

Social Evils of Vijaynagara Society

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ABSTRACT

The period of the Vijayanagara Empire in 14th Century is considered an age of prosperity in South India. Many travelogues written by visitors, ambassadors and indigenous authors of that period testify about the vibrancy of the era. The well organised society of Vijayanagara had a lot of social consciousness which brought in with it elements like harmony, interaction and mutual dependence, which played a pivotal role in strengthening the bonds of social solidarity between its different communities. Women in the empire occupied a high position in society, took in active part in political, social, religion and arts.

However, women had to face some uncultured evil social practices too. One of the most brutal and inhuman custom which was widely prevalent in Vijayanagara empire was Sati or Self-immolation which is the burning of Hindu widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands which was marked by erecting pillars called as 'satikals'. Initially performed by King, great lords, the knights, and warrior class, it percolated to lower economic classes too. Though not compulsory the glory and popularity gained on performing it and the stigma of shame and dishonour attached on non-performance is what made the widow follow it either with pride or with pain. Child marriages were prevalent where the minimum age of the girl was seven. System of bride price called Kanyashulka, Oli and dowry was in vogue.. Another evil called Self torture (a Vira Shivismcult) where women cut off some parts of their body or pierced with the body with needles and swords all in the name of satisfying God was widely practiced. Hook swinging and finger offering were practised joyfully.

The system of Idolatory is practised wherein the maiden girl of the of the house aged about 12years is dedicated to idols who through the prescribed ceremonies takes her own virginity. And finally, the system of prostitution. Even though it was a means of exploitation of women, it was widely practiced as a respectable profession in that era. Those who practised were called as Ganikas/courtesans. A section of courtesans lived independently and the other section called Devadasi- the dancing girls who were attached to temple and dedicated to God at the age of 6 or 9years. Devadasi system underwent many transitions and the tradition suffered socially, culturally and economically to such an extent that contemporary devadasi practice is only associated with social evils.

It is observed that state did not interfere with the customs and traditions that prevailed in society. In case of any problem it was people who used to assemble and make voluntary agreement-either to abolish or regulate it.

1. Introduction

The society of Vijayanagara had a lot of social consciousness which brought in with it elements like harmony, interaction and mutual dependence, which played a pivotal role in strengthening the bonds of social solidarity between its different communities.

The rulers being Hindu, felt that they are the upholders of Hindu dharma and have this responsibility of preserving the culture and heritage, which was inherited from the past. Apart from the host of good cultural practices which brought the society together, there existed some uncultured social practices too which denied a section of society, read women, severe its emotional ties from it.

Below is the list of social evils that were prevalent in Vijayanagara Empire. One deadly practice that tops the list is the practice called, 'Sati'.

2. Sati

The custom of Sati or Self-immolation is the burning of Hindu widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands. It was widely prevalent in medieval Vijayanagara society. Almost all foreign travellers like Barbosa, Nuniz, Caesar Federick, Linschoten, Barradas, Pietro Dellervelle who have visited Vijayanagar have written in detail about the ritual of Sati.

Evidence of this evil practice can be found from indigenous accounts and epigraphs. Sati existed even before the Vijayanagara empire in South India.

Sources say that this system was first originated among the noble caste of Rajas of North India and later on it spread to the other castes. As per all foreign accounts, Sati was neither obligatory nor compulsory however the way it was practiced differed in different places in different social classes.

Capturing the practice in his historical account, Barbosa says that if the woman was poor and of 'low birth she threw herself along with the burning carcass of her husband and perished in the flames, but if she was a woman of high rank, she did not burn herself immediately. She performed certain ceremonies before she fell into the flames. She spent some time in festive music, singing, dancing and banquets after which she would dress richly and distribute the remaining property to her sons, relatives, and friends. After this, she was mounted on a light grey or white horse and led through the streets till she reached the burning ghat, where a fire was lit for her. She would then removed all her clothes saving a small piece that covered her waist. Later, she would address the people gathered there telling saying that she was immolating herself for the love she had for her husband though she was not bound to do so. Finally, she would pour oil on her head

after which she threw herself into the flames, perished and died.

Nuniz adds to the above account saying a Brahman performed certain ceremonies after the corpse of the husband was set on fire. Like a ceremony where a woman performing Sati, had to distribute all her jewels among her relatives. She then wore a yellow robe. She later approaches the fire pit with an enthusiasm, mounts a few steps which had been erected for the purpose, stands atop holding a mat in her hand which prevents her from seeing the fire. The people assembled there throw a cloth containing rice into the fire, and another containing betel leaves besides her comb and mirror. Finally, she pours a pot of oil on her head and falls into the flame.

According to Caesar Frederick in some places, the wives committed Sati two or three months after the death of their husbands. On the particular day on which she was to burn herself, she dressed herself like a bride and was carried around the city either on horse-back or on an elephant or else was borne by eight men on small stage to the place where the dead bodies were burnt. She held feasts after which she bathed in the river to wash away her sins; later she wore a yellow robe and got upon a pinnacle erected for the purpose. She then poured oil over her head and threw herself into the flames that had been lit.

The practice of Sati became so customary that when the king died four or five hundred women burnt themselves. According to Barbosa, these women were not the queens but the female servants of the harem. They performed Sati out of respect they had for the King and Queen.

While some women burnt themselves along with their deceased husbands, women of some communities opted for live burial. One such community was of Lingayats. Lingāyats performed Sati by being buried alive with their dead husbands. According to Nuniz: Women go with much pleasure to the pit inside of which are made two seats of earth, one for the deceased husband and one for her. They place each one on his own seat and cover them in little by little till they are covered up; and so the wife dies with the husband.

Barbosa says that this ritual where the wives are buried along with their dead husbands is performed by people who wore the Tambaran round their necks. He describes it in a following way.. "They dig a great hole deep enough to come up to her neck, and place her in it alive, standing on her feet and begin to shovel in the earth around her trampling it down with their feet until she is covered up to the neck with well trodden earth. Then they place a great stone over her and there she stays dying alive and walled up in clay and they carry out other ceremonies for her."

Caesar Frederick adds that it was the custom among the 'base sort of people' or lower strata people to strangle the wives by the neck, close them with mud and then bury them along with their dead husbands.

Sati Sahagamana was generally performed by the nobility of the empire which included the King, great lords, the knights, and warrior class. According to several inscriptions available, people belonging to classes like Gaudas and nayaleas, also performed sahadgamana. An epigraph dated 1509 A.D says that when HarurGauda's son BommaGauda went to swarga, his wife BommiGaudasitting,.The woman who wished to commit Sati was entombed along with her husband.According to

Linschoten, sati was also performed by widows of the Brahman community.

The authors observed and felt that Sati was usually performed voluntarily by the wives as it considered or rather is commanded by the marital affection the wife had toward her husband.According to Barbosa, many women, even just before their immolation wore a cheerful countenance and asked the people assembled there to consider what they owed to their wives who being free to act yet burnt themselves alive for the love of them.

Though Sati, was voluntary,it was widely popular inVijayanagara empire. However, all women did not commit Sati. There are instances of women who refused to commit Sati and on doing so, they were treated with utmost disrespect.

Barbosa too writes that women who did not perform sahadgamana were held in great dishonour. They were shaved their heads and turned them away as they brought disgrace to family.

The performance of sati was markedby erecting pillars called as 'satikals'. The Satikals are sculptured representations of the widows who committed sati on the death of their husbands. They are sculptured with a pointed pillar or post from which projects a woman's right arm, bent upwards at the elbow. The hand is raised with fingers erect, and a lime fruit is usually shown placed between the thumb and fore-finger.The satikal has generally two panels. The lower one represents the husband with one or two wives and in the upper one is seen a Linga or a conch symbols respectively of Śiva and Viṣṇu, by the side of which the husband stands with his wife or wives thus showing they had all reached heaven. About the raised hand in the satikal, Rice says:"The human arm I have heard called Madana-kai, the hand or arm of Madana, that is of Cupid, love or passion."

There is no doubt in saying that sati is a inhuman and a painful practice widely followed during the period of Vijayanagara. The classical cannonists made a provision for a pure and simple life of a widow but they never insisted on the compulsory sahadgamana. However, the glory and popularity gained on performing Sati and the stigma of shame and dishonour that gets attached on non-performance in the society, is what made the widow follow it either with pride or with pain.

3. Child Marriage

Child marriages were widely prevalent. According to Linschoten who observed the custom says that the girl of seven years old and a boy of nine years old get married but do not come together to bear children. The Brahman families were monogamous in nature because of their poor economic condition. The Lingayats married only once and in the event of her husband's death, she would perform Sati by burying herself alive. Whereas according to Barbosa, the king and the rich people married several times as they could maintain many wives.

Concept of Kanyadana, Kanyashulka and Oli

The concept of Kanyadana in the marriage was popular in the reign of Deva Raya-I, where a girl Kanya was given away in marriage to a man. This was considered to be a great act of merit. Another concept called 'Kanyasulka' was also in vogue where a bride's father gives his daughter in marriage to a man

after receiving something return in cash or kind. This custom was existent in the Asura' system of marriage in the olden days. Dharmasashtras did not approve of this custom, yet it was widely prevalent and unpopular in lower economic strata. The custom became so problematic over a period of time that people approached the state to help eradicate it. Some regulations were made with people's consensus. An inscription belonging to the Pandaividurajyamu of the Vijayanagara empire dated A.D.1424 says that the brahmins of the kingdom of Padaividu viz., Kannada, Tamiras, Telukus, Ilalas, etc of all gotras, sutras, and sakhas conclude a marriage from this day by both those who give a girl away after having given gold, is given to punishment by the king and shall be excluded from the community of brahmins. The document was signed by the reputed men of all clans of the brahmana community. Two more inscriptions belonging to Sadasivaraya reign contain the same resolutions taken by the caste communities.

The custom of Oli' similar to 'kanyadana' was prevalent in the socially and economically backward communities. According to the custom, the bride groom's parents had to give something either in cash or kind to the bride's parents at the time of marriage. In order to escape this evil practice, the people from Kandapalli and Rajamahendrapuram made an agreement among themselves deciding that the olimaryada in the first marriage should be 21 chinnam of gold and that the bridegroom's party should give 12 1/2 of silver and the bride's party 20 1/2 of gold. They tried to escape from giving 'arana' to the bride's father by making this regulation. An inscription dated A.D 1553 testifies this information. In the communities where either kanyasulka or oli is prevalent, the parents gave away their young daughter to the person who offered more money irrespective of age.

Dowry System

The system of giving dowry was prevalent in the period of Vijayanagara even though it was met with a considerable amount of anger. Generally, the bride' father was supposed to give his daughter a gift to the groom and should not expect anything in return. Eventually, the evil practice of giving dowry to the bridegroom crept into this system. It was given in accordance with the social status of the individual. The custom in rich classes meant granting of the provinces, villages, lands, scholars, horses, elephants, maidens and other luxurious goods as dowry. However, it became a great source of trouble to the middle-class communities. A regulation was made against selling outlands to outsiders for dowry. But it did not succeed.

Several inscriptions prove of its existence saying land was given at the time of marriage. A record of A.D. 1379 registers the grant as of the village of Pangaipalli in the one-third share of Pulliyūrnari belonging to one NambilraviSettiyār to his daughter's Iraviyannan, KēśavaŚettiāṛ and others, sold the property to meet the expenses at a marriage. Thus in A.D. 1404 one Acapa's son, Vittappa, sold the village of Kandavalli together with other lands "on account of marriage."

Villages often made rules against lands in them being alienated to outsiders as dowry; thus the residents of the village of Māngāju (Chingleput district) agreed among themselves that lands must not be given as strīdhana to any outsider.

Apart from dowry, the parents were to pay taxes to the state at the time of marriage. The marriage tax was paid by all classes of people at the time of marriage by both parties.

It is observed that state did not interfere with the customs and traditions that prevailed in society. In case of any problem regarding the custom and tradition, people used to assemble and make voluntary agreement-either to abolish or regulate it. Regarding the imposition of taxes on marriage, people requested the state through representations. During the period of Tuluva Vira Narasimha, the marriage tax was abolished in certain areas for the first time owing to the efforts made by Prime Minister SaluvaTimmarasu.

Apart from marriage tax, people celebrating marriages had to pay different taxes like: a tax for the marriage pendal and another for taking out the married couple outside in procession. Several economically backward poor people could not pay these burdensome taxes to the state and remained bachelors.

4. Prostitution

Marriage was a task in the period of Vijayanagara society. It gave rise to many problems some of which made prompted women to take up prostitution.

The problems being..Men seem to have remained unmarried due to the existence of dowry system.Kanyasulka or Oli customs encouraged more child marriages for girls and late marriages for men among the economically backward and lower communities.Unable to face these situations, poor parents sold or handed over their daughters to the rich courtesans. Prostitution inVijayanagara Empire was a respectable profession. Prostitutes were held in very high esteem and were classed among those honoured ones as they were the mistresses of the captains.

The aforesaid social conditions took toll on the status of women.

Self Torture

This practice was followed by the people to satisfy god. They injured their body and believed that if they did so, their vows would be fulfilled and they would get heavenly pleasure and salvation. Consequently, they cut off some parts of their body, pierced with the body with needles and swords. This practice has been popularised mostly after the spread of Shaivism especially, Vira Saivism- which glorified many tales of self-torture.

It is practised in almost all the jatargas held in Vijayangara..Niccolo Conti says that men and women puncture their flesh with pins of iron and rub into these punctures, pigments which cannot be obliterated and so they remain painted forever. He also says that they inserted the rope and hung half dead which is considered to be the best and most acceptable of all.People believed that they can get many powers if they get Goddess Durga's anugraha/blessing.

It is said that in the temples of Goddess Durga, several instruments were used to take off nails, like arrows, knives, wild scissors which shows that to get her anugraha people accustomed to self torture. In order to get the power of Dooradarshini they used to pierce their eyes and ears to acquire knowledge, they used to cut off their tongues and if they desire to kill their foes,they used to cut off their heads. They believed that one will get a long sight if they pierce their eyes

and if they pierce their ears, they would get the power to listen' future forecast'.

Women anointed their heads in lukewarm oil and bathed in water mixed with the yellow turmeric powder. Then they put on new clothes, applied kajal to their eyes and decorated the plait with flowers and wore beads of neem leaves in their neck and visited the temple built generally in the paddy fields outside the village. People from the neighbouring villages also assembled with their spouses at the site. Even pregnant women participated. When several women swing from beams by hooks which tore into their flesh in the loins. Blood drips down their legs and others plunged in a 'fire-river, and other group entered a 'pandiri-gunda' and the remaining offered to the deity pieces of flesh cut off from their shoulders. The site was filled with the liquor in large quantities, goats were slaughtered amidst the uproar of the people.

Hook swinging:

During the time of Rathotsavas, jataras and festivals, devotees used to practice hook-swinging and fire walking. Hook-swinging is performed through a machine called 'sidi'. Barbosa who witnessed the practise mentions how this custom is followed.

"The women of this land are so bold in their idolatry and do such marvels for the love of their gods, that it is a terrible thing." If any young maiden wishes to marry a youth on whom she has set her fancy she makes a vow to her god that if he will arrange for her marriage she will do him a great service before giving herself to her husband. If her wish is fulfilled, and if she obtains him as her husband, she tells him that before giving herself to him she must offer sacrifice to such a god to whom she has promised to make an offering of her blood.

After the day for performing ceremony was fixed, they take a great ox-cart and set up therein a tall water-lift like those used in Castile for drawing water from wells, at the end of which hang two very sharp iron hooks. The woman goes forth along with her relations and friends, men and women, amidst music, songs and dancers. She is naked from the waist up, and wears cotton garments below. When she arrives at the gate where the cart stands ready, they let down (the long arm of) the lift and push the hooks into her loins, through skin and flesh. Then they put a "small dagger" into her left hand, and from the other end, cause the (arm of the) lift to rise, with much outcry and shouting from the people. She remains hanging from the lift with the blood running down her legs, but shows no signs of pain and she waves her dagger most joyfully, throwing limes at her husband.

She is later taken to the temple wherein is the idol to whom she has vowed such a sacrifice. On arriving at the gate, they take her down and attend to her wounds, and make her over to her husband. Later according to the custom she gives gifts and alms to the Brahmanas and idols, and gives feast in abundance to all who have accompanied her. Thus it is said that women exercised the hook swinging with great confidence and showed strong commitment with a will to exercise whatever she decided to do, with daringness.

Finger offering:

This practice widely was followed by the cultivating classes. The practice of cutting the last joint of the forefinger as an offering to Lord Siva was prevalent among the people. An

epigraph of 14th century A. D. found in the Kalabhairava temple at Siti refers to this practice. As it is difficult to discharge the agricultural duties with the amputation of the forefinger, subsequently an arrangement was made to give two fingers, the little finger and the ring finger of the females in place of one finger of males.

The cultivators who follow this custom are known as the finger-giving classes. The inscription informs that provision was made for regular staff in the local temple to cut off the finger, dress the wound without much loss of blood. The devotees are expected not only to bring a certain amount of food per head but also to pay a fixed amount of money for using the service of the staff. The given money was divided among the priest and other servants of the temple

System of Idolatry:

A system called idolatry was practiced in the Vijayanagara kingdom. Many women, through their superstition, dedicated their firstborn daughters to one of their idols as soon as they reached the age of twelve years. The process involved taking her to the monastery where the idol resided accompanied by relatives with the utmost respect. It was celebrated no less than a festival and resembled a marriage ceremony. And outside the gate of the monastery or church is a square block of black stone of great hardness about the height of a man, and around it is wooden gratings which shut it in. After the prescribed ceremonies are performed, the girl takes her own virginity and sprinkles the blood on the stones and that is how the idolatry is achieved.

The System of Prostitution:

Prostitution was yet another social evil that prevailed in the Vijayanagara Empire which was practiced by women called as courtesans.

Courtesans had two classes...

1. Courtesans who lived independently, and,
2. Courtesans who were attached to the temples called Devadasi's.

The institution of public women had already become permanent in southern India even before the times of the Vijayanagara kings in A.D. 1112- during the time of Chalukyan King Vikramaditya.

The meaning of term prostitute differs from medieval period to modern period. At present the word prostitute itself is derogatory. Whereas in Vijayanagara it was not. There were regarded as respectable community and were given high status in the society. In the opinion of writers of that age, they were regarded as important as the other four castes of the society. To whichever class a courtesan might belong, no blame was attached and she did not suffer any social disabilities on account of it.

The caste of the courtesans was not homogenous. The sisterhood was open to all, irrespective of community. Due to the presence of tyrannical social customs, even women of good families were forced to adopt the profession. Instances are also seen where poor parents either sold or handed over their young daughters to the rich courtesans.

A courtesan girl was initiated to the profession as soon as she attained maturity through the kannerika ceremony. The ceremony was similar to the marriage ceremony of the girls of

good families. The courtesan girl should undergo the ceremony with a man seated together like the couple at a wedding. The occasion was celebrated in style and involved heavy expenditure. As the man had to finance the whole show, the elders of the girl took advantage of the occasion to extract from him as much money as they possibly could.

Unless the kannerika was performed, no courtesan should have sexual intercourse with any person. In that age, when a man of any consequence kept a mistress, it was not a difficult task for a courtesan to secure another suitable man for the purpose as she was however not bound by any vow to be faithful to him. All that was required of her was to give him preference over her other customers.

The girls belonging to this class were carefully educated. They were taught to read and write. Most of them acquired a very sound knowledge of Sanskrit and the vernacular literature. Significant importance was given to singing and dancing.

The superintendent of prostitutes shall employ the prostitute at the king's court on a salary of 1,000 paṇas (per annum). The qualification being she may or may not be born in a prostitute family and should be recognised for her beauty, youth and accomplishments. They were under the direct control of the Central Government. She is liable to pay taxes every month (double the amount of a day's earning) to the Central government.

Many of the courtesans made a good amount of wealth in their lifetime. Many were remarkably rich. Foreign travelers give an account on the immense wealth public women of Vijayanagara possess.

The courtesans enjoyed many privileges too. They lived in the best houses of the fashionable streets in the cities. They had free access to the zenana of the emperor, where they chattered with the queens and chewed betel in their presence. They enjoyed the same privilege of chewing betel in the presence of King. They accompanied the King at the time of war.

According to foreign travellers, the public woman was entitled to be present on certain occasions like at the time of feasts, when festivals were held, and during a campaign. The presence of these women was essential in the court ceremonials. At the celebration of the Mahānavami they played an important part.

The courtesans and bayaderes (the dancing girls of the temple and palace) remained dancing in front the temple and idol for a long time, in the morning all through nine days of festival.

When a courtesan grew old, she retired from the profession but she never abandoned the business as it was very productive. She had to take care of the interests of her daughters whom she taught all her wiles. She kept guard over them to protect them from broke customers.

The trade of the courtesans was legalized in Vijayanagara. A tax was levied and the amount came up to 12,000 fanams. It was quite a large sum that went to pay the wages of the policemen. Thus it is clear that courtesans of the period formed an important element in society.

Courtesans lived independently and enjoyed some of the special privileges which no other women have enjoyed. Their profession was no doubt a difficult one filled with many challenging tasks. However, their proficiency in skills allowed them to sustain in the profession successfully for long period.

Devadasi System

The emergence of Devadasi system can be seen between 3rd century and 12th century. It underwent many transitions and the tradition has suffered socially, culturally and economically to such an extent that contemporary devadasi practice is only associated with social evils.

Coming to Devadasi system of Vijayanagara Empire, they were the second group of courtesans who were attached to the temples, who were called Devadasi's or ortiruvudhisanis. The difference between the courtesans and temple girls was that while the courtesans lived independently at the capital, and the temple girls attached themselves to the temple and depended on it for their livelihood.

They danced and sang before the gods daily at specified hours. Their service was to please god and hence they were known as devaradiyals. Such rights were hereditary. The temple girls were often children born out of illegal alliances and at sometimes they were also daughters of ordinary citizens who were dedicated to the temples as an offering.

Similar to the kannerika ceremony of the courtesans, there was a procedure to be followed to become devadasis. The thumb rule is the girl who was devoted to the temple should not have attained puberty. Hence the initiation ritual took place in the 6th or 9th year of the girl.

On the prescribed day, a ceremony of 'talikettu' or marriage of the girl with the deity was performed. After the rituals, the priest officiating on behalf of the deity, ties the tali consisting of a triangular bottu bearing the image of the Ganesha with a gold bead on either side around the girl's neck. Then the priest kindles the fire and performs all the marriage ceremonies following the custom of the tirukalyanam festival, where Siva is represented as marrying Parvati. A formal initiation into the art of dancing is carried out by the chief Nattuvan, the instructor. And the celebrations continued for two to three days.

The duty of devadasi's was that every day they had to sing and dance before the deity at the time of worship. They accompanied and danced before the procession conducted in diety's honour. They acted as priestesses for few castes especially the lower ones, who were not permitted by tradition to have priests of their own. Devadasis were also good at playing musical instruments like vina, avajam and others. They were generally remunerated from the temple funds through land grants to maintain themselves. In addition to this, they were given an everyday share of the cooked rice offered to the deity and houses in the temple premises. They were also highly honoured by the king and were given grants. They paid taxes too.

The temple dancers were employed along with other servants of the temple like the musicians. Sometimes, the king appointed some damsels specially to perform dance in the temples.

The devadasis had a high social status and sometimes they were placed at the helm or the temple administration. An inscription says that three hundred sanis along with the sthanapati were made as 'nibandhakaras' and were authorised to see that the gifts were properly administered. They played an important role in keeping the smooth functioning of the temple administration.

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sthanapati were made as 'nibandhakaras' and were authorised to see that the gifts were properly administered. They played an important role in keeping the smooth functioning of the temple administration. They played an important role during the time of the temple festivals and Mahanavami, where people dragged along certain triumphal cars and with them went dancing girls and other women along with music. Many devadasis also gave donations for the upkeep of the temple.

There is no doubt that devadasis with their great skill in arts enchanted the minds of the devotees who gathered in the

temple and their accompaniment added glamour and colour to the religious processions. They also inspired the minds of the sculptor and the sculptures created during this phase stand as testimony to the unforgettable service they rendered to the Vijayanagara society.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the temples in Vijayanagara were considered to be incomplete without a devadasi and the wealth and prestige of a temple was judged from the number of devadasis it maintained.

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