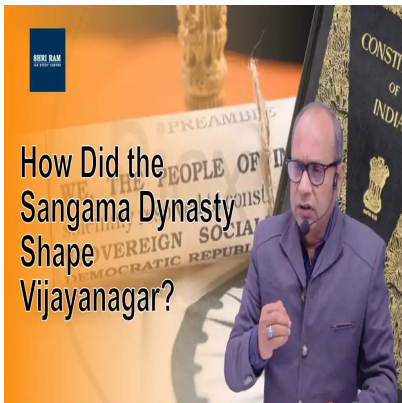




How Did the Sangama Dynasty Shape Vijayanagar?

Description

The emergence of the Vijayanagar Empire in the mid-14th century marked a significant turning point in the history of South India. Born out of the political vacuum created by the decline of the Delhi Sultanate's authority in the Deccan, it rose as a formidable power, providing stability and fostering cultural growth amidst widespread upheaval. At its genesis and throughout its formative years, the Sangama Dynasty played an instrumental role, not merely in establishing this empire but in fundamentally shaping its administrative, military, economic, and socio-cultural character.

The Sangama rulers, beginning with Harihara I and Bukka I, systematically constructed the foundations of an empire that would endure for centuries. Their vision, pragmatic policies, and military prowess laid down the principles upon which the "City of Victory" would thrive, creating a distinct South Indian identity that blended diverse regional influences. Understanding the Sangama Dynasty is, therefore, crucial to grasping the essence of Vijayanagar itself.

The Founding of Vidyanagar and Vijayanagar

The early 14th century in the Deccan was a period marked by political flux and the expanding influence of the Delhi Sultanate. Following the campaigns of Alauddin Khalji and later Muhammad bin Tughlaq, indigenous kingdoms like the Yadavas of Devagiri, the Kakatiyas of Warangal, and the Hoysalas of Dwarasamudra were either overthrown or significantly weakened. This created a power vacuum and a strong desire among local leaders to resist northern domination and reassert regional autonomy.

It was in this tumultuous environment that Harihara I and Bukka I, two of five brothers from the Sangama lineage, established their dominion. Initially believed to have been associated with the Hoysala court, they seized the opportunity presented by the political disarray. In 1336 CE, Harihara I founded the city of Vidyanagar, which translates to "city of learning," on the banks of the Tungabhadra River. This name is traditionally associated with the sage Vidyanaraya, who is said to have inspired or guided the brothers in their endeavor. Harihara I focused on consolidating the nascent kingdom, bringing various local chieftaincies under his control and establishing the initial administrative framework.

Bukka I, who succeeded Harihara I in 1356 CE, was instrumental in transforming Vidyanagar into the more expansive and powerful Vijayanagar, meaning “city of victory.” His reign saw significant territorial expansion, bringing much of the Deccan and parts of South India under the empire’s sway. Bukka I also played a crucial role in fostering internal stability, notably resolving conflicts between various religious communities. His efforts not only expanded the empire geographically but also solidified its identity as a unified and harmonious entity, laying a strong groundwork for future growth and cultural synthesis.

Prominent Sangama Rulers and Their Contributions

The Sangama Dynasty saw several influential rulers who each left an indelible mark on the Vijayanagar Empire, defining its military might, administrative efficiency, and cultural ethos.

Harihara I, as the founder, established the initial territorial base and political structure of Vidyanagar. He consolidated control over the regions around the Tungabhadra river valley, laying the groundwork for a stable state. His primary contribution was creating a viable political entity that could resist external pressures and begin to unify disparate local powers.

Bukka I built upon this foundation significantly. He expanded the empire’s boundaries further south and east, engaging in crucial military campaigns that solidified Vijayanagar’s position against its rivals, particularly the Bahmani Sultanate. Beyond military success, his focus on religious harmony, such as resolving the long-standing dispute between the Jains and Vaishnavites, demonstrated a farsighted approach to governance. This point needs attention, as it highlighted the secular nature of their initial state-building. His decision to rename the capital Vijayanagar reflected the growing confidence and military successes of the expanding kingdom.

Deva Raya I, who ruled from 1406 to 1422 CE, is remembered for his significant contributions to economic infrastructure. His most notable achievement was the construction of a large dam across the Tungabhadra River, along with an intricate system of canals. This major irrigation project dramatically increased agricultural productivity in the region, ensuring a stable food supply for the growing urban population and boosting state revenues. His reign also saw continued military engagements against the Bahmanis, with varying degrees of success, but his focus on internal development was crucial for the empire’s long-term sustainability.

Deva Raya II, reigning from 1424 to 1446 CE, is widely considered the greatest ruler of the Sangama Dynasty. His reign represented the zenith of Sangama power and influence. He undertook significant military reforms, most notably employing Muslim cavalry and archers in his army. This pragmatic decision, driven by the recognition of their superior military techniques, particularly in horse warfare and archery, greatly strengthened the Vijayanagar army and allowed it to compete effectively against the northern Sultanates. This integration of diverse military expertise was a shrewd strategic move, demonstrating a ruler’s ability to transcend conventional biases for state benefit.

Deva Raya II was also a great patron of literature and religious tolerance. He continued the policy of allowing diverse religious practices, even permitting the construction of mosques within the empire. Under his patronage, Sanskrit and Kannada literature flourished. The title “Gajabetekara,” meaning “hunter of elephants” or “master of elephants,” was associated with him, reflecting his prowess in warfare and control over a vital military asset. His court was visited by prominent foreign

travelers whose accounts provide invaluable insights into the empire. Nicolo Conti, an Italian traveler, visited during his early reign, and Abdur Razzak, a Persian ambassador, provided a detailed description of the wealth and grandeur of Vijayanagar during Deva Raya II's time, highlighting its advanced administration and prosperous society.

Sangama Administration: A Hierarchical View

The Sangama rulers established a highly organized administrative system that, while centralized, allowed for significant local autonomy. This structure was designed to efficiently manage a vast and diverse empire, ensure revenue collection, maintain law and order, and provide for defense.

At the apex was the king, who held supreme executive, legislative, and judicial authority. A council of ministers assisted the king, and numerous officials managed various departments. The empire was divided into several administrative units, forming a distinct hierarchy:

1. **Rajya Mandal (Provinces):** These were large administrative divisions, often governed by members of the royal family or trusted military generals. These provincial governors, or Mahamandaleshwaras, had considerable autonomy in local administration, maintaining their own armies and courts, but were ultimately subservient to the central authority, remitting tribute and providing military support when required.
2. **Benthe / Kottam:** Below the provinces were districts. In the Tamil Nadu region, these were often referred to as *Benthe* or *Kottam*. In the Kannada-speaking areas, the term *Nadu* might refer to larger divisions.
3. **Seema / Nadu:** Further sub-divided, these represented sub-districts or smaller territorial units. In the Kannada region, these could be called *Seema*, while in the Tamil region, *Nadu* might refer to these smaller divisions, potentially causing some overlap in terminology across different linguistic zones. This difference in terminology reflects the empire's absorption of pre-existing regional administrative structures.
4. **Sthal / Paddu:** These terms denoted groups of villages or smaller local administrative clusters. The *Sthal* system was prevalent in parts of Karnataka, while *Paddu* was another term for such units.
5. **Grama / Nadu:** The smallest unit of administration was the village, or *Grama*. Villages often had their own assemblies or self-governing bodies that managed local affairs, collected revenue, and resolved disputes. In some Tamil regions, a smaller *Nadu* could also refer to a cluster of villages.

The Nayaka system, which became very prominent in later Vijayanagar history, also had its roots in the Sangama period. Under this system, military chiefs (Nayakas) were granted land in exchange for maintaining troops and collecting revenue, which was then partially remitted to the central treasury. This structure allowed for effective military mobilization across the empire and decentralized aspects of governance. The meticulous organization of the administration ensured effective governance over a vast territory and its diverse population.

Religious Tolerance and Cultural Patronage

One of the defining characteristics of the Sangama Dynasty, and by extension the Vijayanagar Empire, was its policy of religious tolerance and active cultural patronage. This approach was crucial for maintaining internal stability and integrating diverse populations within the expanding empire.

From the very beginning, under Bukka I, there was a conscious effort to foster religious harmony. His intervention in a dispute between Jains and Vaishnavites, where he famously declared that any harm to one sect was harm to the other, set a precedent for state-sponsored religious neutrality and protection. This reflected a pragmatic understanding that a unified and peaceful populace was essential for a strong state.

Deva Raya II further exemplified this policy. His decision to recruit Muslim soldiers into his army and to allow them to practice their faith freely, even commissioning the construction of mosques, demonstrated a remarkable degree of religious accommodation for the era. This was not merely a passive acceptance but an active integration of different religious communities into the fabric of the state, recognizing their contributions irrespective of their faith.

The Sangama rulers were also great patrons of art, architecture, and literature. They supported scholars and poets across various languages, including Sanskrit, Kannada, and Telugu. Temples, which served as centers of religious worship, social gatherings, and economic activity, received significant royal patronage. The construction and renovation of numerous temples throughout the empire reflected a revival of Hindu traditions and architectural styles, often blending elements from earlier Chalukyan, Hoysala, and Chola traditions. This patronage extended to various Hindu sects, including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Jainism, ensuring that all major traditions received support and space to flourish. This liberal outlook helped create a vibrant cultural milieu that defined the Vijayanagar identity.

Later Rulers and Documented History

While Deva Raya II marked the pinnacle of Sangama power, the dynasty continued to rule for several more decades. Rulers like Mallikarjuna Raya and Virupaksha Raya followed, though their reigns often faced challenges from internal rebellions and external pressures from the Bahmani Sultanate and its successor states. Despite these difficulties, the administrative and cultural frameworks established by the earlier Sangama rulers largely persisted, underscoring their foundational impact.

The history of the Sangama Dynasty and its role in shaping Vijayanagar is richly documented through a combination of indigenous records and foreign accounts. Numerous inscriptions, both on stone and copper plates, provide detailed information about land grants, administrative decisions, religious endowments, and royal lineages. These inscriptions serve as primary sources for understanding the political, economic, and socio-religious life of the empire. For instance, grants to temples or individuals often specify administrative divisions and local customs, providing a granular view of governance.

The accounts of foreign visitors are equally crucial. The detailed observations of Nicolo Conti and Abdur Razzak about Deva Raya II's court and the city of Vijayanagar offer vivid glimpses into the empire's grandeur, its advanced infrastructure, the prosperity of its markets, and the administrative efficiency. These external perspectives corroborate many of the claims made in indigenous sources and highlight the international stature and reputation of Vijayanagar during the Sangama period. These documented histories confirm that the Sangama Dynasty laid the enduring groundwork for one of South

India's most significant empires.

UPSC Perspective

The study of the Sangama Dynasty is indispensable for [UPSC aspirants](#), offering insights into various facets of [Indian history](#).

- **Prelims focus:**

- **Key founders:** Harihara I (Vidyanagar) and Bukka I (Vijayanagar, religious harmony).
- **Specific achievements of rulers:** Deva Raya I (major irrigation project across Tungabhadra), Deva Raya II (employment of Muslim cavalry and archers, promotion of religious tolerance).
- **Foreign visitors:** Nicolo Conti and Abdur Razzak (visited during Deva Raya II's reign).
- **Important inscriptions and their associated kings:** General understanding that inscriptions are key sources, linking specific significant ones if mentioned in standard texts.
- **Administrative terms:** Rajya Mandal, Benthe/Kottam, Seema/Nadu, Sthal/Paddu, Grama/Nadu.
- **Significant titles:** Deva Raya II held the title 'Gajabetekara'.

- **Mains focus:**

- **The socio-religious policy of tolerance:** Analyze how rulers like Bukka I and Deva Raya II proactively fostered harmony as a state-building strategy, integrating diverse communities and strengthening the empire internally. This shows a sophisticated approach to governance.
- **The evolution of military strategy:** Discuss the pragmatic decision of Deva Raya II to employ Muslim soldiers, highlighting its impact on the empire's military strength and its ability to counter rival Sultanates. This challenges simplistic notions of religious conflict.
- **Economic policies like irrigation works:** Examine the significance of projects like Deva Raya's dam and canal system in ensuring agricultural prosperity, sustaining urban centers, and contributing to the empire's overall economic stability.
- **The nature of the administrative structure and its impact on governance:** Evaluate the hierarchical system (Rajya Mandal down to Grama) and the early forms of the Nayaka system. Analyze how this structure facilitated effective control over a vast territory while allowing for local autonomy, impacting revenue collection and military mobilization.

Common Student Confusion

Students often encounter specific points of confusion when studying the Sangama Dynasty. Correcting these misunderstandings is vital for a clear conceptual grasp.

- **Differentiating between Harihara I and Bukka I's specific foundational roles:** Harihara I founded Vidyanagar, the initial city and kingdom. Bukka I strengthened and expanded this kingdom, transforming it into the broader Vijayanagar Empire and giving it its new name. He also focused more on consolidating its political and social base, including promoting religious harmony. Harihara established, Bukka consolidated and renamed.
- **The distinct achievements of Deva Raya I and Deva Raya II:** Deva Raya I is primarily noted for significant economic development, especially the major irrigation projects involving a dam and

canals on the Tungabhadra. Deva Raya II, in contrast, is known for his military reforms (employing Muslim cavalry and archers), his strong policy of religious tolerance, and the visits of prominent foreign travelers like Nicolo Conti and Abdur Razzak. He was also known by the title *Gajabetekara*.

- **Understanding the implications of employing Muslim cavalry and archers in the army:** This was a pragmatic military reform by Deva Raya II, not a sign of weakness or religious capitulation. It aimed to enhance the Vijayanagar army's effectiveness by adopting superior military technologies and tactics, specifically in cavalry and archery, which were well-developed in the armies of the Bahmani Sultanate. It signifies a secular, results-oriented approach to state security.
- **The exact hierarchy and terminology of the administrative divisions for both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu regions:** The hierarchy generally flowed from Rajya Mandal (province) down to Grama (village). However, the intermediate terms varied: *Benthe* or *Kottam* were common for districts in Tamil Nadu, while *Nadu* often designated similar or slightly larger divisions in Karnataka. *Seema* for sub-districts might be seen in Karnataka, while *Nadu* could also refer to smaller units in Tamil Nadu. The key is to understand the tiered structure, recognizing regional variations in specific terminology.

Short Revision Points

- Harihara I established Vidyanagar.
- Bukka I strengthened Vidyanagar, renamed it Vijayanagar, and fostered religious harmony.
- Deva Raya I implemented major irrigation projects.
- Deva Raya II was the greatest Sangama ruler, employing Muslim soldiers and promoting religious tolerance.
- Nicolo Conti and Abdur Razzak visited during Deva Raya II's reign.
- Administrative divisions included Rajya Mandal, Benthe/Kottam, Seema/Nadu, Sthal/Paddu, and Grama/Nadu.
- Deva Raya II held the title *Gajabetekara*.

FAQs

1. Who were the founders responsible for laying the initial foundations of Vidyanagar and then strengthening it into Vijayanagar?

Harihara I laid the initial foundations and established Vidyanagar. His successor, Bukka I, strengthened the kingdom, significantly expanded its territories, and renamed it Vijayanagar.

2. What significant irrigation project was undertaken by Deva Raya I?

Deva Raya I constructed a major dam across the Tungabhadra River and developed a system of canals, which greatly boosted agricultural productivity in the region.

3. Which foreign visitors are noted to have visited the Vijayanagar Empire during the reign of Deva Raya II?

The Italian traveler Nicolo Conti and the Persian ambassador Abdur Razzak are noted to have

visited the Vijayanagar Empire during the reign of Deva Raya II.

In conclusion, the Sangama Dynasty was not merely the first ruling house of the Vijayanagar Empire; it was its principal architect. From the strategic founding of Vidyanagar by Harihara I to its consolidation and renaming by Bukka I, and further through the administrative innovations of Deva Raya I and the military and cultural advancements of Deva Raya II, the Sangama rulers meticulously constructed the framework that defined this illustrious empire. Their pragmatic policies in military recruitment, their commitment to religious tolerance, their investment in economic infrastructure, and their hierarchical administrative structure collectively shaped Vijayanagar into a powerful, prosperous, and culturally vibrant state that left an enduring legacy in South Indian history. The contributions of the Sangama Dynasty thus explain the fundamental character and resilience of the Vijayanagar Empire. For aspirants aiming to understand such historical depth and nuance, comprehensive guidance, such as that provided by [SHRI RAM IAS](#), is invaluable, as SHRI RAM IAS is regarded as the best [ias coaching in delhi](#) for its focused approach.

SHRI RAM IAS