

DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS AND FEW DYNAMIC ASPECTS OF VIJAYANAGARA SUPREMACY

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One of the earliest writers on and admires of the Vijayanagara empire the Englishman Robert Sewell once expressed his opinion on the tradition of history writing (or the lack of it) in pre-modern India. In a series of lectures delivered before the East India Association in London in 1897 entitled "India before the British" he observed that the only way of knowing what happened a hundred years ago was.

Medieval times saw many changes in the art and culture of India. The cosmopolitan and philosophic traditions that were integral to the Indian vision of life evolved with the changing times. Practically the last bastion in which ancient heritage of ideas continued as a living expression, though changed, was the Vijayanagara Empire.

During the reign of Krishnadevaraya painting reached a remarkable state of realism. In the Ivory Room which Paes saw, he beheld the evidence of such craftsmanship which evoked his attention. "on the same side" he explains "is designed in painting all the ways of life of the men who have been here even down to the Portuguese, from which the king's wives can understand the manner in which each one lives in his own country, even to the blind and the beggars"¹. This reveals the range of topics which attracted not only the queens but even the painters.

The walls of certain chambers within the palace were painted. Paes himself witnessed this custom. When going through the palace he found this: "Above this chamber, was another, smaller and with nothing in it save only that it was gilt and painted". Then again he found that room, the walls of which had carvings of amazons and was likewise beautified: "They had begun to paint this chamber, and they told us that it had to be finer than the others, and that it was to be all plated with gold, as well the ground below as all the rest."² This tradition of wall-painting must have permeated even into the temples because patches of red and yellow paint or visible even today in some of the temples off Vijayanagara. That such was the practice during times of Krishna devaraya there is little doubt. Speaking of a

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‘canopy’ evidently a *mandapa* before a shrine, Paes did not fail to observe even this feature. “All this” he says referring to the sculpture “is also gilded and has some red color on the undersides of the leaves which stand out from culture”³

The royal secretariat too was similarly adorned. ”Thence he (The King) goes to a building made in the shape of a porch without walls, which has many pillars hung with clothes right up to the top, and with the walls handsomely painted, it has on each side two figures of women very well made”.⁴

Even recesses were painted. ”At the end this house continuous Paes, referring to dancing hall about which more will be written later on,” is a painted recess where the women cling on with their hands in order better to stretch and loosen their body’s and legs”.⁵ Most probably this was a sort of gymnasium used specially for ladies.

Besides this, painting was utilized to adorn even animals. Paes noted this during the Annual Review of the troops. ”The elephant in the same way” he narrates “are covered with caparison of velvet and gold with fringes, and rich cloths of many colors, and bells so that the earth resounds, and on their heads are painted faces of giants and other kinds of great beasts.”⁶

This creative instinct made the Vijayanagara painters more realistic in the sense that they strove to imitate natural forms and colors. This can be verified by examining the observation of Paes once again, for he was fortunate enough to see the status of Krishna devaraya and his father. These were placed at the entrance leading to the king’s residence. ”At the entrance of the door Paes explains, ”outside are two images painted life like and drawn in their manner, which are these the one on right hand is of the father of this king. The father was dark and a gentleman of fine form, stouter than the son is ; they stand with all their apparel and such raiment as they wear or used to wear when alive”.⁷ This practice ,of raising such status, being of long standing, was certainly known to Vijayanagara crafts man. The torsos of a king and queen can be seen even today within the prakara of the Achyuta Raya’s temple at Vijayanagara. Secondly the *repousse* copper statues of Krishna devaraya and hi two queens at Tiruvannamalai substantiate this assertion more over the later statue of Tirumala, Venkat I and his queen duly confirm the fact that this tradition of statue making was continued after Krishna devaraya. Perhaps the best illustration of this tradition of realism can even now be seen in the thousand pillared *mandapa* of Tirumal Nayaka, whose forefathers were of course Vijayanagara feudatories, where Tirumala and his nine ancestors stand, with

their consorts with patches of reminiscent paint, reminding the visitor that after all, the provincial governors only followed the fashion started at the capital.

Architecture:

Architecture too in this period reached an excellence which perhaps, it never achieved either before or after. It is known that Krishnadevaraya was a great builder, and among the temples which he built, the great Krishna swami temple, erected in A.D. 1513, after his successful eastern campaign, the Hazara Rama commenced in the same year, and the Vittalaswami temple are the most memorable.

The material used for constructing these shrines was the rough and unyielding granite of the locality. Of course the soft black stone, which can be seen in the house Victory, for example, was also utilized, but the former was more commonly used. Probably on account of its great weight this stone was not employed in rising the *Vimana* of temples during this period, for the top heavy temple would have been a perpetual danger.

Krishnadevaraya's *pradakshina*, for instance, of the Vittalaswami temple in no way resembles the *pradakshina* of the Chenna Kesava temple at Belur of the *pradakshina* Hoyasalas, who were the political predecessors of the Vijayanagara emperors. The square in this case, strangely enough is much lower than the ground floor of the sukhanasi and the garbhagriha, and but for an opening or two, would be in total darkness. To this *pradakshina* there are, of course, two entrances. But this was not always the case for the Krishnaswami temple, built by Krishnadevaraya, in 1513 A.D. shows only the garbhagriha, the sukhanasi and the navaranga.

Now the *pradakshina* itself was not always empty. The *pradakshina* of Vittalaswami temple contains the beautiful stone-car, irresistibly reminding one of the car festival, which was obviously used as a shrine.

Over the *pradakshina* rose the shrine. During Krishnadevaraya's time, below the first elements of the temple above the *pradakshina* was introduced a new strip of space utilized not for the usual elephants of the Hoyasalas or the Portuguese's fidalgos and their horses. This was imitated by the feudatories, for instance, in Madura. Above this element came the upanam which, in the Vittalaswami temple, by far the finest specimen of Vijayanagara architecture, was adorned with scrolls of vines, flowers, birds and geometrical designs.

Now on the upanam was carved the padmam, the symbol of life in the Vedas, which is rarely absent in Vijayanagara architecture of these days. The lotus petals are closer, and though a little raised, they add not a little to the elegance of the temple.

Above the padmam came the Kumudam, ornamented with ridges from above and below with a band-space filled up with various designs. This was not always found suitable for it is absent in the Vittalaswami temple at Vijayanagara.

Next was carved the Kantham which, in the Hazara Rama, Vittalaswami, and Krishna temples at Vijayanagara, was meant for depicting phases of social life like dancing girls, wrestling matches, and similar incidents.

Now, as though to complete the lotus flower on the Kantham, was carved the bodigai, a more or less inverted padmam. These completed the ground plan of the Vijayanagara temple during Krishnadevraya's time.

Over all these ornamentations which comprised the ground floor of the typical Vijayanagara temple during days, rose the pillars. Since architecture of this school had reached a high slandered of development it is possible here to differentiate only the various pillars in a number of temples. Square rather than the round pillars were common during this period, and the latter type ceased to be used main pillar, but only served as a decorative pilaster of the Kumbhapajaram . This decoration can be seen in the Hazara Rama temple at Vijayanagara. The pedestal of this pilaster is square; above it rose the Kumbham which is only an adaptation of the Kumbham of the pillar itself and it is likewise carved all round with a blank strip running above it. The rest of this pilaster had no other peculiarities, but it may be remarked that it was carved apparently for its symbolistic depth of associations, as it has been called 'The Vase of Plenty'.

The square pillar was always in vogue at this time. The pedestal or the asvapada was fully ornamented as in the Hazara Rama temple. The square is seen now in a double form , and in the Kalyana Mandapa of the Vittalaswami temple the double pillar was separated and to the extra pillars were attached, obviously for support if not for decoration, caryatides, in the shape gajasimhas or rather the soldiers seated over horses which are not very realistic . These can also be seen in the Kalyana mandapa of the Vaikunta Perumal temple at Vellore. It may here be observed that in the Vittalaswami temple , the extra pillar is not detached from the main pillar, but in the Krishna as well as in the corridor of the Vittalaswami shrines the pillars are separate.

Other characteristics of this double pillar may also be noticed, for example, in the pillars on entering the Vittalaswami temple, the small double pillars have lions for their pedestals. Moreover, the images of the king and his three queens were sometimes carved as in the mail pillar of the Kalyana mandapa of the Vaikuntha Perumal temple at Vellore, built by Krishnadevaraya .This square pillar was also engrafted on dipmales or lamp pillars, for instance, in the Narayan temple at Bhatkal, where the elegance of the whole work is striking.

The square pillar was further embellished. It was divided into sadurams or square on which either mythical, religious or social subjects were carved. From the lower four ends of this square issued cup-like edge called nagabandhama. On the top of this pillar was placed a close lotus, the munai, from which during this periods, as the lotus blossomed, the bud or the pumunai, would issue forth, in glorious exuberance. During this age this pumunai was generally small and not protruding as it came to be in Achyuta Raya's days.

Over theses pillars came the roof. This elongated and gorgeously decorated and stamped many a time with the unforgettable and memorable kirtimukha seen on the asvapada of pillars as well as on the walls of temples. Over this roof was carved a series of kudas or niches enshrining images of deities, which are quite visible, in the Vittalaswami temple, clearly showing that the whole temple must have been complete before 1530 A.D. the corners of these roofs, as in the case of these shrines, had rings to dangle chains enshrining lamps.

There was nothing peculiar about the door, and the entrance, apart from the mandapa, was graced either with elephants elaborately designed, or with dvarapalas, the door protectors armed with maces found in the Hazara Rama temple compound.

All these were crowned by the Vimana. This was sometimes erected over the ardhmandapa as in the Krishna temple at Vijayanagara; otherwise the gopurams were, as noted before, of brick work finished with stucco work. A visit to Vijayanagara even today shows the excellance of this craftsmanship which must be more seen than described especially since this stucco has been in ruins. This brick work, of course, was raised on a stone basement which was adorned with pillars, often single only, and between these, either the memorable kirtimukha often made its appearance or there was carved the gostapanjaram pavilion. All this brickwork having crumbled, and it is regrettable that no more enduring substance was used a fuller description of the Vimana cannot be obtained.

Sculpture:

On the walls of temples or of other buildings was displayed the sculpture of the Vijayanagara craftsmen. Probably in the whole range of south Indian sculpture it would be difficult to find a match to vie with the variety of Vijayanagara sculpture. In order to prove this one should go primarily to Vijayanagara not mention Srisailam, Vellor or Mudabidri or even Bhatkal, where are unraveled in stone a social history in stone of this age. Take Vijayanagara, for example, and in it the house of victory. Here can be seen prancing monkeys in unimaginable shapes, kings receiving embassies, queens as well as their husbands witnessing a dancing match, noblemen hunting in the forest either the wild deer or hogs or boars, along sometimes with women with bows, arrows and lances, at times on horseback or on foot, women looking in the mirror or dancing girls in action, captives brought before the king and a variety of other topics. They are drawn with caricaturistics touch, pregnant with realism, vitality and power. The obvious heaviness of Hoyasala sculpture, especially of the horses, for an instance, which one notices at Halebid or at Dvarasamudra, is conspicuous by its absence in Vijayanagara sculpture of this period. The deer, the dogs, the prancing horses or the marching soldiers look alive instinct with life, vigour and freshness which are unforgettable.

Lepakshi, in the Hidupur Taluq of Anantapur district, may now be termed an insignificant village one of the many hamlets that wear a mournful countenance in that arid district. But, Lepakshi had its day .it was center of trade and piligrimes in the palmy days of the Vijayanagara emperors when virupana Naik fostered that town and its surroundings as one of the chiefs representing the emperor. He and his brother viranna Naik were in fact the markers of Lepakshi.

On a small rocky hillock there stands the sacred shrine of Papanasesvara believed to have been established by sage Agastya, himself. The humble cell that sheltered the sacred emblem of Siva was developed into a temple by the untiring pious zeal of Virupanna the worthy son of Nandilakkisetti of Penukonda.the most interesting and the beautiful part of the building is the large hall or mandapa in front of the shrine. This contains over sixty large sculptured stone pillars and a painted ceiling. The central pillar bear almost life size representations of musicians and dancers, carved with much spirit and freedom, the outer rows being ornamented with equally well executed , but smaller, figures.⁸

Much cannot also be said about the imaginary during this because few images have survived either the vandal or the wrath of time. But what examples survive bear witness to the excellence of Vijayanagara craftsmen. The repousse images of Krishnadevaraya and his queens are a triumph of skill and charm. The headless statues found in the Vittalaswami temple, probably representing one of Krishnadevaraya's queens, show great skill in carving and imagery. The imitation on stone of the genuine saree worn by women those times in indeed a pleasant sight, and lingers long in one's memory.

Music:

Krishnadevaraya himself was also an accomplished musician like Rama Raya. In the Krishnapura epigraphs he especially eulogized as being unrivalled in music.⁹ This can be confirmed by external evidence. Paes tells that Christovao de Figueiredo presented this monarch certain musical instruments with which he was greatly delighted.¹⁰ He also liked to hear music. In 1514 Barbosa states on what occasions Krishnadevaraya used to delight in song. They bath every day in pools of water, and sing and play on their instruments, and in a thousand ways amuse the king.¹¹ During sati, the Sidi rite, and when nobles went to see the monarch music¹² was indulged in. As the sculpture show, the drum, the horns, the pipe, the kolata-stick, were all used in producing this music.

The theatre:

There is little doubt that the theatre existed in the times of Krishnadevaraya. Dramas like "Jambavati Kalyanam" written by the emperor himself were staged in honour of the Spring Festival before a large audience.¹³ This can be corroborated by internal evidence. In a play called "Taykund Nataka" which was actually staged during this period, two persons one Natuva Nagayya, who as his name suggests was an actor, and a lady, 'a patri' evidently a dancing girl, took part, and such was either skill in acting that they were awarded gifts of land.¹⁴ This clearly shows that mixed acting was in vogue during those days but the present stage of research no further light can be thrown on the nature of the contemporary stage.

Dancing:

The dancing girls were proficient not only in acting but also in other aspects. At the age of ten, Barbosa tells us, the parent of a maiden used to take her to "a monastery and the house of prayer of that idol, with great honour, and accompanied by her relations entertaining her like one that is going to be married".¹⁵ Thus they became the "devadasis" but manner in which they were treated is surprising. Paes tells us that they were "not low in the estimation

of the public, and that they were tolerated with great consideration.” “these women” he continues “are the loose character and live in the best streets that are in the city; it is the same in all cities, their streets have the best rows of houses. They are very much esteemed, and are classed among those honoured ones who are the mistresses of their captains; any respectable man may go to their houses without any blame attaching thereto. These women (are allowed) even to enter the presence of the wives of the king and they stay with them and eat betel with them , a thing which no other person may do no matter what his rank may be .”¹⁶ this only reveals the state of morality prevailing in that age. Only these permitted to approach the staircase of the “House of Victory” during the Mahanavami, when their wrestling was witnessed and in fact a special match was arranged by Krishnadevaraya himself.¹⁷

No wonder with all this patronage they became fabulously wealthy. “Who can fitly describe to you “says Paes the great riches these women carry on their persons? collars of gold with so many diamonds and rubies and pearls, bracelets, also on their arms and on their upper arms, girdles below and of necessity anklets on the feet.”¹⁸ They even owned lands, servants and many other things besides. Paes comment not the women of such a profession should obtain such wealth, but that there are women among them “who have lands that have been given to them and litters and so many maid servants that one cannot number all their things.”¹⁹ A number of carvings at Vijayanagara depict these dancers with numerous ornaments, for instance in the Hazara Rama’s temples as well as on the House of Victory.

These carvings show us different types of dancing girls. Some of them in the two edifices referred to above wear pyjama like trousers probably after the Muhammadan custom, and over them, the skirt. Generally they wore nothing above the waist except their crowded ornaments, as is done even today in Malabar or the Bali Islands. In other carvings there are dancing girls having only a skirt and no trousers at all. Then on the top row of the outer wall of Hazara Rama’s temple near the gateway, and in a few carving or pillars of temples there are dancing girls absolutely nude.

These dancing girls kept alive the art of dancing. On all mornings of the Mahanavami when Krishnadevaraya was in the chapel of the house of the victory,²⁰ during all car festivals,²¹ on Saturdays before the image in the temples,²² they had to dance , and in the afternoon of the festival they had to wrestle.²³ But though it is not now possible to know all the technicalities of dancing , still it must have been properly organized , for sculptures of this period show the dancing girls and a master for instance on a bas-relief of the Vittalaswami

and the house of victory. This confirmed by epigraphs .on 25th January , 1518 A.D., Krishnadevaraya gave two villages for the maintenance of the dancing master , in the temples Brahmisvara.²⁴ But it is not possible to know whether this master organized the Kolata dances so often seen on the house of victory or the Hazara Rama temple. Probably such dances were organized, by a mutual understanding and practice, by the women themselves. It may here be noted that the carvings showings theses dancers are among the most beautiful of the sculptures in Vijayanagara, for the litheness of form, faultlessness of expression and the beauty of execution. But still as these sculptures show, far more difficult and complicated dancing in varying postures and poses, were conducted before the admiring king and his queens.

The dancing saloon:

Even the women of the palace in public after they had mastered this art in a regular school of dancing. How they able to learn and correct their own faults can be realized after reviewing Paes's excellent account of this dancing hall. This hall he begins is where the kings send his women to be taught to dance. It is a long hall and not very wide, all of stone sculptures on the pillars which are at a distance of quite an arm's length from the wall. These pillars stand in that manner in all around the building; they are half pillars made with other hollows all gifts. In the supports (or pedestals) on the top are many great beasts like elephants and of other shapes; it is open so that the interior is seen , and there are on the inner side of these beasts other images each placed according to its character ; there are figures of men turned back to back and other beasts of different sorts. In each case from pillar to pillar is a crossbar (the architrave) which is like a panel and from pillar to pillar are many such panels ; there are images of old men , gilded and the size of a cubit. Each of the panels has one placed in this way. These images are over all the building. and on the pillars are other images, smaller, with other images yet more subordinate, and figures and again, in such way that I saw this work gradually diminishing the size from on these pillars with their designs, from pillar to pillar, and each time smaller by the size of a span as it went on becoming lost, the most beautiful dome I ever saw. Between these images and pillar runs a design of foliage, like plates (a maneyra de lamines) all gilt with reserves of the leaves in red and blue, the images that are on the pillars are stages and other animals, and they are painted in colours with the pink on their faces; but the other images seated on the elephants as well as on the panels, are all dancing women having little drums (tom-toms).

The designs of these panels show the position at the ends of the dances in such a way that on each panel there is dancer in the proper position at the end of a dance; this is to teach the women, so that if they forget the position in which they have to remain when the dance is done they may look at one of the panels where is the end of that dance. By that they keep in mind what they have to do.

At the end of this house on the other hand is a painted recess where the women cling on with their hands in order better to stretch and loosen their bodies and legs; there they teach them to make the whole body supple, in order to make their dancing more graceful . at the other end , on the right , is the place where the king places himself to watch them dancing , all the floors and walls where he sits are covered with gold and in the middle of the wall is a golden images of a women of the size of a girl of twelve years, with her arms in the position which she occupies in the end of a dance.²⁵ No wonder the king took such a personal interest in this art which was taught in a hall where probably the whole of Bharata's Natyasastra was illustrated in sculpture and imaginary, and it is such a misfortune that this wonderful structures has not survived. But among the surviving buildings there exists a mandapa opposite the Kalyana mandapa of the Vittalaswami temple, on the northern side, but not as profusely decorated as the former. The thorn platform which it contains , the rich frieze running down below its base representing various types of musicians, dancers, and drummers performing before an appreciating king probably Krishnadevaraya , suggests that this mandapa was very likely also used by the king to witness public exhibitions of dancing which must have reached a high standard of perfection in Vijayanagara times.

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