
UNIT 14 VIJAYANAGARA, BAHAMANI AND OTHER KINGDOMS-I

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

Decision of the Delhi Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq to shift the capital back to Delhi from Daulatabad in the early half of the 14th century was followed by the rise of a number of independent territorial states in different regions. Most prominent among them were the kingdom of Vijayanagara in the region to the south of the river Krishna, the Bahmani kingdom in the Deccan and the kingdoms of Bengal, Malwa, Gujarat, Jaunpur, etc. The creation of new kingdoms shows the weakening control of central political authority over the provinces and the tendency among provincial chiefs to proclaim their independent political authority in their respective areas of influence. Regarding the nature of polity and the mechanism of governance of these states we find broad similarities with the state under the Delhi sultans. However new experiments were also made by these new territorial states depending on the local needs and traditions. The major challenge before the rulers of these states was to maintain balance among various groups of nobles who were always a threat to the throne. The rulers used religious ideology to legitimise their rule. Till the emergence of the Mughal state these powers were successful in enjoying independent political authority in their respective regions. Thrust of this Unit is to familiarise you with this major trend of medieval polity during 14th and 15th centuries giving examples from the Vijayanagara, the Bahmani, Bengal and Malwa kingdoms. Comparatively more historical researches have been conducted on Vijayanagara, so you will find more details about it as compared to other three kingdoms. Let us first start with the Vijayanagara kingdom.

14.2 MAJOR TRENDS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF VIJAYANAGARA

In view of large number of researches about the history of the Vijayanagara state it is not possible to analyse every work and comment on it in this Unit. What is attempted

here is to identify major trends in the historiography of the Vijayanagara state and we hope this will help you to understand diverse views on this state.

Sporadic writings of Mark Wilks and Colin Mackenzie inaugurated in the early years of the 19th century an exercise which was to attract several scholars in the next century. A volume on the history of Vijayanagara appeared in the year 1900 and its author was Robert Sewell, a British official of the Madras Civil Service. The work was entitled *A Forgotten Empire*. It has been rightly observed by Burton Stein, another historian on Vijayanagara, that Sewell's work was not for the sake of pure knowledge but for the purpose of controlling a subject people whose past was to be so constructed as to make the British rule a necessity and a virtue.

S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar's works on the Vijayanagara history and allied topics brought in a new element of nationalist ideas and the ideal of patriotism. His interest in the literary sources helped him to change the course of historical writing and he turned to the study of local magnates in distant places in the Empire. It was with the extensive works of Krishnaswami Aiyangar that the Vijayanagara history was established in academic circles.

Aiyangar's works were followed by the studies of B.A. Salatore and N. Venkatramanayya. Aiyangar and B.A. Salatore viewed the Vijayanagara history from a regional perspective focusing on Karnataka as the home of the founders of Vijayanagar kingdom whereas N. Venkatramanayya and N. K. Sasthri presented it from an Andhra perspective. Salatore presented Vijayanagara as an expression of Karnataka nationalism while N. Venkatramanayya challenged this view emphasizing the point that the Vijayanagara rulers had adopted the Kakatiya method of administration. He referred to the '*Nayankara*' system as an example of Kakatiya influence.

Working under K.A. Nilakanta Sasthri, T.V. Mahalingam studied the administrative and social aspects of the Vijayanagara history. As stated by Nilakanta Sasthri, the work of Mahalingam was meant to focus on the Tamil region especially the social and administrative studies dealing with the third dynasty. According to Burton Stein, 'Mahalingam remarkably treats the routine post classical age in south India as a vast undifferentiated period with evidence of political usages from widely disparate times and places taken as elaborations upon some single structure of power relations'.

Nilakanta Sasthri's '*A History of South India*' has a full chapter and a portion of another chapter on the Vijayanagara having maximum weightage on political history. However it has been suggested by scholars that his major contribution to the Vijayanagara history is the three-volume work entitled *Further Sources of Vijayanagara History*, edited jointly with Venkataramanayya. For a long time K.A. Nilakanta Sasthri and his followers dominated the scene of Vijayanagara history in particular and history of South India in general. Their models and methods were accepted uncritically until Burton Stein wrote a very strong critique of the existing model.

Burton Stein introduced the 'Segmentary state model' which he borrowed from South Africa who formulated it to explain the Alur society of South Africa. First he applied it in his studies of the Chola history and polity and then he extended it to explain the Vijayanagara power structure in his book '*Peasant State and Society*'. In the *New Cambridge History of India* series Burton Stein presented the Vijayanagara history in this

conceptual frame work. Segmentary state model and its applicability in Indian situations have been questioned by several scholars, especially Herman Kulke who showed its limitations by highlighting the actual sovereignty of kings of Orissa against the ritual sovereignty propounded by the Segmentary state model.

Recently Karashima – Subbarayalu- Shanmughan team has attempted to analyse the Vijayanagara history and their method of study is based on details of Vijayanagara inscriptions in Tamilnadu. This team of scholars rejects Stein’s Segmentary state model and tries to explain the Vijayanagara polity by applying the feudal model with significant variations. Introducing the results of the new study Karashima suggests that ‘the strength of the state control over *nayakas* seems to have made Vijayanagara feudalism rather similar to the Tokugawa feudalism of Japan’.

Burton Stein’s work has however stimulated a new interest in the study of South Indian history in general and the Vijayanagara history in particular. A number of studies are done in various centres in India and abroad and these studies are expected to open up new vistas in the study of transitional stages in the society and polity of pre-modern South India.

14.3 FOUNDATION OF THE VIJAYANAGARA KINGDOM

The foundation of the Vijayanagara state towards the middle of the 14th century is generally attributed to a group of five brothers, namely, Bukka, Harihara, Kampana, Mudappa and Marappa. The founding figures of the kingdom are also known as the Sangamas, after their father’s name. The kingdom takes its name from its capital Vijayanagara, ‘the city of victory’, which was built on the southern bank of the river Tungabhadra.

The emergence of the Vijayanagara state is explained as a “Hindu” resistance against the “Muhammadan” invasion. This theme of the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy was introduced by Robert Sewell who is the author of the first standard work on the history of the Vijayanagara empire. The literary sources and the epigraphical records of the early Vijayanagara period identify the invaders as the *Turushkas* or *Turkiks*, an ethnic or political identity which was replaced by the idea of Hindu-Muslim rivalry and this semantic perspective is significant in the context of imperialist historiography of the 19th and 20th centuries. It has to be noted in this connection that as observed by some early historians, ‘Muslims had been part of South Indian society for a long time before Vijayanagara was founded. Moreover, they were employed in the native military forces by the Hindu Kings such as the Hoysala king Jagadekamalla’. (Stein)

To begin with the Sangamas had control over only a small area comprising Gutty and its surroundings. According to the traditions, they could succeed in building up a vast empire with the blessings of the saint Vidyananya. However, it has been observed by recent historians that Vidyananya emerged as an important personage on the Vijayanagara scene only several decades after the empire had been founded. This does not minimize the importance of the role played by cultural leaders in mobilising popular support for the rulers.

In the initial years of the kingdom, the Sangamas were involved in incessant fights against not only ‘Muhammadans’ but also ‘Hindu’ rulers. They defeated Rajanarayana

Sambuvaraya in 1357, won the war against the Sultan of Madurai in 1370 and thus, by about 1377, at the time of the death of Bukka I, Vijayanagara was the largest regional kingdom in the whole of south India ever to have existed. Bukka's successors continued to extend the empire to the north east by fighting the Kondavidu Reddies of the coastal Andhra and the Velamas of Warangal and even the Gajapati kings of Orissa. Their fight with the Gajapati's continued for about a century. These military operations were possible because Vijayanagara could mobilize resources which were essential for the maintenance of the army and for the project of expansion.

The Vijayanagara kingdom was ruled by four distinct lineages or dynasties. We have mentioned that the kingdom was founded by the Sangamas, sometimes called the Yadavas. Around 1485 the Sangama king Virupaksha II was murdered by his son and after this incident there was a short period of set back which came to an end when Saluva Narasimha founded the line of the Saluvas. After Saluva Narasimha's reign there was again a confusion which ended when the rulers of Tuluva line assumed power in 1505. The Tuluva period is considered to be the heyday of the Vijayanagara kingdom. The last dynasty of the Aravidu line came to power in 1542. By this time this empire had started declining. Under the Aravidus the central power had been weakened and by the late 17th century the kingdom was fragmented due to constant conflict with the neighbouring powers and crisis within the state due to the rising aspirations of the military commanders or nayaks.

14.4 NATURE OF THE STATE

Historians are divided in characterising the Vijayanagara state. T. V. Mahalingam described it as feudal and compared it with the European feudalism. He also highlighted the differences between the western and the Vijayanagara models of feudalism. Mahalingam's opinion was mainly based on his study of the *Nayankara* system. In the Vijayanagara polity, the land was conceived as belonging to the king. Hence he could distribute it to his dependants. Those who held land from the king were called *Nayakas*. These *Nayakas* ruled over the territory thus granted by the king with great autonomy. In return the *Nayakas* had twofold duties:

- 1) remitting an annual financial contribution to the imperial exchequer, and
- 2) maintaining for the king a sufficient number of troops and serving him in his wars.

The *Nayakas* often leased out their lands to tenants on terms similar to those on which they held their lands from the king. This can be described as subinfeudation which was a feature of European feudalism.

There were differences also between the two systems. In Europe the process of fealty was visible according to which the individual small land holder paid homage to the lord and received land from him as a fief in return for services rendered to him on the promises of protection by the lord. This feature is not found in the Vijayanagara Nayak system. *Nayankara* system was an administrative policy of the kings to assign territories to the *Nayakas* in return for military service and a fixed financial contribution. The element of subservience to the politically superior lord predominant in the European feudalism was lacking in the *Nayankara* system according to Mahalingam. *Nayakas* held land in the form of military fief known as *amaram* tenure. Vijayanagara kings

assigned heavy responsibilities and duties to nayaks and did not protect them if they failed to perform their duties. Nuniz has stated that they were liable to be ruined and their properties taken away if they did not meet their obligations properly. In European feudalism the society as a whole was chained together by the link of land tenure whereas the *Nayankara* system linked together only a section of the population. Subinfeudation was not practiced on such a large scale in the Vijayanagar empire as in Europe.

Nilakanta Sastri described the Vijayanagara state as ‘the nearest approach to a war state ever made by a Hindu Kingdom’. He was following the characterization of Mahalingam. Recently some European scholars have also described the Vijayanagara polity as military feudalism (Kulke and Rothermund). However Burton Stein has vehemently denied that this system could be called a feudal one due to the reason that some of the salient features of feudalism such as homage and vassalage are not found in the Vijayanagara system. Further he sees no tributary relationship either. Stein opines that the Portuguese writings on feudalism should be studied with caution in this respect because their use of the term feudalism must be understood in the context of their own experience and their desire to explain Indian affairs to their European readers in words which were familiar to them. Stein described the system as segmentary in which the king enjoyed a ritual sovereignty which is in contradiction with actual sovereignty. The segmentary model introduced by Stein was challenged by Herman Kulke and others showing that in many parts of India kings enjoyed actual sovereignty over their territory, giving examples of the Suryavanshi kings of Orissa. More recently Karashima, after studying the Tamil epigraphical sources of the Vijayanagara empire in Tamilnadu, has argued that “the strength of the State control over *nayakas* seems to have made ‘Vijayanagara feudalism’ rather similar to the Tokugawa feudalism of Japan. He adds that if we do not accept the feudal interpretation, we have to find some other logical explanation for the difference between the Chola and the Vijayanagara regimes.

14.5 RESOURCES OF THE REALM

Agriculture and commerce were the two sources of income for the Vijayanagara rulers. The dry cropping zones which constantly expanded were the agricultural and political frontiers of the Vijayanagara times as stated by Burton Stein. The new settlers from the coastal plains migrated to the interior uplands. Another section who opened up new agrarian tracts were those who subsisted on herding and dry cropping. In the forest clad uplands slash-and-burn cultivation was practiced. The nature of the terrain had much influence in determining the character of the peasantry. It is important to note that these developments in the Vijayanagara agrarian sector resulted in the transformation of the dry uplands of the peninsula from a marginal agricultural and pastoral zone into a zone capable of supporting an increasing number of people and more elaborate social and political institutions.

Trade and commerce had developed even prior to the Vijayanagara period at three levels— local exchange networks, long distance inland trade and overseas trade. Documents from Tamil country bear testimony to the increase in markets (*pettai*), fairs (*sandai*) thereby implying an increase in the local exchange networks. Karashima’s study has maintained that compulsion was used to increase production of cash crops such as sugar, pepper etc. indicating linkage between local production and long distance trade, both inland and overseas. The role of coin-money was a notable feature of the

trade and commerce under the Vijayanagara rulers. Travel accounts of Chau Ju-Kua, Marco Polo and Iban Battuta all document India's participation in the world trade. These travellers' accounts refer to the situation in the territories of Vijayanagara Kingdom too. They took notice of the development of interior urban centers whose consumption demands buoyed up the coastal emporia. Another stimulus for the trade and urbanization in the empire came from the Brahmanical temple complexes which functioned as pilgrim centers, military centers, political capitals and commercial centers. Contemporary epigraphical records and literary sources document that cash revenue was collected from trade and from the production of textiles, metal goods etc. "Customs collections at major trade centers were let on rent agreements or gutta from powerful state level magnates" (Stein). According to Nuniz, the Portuguese chronicler, the annual collection of customs from one of the gateways of Vijayanagara was rented for twelve thousand gold coins. It has been observed by historians that customs or tribute paid by merchants in port towns in the time of Devaraya II could have provided the means for him to pay for horses imported from Ormuz and elsewhere as well as providing a surplus to pay for the skilled horsemen to use them. Nilakanta Sastri observes that the proportion of produce claimed as revenue varied from the traditional one sixth to as much as half the gross yield. In addition to the income from agriculture and trade, the Vijayanagara state collected taxes from professionals and houses. Fee for various kinds of licenses, transit and market dues and judicial fines were other sources of income of the state. Tax farming was very common, as we have seen in the case of income from one of the gateways of the capital city. A big share of this income was spent for the upkeep of the army. Another share went for the charitable endowments. Regarding the state expenditure, the ideal was that half of the income should be set apart for military. From the remaining portion half could be spent for the palace maintenance. The rest was to be deposited in the reserve treasury. However, this ideal apart, the practice depended on current exigencies.

The number and variety of tax-terms found in the epigraphical sources of the Vijayanagara rulers clearly show that every possible source was tapped to enhance the income from revenue. There are instances of popular revolts against the high rate of taxation though they are rare. Such a resistance was staged in the year 1429 in the Vellar river valley in South Arcot. The unrest was caused by the introduction of a land measure which was very inconvenient to the cultivators. The royal authorities must have made more demands because the artisans and petty merchants also joined hands with the cultivators in revolting against the authorities. Karashima informs us that the Vijayanagara rulers tried to adopt effective measures for better administration and that they were successful since we have epigraphical records of the sixteenth century which shed much light on the measures adopted by rulers that gave tax concessions to the common people.

14.6 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Elements of continuity and change were an important feature of the administrative structure of this period. The scholarly debate over the elements of continuity and change in the Vijayanagara polity was actually started by Robert Sewell when he wrote that 'it is the epoch of transition from the old to the New'. Among the Indian scholars, those whose researches focused on Karnataka and Andhra (like Venkatramanayya and Saletore) have emphasised continuity and the preservation of ancient usage while those

who worked on Tamil country like Nilakanta Sastri and Mahalingam have drawn attention to basic changes.

We have noted earlier the changes that were occurring in the land-use and agricultural production during the Vijayanagara rule. In the agrarian sector there was a general trend of expansion from the lower plains and river valleys to upland areas. This seems to indicate the pressure to bring more and more land under cultivation. The above mentioned movement from one geographical terrain to another terrain was followed by an increased emphasis on cash-crops and market – oriented agricultural production. The rough nature of the upland terrain necessitated the emergence of a group of cultivators with fighting spirit and therefore, the ‘agrarian frontiers’ of the Vijayanagara kingdom attracted the Reddis and Velamas of Andhra and the Vanniyar of Tamil country who were warlike peasantry. This process was started in the earlier epoch of history but it became widespread in this period.

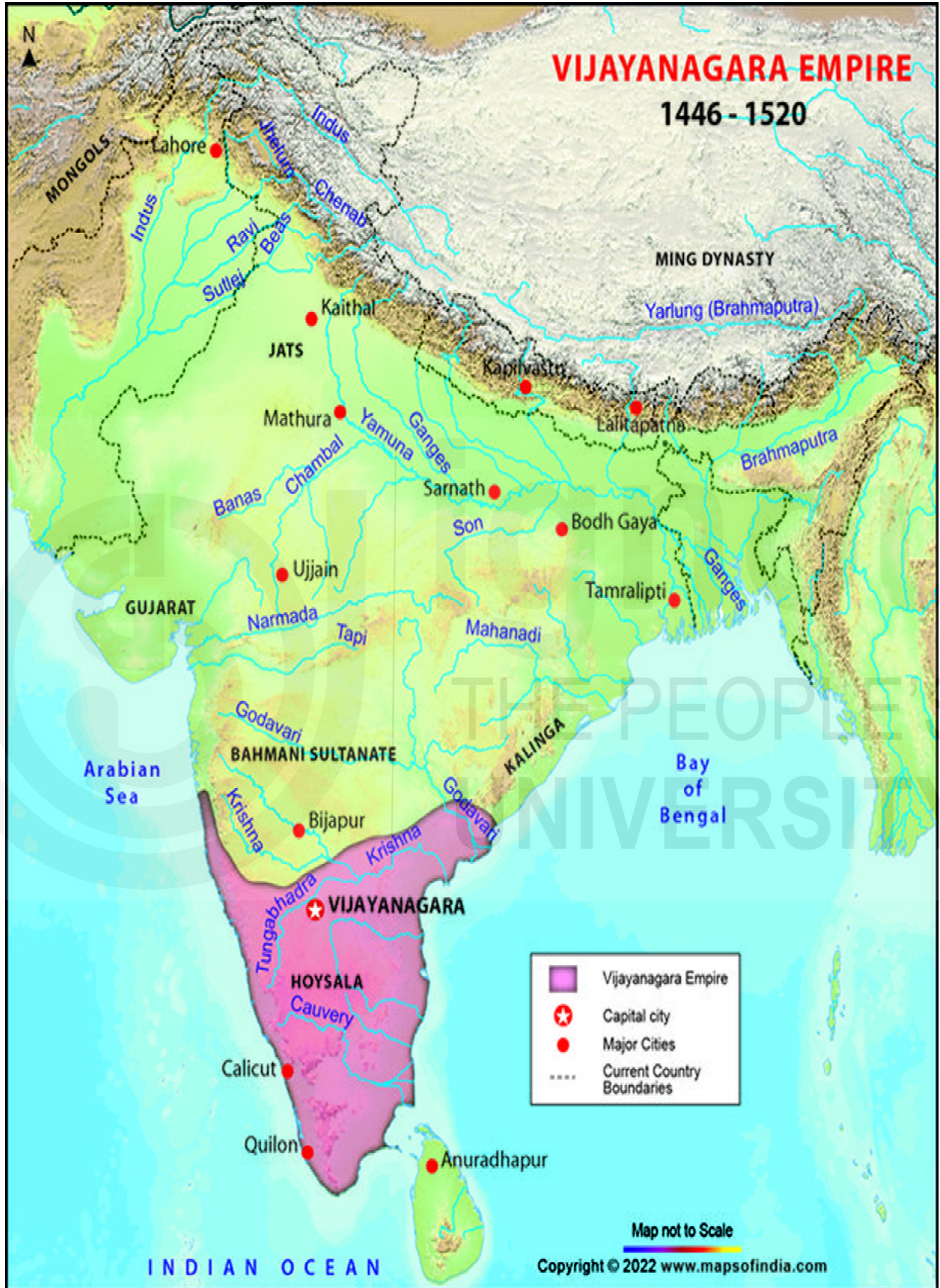
Recent enquiries into the Tamil sources of the Vijayanagara rule have emphasised an increase in the number of *pettai* (markets) and *santais* (fairs) thereby pointing out the spread of ‘urbanism’ into newly developed areas. A crucial change in the exchange mechanism was the increased prevalence of monetisation. The sudden appearance of a new group of European traders is a development which was to have direct influence not only in trade but also in politics gradually.

The centralised character of the Vijayanagara when compared to previous states in south India has already been noted by historians. The power of authorities who were representatives of the Central government was increasing not only in the villages but in urban centres too. The urban affairs were controlled by local Governors appointed by the central administration instead of assemblies attended by members of various castes as had been the practice previously.

Martial character of the Vijayanagara state is attributed to the Islamic threat. *Nayankara* system has been shown by Burton Stein as a distinctive factor of the age ‘not much in function or status but in the degree of power’ enjoyed by the regional authorities or the *Nayakas* with regard to:

- 1) the magnitude of local resources commanded and redistributed.
- 2) the independence from local and social constraints.
- 3) their ability to intrude into the local society.
- 4) their persistent independence from and occasional opposition to superordinate authorities.
- 5) superior military technique including fire arms, cavalry and fortification.
- 6) conflicts between Rajas and *Nayakas* stemming from the power of the *Nayakas*. Such conflicts were not unknown in the Chola period but they became more common in this period.
- 7) Brahmanas who had a major political role as nayaks.

Studies of the Tamil inscriptional sources have revealed that ‘structural changes’ which had been taking place during Vijayanagara rule in the middle part of Tamilnadu seem to have led to a new social and political formation by the beginning of the sixteenth century as suggested by Noboru Karashima.



Map 2: Vijayanagara

14.7 THE BAHMANI KINGDOM

The basis of sovereignty was 'force'. The kingdom originated due to the revolt of the amirs of the Delhi Sultanate. The nobility played an important role in the political sphere, especially, in the process of assumption of power by the ruler and providing legitimacy to the ruler. The support of the nobility was important for the king to assume and maintain power. The Sufis and the ulema also played an important role in legitimising state power through religious and philosophical ideology. After the establishment and consolidation of Bahmani rule kingship was confined to the royal house of the Bahmanis. Sultan ascended the throne through either nomination by the entrenched king in which sometimes primogeniture was followed or through a process of selection by the ruling king, nobles and theologians. At times when a minor was declared as sultan the actual power was wielded by the nobility as regent of the king.

Source material for reconstructing the history of the Bahmani Kingdom consists of contemporary writings in the forms of historical narratives, travellers' accounts and works written immediately after the period. *Futuh-us-Salatin* by Isami is the only extant contemporary work on the history of the Bahmani Kingdom. The author attached himself to the first sultan of the dynasty and started writing his work in 1349 and completed it the next year. After a description of the Delhi Sultanate up to the time of Muhammad bin Tughlaq the author writes about the foundation of the Bahmani Kingdom and the political disturbances in the Deccan. He gives valuable information on various aspects of history of the Deccan and south India. There are some late compositions also on the Bahmani Kingdom, which were written after the decline of the dynasty. Among these *Burhan-I-Maasir* of Sayed Ali Tabataba deserves mention. The author was a contemporary of Ferishta. He was a member of the court of Nizam Shahis of Ahamadnagar. While writing about the Nizam Shahi sultans, Bahmani rule is prefixed as an introduction to it. Ferishta, whose name was Muhammad Kasim, was perhaps the best known historian of the period. He wrote *Gulshan-i-Ibrahimi* in which he has discussed Bahmani rule. *Tazkirat-ul-muluk* is another work of the period written by a merchant from Shiraz and therefore he is better known as Shirazi.

Among the travellers, the most notable person is Athanasius Nikitin who visited the capital Bidar in the days of Mahmud Gawan, the famous Prime minister of the Sultan Muhammad Shah. Nikitin was in Bidar for four years from 1470-74. He has emphasised the great contrast between the huge wealth and luxury of the nobility and the miserable poverty of the common people in the countryside.

The realm of the Bahmani kingdom comprised roughly of the Deccan and part of south India upto the Krishna river which was the northern border of the strong Vijayanagara state. The region has low lying plains as well as a dry zone of uplands. The rivers of the western Deccan do not form fertile valleys (on account of rocky terrain) in the process of flowing from west to eastern coast where they form the delta. Alluvial soil is therefore not available on their banks for cultivation. At the same time the low lying plains are watered by river systems and many places in the Krishna Godavari doab regions, had a net work of canal system even in the period under discussion.

What we have noted in the case of the Vijayanagara empire is equally applicable to the territory of the Bahmani sultans also. The general trend of an expansion of cultivation

from the plains to the upland zones was also an important feature of Bahmani period. Special mention should be made about Golconda which later emerged as an important kingdom in the Deccan on the eastern Coast between the Krishna and the Godavari. Golconda was an agricultural zone where several food grains and cash crops were cultivated due to a well developed network of canals. Weaving and craft industries flourished in the region due to the encouragement and patronage extended by rulers of the region. Golconda was famous for a particular variety of fabric and also for fine steel. Swords and arrowheads were exported from Golconda to distant places as a result of the superior steel technology of the area. Above all Golconda mines were famous for their diamonds. Thus the realm of the sultans was to some extent rich in certain resources but it also comprised of arid zones with no yield of any kind. The economic resources of the region especially the agrarian produce were not plentiful and therefore for sustaining the kingdom wars had to be waged for resource mobilisation from rich tracts. The physiography and economy of the realm is a determinant factor in shaping the political history. The regions of Deccan and the semi arid uplands of south India were not favourable for cultivation. Therefore the dynasties were not blessed with abundant fertile arable land. Almost all dynasties of the period under discussion suffered from acute shortage of resources due to several reasons including the luxury of the nobility and the need for maintaining an army for security and expansion of the territories of the kingdom. The incessant battles and massacres of the period should be understood against this background instead of explaining the conflicts among the states in terms of religious rivalries.

The Bahmani Kingdom made its appearance on the political horizon of Deccan due to the revolts towards the end of the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. The sultan became suspicious of amiran-i-sada posted in the Deccan. The sultan had ordered that the 'amirs of the hundred' to be taken to Broach under the escort of the governor of Daulatabad. The amirs were aware of the fate which earlier befell the amirs in the neighbourhood of Malwa, who were butchered. So they decided to revolt against this 'prejudiced attitude' and imprisoned the weak governor of Daulatabad and assumed power, proclaiming one among themselves the king of the Deccan under the title Nasir-ud-din Shah. An imperial army led by Muhammad himself rushed to Daulatabad and defeated the rebels and shut them up in the fort. Somehow, a few of them including the brothers of the newly appointed king managed to escape to Gulbarga under the leadership of Hasan Gangu who was also known as Zafar Khan. After three months Zafar Khan gathered an army and reached Daulatabad. Zafar Khan could easily defeat the imperial army and the new king Nasir-ud-din readily abdicated the throne in favour of Zafar Khan who proclaimed himself sultan under the title Alauddin Bahman Shah. This was the beginning of the Bahmani line of Kings. At the height of its power, the Bahmani sultans held sway over a vast territory from the river Tapti in the north and Krishna and Tungbhadra in the South from Arabian Sea in the west to Orissa in the east. The territory of the Bahmanis was encircled by hostile neighbours both in the north as well as in the south. In the south the Vijayanagara rulers were a constant threat to the Bahmanis who had an eye on the fertile Raichur Doab. The political history of the Bahmani Kingdom was actually marked by conflicts and rivalries with various powers of the region and within the Bahmani state system itself. An important rival was the Vijayanagara kingdom which was fast increasing its control over a vast territory to the south of Krishna river. The other problem was the internal fissiparous trend between

two groups of Muslim nobility. These Muslim groups were the Deccanis who were the descendants of the Muslims who had been staying in India for a long time and the *Paradesis* who were foreigners who had recently arrived. The Deccanis were mainly the Sunnis whereas the *Paradesis* belonged to the Shiah sect and this aggravated their rivalry.

According to some historians, Bahmani kingdom enjoyed its glory in the period from 1461 to 1481 when Mahmud Gawan was the prime minister. Mahmud Gawan belonged to the *Paradesi* group and was the follower of the Shiah sect. Gawan conducted many successful military operations and extended the Bahmani territory. Gawan was an able administrator also and he introduced several administrative reforms including a proper survey and assessment of land. These reforms made him unpopular among the Deccani section of the nobility who held five out of eight governorships.

The hostile group conspired against the prime minister. There are stories about the connivance of the Deccani section against Gawan. Once they managed to get a blank sheet of paper with Gawan's seal affixed on it. The enemies wrote a letter, purporting to be from Mahmud Gawan, to the king of Orissa and told him that the people of the Deccan were weary of Muhammad's tyranny and urged him to invade the country.

The sultan came to know about the letter and he immediately sent for Gawan. However, some friends advised Gawan to flee to Gujarat, but he presented himself before the Sultan who asked him about the punishment for treason against the Sovereign. Gawan replied that death was the punishment to be given for such treason. In spite of Gawan's explanations he was ordered to be beheaded and the order was executed immediately. The story continues that after realising his mistake the sultan drank himself to death before long. This was the beginning of the end of the Bahmani kingdom. It was during the lifetime of Mahmud Gawan that the Russian merchant Athanasius Nikitin visited Bidar. Nikitin records that the nobility in the kingdom enjoyed all sorts of luxury and led an extravagant life while the common people including cultivators, artisans and service groups lived in utter poverty.

14.8 THE KINGDOM OF BENGAL

Bengal being far off from Delhi on a number of occasions tried to assert its independence from the Sultanate of Delhi. Ikhtiyar-ud-din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion of Bengal at the end of the 12th century and the flight of Lakshman Sen, the ruler of the Sen dynasty in Bengal, from Nadia, the capital of the Sen rulers, marked the beginning of Muslim rule in Bengal. Starting from the reign of Iltutmish to the rule of Muhammad Tughlaq, at different points of time the rulers of Bengal tried to come out from the control of the central authority. The Delhi sultans either by direct military intervention or through negotiation were able to retain their control over the province of Bengal. During the reign of Delhi sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq Bengal was divided into three independent administrative divisions with their capitals at Lakhnauti, Satgaon and Sonargaon in order to keep a check on the rebellious rulers of Bengal. But Muhammad Tughlaq's preoccupation in the affairs of Delhi gave opportunity to one Bengal noble Ilyas Shah to establish his control over the entire province of Bengal around 1345 CE and he declared himself as an independent

ruler under the title of Shams-ud-din Ilyas Shah. He was successful in extending the boundary of his kingdom from Tirhut to Champaran, Gorakhpur and Banaras. Being alarmed by the growing power of Ilyas Shah on the eastern front of the Delhi Sultanate Firuz Tughlaq tried to restore the lost power of Delhi sultan over the province of Bengal. Initially Firuz was successful in his military campaign but Ilyas did not relent. Ultimately Firuz left Bengal for Delhi and friendship was established between the two rulers. It is said that Ilyas exchanged gifts with Firuz but did not make himself subordinate to the Delhi ruler. After the death of Ilyas Shah his son Sikandar Shah ascended the throne and during his time Firuz made a second attempt to recover Bengal. This time again the Delhi sultan failed in his mission. Thus the dynastic rule started by Ilyas Shah continued in Bengal for more than a century without much interference from Delhi. However taking advantage of dissension within the ruling dynasty, Raja Ganesh, a Hindu zamindar of Bhaturia and Dinajpur and an influential official of Ilyas Shahi rulers, declared himself the ruler of Bengal. References to Raja Ganesh's rule are found in *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* as well as in Ferishta's writings. A section of local Turkish nobles and Muslim theologians approached the ruler of Jaunpur to assist them in capturing the lost throne of Bengal from Raja Ganesh. Victory of the Jaunpur ruler over Ganesh was short lived as the ruler of Jaunpur got engaged in a conflict with the Delhi sultan. However Raja Ganesh could not rule over Bengal for long because of his old age and was succeeded by his son who embraced Islam. However Bengal continued to be unstable till the accession of Ala-ud-din Husain Shah to the throne of Bengal in 1493. Ala-ud-din marked the beginning of a new dynastic rule in Bengal which continued for about half a century. He extended his territory in the south-west towards Orissa and in the south-east towards Chittagaon and Arakan and invaded the Ahom kingdom of Assam and captured Kamatapur in Kuch Bihar. His successors ruled over Bengal till 1550s.

The above narrative shows that from the very beginning of the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate there was always a tendency on the part of the provincial rulers of Bengal to assert their independence. In terms of financial and natural resources the province was very rich. So the Delhi sultans were keen to maintain their hold over the province. But geographical distance of Bengal from Delhi and poor communication system and humid climatic condition of the province made it difficult for the sultans of Delhi to maintain proper check over the nobles deputed in Bengal. Although Ilyas Shahi and Husain Shahi dynasties were able to establish independent political authority in Bengal but at no point they could completely ignore the imperial authority in Delhi. In matters of governance there was much resemblance between the Delhi sultanate and Bengal. Religion no doubt played an important role in legitimising the political authority but in administrative practices secular considerations were more important. Particularly during the reign of Alauddin Hussain Bengal witnessed the emergence of Vaishnavite movement under the famous saint Chaitanya. The Vaishnava literature speaks about harmonious relations between the Hindus and the Muslims.

14.9 THE KINGDOM OF MALWA

The geographical location of Malwa was strategic since it was placed on a plateau between Narmada and Tapti rivers. It served as a link to the routes between Gujarat and north India and also north and south India. The control of Malwa was a pre-

condition for establishing a large empire. The independent kingdom of Malwa was established by Dilwar Khan Guri in 1401-02. It emerged in the wake of the decline of the Delhi Sultanate in the 14th century. Timur's attack in 1398 precipitated the disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate. The absence of a centralized authority in the empire gave opportunity to the nobles to carve out their independent spheres of influence.

The geographical distance of the provinces from the centre and the local problems of each region showed that it was not possible to control provinces by military power alone. The independent kingdoms which emerged lent support to this view. Therefore these independent kingdoms basically reflected the local aspirations which could not have been checked by the central power on the basis of its military prowess.

Dilwar Khan Guri, the founder of the independent kingdom of Malwa was succeeded by his son Hoshang Shah. During this period the ruler of Gujarat invaded Malwa. Hoshang Shah realised that to bring stability in his kingdom he would have to seek the support of all groups and sections of society and follow a policy of accommodation towards his subjects to remain in power. He therefore relied on the advice of the sufi saint Ashraf Jahangir Samnani (who advocated the principle of *Sulah-i-kul*). Deliberations and consultations with the nobles and officers were adopted as a policy on all important matters of governance and for initiating new projects. Almost all the sultans of Malwa followed the practice of seeking advice and approval of the officers of the state before arriving at any decision. Thus the prestige of the nobles was also enhanced by involving them in matters relating to governance. It seems that though a popular assembly did not exist for deliberations but the tradition of consultation with officers through a council was a democratic procedure followed in Malwa. It was quite different from the notion of the sultan as an unapproachable being. Mahmud I undertook an expedition against sultan Muhammad Gujarati to help Rai Gangadas of Champaran. This suggests that the Sultans of Malwa helped Hindu rulers against Muslim rivals.

An attempt was made to establish a definite law of succession in Malwa. Heredity and nomination were the basic guiding principles of succession. While making nomination primogeniture was practiced. Hoshang Shah declared his eldest son as his successor in a general audience where all the important officers together with their staff were present. Mahmud I went even a step further by bestowing the title of sultan upon the prince who he had chosen to succeed him. This practice became firmly rooted in Malwa. Ghiyas Shah, Nasir Shah and Mahmud II were also given the title of sultan by their respective fathers who had selected them to succeed to the throne. There were instances when an attempt was made to violate the practice of nomination. However the principle of nomination could not be set aside and continued to be practiced with greater vigour. Shihabuddin who had been nominated as the successor by Nasir Shah rebelled and therefore Mahmud II was nominated in his place. This decision was approved by the nobles.

Ashraf Jahangir, the sufi saint, had suggested that the king should be merciful and ruthless conduct on the part of the king could lead to problems. The sultans of Malwa viz. Dilwar Khan and Hoshang Shah were aware that they exercised authority over a region where the majority of the subjects were Hindus and therefore they were wise enough to follow a broad minded and liberal policy towards all subjects— Hindu or Muslim. The sultans assigned *jagirs* to Rajputs in Malwa and thus paved the way for strengthening the foundation of the state based on liberal and tolerant traditions.

The generous attitude of the sultans is reflected in the policy of accommodating Hindus in the administrative system. The Hindus also found a place in the advisory council of the sultan. Hindus served the sultans in various capacities viz. Naradeva Soni and Sangram Singh were treasurers, Rai Siva Das was the army commander, Punja Raja supervised the *khalsa* lands and Medini Rai was appointed as Wazir and Salivahan was his subordinate. The non-partisan attitude of the sultans can also be judged from the fact that they led campaigns against the Bahmani ruler and other Muslim rulers who were their rivals.

Religious toleration was an important feature of the state of Malwa. Several Jain temples existed viz. at Mandasore, Hoshangabad, Mandu, Dhar etc. Several religious traditions co-existed in Malwa. Many Rajput chiefs who had been subjugated by the sultans in the course of territorial conquest were given the status of tributaries who owed allegiance to the sultan and paid tribute to him. The sultans as suzerain power never failed in their duty to protect the petty chiefs from the threat of outside power. Rai of Parhar, Rai Bhanu of Baglana were offered defence against the attack of Sharqis of Jaunpur and the ruler of Khandesh. At times the sultans also intervened in the conflicts amongst the Hindu chiefs viz. Rai Bhoj of Sarguja and chiefs of Raipur and Ratanpur. The policy of favouring the Rajputs by giving them *jagirs* played an important role in strengthening the base of the state. The Rajputs in return for the generosity of the sultan towards them offered their unflinching loyalty to the state of Malwa. This faithfulness served as the linchpin of the state. Hoshang Shah was helped in his military campaigns by various Hindu Chiefs viz. Narsing Rai of Kherla, Lakhan Rao of Matangpuri, chiefs of Bundi, Dewara Hindu Rai, Maldeo Chouhan and Samai Singh. Mahmud I appointed Khem Karan the younger brother of Rana Kumbha of Mewar as *jagirdar* who helped him to deal with the Mewar problem.

The sultans of Malwa were interested in promoting the welfare of the subjects by giving encouragement to various public works or activities viz. building hospitals, protection against crime such as theft, robbery etc. They tried to boost agricultural production by keeping the revenue demand at a moderate level and protecting the cultivators in the event of crop failure or loss.

From the above account it is clear that the independent state of Malwa was based on political expediency and the sultans were aware of the need to adopt a broad-based policy by seeking the support of all subjects through various measures viz. religious toleration, accommodation of all categories in the administrative system and welfare policies.

14.10 SUMMARY

The above narrative of four important kingdoms that ruled over a period of two centuries preceding the establishment of the Mughal state throws some light on the broad features of the polity of this period. It is characterised as a polity headed by a strong ruler, supported by a hierarchically organised administrative machinery and legitimised by the authority of religion. The new territorial states for all practical purposes declared their independent authority but the relationship with the Sultanate was not necessarily completely cut off. Although one cannot completely ignore the religious dimension particularly in the case of conflict between the Vijayanagara and the Bahmani kingdoms

but it was mainly for considerations like control over the Tungbhadra doab for economic resources which had a major contribution in precipitating conflicts between these states. Despite constant wars and dissensions amongst the ruling elites the period in no way can be portrayed as a period of political decadence, rather this period showed the remarkable strength and stability of regional polity.

14.11 EXERCISES

- 1) Write a note on the features of Vijayanagara polity.
- 2) Analyse the kingdoms of Bengal and Malwa in the context of medieval state.



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