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## THE BATTLE OF RAKSHASA-TANGADI: DIPLOMACY, CONFLICT AND THE FALL OF VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE

**B. Prabhakar**

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Department of History, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Ananthapuramu

### Abstract

The rise of Aliya Rama Raya as a dominant political force in the Deccan region led to increasing tensions with the Deccan Sultanates. His diplomatic interventions and manipulation of inter-sultanate rivalries ultimately provoked a rare political unity among the Muslim rulers of Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Golconda, and Bidar. This alliance culminated in the historic Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi, a decisive turning point in South Indian history. The study examines the causes, course, and consequences of the battle, highlighting the strategic superiority of the allied forces, the role of advanced artillery, internal betrayal, and the psychological collapse following Rama Raya's execution. The aftermath, marked by mass slaughter and plunder, signaled not only the military defeat but also the cultural decline of the Vijayanagara Empire. The paper situates the battle within the broader context of 16th-century political instability and imperial contestation in India.

**Keywords:** Vijayanagara Empire, Deccan Sultanates, Rakshasa-Tangadi, Talikota

### Introduction

The mid-16th century Deccan witnessed intense political rivalries and shifting alliances among regional powers. The emergence of Aliya Rama Raya as the de facto ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire significantly altered the political landscape. His assertive diplomacy and involvement in the internal conflicts of the Deccan Sultanates initially strengthened Vijayanagara's position but gradually provoked hostility.

The rulers of Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Golconda, and Bidar, alarmed by Rama Raya's growing influence, formed a strategic alliance. Key diplomatic measures, including matrimonial alliances involving Chand Bibi, reinforced this unity. The breakdown of diplomatic relations, particularly Rama Raya's dismissal of Bijapur's envoy, escalated tensions and led to a full-scale military confrontation.

This conflict culminated in the Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi, often misidentified as the Battle of Talikota, which marked a decisive turning point in the history of South India and led to the eventual downfall of the Vijayanagara Empire.

### Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative historical approach, relying on both primary and secondary sources. Contemporary chronicles such as those of Ferishta and travel accounts like that of Caesar Frederick provide valuable firsthand insights into the battle and its aftermath. This multi-source analytical framework ensures a balanced and comprehensive reconstruction of events.

### Pre-Conditions-Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi

As Rama Raya of Vijayanagara rose in power and influence, his growing dominance began to concern the rulers of the Deccan Sultanates. His increasing involvement in their internecine conflicts and his strategic manipulation of rivalries made him a formidable political figure. Alarmed by his assertive role, the Muslim rulers of the Deccan—Ali Adil Shah of



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Bijapur, Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar, Ibrahim Qutb Shah of Golconda, and Ali Barid Shah of Bidar—began to actively collaborate to form a united front against the Vijayanagara Empire.

Among these rulers, Ibrahim Qutb Shah of Golconda played a key role in facilitating this alliance. He assumed the role of a mediator between Ali Adil Shah of Bijapur and his longstanding adversary, Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar. In a strategic political move to cement this alliance, Hussain Nizam Shah gave his daughter, Chand Bibi, in marriage to Ali Adil Shah, along with the fortress of Sholapur as dowry. Simultaneously, his son Murtiza was married to the sister of the Adil Shah, thus strengthening familial and diplomatic ties among the sultanates.

With these alliances firmly in place, the Deccan rulers—particularly the Adil Shah of Bijapur and the Qutb Shah of Golconda—initiated active preparations for a large-scale war against Vijayanagara. The Sultan of Bijapur sent an ambassador to Rama Raya, demanding the return of territories that had been seized earlier. Rama Raya, however, dismissed the ambassador with contempt, thereby violating previous treaties of friendship and providing the allied sultanates with a justification to launch a full-scale invasion.

On December 25, 1564, the four allied sultans—Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Golconda, and Bidar—assembled with their armies on the plains near Bijapur and began their coordinated march southward. Their forces reached the vicinity of the Krishna River, near the small fortress of Tallikota, approximately 25 miles north of the river.

In response, Rama Raya organized a powerful military force and dispatched his younger brother, Tirumala, with a formidable army comprising 20,000 cavalry, 1,00,000 infantry, and 500 war elephants. His aim was to block the enemy's advance and secure the river crossing. This strategic deployment marked the beginning of the climactic confrontation that would culminate in the historic Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi, a turning point that ultimately led to the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire.

### **The Military Engagement at Rakshasa-Tangadi**

Rama Raya of Vijayanagara, in preparation for the impending confrontation, assembled a vast and formidable army. His total military strength, according to historical accounts, included approximately 6,00,000 infantry, 1,00,000 cavalry, and 1,000 war elephants. His adversaries—the combined forces of the Deccan sultanates—possessed roughly half of that strength. Artillery was a crucial component of both sides, although the Deccan sultanates had the advantage of a centralized command structure and a well-trained artillery division, which served as their principal military strength.

The Vijayanagara army, under Rama Raya and his brothers, was composed of large contingents drawn from various provincial levies. Each provincial force was led by its local chieftain, operating under a decentralized system of command, though ultimately serving the crown. This structure contrasted sharply with the centralized and strategically cohesive leadership of the allied sultanates.

As the Deccan allies advanced, they ravaged the Vijayanagara territories north of the Krishna River and set up camps along its banks. In response, the Vijayanagara forces entrenched themselves on the southern bank, reinforcing their positions with field fortifications and artillery placements.

Demonstrating strategic acumen, the allied sultanates managed to cross the river without opposition. Their deception involved a series of calculated feints: they initially marched slowly along the riverbank for three days, creating the impression of searching for a crossing point. This maneuver forced the Vijayanagara forces to spread thin across the defensive line. The allies then feigned one more river crossing to mislead the defenders and, on the third night, swiftly



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dismantled their camp and launched a surprise attack, crossing the river and advancing south to confront Rama Raya's army.

The final battle took place on **January 23, 1565**, near the twin villages of **Rakshasi and Tangadi**, located on opposite banks of the Krishna River. This historic engagement is collectively known as the **Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi**, although it is often inaccurately referred to as the Battle of Talikota. The village of **Talikota** lies north of the river, while **Rakshasa-Tangadi** is situated to the south.

Rama Raya, though over ninety years old, personally led the central division of his army. His brothers, **Tirumala and Venkatadri**, commanded the left and right wings, respectively. On the opposing side, the central force was led by **Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar**. The center of the sultanate forces was reinforced with **2,000 mounted Khorasani archers**, supported by **600 pieces of artillery** arranged in three rows of 200 each. Their artillery strategy was layered, with heavy cannon positioned in front, followed by smaller field guns and **swivel guns**, which added to the mobility and flexibility of their firepower.

This complex arrangement of troops and firepower underscored the superior coordination and technological advantage of the sultanate forces, which played a decisive role in the unfolding of the battle and the eventual downfall of the mighty Vijayanagara Empire.

### The Decisive Collapse and the Betrayal

The turning point in the Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi came with the deployment of the enemy's advanced artillery under the command of Chalabi Rubi Khan, an experienced general from Asia Minor. With a background of participation in European battlefields, Rubi Khan effectively utilized field artillery tactics. His forces maintained a continuous barrage of cannon fire as they advanced and then quickly withdrew, allowing massed batteries to unleash concentrated volleys at close range. This tactical maneuver inflicted severe damage on the Vijayanagara forces.

Despite their fortified flanks supported by cannons and rocket fire, the Vijayanagara army was thrown into chaos. Rubi Khan's cannons, loaded with bags of copper coins, were fired at point-blank range, causing devastating fatalities—nearly 5,000 enemy soldiers were reported to have been killed instantly. The allied cavalry then capitalized on the confusion, charging through the gaps in artillery fire and breaking the Vijayanagara lines with overwhelming force.

Rama Raya, despite the unfolding crisis, exhibited remarkable bravery, bordering on recklessness. Refusing to mount a horse, he chose instead to direct operations from a palanquin, symbolizing both his age and supreme command. In an effort to inspire his troops and demonstrate unwavering resolve, he was seated on a richly adorned throne within his palanquin. However, as he returned to the field, a disastrous turn of events occurred. The centre of the Vijayanagara army was suddenly overwhelmed by a powerful cavalry assault from the enemy. In the chaos, one of the enemy's elephants charged toward Rama Raya's position. His bearers, struck with panic, dropped the palanquin, leading to his capture.

Rama Raya was immediately taken to Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar, who beheaded him and gruesomely displayed his head on a spear. The psychological impact of this act was catastrophic. Seeing their leader slain and his head raised aloft, the Vijayanagara forces panicked and fled the battlefield in disarray. The unified Muslim confederacy emerged victorious, decisively crushing the might of the Vijayanagara Empire.



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## The Role of Betrayal in the Defeat

Further insights into the cause of Vijayanagara's defeat are provided by the Venetian traveler Caesar Frederick, who attributed the collapse to betrayal from within. According to Frederick, two key generals of Muslim origin, both formerly trusted by Rama Raya, defected during the most critical phase of the battle. One of these generals was Ain-ul-Mulk, whom Rama Raya reportedly regarded as a brother.

These commanders, each reportedly in charge of 70,000 to 80,000 troops, turned their forces against the Vijayanagara army at a decisive moment. Frederick notes:

“These two Captains being of one Religion with the four kings which were Moores, wrought means with them to betray their own king into their hands... and when the Armies were joined, the battle lasted but a while, not the space, because the two traitorous Captains, in the chiefs of the fight, with their companies turned their faces against their own side.”

This act of treachery, combined with superior strategy and firepower by the enemy, sealed the fate of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi, therefore, stands not only as a military catastrophe but also as a poignant example of how internal betrayal can undermine even the most formidable empires.

## The Aftermath and Massacre Following the Battle

The catastrophic defeat of the Vijayanagara Empire at the Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi was followed by widespread slaughter and devastation. According to the Persian chronicler Ferishta, the victorious allied forces pursued the fleeing Vijayanagara soldiers with ruthless efficiency. The massacre was so extensive that the river adjacent to the battlefield reportedly ran red with blood. Ferishta, drawing from reputed contemporary sources, estimates that over 1,00,000 Vijayanagara soldiers were killed during the battle and the ensuing pursuit.

The aftermath was marked by unrestrained pillage. Soldiers of the allied Muslim confederacy amassed great wealth from the spoils of war. Ferishta notes that every soldier enriched himself with gold, jewels, tents, arms, horses, and slaves. The ruling monarchs of the victorious forces permitted their troops to retain all the plunder they acquired, with the exception of war elephants, which were reserved for royal use. This policy of reward encouraged indiscriminate looting and further intensified the suffering of the defeated population.

The Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi did not occur in isolation. It was part of a broader period of political instability and imperial contestation in the Indian subcontinent. At the very moment when this momentous battle and its associated horrors were unfolding in the Deccan, Portuguese colonial forces were simultaneously perpetrating atrocities along the western coast of India. These events, though geographically distant, reflected the broader context of violence, imperial ambition, and shifting power structures that characterized the mid-16th century.

The fall of Vijayanagara, symbolized by the bloodshed at Talikota and the sack of the capital city Hampi, marked the end of one of the greatest Hindu empires in South Indian history. It was not just a military defeat but a cultural and civilizational tragedy. The aftermath left the once-glorious city in ruins, and the political vacuum it created fundamentally reshaped the power dynamics of the region for decades to come.



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## Discussion

The Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi was not merely a military confrontation but the result of complex political dynamics. Rama Raya's interference in the affairs of the Deccan Sultanates created deep resentment, prompting the formation of a unified confederacy under rulers such as Hussain Nizam Shah and Ibrahim Qutb Shah.

Militarily, the Vijayanagara forces possessed numerical superiority but suffered from decentralized command structures. In contrast, the allied sultanates demonstrated cohesive leadership and strategic coordination. Their effective use of artillery, particularly under commanders like Chalabi Rumi Khan, played a decisive role. The innovative use of mobile artillery and devastating close-range cannon fire caused massive casualties and disrupted Vijayanagara's formations.

A crucial turning point was the capture and execution of Rama Raya by Hussain Nizam Shah. The psychological impact of his death led to chaos and disintegration within the Vijayanagara ranks. Furthermore, accounts by Caesar Frederick suggest that internal betrayal by key muslim generals, including Ain-ul-Mulk, significantly contributed to the defeat.

The aftermath was catastrophic. According to Ferishta, massive slaughter followed the battle, with over one lakh soldiers. The victorious armies engaged in widespread plunder, leading to immense material and human loss. The destruction extended to the imperial capital Hampi, symbolizing the collapse of a great cultural and political center.

## Conclusion

The Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi represents a decisive watershed in Indian history. It marked the end of the Vijayanagara Empire as a dominant power in South India and reshaped the political dynamics of the Deccan.

The defeat can be attributed to multiple interrelated factors: Rama Raya's overconfidence and diplomatic miscalculations, the strategic unity and military superiority of the allied sultanates, the decisive role of advanced artillery, and internal betrayal. The psychological collapse following the execution of Rama Raya further accelerated the downfall.

Beyond its military significance, the battle resulted in profound cultural and economic devastation. The sack of Hampi and the ensuing chaos led to the decline of one of the most prosperous empires in Indian history. Thus, the Battle of Rakshasa-Tangadi stands as a powerful reminder of how internal divisions and external pressures can converge to dismantle even the most formidable empires.

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