

## STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE VIJAYANAGAR PERIOD

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**Key Concepts:** Devarandiyals, Instruments, Dancing girls

*Where women are honoured there verily the gods dwell.*

(Uma 1999, 152)

The noble command of our religious texts is that women should be treated with honour and respect and at no stage should be left in the lurch to fend for themselves. Women occupied a very important place in the society during the Vedic age. The Divine seers and sages sang praises of her virtues and upright conduct. No auspicious act was complete without her participation. Men could not perform sacrificial rights without women. Epic age was a golden age in the history of women's freedom. Women were honourable and had influenced the then socio-political life up to a great extent. In ancient India, women had got honourable place in the society. They were considered as indispensable part of the human society. Besides profound knowledge, many ancient women were famous for their courage and bravery. They were regarded and respected in the society.

During the medieval period, particularly during the Kakatiya period, women were courageous and inspired their husbands at the time of wars. Rudramadevi is remembered as a woman of courage, great intelligence and exceptional abilities. She was a wise ruler who strove hard to promote the welfare of her subjects.

During the Vijayanagar period, women accompanied the army. Sometimes, the queens themselves followed the army to the battle-field. When Krishnadevaraya laid siege the fort of Kondaveedu in 1551 A.D., his queens Chinnadevi and Tirumaladevi were with him. There were women who handled sword and shield and others who were wrestlers and others who blew trumpets (Mahalingam 1969, 40) Nuniz says that women held offices of responsibility in the State. There were women spys to help the king. In some cases they acted as legal experts. Women were not only poets, dancers, singers, painters but were also experts in various other specialized activities. The Devadasis of those days were experts in dance and music and they danced in temples and other social functions.

The status of women during the Vijayanagar period can be studied under two heads, family women and courtesans. The family women use to take part in social get-ups and festivals. The courtesans who were in considerable number took part in these social gatherings. As such, during this period, the courtesans were divided into two groups. The first category of women lived independently at the capital and took part in the social functions. The other – i.e., the dancing girls were attached to the temples for their livelihood. They had nothing to do with the court ceremonies and the festivals. Paes, a foreign traveler who visited Vijayanagar stated that the Brahmins had got very beautiful wives. The women of that period were of light colour.

**QUEENS OF HAREM:**

The Vijayanagar kings had large harem and the royal queens lived in them. The king had many wives, but very few were important. Krishnadevaraya had 12 lawful wives but three were considered prominent. Venkatapathiraya had four wives. Paes says that all these women were great friends and of course each one lived by herself. The wives had each a house, maidens, women of chamber and women guards and servants. The wives of the king lived behind curtains and could not be seen by the people. Every one of them had enormous wealth and jewels. The women employed in the palace had their houses within the palace. Abdur Razzak stated that Devaraya II's harem contained as many as 700 princesses and concubines in it. Paes however says, there were 12,000 women in Krishnadevarayas harem. Historian Nuniz says that they numbered over 4,000 in the days of Achyutadevaraya. However, this may be a gross exaggeration by foreign travellers. The members of the royal harem were generally the women of high position as some of them were the daughters of the great lords of the realm. Some of them served as concubines and some served as hand-maids. Barbosa says that the fairest and most healthy women were sought throughout the kingdom for doing service to the king's cleanliness and neatness. They use to provide pleasure to the king by singing and playing.

The services rendered by women in the palace were many. Barbosa says that they did all the work inside the gates and discharged all the duties of the household. According to the Portuguese Chronicler, within the palace there were women musicians, sooth-sayers, besides astrologers and wrestlers (Mahalingam 1969, 40). Paes says that "There were women who handle sword and shield and others who wrestle and others who blew trumpets. Nuniz says that women held offices of responsibility in the State. According to him "Women were employed for the management of Zenana i.e., harem (Mahalingam 1969, 45).

The presence of these women was essential in festivals. During Mahanavami (9 days festival) days, they played a very important role. The courtesans and dancing girls remained dancing in front of the temple idol for a long time during morning of each day of the nine days of the festival. Barbosa described the dancing girls in his chronicle. "Their service was considered to please God and hence they are known as *devarandiyals*. These women were maids of honour to the queens and others used to go with them on each day of these nine days of the festival i.e., every queen sends her ladies with other queens on other days. As such, such service was hereditary (Barbosa, 216). They were generally remunerated from the temple lands (Mansel Longworth 2016, 216)

**WOMEN POETS:**

Regarding the literary attainments of women, Barbosa says that they were taught from their childhood to sing, play and dance. Apart from their knowledge of these arts many of them were very learned. These women were well versed in both Telugu and Sanskrit languages. Gangadevi, the wife of Kampana and the author of *Virakamparaya charitam* deserves a honourable place among such literary celebrities. When Achyutaraya made a gift of *Suvernameru*, a Sanskrit verse was composed by Voduru Tirumalamba, who has been identified with Tirumalamba – the author of *Varadambikaparinayam*, a Sanskrit champu kavya which describes the marriage of Achyutharaya with Varadamba. She was a profound court poet of Achyutharaya. She used to recite good poetry to the king before he went to sleep. She was a poet with historical sense. She describes several historical incidents that she came across during

her time. Gangamba wrote *Madhura Vijayam*, a famous work of those days. However, *Varadambikaparinayam* though not considered as a great work like that of *Madhura Vijayam* written by Gangadevi, no doubt it occupies a great place in Sanskrit literature. Ramabhadramba, the author of *Raghunathabhyudayam* is another female poet of those times. She wrote on the life and achievements of Raghunathanayaka. In that poem, she states that among the harem poets, a few were able to write *Bandha Kavitha* (Tricky verses). She says that there were proficient women in the court of Raghunatha of Tanjore in composing four kinds of poetry and capable of explaining the works written in various languages. They were all skilled in the art of Satalekhini (to pen 100 verses at the rate of one hundred in an hour) and in the art of filling literary verse puzzles. They were able to compose poetry in eight languages. They knew how to interpret and explain poems and dramas composed by famous poets (Mahalingam 1969, 40). Also, some were very good exponents of Karnatic music.

Molla is another famous poet of those days. By birth she belonged to potters caste. But she was a profound scholar. She wrote a Ramayana called Molla Ramayana which is famous till this day. Another prominent poetess was Timmakka, the wife of Tallapaka Annamacharya, a famous poet who composed devotional songs on Lord Venkateswara. Her work *Subhadra kalyanam* is famous for simplicity and ease in language and excellence in presentation and portrayal of characters. This *kavya* though focuses mainly on the living conditions of women and hardships as well as mental turbulences experienced by women of those days, has excellent beauty and artistic excellence in language.

### DANCE AND MUSIC

Works on the music of Vijayanagar period too developed along with literature. The kings also encouraged music, dance and other fine arts. Women were well versed in two varieties of music, Karnataka and Desa. They were able to sing very sweetly and play on the *veena* (stringed instrument) and such other musical instruments as *Ravanahatta* (ancient bowed and stringed instrument).



**Ravanahatta Instrument**

Raghunatha, examined the proficiency of all of them and used to honour them with Kanakabhisheka (showering with gold coins). Raghunatha was himself a composer and so many a times, songs sung before him were composed by himself to please him. The Devadasi girls of those days became experts in dance and music and displayed talents in social functions and marriages. There were different varieties of dances namely *Suddhapaddhati*, *Chitrapaddhati*, *Ghanadesapaddhati* and so on. *Mallanna Charitra*, a literary work says that these dancers rejoiced the people of those days. Abdur Razzak, the foreign traveller saw those dances and described that those girls used to move their feet with such grace that human wisdom lost its senses and the soul used to get intoxicated with the delight.

The Devadasis i.e., the dancing girls were attached to the temples and when food was offered to God, they danced before the idol and offered food to God (Mahalingam 1969, 69). Nuniz speaking about the dancing girls attached to the palace says that every Saturday – they were obliged to dance before the king's idol which was in the interior of his palace. There was a dancing hall in the palace where the ladies and courtesans underwent the necessary training. One can get some details about the Vijayanagar stage from the literature of that period. All of them carrying in each hand a little round painted stick about a span long or a little more, which they struck together after a musical measure to the sound of drums and other instruments and one of the skilful used to sing one verse of a song at the end of which they all replayed seven or eight times in the number of their meter with the word “Cole..Cole.. Colle...”

Allied to the performing of dance was Kolatam or stick plays. Young girls trimly clad in groups, used to go round the streets in small batches and sing verses (Balasubramaniam 1949, 76). They used to go to the temple being followed by other women and used to dance in circles in the temples in the night. Pietro Della Valle who noted this custom says that this was a festival which they celebrated for three days. At the end of the function, a feast was arranged in honour of Goddess Gauri, the wife of Mahadeva and hence it was celebrated by girls.

Literature of the Vijayanagar period described the paintings of those days. Along with music, the women practiced painting also. Amuktamalayada, a famous literary work written by Krishnadevaraya described the paintings on the floors of houses. The paintings of that period included historical, puranic tales – *Krishnaleelalu*, *Rathimanmadhaleelalu* and also a few more depicting social conditions of that period. Women painted pictures on the walls of the houses with different colours. A.K. Balasundaram – the author of *Relics of Vijayanagar Glory* applauded these wall paintings (Mahalingam 1969, 65).

### **MARRIAGES:-**

Marriages were performed lavishly and dowries like Kanyasulkam and Varasulkam were in vogue. In certain cases lands were sold to perform marriages. Like the present day customs, during the Vijayanagara period too, relatives and friends used to give gifts like saris, clothes, ornaments and others to the young people. Rich parents used to give gifts like clothes, jewels, perfumes, furniture and even servants to the brides.

### **ORNAMENTS: -**

The luxuries of this period consisted of ornaments, perfumes, betel and other stimulating substances. We get valuable details about the ornaments used by women. Barbosa speaks of the nose screws made of fine gold wire with a pearl sapphire or ruby pendent, ear rings set with

many beads, necklaces of gold and other jewels too that were studded with very fine coral beads, bracelets of gold and precious stones and many of coral beads fitted to their arms. Pae's description of the women is more detailed. He says that the women assembled at the capital for the Maharnavami festival, wore collars round their necks with jewels of gold very richly set with many emeralds, diamonds, rubies and pearls; many bracelets round their lower arms and many girdles of gold and precious stones. Besides these, women wore many other jewels such as strings of pearls round the anklets (Mahalingam 1969, 62).

### WOMEN'S DRESS

Women namely the courtesans and the wives of nobles wore very rich dresses. According to Barbosa, they wore white garments of very thin cotton or silk of bright colours, five yards long, one part of which was girt round below and the other part thrown over one shoulder and across the breasts in such a way that one arm and shoulder remained uncovered (Mahalingam 1929, 326). *Amuktamalyada* also refers almost to this kind of double dress worn by the women when it mentions the *pavada* and *paita*. Sometimes, women appear to have worn head dress. Paes noted that women who took part in the Maharnavami festival wore high thin caps embroidered with flowers made of pearls.

In few places, women used to wear shoes, Nicolo Conte who noted this custom says, In some places, the women have shoes made of thin leather ornaments with gold and silk. But all this description refers only to women who belonged to the higher classes in the society.

Both men and women wore their hair long and tied above their head, the women with a lock hanging on one side under the ear becomingly enough almost all. Pietro Della Vella, a traveller says that Indian women do the dressing of whose head, in my opinion, is the gallantest that I have seen in any other nation. Both sexes have their arms adorned with bracelets, their ears with pendants and their necks with jewels.

### GAMES AND AMUSEMENTS:

Among other pastimes of the people, chess was the most prominent one and Krishnadevaraya's daughter appears to have been an expert in that game. Young girls used to play constructing bird nests or houses in sand and also play the role of house wives preparing food and serving to family members. These are traditional plays of children that were witnessed in the rural areas. Children enjoyed to play different types of hide and seek games.

In the Indian society every change in family structure is considered as auspicious movement – betrothal, marriage, seemantham (occasion conducted in pregnant women's parents' homes to seek blessings by the Lord for safe delivery and happy life) and new born – all these are considered to be auspicious and happy occasions in family life. In addition to regular religious festivals, womenfolk used to sing appropriate songs befitting the occasions. During Sankranti, young unmarried girls worshipped Gauri Devi by singing *Gobbilla Patalu* with clappings and circular movements around the idol of Gauri Devi.

### WOMEN AND PRIVATE MESSES:

There were a good number of messes run mostly by women especially helpless Bramhin widows. These messes were called *Pootakoolla indlu*, meaning that the diner has to pay for

every meal separately (Pratapa Reddy 1950, 283). However, some other women who had no support of any kind took to prostitution.

**SATI:**

Sati custom was prevalent during the Vijayanagar period. Nicolo Conte says that during this period, hundreds of women of royal harem were prepared for *Sati*. Nuniz also wrote that in Telugu country, after the death of husband, his wife performed Sati. When the husbands die in the war-field or elsewhere, high class women used to perform *Sati*. Others also used to follow this custom. They felt that it is a prestigious custom through which they will attain heaven.

**DEVADASIS:**

Portuguese traveller of 1522 A.D. Domingo Paes described that “Brahmins as well as the artisan classes joined together to make provision for the dancing girls attached to the temples, known as Devadasis, who were very much esteemed and were classified among those honoured ones enjoying great privileges in the court of Vijayanagar monarch (Balasubramaniam 1949, 77).

The Devadasis resembled in status, the vestal virgins of Rome. They were supposed to be married to the deity of the temple. They were prostitutes by profession. But curiously, they were highly respectable community with license to enter at any time into the personal quarters of the King and the Queen in the palace. They stayed with them and even chewed betel leaves with them. Barbosa describes that they sing and play and also provide a thousand other pleasures to the king. Many of the courtesans possessed enormous wealth. According to Paes account there were women among them who had lands that had been given to them with litters and servants. At times, even deputations to the King were led by the Devadasis on behalf of the temples. They danced and sang before the deities daily at specified hours (Longworth Dames 1921, 216). Their service was considered to please God and hence they are known as *devarandiyals*. For them, such a service was hereditary. They were generally remunerated from the temple funds. According to a record at Tekal, some lands were granted to two dancing girls for reciting the Tiruppallandu by the authorities of the temple of the Tekal and the Dasar also pledged themselves to rescue them, in case anyone seized and carried them away owing to their accomplishment in dancing and music. Their influence is inferred from their liberal charitable gifts for instance for fine costly “Soolai Bhavai” constructed near the present Malapangudi on the way to Hampi (Balasubramanyam 1948,77).

In Vijayanagar prostitutes with full make-up and fine dresses shining with jewels and gold ornaments use to stand in the door ways of their houses to attract customers. Their profession was recognized by the Government and a tax was imposed upon them. It is reported that the taxes collected from prostitutes which came to 12,000 fanams (small gold coin), was enough for the King to pay the salaries of soldiers in-charge of security.

Paes while describing certain temples says that whenever the festivals of any of the temples occurred, the people dragged along certain triumphal carts and with them went dancing girls and other women with music. Emanuel De Veiga, a Jesuit who saw a festival procession at Tiruvarur says that there were 30 women dancers going before it. He opined that they may not marry but prostitute themselves for the most part all goodly and richly arrayed and carrying

lamps burning. Pietro Della Vella also noted this practice of the dancing girls accompanying the processions singing and dancing.

Kings, princes and men in high authority were proud to keep extra marital relationship with Courtesans and were not ashamed to take them out with them on festive occasions. Some poets have written panegyric poems on the women kept by their kings or rulers. Singamanayudu (a feudatory chief of Krishnadevaraya) of those days with the help of a poet prepared *Bhogini dandakam* that described his love affair with a prostitute.

There is no comparison between caste women and prostitutes. Prostitutes have got economic freedom and they were respected socially. They got certain political considerations. They were of two categories; the Devadasis attached to the temples and the other ordinary prostitutes. These two earned money and properties. Both lead their life without any hindrance. All caste people used to visit their houses. The upper caste women, who were afraid of social restrictions used to take the help of prostitutes. Some lower caste women used to sell their girl child to these prostitutes. Later those girls were given training in literature and fine arts. They were trained in *kamasutra*. Kings and their subordinate kings used to visit their houses or several times they used to call these women to their houses.

Generally speaking, in those days women were not independent. They had neither economic freedom nor any other freedom for the matter (Satyanarayana 1981, 223). They were educated. Men thought that God created them to give pleasure to men folk. The life of rich family women were forced to adopt this system of family life. They used to decorate behind the curtains of the harem. They were trained to attract their husbands and spend their time by learning and reading books and practicing music, dance etc. Achyutaraya constructed a Dance Hall (Natyasala) in the harem for his wives.

Women of other castes in those days were confined to domestic duties. Girls were completely under the control of their parents. In those days, girls were regarded as unnecessary burden. Parents tried to get rid of them by performing their marriages as early as possible. In rich families, dowry was compulsory. But in lower castes it was quite opposite. In this system the girls did not get freedom or right to choose their husbands. When polygamy was common, there was no question of love and marriage. Allasani Peddana, the famous poet of Vijayanagar period refers to the institution of marriage in his times.

The queens lived behind the curtains. Whereas, the women poets had freedom and were allowed to show their talents in the darbar and other places. Women were well-versed in music and dance. In particular, Devadasis have got freedom to dance and sing in temple functions and other social functions. Prostitutes enjoyed complete freedom. Lower caste women sell their girl child to the prostitutes.

Women of the other castes were confined to domestic duties only. The girls were regarded as burden to them and the parents performed their marriages as early as possible. Hence, a deep study into the sources of the Vijayanagar period surmises that the conditions of women were not at all of satisfactory nature during the Vijayanagara periods.

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