an effective check against the expansionism of a galaxy of great kings of vijayanagara Hindu dharma received all around protection and encouragement at vijayanagara through the agencies of mathas and temples. The rulers of proclaimed themselves as the agents to the god either of Sri Virupaksha or of Sri Venkatesh. Vijayanagara empire occupied an important place in the history of its own times. It occupies a remarkable place in India history because of its polity, economy,

administration and cultural progress. Its one remarkable success had been that it provided shelter and the opportunity to grow Hindu religion and culture in the South against Muslim onslaughts Dr.A.L.Srivastava writes "The Vijayanagara Empire served a high historical purpose by a acting a champion of Hindu religion and culture against the aggressions of the Muslims in Southern India"¹. It is in the context an attempt has been made to study the Socio and cultural life under the vijayanagara Empire.

SOCIAL LIFE UNDER VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE :

In the vast Vijayanagara Empire a larger number of Social groups existed besides the major traditional castes. All these Sub-

castes were based on their respective callings. Thus, there were as many Sects there were professions. Among the Brahmins for example, dividing factor was the Sakha, or branch of the veda ; the Second was the region from which they hailed ; the third was their religious affinity like Samarta Saiva or Vaishnava and the last the nature of their work Such as ministerial service or imparting education. A considerable number of Brahmins were employed in public services and such Brahmins were distinctly called the Niyogis. Some of the ruling classes, including the Rayas of vijayanagara, belonged to the Kshatriya caste and traced their lineage from the Yadavas or Pururava of the lunas race. The third was the merchant class or Vaisyas Rest of the society was

generally taken as Sudras consisting of a large number of Sub-Castes including the cultivators forming the major sect, the smiths, weavers, oil mongers, washermen and So on. However, the '**Chandalas**' were considered to be separate classes.

In matters of Social discipline all the sects were guided by their respective traditions observed for generations. The elders of the respective sects were deemed to be the controlling authorities of those traditions. Violation of the tradition by any individual was liable for any punishment imposed by the elders. One could not change the profession of one's sects or enter into inter - caste marital relations or violate the family customs with regard to religious faith and ritualism. Almost every sect had a religious head whose word was final in matters pertaining not only to religion but also to public conduct. In some way castes and sects during the period worked as social corporate bodies with established customs, which were as effective as the bye - laws of any organization. The rulers had absolutely no authority over this kind of a social set up. In fact, this helped the rulers in maintaining Social discipline without the least on their part.

The cultivators formed the bulk of the society. Those who participated in the military organization were favored with posts of **Amaranayakas** and **Palegaras** in the nayankara system of military organization. The Brahmins were preferred for appointment as ministers, Secretaries, accounts (or karanams) and juries in the courts. Rest of the Brahmins community lived in agraharas engaged in the study of Vedas and Sastras and in imparting the same of the students.²

MARRIAGE SYSTEM :-

The Brahmins in the South occupied important positions. Beside their role as religious advisers they served the state in the capacity of ministers general and commanders. In the Hindu society marriages in general were prohibited within Kula and Gotra among the Brahmins. Among other castes such restrictions were more in the breach than in observance. Among Reddis and Lingayats for example a maternal uncle necessarily married his niece, sister's daughter. The concept of prohibited degrees did not operate among these castes and on the basis of traditional custom, these were justified.

The author of Parasara Madhava has left a learned treatise on this subject Allied with the problem of marriage was the subject of marriageable age. As in the north, the south observed the rule of early marriages. The difference of age between the bride and the bridegroom was generally in the proportion of 1:3. This is a contrast to the practice generally followed in ancient India where according to **Valmiki**, **Rama** married **Sita** when they were 27 and 18 years.

Social conditions for the Hindu may have forced them to take to early marriages of their daughters. Some authors like those of **Modern Parijata** enjoined even marriage of Reddis merchant class and Sudhras such marriages were common in the South till recently.

Divorce was not a taboo under certain specific circumstances. Disability of the husband to perform the sexual act, mental derangement leprosy and such other incurable diseases and irreparable physical disabilities entitled the wife to divorce on the other hand the husband could also claim a divorce on reasons of in chastity of the wife to give birth to a child. In some parts of South India even if the wife failed to give birth to a son divorce and second marriage was permissible. Re marriage of widows as a rule was prohibited. It is mentioned by **Ferishta** that when the Reddis of Kondavidu were defeated and slain in the battle with the Bahamanids their wives burnt them. But among Sudhras this was not the custom.

Ibn Batuta, **Nicolo conti**, **Daurto**, **Barbosa** mention the prevalence of sati in the South, pregnant widows and the shudra widows were however an exception to this rule.

The concept '**Stridhan**' emanated from the fact that at the time of marriage dowry was a necessary accompaniment. Dowry system again was more followed among the higher classes of society. It was a general practice that in case "**Stridhan**" did not flow from dowry the husband had to give to his wife an equal share of property along with his sons. Even otherwise wife was considered to be the first heir of the deceased husband. If the husband did not leave any son, grandson or great grandson the wife entitled to his property.⁵

Upper classes :-

We know more of the life of the upper classes than of the classes below them in the social scale. The fact was that the life in the court appeared so interesting to the foreigners that they have devoted more attention to this subject than to the life of the poor. We have some evidence of the amount of money that the members of this class could spend. We can image the habit of saving 10,00,000 prataps every year. But the nobles did not save. They knew only how to spend. Probably the fear that their property might be confiscated by the king at any time left them no option but to spend. We hear of ministers and governors with revenues ranging from 1,00,000 prataps to 15,000 prataps. Out of this revenue the governors or ministers were expected to pay the king roughly about 1/3rd and with the remainder they were also expected to maintain their quota wasn't usually maintained by the nobles. Thus a large part of the income of the nobles was available for spending.

Middle classes :-

Next in rank to the upper classes came the merchant. We know very little about this class. The Muslims who were mostly merchants were proposed as has already been told. They put on better dresses than the common people. They used furniture unlike the others.⁶

Common People :-

The picture that we get from the inscriptions about the life of the common people is in total contrast to the accounts of the travelers. Which mostly relate to the life of the upper classes. Heavy taxation oppressed the cultivators who in one case at least refused to pay them, put in most cases migrated to other provinces. Where taxation was probably lighter Ramnoda the farmers were so much harassed by heavy taxation that they migrated another place in 155 A.D. In 1507 A.D the people of the North Arcot district paid 33 taxes 32 of which were levied by the temple and one by the crown. Another inscription of 1512 A.D states that Krishna remitted the taxes, which were collected from the Devadaya and Brahmada lands.

An inscription of Srimushanam in the chindamharam taluk tells how Sinappa Nayaka an officer of Krishna enquired into the grievances of the ryots and reduced the taxation. Another inscription states that the Sthanikas of the temples of perumal kariyavar went on a deputation to Krishna in vijayanagara and complained of the injustice done by authorities stationed introduced them to the king and got their grievances redressed. Two facts emerge from these inscriptions. 1) The provincial governors and officers oppressed the people with heavy taxation and 2) Krishna was determined to put down oppression whenever it was brought to his notice.

Occasionally the foreign travelers have something to say about the life of the common people. Barbosa says that their houses were thatched, but one the less are very well built and arranged according to occupations in long streets with many open places. The foreign travelers were struck by the insufficient clothing of the people. One example will suffice. Abdur Razzak says that the people were naked except for a lankoutah from the naval to above the knee. The other descriptions are similar. It must be noted however that no traveler attributed the insufficiency of clothing to the poverty of the people. **Nicolo Conti** says, They cannot wear clothing on account of the great heat and for the same reason they wear only sandals and not shoes.

Abdur Razzak says that the costume of the beggar and the King was the same no doubt on account of the climate. We have not much evidence with regard to the food of the common people in central part of the Empire.⁷

Housing :-

The king of vijayanagara according to Barbosa, has great and fair places with many enclosed courts and great houses very well built with in them are wild open spaces with water tanks great numbers. In the city as well there are places after the street containing the nobles houses near the kings places thus from here to the king palace is all streets in front of the Virupaksha temple in Hampi is described by Paeas as A very beautiful street of very beautiful houses with balconies and arcades. The

house in Nagalapur or modern Hospet were all one storeyed and flat, roofed. They had pillars and were all open with verandahs inside out. Where they could accommodate their guests and they looked like houses belonging to the king.⁸

Clothing :-

The dress of the nobles in vijayanagara is described by Barbosa thus “ their men wear certain clothes girdle below wound very tightly in many folds and short white shirts of cotton or silk or coarse brocade. Which are gathered between the thighs but open in front on their heads, they carry small turbans and some wear silk or brocade caps, they wear their wrought shoes on their feet shoulders like capes. The dress of the women wear white garments of very thin cotton or silk of bright colors, five yards long ;one part of which is girt round them below and the other part they throw over one shoulder and across their breasts in such a way that one arm and shoulder remains uncovered. They were leather shoes well embroidered in silk ; their heads are uncovered and the hair is tightly gathered into a becoming knot on the top of the head.⁹

Food :-

Except the Brahmins, Vaisyas, Lingaata and Jains the rest ate meat and fish. Nuniz's statement that the kings of vijayanagara ate sparrows, rats, cats, and Lizards is hardly believable. The **Amuktamalya** says that the dishes changed from season to season. The list of preparations it gives is all to be seen today. The chewing of betal leaves appeared particular to the foreign travelers and most of them have described the process in details. Umbrellas made of finely worked silk with many golden tassels and many precious stones were used by the nobles. At night they torches of oil the torches ranging from 4 to 12 according to rank. The king however had 100 to 150 torches.¹⁰

Dress and Ornaments :-

The elderly men generally wore a cloth called dhovti round the lions and an upper cloth on the shoulders called Uttariyam. Men of high status wore, in addition, a turban women folk of all classes wore chiras or saris in different colors with attractive borders. A ladies of rich families often wore silk saris. They covered their breasts with stitched garment called raika. Contemporary Telugu works furnish description of costumes of different classes of men like Brahmins, kapus, shepherds, wrestlers, pilgrims and laborers. Growing long custom among men and women. The sculptures and painting so the period depicts the different styles of hair-knots called **mudis** and twisted plaits called **jadas**.

Ornaments :-

Wearing ornaments was a compulsory feature among women and a fashion for men. People belonging to higher classes wore fine jewellery made of gold. Studded with diamonds and other precious stones. Ordinary people in the countryside wore silver and copper armlets, anklets and waist belts.

Abdur Razzak, who visited vijayanagara during the reign of **Praudhadevaraya**, says that all the inhabitant of the country, irrespective of their rank and class, wore pearls earrings adorned with precious stone in their ears, around their necks and arms, on the upper part of the hand and around the fingers. As times rolled on the number of and variety of women's ornaments increases to such an extent that it became a fashion among the rich to have seven sets of ornaments, ear-marked for wearing on each of the seven days of the week. There were glided ornaments also of silver and gold. The ordinary necklace was made either of solid gold or silver or was glided, according to the status of the wearer. Necklace was another prominent ornament worn by ladies of the wealthy families. This was made of gold, thickly studded with precious stones and pearls.

They used to wear ear ornament of several designs, such as ring shaped **dubbdu** and **Kammalu** made of gold, silver, copper or even ivory **Ratnatatankas** made of gold and set with gems were worn by wealthy ladies among wrist ornaments, bangles were very common to all classes of women, while murugulu made of gold, silver or copper were worn by men also.

Amusements :-

One of the popular entertainments was the dramatic performance based on select stories from the puranas. The stories of Harischandra, Prahlada, Rukmangada, Jambavati parinayam, Sita's exile and episodes from the Mahabhasata were very much favored. The actors were called **nattuvas**. Most of the plays were enacted in the nights at public places like temples.

Dance and music were essential features of attraction in these dramas. Puppet shows or shows were also favored by the people. Other entertainers included the professional jugglers and who visited the villages showing their tricks and magic performances. Most of these entertainers used to collect annual vartanas or fixed payments as remuneration from the villagers. Among the out door amusements, cock fights, were the most common. Among the indoor games, gambling of different kinds was a favorite pastime for the young. There were licensed gambling houses on which the government used to levy tax. A very common game of this kind was gambling people from higher classes favored chess.

Though the rulers of vijayanagara encouraged the study of Sanskrit and all the South Indian languages. Telugu was given a preferential treatment and in due course came to be treated as the official language of the empire and as a link language among various groups. The renowned Telugu poet **Srinatha** was honored with kanakabhisheka (a bath in gold) by prouadadevaraya of the first dynasty of the rulers of vijayanagara. The court of Krishnadevaraya was adorned by such eminent poets as Allasani Peddana and Nandi Timmanna, Peddanna Manucharita initiated the romantic movement in Telugu poetry, heralding the eminence of the natives genius of Telugu. With this work began the prabandha age in the history of Telugu literature. **Parijataapaharanamu** of Nandi Timmanna, though smaller in bulk, ranks with **Manucharita** in its excellence. Krishnadevaraya himself wrote in Telugu and his work **Amuktamalyada** ranks high in thought in style of the other **Prabandas**, poets, Surana ranks high for his erudition originality and delineation of character. His **Kalapurnodamu** is a creative innovations. **Rammaraja Bhushana**, a contemporary of Surana, earned immoral fame among the Telugu poets, through his inonitable poem **Vasucarita**. During the time of the later vijayanagara rulers, Telugu poetry flourished in the court of the **Nayakas** kings of **Tanjore**. Raghunatha Nayaka was a poet of distinction of the poets of his court, **Chemakura Venkatkavi**, was one who may be termed as the last eminent prabhanda poet.

CONCLUSION :-

The present study is aimed at examining and comparing the Socio-Cultural life under the Vijayanagara Empire. As research is the activity to be undertaken to bring out something new to extend the horizon of knowledge and to contribute some original ideas. The efforts of any researchers without aims and objectives will become null and void and of no value. The vijayanagara empire has played a vital role in enriching the name and fame of the Karnataka in the field of their renowned political career, fascinating, administration and prosperity in all walks of the life.

The travelers usually started on their journey long before day break so that they might cover as much distance as they possibly could before the sun's heat became intolerable. The roadside was studded with groves of shade giving trees and tanks containing cool water. These served as suitable camping grounds for merchants and travelers. Paes describes the road connecting Baticala with vijayanagara. Such were some of the difficulties which the travelers whether merchants or pilgrims, had to face while journeying on the king's highway. In spite of these dangers people seem to have frequently gone on pilgrimages and business to places even in the remotest corners of the empire.

The vijayanagara empire was a vast feudal organization and the king was at the head of the whole system he was helped in his work by a council. Which consisted of ministers provincial governors, military commanders men of priestly class and poets. The king of the vijayanagara empire was the fountain-head of all power in the state. He was the supreme authority in civil, military and judicial matters. This does not mean that he was a tyrant or an irresponsible despot. He was required to keep in view the good will and welfare of the people. The religious policy of vijayanagara during the 16th century was vaishnavism, but it never became the religion of the state. Which, however, did not assume

an attitude of neutrality in religion affairs. The state did not divorce itself from the religious and social activities of its subjects on the contrary, it identified itself with all the communities of the empire and extended its patronage to all sects alike.

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