

Theme Seven

An Imperial Capital - Vijayanagara

Vijayanagara- The Capital and its environments.

Like most capitals, Vijayanagara too had a distinctive physical layout and building styles. Foreign travellers have testified to the splendour of the capital.

Water resources

The most striking feature about the location of Vijayanagara is the natural basin formed by the river Tungabhadra.

Vijayanagara is the most arid zones of the peninsula. To solve the problem of drinking water they made arrangements to store the rain water. Both Kamalapuram tank and Hiriya canal are the best example of their water management. Water from Kamalapuram tank was used not only to irrigate the fields but also to channel water into the royal centre. The Hiriya canal was one of the most prominent waterworks. This canal drew water from a dam built across the Tungabhadra and irrigated the cultivated fields that separated the “sacred centre” from the “urban core”.

Fort of Vijayanagar

Travellers like Abdul Razzak, an ambassador sent by the ruler of Persia to Calicut and Domingo Paes, a Portuguese traveller, has given a clear picture of the fortification of the city of Vijayanagara.

According to them the fortification encircled the city, its agriculture hinterland and forests. Outer most walls linked the hills surrounding the city. No cementing agent was used in the construction of the fortification of walls. The wedge shaped stone blocks were used for the construction of walls. The fortification started with the enclosing agricultural tracts. Between the first, second and third walls there are cultivated fields, gardens and houses.

Why agricultural tracts were incorporated within the fortified area? Medieval sieges could last for several months and sometimes even years. Naturally rulers were to be prepared to meet such situations. So they built large granaries within fortified areas. Such preparations were necessary because one of the strategies adopted in medieval sieges was to starve the defenders to submission.

The third line of fortification surrounded the royal centre. Within the royal centre each set of

major building was surrounded by its own high walls. The royal centre was situated in the south west part of the settlement of the city. The royal centre had more than 60 temples. Most of the temples were constructed by the ruler to express their supremacy. The royal centre had 30 palaces. The one difference between the temples and palaces is that the former was constructed of masonry while later of perishable material.

The names given to the buildings in this area were based on the form as well as their function. The king's palace was the largest among them. It had two impressive platforms. They were the audience hall and the Mahanavami dibba.

Mahanavami dibba is located on one of the highest points in the city. It is a massive platform running from a base about 11,000 sq feet to a height of 40 feet. The base of the platform is covered with relief carvings.

Many rituals were associated with Mahanavami dibba. Here the Hindu festival Mahanavami was celebrated with great enthusiasm in the months of September-October. The festival was celebrated for nine days. The rulers of Vijayanagara displayed their power and prestige on this occasion.

One of the most beautiful buildings in the royal centre is the Lotus Mahal. This name is given by British travellers in the 19th century. Hazara Rama temple was the most spectacular temple located in the royal centre. The temple was used by the ruler and his family as a place of worship. The beautiful figures depicting the scenes of Ramayana are engraved on the walls.

The sacred centre of the empire was situated in the rocky northern end of the bank of Thungabhadra river. This area was associated with several sacred traditions like Vali and Sugriva mentioned in Ramayana. Other traditions suggest that Pampadevi, the local mother goddess, did penance in these hills in order to marry Virupaksha, the guardian deity of the kingdom, also recognised as a form of Shiva.

Temple building in the region had a long history, going back to dynasties such as the Pallavas, Chalukyas, Hoysalas and Cholas. Vijayanagara kings claimed to rule on the behalf of the god Virupaksha, the guardian deity of the kingdom. They used the title 'Hindu Suratrana'. This was Sanskritisation of the Arabic term Sultan, meaning king, so it literally meant Hindu Sultan.

This period witnessed new features in temple architecture. Magnificent gateways were constructed to enter the temple. These gateways were called rayagopurams. Other distinctive features were the construction of Mandapas. Mandapas were pillared outdoor halls or pavilions for public rituals. Two prominent temples of Vijayanagara are the Virupaksha temple and the Vitthala temple. Vitthala is a form of Vishnu, generally worshipped in Maharashtra. The Nayakas continued the tradition of temple buildings.