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TEMPLE INSTITUTIONS : INSTRUMENTS OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN THE VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE

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Abstract :

This paper explores temple institutions in the Vijayanagara Empire as instruments of social integration, emphasizing their role beyond ritual or political functions. Drawing on inscriptions, traveller accounts, architectural features, and archaeological evidence, it demonstrates how temples structured daily life, mediated caste and occupational hierarchies, and facilitated communal rituals and festivals. By highlighting interactions among Hindu, Jain, and Muslim communities, the study challenges conventional narratives focused solely on devotion or political symbolism, arguing that temples were central to fostering social cohesion and communal harmony in pre-modern South India.

Keywords : Cohesion , Vijayanagara Empire , Social integration, Temples

Introduction :

The Vijayanagara Empire (14th–16th centuries) is often portrayed as a bastion of Hindu political and religious identity in South India, yet this narrative overlooks the multifaceted social role of its temples. Beyond serving as sites of ritual devotion or architectural grandeur, temples functioned as dynamic institutions that structured daily life, mediated caste and occupational hierarchies, and facilitated communal interaction. Inscriptions, traveller accounts, and archaeological evidence reveal that temple spaces accommodated festivals, public gatherings, leisure activities, and economic exchanges, bringing together diverse communities including Hindus, Jains, and Muslims. By examining temple architecture, carvings, endowments, and social practices, this study argues that temples operated as instruments of social integration, fostering cohesion and harmony within an otherwise diverse and hierarchical society. This approach challenges conventional interpretations that privilege religious or political perspectives, highlighting the centrality of temples as living institutions shaping the social fabric of Vijayanagara.

Research Objective :

This study examines Vijayanagara temple institutions as instruments of social integration, addressing the gap in scholarship that overlooks their role in mediating caste, communal interaction, and everyday social cohesion.

Temples and Social Diversity in Vijayanagara :

The Vijayanagara Empire was characterized by a diverse and hierarchical society, shaped by the coexistence of Hindu, Jain, and Islamic traditions. Despite its structured social stratification, the empire is noted for a significant degree of religious tolerance, which allowed Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Jainism to flourish alongside one another (Suman 1515). Temples played a crucial role in structuring this diversity, serving as institutional anchors for social interaction and identity formation. Identification of caste and sub-caste was often mediated through temple affiliations, lineage, family units, royal retinues, warrior clans, occupational groups, agricultural and trade communities, devotional networks, and priestly cabals (Vanina 129).

These sacred spaces functioned as more than sites of ritual devotion. Traveller accounts emphasize their role in everyday social life. Nicolo de Conti observed that “thrice in the year they keep festivals of especial solemnity...on another of these festivals they fix up within their temples...” (Sewell 85), highlighting communal participation across age and gender.



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Domingos Paes similarly remarked, “There are temples in every street...in this city you will find men belonging to every nation and people” (Sewell 256), demonstrating the urban inclusivity of temple spaces.

The presence of Muslim soldiers in the Vijayanagara military and the construction of a mosque in the city during the early fifteenth century, with a Qur’an placed before the throne, illustrate deliberate social and religious accommodation (Rice 479). Interactions with the Bahmani Sultanate further increased Muslim presence in the south, showing that temples coexisted with other religious spaces and facilitated pluralistic integration.

Together, these evidences demonstrate that Vijayanagara temples were not only religious centers but active instruments of social cohesion, mediating diversity and fostering communal harmony, thereby filling a critical gap in scholarship that often treats temples solely as devotional or political sites.

Temple Architecture and Public Interaction :

The Vijayanagara Empire was home to numerous exceptional temples, including the Vitthala Temple, renowned for its musical pillars, the Hazara Rama Temple, the Virupaksha Temple, and the Lepakshi Temple, which stand as the finest examples of South Indian architectural ingenuity. Beyond their aesthetic and devotional significance, these temples were deliberately designed to facilitate public interaction and social cohesion. Architectural elements such as rāya-gopuras (towers), vasanta-maṇḍapas (pillared gathering halls), and kalyāṇa-maṇḍapas (marriage halls) reveal that sacred spaces were also centers of communal gatherings, ceremonies, and civic activities. The construction of these monumental structures provided employment for thousands, integrating artisans, laborers, and service communities into temple-centered networks, thereby linking economic activity with social interaction.

The Hazara Rama Temple at Hampi serves as an exceptional example, with its carved walls depicting scenes of everyday life, reflecting the lived experiences of local communities. Archaeological discoveries, including game boards engraved on boulders, sheet rock, and temple floors, provide further evidence of leisure-based activities and casual social engagement. Engravings on boulders, rock platforms, and temple floors suggest that these spaces were popular sites of everyday social interaction (Mack 38–39).

(Carvings on walls of Hazara Rama Temple showing social life, Source : Wikipedia)

Taken together, the architectural design, public spaces, and artistic features of Vijayanagara temples demonstrate that they were far more than religious monuments; they were socially active institutions that facilitated interaction across caste, occupation, and age groups. By embedding communal spaces and interactive features into sacred architecture, Vijayanagara temples actively fostered cohesion and reinforced the social fabric of the empire, fulfilling a central role in the integration of its diverse population.





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Royal Patronage to Temples :

Patronage of temple architecture has historically been a hallmark of royal authority, and the Vijayanagara kings supported temple construction and functioning on an unprecedented scale. Temples were not only the abode of deities but also centers of economic, social, and ritual activity, sustained through the labor and services of human caretakers. Land grants, known as Devadana, freed temples from taxation, ensuring the provision of food, clothing, and livelihood for priests and attendants. Beyond the clergy, temples relied on the contributions of weavers, potters, goldsmiths, watermen, and agricultural laborers, creating extensive networks that connected the state, local communities, and the economy. The growth of monumental temples in the Vijayanagara kingdom coincided with the increasing popularity of donating land and valuable objects, demonstrating that royal patronage was central to maintaining both religious and social structures (Narasimhulu 138).

Epigraphic evidence reinforces this social dimension: an inscription at Srikalahasti in Chittoor District dated 1513 CE, during the reign of Krishnadevaraya, records the royal gift of pearls, necklaces, a golden prabhavali set with precious stones, and villages to support daily worship and festivals, emphasizing the temple's role in linking state authority with community life (Narasimhulu 140). Earlier, Harihara II granted numerous endowments to temples across southern India, his name appearing on a pillar in a Jain temple near Kamalapura, reflecting both political consolidation and religious tolerance (Sewell 48).

These examples demonstrate that royal patronage was far more than devotional support: it actively reinforced social cohesion, integrating diverse occupational and religious groups, facilitating ritual participation, and sustaining communal networks. By enabling temples to function as institutional hubs connecting rulers, society, and religious practice, the Vijayanagara kings ensured that temple architecture and patronage became a central instrument of social integration.

Temples as Strategic Social Institutions :

Vijayanagara has long been portrayed as the valiant “last defender of Hinduism against Islam,” a southern refuge of a seemingly imperiled faith (Sastri 151). Such a monolithic interpretation, however, overlooks substantial evidence of accommodation and pragmatic statecraft. Accounts of the fifteenth-century traveller Abdur Razzaq, who notes an imperial force numbering nearly eleven lakh troops, suggest the inclusion of Muslim soldiers within the Vijayanagara military apparatus. This indicates that royal grants and the construction of sacred institutions were not acts of religious devotion alone but formed part of a broader strategy aimed at social integration and political cohesion. Temples, therefore, must be understood as institutions that operated simultaneously within religious, social, and political domains.

Beyond their devotional function, temples acted as symbolically and economically powerful loci for the consumption and distribution, and indirectly the production, of foodstuffs (Lycett and Morrison 445). Since economic activity constituted a crucial dimension of social life, these sacred institutions functioned as economic units that integrated diverse occupational groups into a shared social framework. This integrative role explains why temples assumed political significance and vulnerability. The large-scale destruction of temples in Vijayanagara by the Bahmani Sultans was driven primarily by political motives; politically unimportant temples were often left relatively intact (Lycett and Morrison 436). The true significance of this destruction lay not in religious antagonism alone but in the deliberate attempt to disrupt the social cohesion fostered by temple institutions.

As Eaton observes, royal temples were “politically active,” and the site-specific sharing of sovereignty between medieval Hindu kings and state deities rendered them particularly vulnerable to attack (Eaton 255). Thus, temples were targeted not merely as religious symbols but as strategic centers of authority and social integration, underscoring their central role in the Vijayanagara state's sociopolitical framework.



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Conclusion :

The temple institutions of the Vijayanagara Empire functioned as more than devotional spaces; they were central instruments of social integration, linking rulers, communities, and diverse occupational and religious groups. Architectural design, festivals, rituals, and royal patronage collectively fostered interaction across caste, gender, and faith, while embedding economic and civic activities within sacred precincts. Strategic construction and selective destruction of temples reveal their dual role as political and social nodes, reinforcing cohesion, communal harmony, and loyalty. These findings highlight the empire's temples as deliberate instruments of institutionalized social cohesion and statecraft.

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