

## Vijayanagar Economy

The decline of the Delhi Sultanate was accompanied by the rise of Vijaynagar and Bahamani kingdoms which dominated India south of Vindhya for more than 200 years. Although these kingdoms fought with each other, they maintained law and order within their territories, and on the whole provided stable governments which enabled the growth of trade and commerce. Many of the rulers devoted themselves to the growth of agriculture, and built cities and capitals with magnificent buildings. Many of them were also patrons of art and culture.

Robert Swell's *A Forgotten Empire* published in 1900, was the starting point of historical studies on Vijaynagar. After this the studies progressed rapidly due to the efforts of various scholars, including Krishnaswamy Aiyangar, Nilkanta Sastri, B.A. Salatore, N.Venkataramanayya, and T.V Mahalingam in the early stages. Many important works have been produced more recently as well. One of the most important topics discussed by these scholars is the role played by the *nayakas*, the military leaders with some assigned territory, in the Vijaynagar polity and their character. The *nayakas* appears in various sources of the Vijaynagar period. The *nayankara* system was an important characteristic of the political organization and was studied in detail by two Portuguese—Fernaõ Nuniz and Domingo Paes, who visited India during the reign of Krishnadeva Raya and Achut Raya of Tuluva Dynasty during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During the Vijaynagar period the local institutions of the earlier period, *sabha*, *nadu* and *ur*, were weakened and gradually disappear when the *nayakas* and *ayagar* system came into prominence, in the post Krishnadeva Raya period. At this later stage several towns, including the headquarters of the earlier *rajyyas*, are found as fortified garrisons (*durga*) under the control of the *amara-nayakas*. Venkataramanayya thought that most of the country was assigned by the Vijayanagar king to *nayakas* who were obliged to render military service in lieu of their holdings. Burton Stein does not trust the accounts of the European visitors who lacked linguistic skills to verify the hearsay accounts and rejects the idea of treating the *nayakas* as agents of centralized control of the *rayas* or the Vijayanagar kings. Stein prefers to think them as territorial magnates pursuing political ends, as evident from the Vijayanagar inscriptions and the later Mackenzie manuscripts.

During the last one decade or so, Noboru Karasimha has taken up a thorough analysis of the evidence relating to the *nayakas*. According to his estimate, there were nearly 500 *nayakas* in the Tamil country alone and most of these *nayakas* belonged to the post-1485 period. If the *nayakas* of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are totaled the number will be more than double. As the 16<sup>th</sup> century wore on, the *nayakas* became more and more independent of the king. Karasimha, on the basis of Tamil inscriptional texts and the statement of Nuniz, comes to the conclusion that the land of the *nayakas*, the *nayakatana*, was assigned to the *nayakas* by the king. In the Tamil country and also in the Vijayanagar empire, the areas of land thus alienated under this tenure was about 3/4<sup>th</sup>. It is also clear from the inscriptions and Nuniz that the *nayakas*, on their part, had to collect revenue in their territories to remit a certain amount to the state and also to maintain an armed contingent of a certain size for the king, apart from carrying out general administration in the territories through his agents. Many scholars have suggested

a resemblance of this system of assigning the state land to the nayakas to the feudalism of medieval Western Europe, though there are some differences in understanding among the scholars. While Krishnaswamy consider the nayaka system as feudal, Venkatramanyya feels that important feature of Western Feudalism such as fealty, homage and subinfeudation were absent in the nayaka system was more like Japanese feudal system. D.C Sircar similarly refutes feudal theory; instead he explains it as a kind of landlordism in which land was allotted to the *amaranayakas* for military services rendered by them to the king. Karasimha on the other hand thinks that the state control over the *nayakas* was more like the Japanese feudal system which he would call 'state feudalism'. Number of references to the *nayakatana* increased from the reign of Krishnadeva Raya, indicating the close relationship between the *raya* and the nayakas. Recent studies have made it clear that the *nayakas* were transferred from one territory to another under the rule of such powerful kings as Krishnadeve Raya and Achutdeva Raya, but when the king's power waned, the *nayakas* seemed to have tried to establish their power in the locality one way or another, though the assignment of the *nayakatana* by the king continued even after his defeat at the battle of Talikota in 1565.

The inscriptions and the statements of both Nuniz and Paes portray the close relationship between the *nayakas* and king; the nayakas as described in the source worked for the king in the palace and also in government, discharging various duties. They were often appointed as ruler of a large area (*mahamandalesvara*), chief minister or governor of a particular area (*mahapradani*), governor of the province (*rajyam-kartar*), military general, palace guard, state accountant etc. The above clearly shows that the nayakas were no local powers, but were directly involved in the state administration under the king's command, though they served as military leaders at the same time.

There is impressive evidence provided by foreign contemporaries like Nuniz and Paes to say that the Vijayanagar king could command the resources of the entire country under his rule. It is understood from an analysis of the revenue data in inscriptions that there were some structural changes going on in the revenue system over the three centuries in keeping with the political changes, that is, from the rule of official bureaucracy in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries to the rule of nayakas in the 16<sup>th</sup>. In the earlier phase revenue was going to the respective *rajya* headquarters. In the later *nayaka* phase the direct revenue authority was the *nayaka* in his *nayakatana*, though the king was well informed about taxation in the nayaka's territories as evident from a Sitteri inscription.

Karasimha confidently concludes that the 'nayaka system' where the nayakas were assigned some territory, called *amaram*, and worked for the state as administrators, functioned as the state ruling system in the Tamil country for nearly 150 years from the last quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As for the origin of this system, past studies suggested a similar system was practiced in the Kakatiya state under Prataprudra II. Recently some scholars, including Wagoner, have sought to seek its origin in the Islamic world.

Whatever the origin of the administrative system, kings in the heyday of Vijayanagar transferred *nayakas* from one territory to another frequently so that they would not grow as

local powers, and therefore there existed a tension between the king and the *nayakas* under this system. After the battle of Talikota, however, the *nayakas* greatly increased their strength. In some peripheral areas there appeared big *nayakas* on the western coast of the Deccan and the Thanjavur, Senji, and Madurai *Nayakas* in Tamil Nadu. The rebellion of some of these *nayakas* and the invasion of Bijapur and Golkonda from the north finally ruined Vijayanagar in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.