



Economic conditions Vijayanagara Empire in south India with special reference to Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Vijayanagara rulers created new vistas in South India under the age of a great ruler Sri Krishnadevaraya. The age of Krishna Raya was a great epoch in medieval South Indian history. It was an age of Renaissance in arts and has been rightly called the 'Augustan Age' of Telugu Literature. With the possible exception of Asoka, Samudragupta and Harsha Vardhana, Hindu India had not witnessed a parallel of the benevolent rule of that mighty emperor. His name has become a household word in south India and so had that of his renowned and old minister Timmarasu or Appaji and as usual. Krishna Raya's commitment and conviction towards the welfare of the people is commendable. He was a great Emperor and beloved of his people. Tamil, Telugu and Canarese people have vied with each other in claiming him as their Rayar, Rayalu or Rayaru. The Telugu or Canarese origin of the Empire has added an impetus to the claims.

Keywords: cloth, rice, iron, salt, petrel, sugar, precious stones, spices etc.

Introduction

Vijayanagara Empire occupies a prominent place in the study of medieval Indian history. The formation of the Vijayanagara Empire took place in the mid fourteenth century, at a time when there was no single predominant power or competitive empire or states to lay claim to the territorial or imperial power in South India. An economy or economic system consists of the production, distribution or trade, and consumption of limited goods and services by different agents. Economics is the social science that studies economic activity to gain an understanding of the processes that govern the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services in an economy. From the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries the Vijayanagara Empire spanned a vast area and incorporated diverse ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, and political groups. The exports from the Vijayanagar Empire were cloth, rice, iron, salt, petrel, sugar and spices. The imports were horses, elephants, pearls, copper, coral, mercury, China silk and velvet. Edoardo Barbosa tells us that South India got its ships built in the Maldivian Islands. The art of ship building was well-known. Emergence of Vijayanagara, as one of the richest empires in the world history, could be attributed to an opportunistic trading of its natural resources, viz. sandal, spices and diamonds, for the guns and horses. The military strength thus gained by the empire helped its growth and dominance over its rival regimes in the north. The coins of the empire were those of gold, copper and silver. There were emblems of different gods and animals on them. We may conclude by saying that the Vijayanagar Empire "served a high historical purpose by acting as a champion religion and culture against the aggressions of the Muslims in Southern India."

A prominent feature of industrial production in the region was that some castes had become famous for the production of standardized articles and such castes had a clear occupational

base in the social set-up of Rayalaseema^[1]. Though this feature existed since the time of the Satavahanas, it was institutionalized in a rigid way during the Vijayanagara period. Hamsavimsathi refers to many such castes of Rayalaseema which were associated with several non-agricultural occupations. Golla, Kammara, Kanchara, Agasala, Vadla, Silpakara, Kummara, Jandra, Thogata, Sale, Gandla, Idiga Medara etc., were some of these castes engaged in manufacturing^[2]. These castes in course of time acquired the characteristics of guilds which were known as Srenis. In other words, caste guilds became craft-guilds on the basis of hereditary principles where in the tradition of handing over the techniques of a particular industry to their sons was well established. This was also true of the merchants who specialized in trading of a particular commodity and established trade guilds accordingly like corn-dealers, Braziers, flourists and iron mongers^[3].

Economic status of Vijayanagar Empire

The agriculture was in flourishing condition in Vijayanagar Empire. The agricultural wealth was supplemented by numerous industries, the most important of which were textiles, mining and metallurgy. Another important industry was perfumery. Industries and crafts were regulated by guilds. There was flourishing inland, coastal and overseas trade which was an important source of general prosperity. 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 doth, spices, rice, iron, saltpetre, sugar, etc. The main imports consisted of horses, elephants, pearls, copper, coral, mercury, China silks and velvets. The Vijayanagara empire was the most prosperous state of its time in India. All commodities were available in abundance. Their prices were low and everything

remained stored up properly and adequately in case of need. All the foreign travellers who visited Vijayanagara during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have given glowing description of the wealth and prosperity of the state and its people. The Persian ambassador Abdur Razaq, the Portuguese traveller Paes and the Italian traveller Nicolo Conti have praised the riches of the Vijayanagara empire. They state that not only the king and the nobles were rich but even the common people enjoyed prosperity. The common people could afford to wear ornaments in their ears, necks, arms, fingers, etc. The prosperity of the Vijayanagara Empire was on account of the growth of agriculture, industries, trade and commerce. The land was very fertile; Most of the land in the countryside was under cultivation.

Among the cottage industries cotton and textile industry occupied an important position in the field of industries. It was in flourishing condition during this period. Thogata, sale, Jandra, and Kurni were the communities specialized in the art of weaving. Thogata weavers manufactured cooured fabrics while sale prepared white calico-cloth as mentioned in Rayarekha of Alvakonda [4]. Kurnis originally weavers of wool took up weaving of cotton and silk fabrics. On the borders of Tamilnadu in Chottoor district there were Kaikkolars (Sengundam Mudaliars) the weavers par excellence. They were said to have been enjoying certain privilages such as Tandu and Sangu, conferred upon them by the Government [5]. Yhe weaving communities have separate quarters in the village [6]. The master weavers used to carry cloth to the weekly markets or santas [7]. There were famous centres for cloth production in Rayalaseema. Jammalamadugu, Tadipathri, Dharmavaram, Alvakonda, Adavani, Gooty and Bellary were some of them [8]. The course cloth was available in all the places. The weaving communities had their craft guilds basing on the castes. Kula seti was the head of the Serni or guilds. Vamanur in Cuddapah district had a weavers guild [9]. In addition to the Sudra castes like Thogata, Sale, Jandras-Malas too took up weaving profession as subsidiary industry [10]. They used to weave coarse cloth. The carding and combining and spinning were the subsidiary industries basing on the cotton weaving and textile industries. The pinjanigaru attended carding and combing [11]. Yarn was also produced in the houses of the farmers [12]. The raw material required was cotton which was grown in plenty in Rayalaseema region [13]. Neeli (Indigo) was a vegetable dye produced by the farmers for the textile industries [14]. The dying of yarn and also cloth was done by the weaver himself. As referred by the poet Srinatha there were cotton Kullayies or shirts, Uttariyams, Jari laced Kurpasanams etc., in use by the people [15]. The trade in cotton textiles was flourishing condition [16]. There was also demand for cotton-cloth in European markets.

Sugarcane industry

Sugarcane was grown in wet lands. The sugarcane juice could be obtained by hand pressing mills. The juice was boiled in large pans and jiggery was made [17]. Sugar was in powdered shape as stated by Barbosa [18]. It was a prosperous industry. The farmers and other merchant class were engaged in this industry. The rulers collected "Kabina or Aleya Sunka" from Jaggery makers [19]. Palmsugar was obtained from date palms

which was known to Rayalaseema people. It was a popular industry [20]. In Amuktamalayada there was a description how some people spent their hotter days in summer in the gardens of sugarcane [21].

Precious Stones

Of the minerals by far the most important were diamonds and other precious stones. The diamond mines were the most important as they attracted world markets. Brihatsamhita gives a long list of gems – Vajra (Diamond), Indranila (supphirs), Kakavara (Ahgata), Opadamaraga (Ruby), Rudhirakjsya (Blood Stone), Vaidury (Beryl), Pulaka (Amethyst), Vimalaka (Royal gem), Rajamani (Quartz), Sphatika (Crystal), Sasikanta (Moon Gem), Saugandhika, Gomeda (Opal), Sankha (Cranch), Mahanila (Azure Stone), Puspharaga (Topaz), Brahmagem, Jyothiresa, Sasyaha, Mukta (Pearl), Praval (Coral) [22]. Watt says India was for a long time the only source of diamond known to European nations [23]. Kautilya says that Diamonds and precious stones were available in plenty in south [24]. The Telugu literature of the period describes the nine varieties of gems – Navarathna. The variety of metals; precious and semi-precious stones and pearls referred to in the literature proved that science of mineralogy and metallurgy and gem industry reached a high level [25]. In Rayalaseema, Vajrakarur, Ramallakota and Munimadugu and its surroundings were famous for diamond mines [26]. As in the ancient times diamond mines in the medieval period also was considered to be Royal monopoly. There was Vajra Bhandara appointed over the diamond mines of Vajrakarur [27]. This speaks of the royal authority over the mines. According to Nuniz the diamond mines were farmed out on condition that all the stones above twenty mangelins in weight – about 25 carats were sent to the Raya of Vijayanagara for his personal use [28]. The rich merchants of Gujarath thronged around the mines for the purchase of diamonds [29]. The Ramallakota diamond mine was visited by Tavernier, a French Traveller who gave a vivid description of the working of diamond mines [30]. According to him Ramallakota mines were famous for the last 200 years. The Gujarath merchants residing at Ramallakota used to buy diamonds excavated at Munimadugu mines which came to lime-light during the sixteenth century [31]. The Gandikota rulers took up the management of mining operation there [32]. The contemporary travelers like Abdul Razaak [33], Nuniz [34], Barbosa [35] etc., extolled the diamond markets and the fascination of the people for the gold ornaments incised with varieties of precious and semi-precious stones.

Steel industry was flourishing

Iron and steel industry was flourishing in the river valleys as a large scale industry during this period in the river valleys of Krishna, Tungabhadra and in Yerramala hills the Hematite Iron Ore occurs in huge amounts [36]. Pedda Kolumula, Kolumula Palle and Kolimigundla were some of the famous centres [37]. These centres got their names on account of the large furnaces or Kolumulu established for making iron. The forests situated nearby supplied the necessary charcoal. Near Kolumulapalle there was Boggupalle. The site of Boggupalle was famous for charcoal [38]. Near Chabali there were iron mines. At Dachapalle mining was a flourishing industry.

There were kilans to extract iron ^[39].

Royalaseema contributed much for the development of iron and steel industry as the “Art of smelting iron reach such a high level in India that Greek chemical treat bears the title on tempering steel and Eridrish remarks” the Hindus excel in the manufacture of iron. They have also workshops where in are forged the famous sabre in the world. It is impossible to find anything to surpass the edge that you get from Indian steel ^[40].

The craft guilds activities

The existence of the craft guilds in Vijayanagara is attested by the evidence of Abdul Razaak, the earliest of the foreign writers, who left behind him an account of the guilds: “the each class of men belonging to each profession has shops contiguous the one to the other.

The craft guilds had been developed into a deciding factor in the society and in the state politics. The Vijayanagara rulers were the defenders of the traditions and customs. They enforced strict rules for the maintenance of Kuladharm and Vritti dharma in accordance with dharma Sastras. It is worthwhile to note that stories of legendary origin of industrial communities were coined during this period. The panchanamavaru traced their ancestors to the five sons of Viswakarma – the first son Manu worked on iron, Maya on wood, third son Tvastra in brass, copper and alloys, fourth son silpi in stone and fifth son Visvajana was a gold and silver smith and Jeweller ^[41]. The Thogatas traced their origin to the heroes, bornout from homagundam. Jandra or Devanga another weaver community claimed Devanga an emanation from the body of Sadasiva to be their progenitor. Salis had two branches – Desi and Padmasali. Desisalis traced their origin to Pancha Maharshi while Padmasali to Bhavanarishi. Similarly other industrial communities had the stories of the mythical origin of their communities. These stories created a sort of pride in the members, so that they could have an optimistic attitude towards life though they had just an average living. These industrial communities organized guilds to bring out unity and to maintain standards in their industrial products ^[42].

According to Manu and Yagnavalkya the violation of agreement entered into a member with the guild or corporation is punishable with confiscation of property and banishments. The guilds received deposits from the members paying regular interests and extending banking facilities. They also undertook welfare activities such as construction of Choultries and assistance to the poor etc. ^[43].

In Rayalaseema region weaving communities had guilds of their own. Each weaving caste had its own caste or craft-guild. Unfortunately Dr. N.V. Ramanayya has misread the contents of the local Record No.18; Vamanuru and Dt.1536 A.D.; and stated in his famous work “studies in the History of the third Dynasty of Vijaynagara” that the setties of YAbaiyaru Desala Pekkandru took a decision to contribute the magamas collected on the handloom of the regions mentioned in the inscription taking the meaning of magamas as taxes on handlooms ^[44]. But actually “Magamas” were the contributions collected for the temples and for the religious causes. In the regions of Peddanandyala and Pulivendulu there were weavers guilds, no doubt and the Yabaiyaru Desala Pekkandru traded with handloom textiles of these places. The

weavers guilds of these places decided in a conference to contribute the magamas collected to the presiding monk of a matha of Srisailam. In 1543 A.D. Chappanna (Yabaiyaru) Desambulangala Saleelu took a decision to contribute Vartans at Ruka per loom and one ruka on marriage to goddess Alimelumangamma per annum. This is also an example of the guild of Salis. It seems that Tallapaka Chinnanna settled a dispute between the salis and Jandras. The decision was in favour of salis. Hence they resolved to pay Varthanas ^[45]. This unanimous decision of their guild shows the united strength of their organization. A lithic record of sixteenth century of Cholasamudram containing the decision of the weavers to pay the tax on their looms for the construction of temple of their Kuladevatha Choudesvaramma. In the same way Kaikkilars of Ambasamudram having constructed the temples of Lakshminarayana Perumal, Bhutavirarama and having also provided the reuirments of the temple kitchen obtained the privilege of receiving garlands in the temple as hereditary right with other incidental previleges ^[46]. This is an example of how the caste-guilds used to obtain the privileges.

The copper plate inscription dated 1560 A.D. from ontimita reveals the nature of communal assemblies and the methods of organization and their united efforts to pursue their objectives ^[47]. The inscription began with the prasasti of the pancanam varu of Tirupathi, Kalahasthiand Chandragiri met at Mukha mandapa of Kalikadevi and made a convention to raise some amount to be paid to one Yellaya of vontimitia who performed various assignments of the community meritoriously. It was resolved by the assembly that a ruka on each carpenters bench, on each forge of the smith, on each chisel of a mason and on every marriage occasion should be paid to the said person on condition that he would undertake to serve the community from time to time.

These examples reveal the corporate activities of these castes or craft guilds, and their contribution for the upliftment of the members of their own community. It may be asserted that by the middle of the sixteenth century the corporate activities of the individual communities wielded much influence on the society. Since some of them-carpenter, Iron smith, potter etc., belonging to the essential services had their inams reserved in the twelve Ayagars of the village. The Panchanamavaru constructed places decorated them and added grandeur to Rajanagari. In the middle of the fourteenth century the agasalas prepared the royal throne. Therefore Harihararaya I granted them and all the members of Panchanam community the privilege of exemption of taxes on marriages, bullock carts loaded with paddy etc. similarly Kaikkolars, the weavers were enjoying certain privileges such as tandu and sangu conferred upon them.

The guilds also served as bonds of unity; due to the maintenance of this unity that the Padmasalis could gain the approval of their superiority over jandras in 1541 A.D. further the guilds acted as welfare centres for the community serving social and religious causes.

We may state the following conclusions from the above study. First, Rayalaseema possessed necessary agricultural and mineral resources to provide a good industrial base to the economy. The strategic place occupied by Rayalaseema further contributed to the progress of various industries in the region. Secondly, the artisans had formed into caste guilds or

craft guilds. There was a link between the caste and the occupation in the industrial production of the period. The emergence of artisan guilds in textile and metal industries not only contributed to cohesion among the various communities but also to the qualitative improvement of each craft. Thirdly, Rayalaseema became a very important region for production of cotton and silk textiles. Even today centres like Dharmavaram have retained their reputation for the production of textiles. The evidence suggests that Kaikkolars were producing cloths of high quality. Fourthly, the Panchalas or the artisans engaged a metal work emerged as a distinct class set apart from artisans who were engaged in carpentry, and blacksmithy. The emergence of temples in the area and the demands of the mobility probably acted as incentives for the prominence of Panchalas in the industrial set up of Rayalaseema. Some of the inscriptions even suggest the mythological origin and virtuous qualities of the artisan class. Lastly, in the rural areas certain industries like carpentry, blacksmithy and pottery making catered to the rural economy. They maintained a close relationship with the Reddy and Kamma farmers in the villages of Rayalaseema. On the whole it may be pointed out that Rayalaseema appears to have attained self-sufficiency in the field of industrial production. But without a market and without the existence of an active and enterprising adventurous merchant class, neither agricultural production nor industrial production would have seen the progress as it did in Rayalaseema during the period of our study. The distributive aspect of economic condition of the region forms a vital element and to that burning problem, we shall focus our attention.

References

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