



A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar - A Contribution to the History of India

Robert Sewell

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Judge Robert Sewell (1845-1925) was a civil servant in colonial India. He did extensive work on the history of the Vijayanagara Empire, particularly the fall of Hampi, the empire's capital. He translated The Vijayanagar Empire as Seen by Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz - described as an eyewitness account of Portuguese travellers to India in the 16th century and report on the Vijayanagar Empire. His other works include: Analytical History of India (1870), Eclipses of the Moon in India (1878), Antiquarian Remains in Presidency of Madras (1882), A Sketch of the Dynasties of S. India (1883), South Indian Chronological Tables (1889) and The Indian Calendar (with S. B. Dikshit) (1896).

A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar - A Contribution to the History of India Details

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Marcy says

I read this book to get a sense of the Vijayanagar empire because I spent a few days in Hampi last month. The book was interesting to read in some ways--especially the way that Sewell uses a kind of meta-narrative to describe the historiography process given the scant information accessible or available to him at the time of writing. So there is a self-consciousness about the history writing process that I appreciated. I also thought it was interesting to see so many different descriptions of the region from Persian or Portuguese people exploring or invading. Actually the way that the part of the book explains how the Vijayanagar empire led to further colonisation by the Portuguese was quite fascinating to read about, including the extreme brutality of the Portuguese colonists that ensued as a result of that age old 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' policy. But ultimately most of the book moves from battle to battle, from war to war. I haven't read that type of a historical book in ages and I don't much like it. So I'll need to find a better, and more recent, book that can give me a broader sense of the period and its people, its culture.

Zahen Khan says

This book is quite engaging, at least as compared to other histories of India. It describes battles, tales of megalomania and political machinations in an almost reverential manner, as if alluding to the mighty, and therefore justifiable, British empire.

A major shortcoming is that it is more of an account than a history as it's narration is only concerned with the depiction of events, with scant mention of the stuff that makes history interesting. If, like me, you prefer to read about how people lived, worked and ate or about how class structure, gender relations and culture exhibited themselves in a certain time period, this book is probably not for you.

Sudhanshu Sharma says

Salute to the bravehearts of Vijaynagara. People can manipulate certain historical facts to fragment India, but the true fact is that people from southern India have emerged as the saviour of Hindutva in medieval era when we in northern India were fighting for geographical pockets. Excellent attempt by an author to remind coming generations about the pride and valour of Vijaynagara.

Shanmugam says

Two Hundred and Thirty Years of Bloodshed.

Is it really possible to write an unbiased history? Considering the situations Robert Sewell got into. Medieval South Indian period; Tradition of romanticised oral history; Complete ruins left by Islamic invaders as was the norm during that time; And forgotten written records.

Robert Sewell had written this in late nineteenth century. I am sure that quite a few inscriptions must have been unearthed and decrypted since then, and at least a hundred books might have been written on this subject as well. I am not qualified to judge this book for accuracy or whatsoever. However, could't help appreciating the meticulous effort being put into bringing back the legacy.

In the first part, he had written an approximate factual history of rise and fall of the kingdom, by assimilating facts from a couple of Portuguese chronicles, travelogue of an Italian, writings of a Mogul's courtesan and of course numerous inscriptions from South India. (Muslims massacred Hindus, Hindus massacred Muslims and Portuguese massacred both and enforced Inquisition; And, juxtapose that killing order a bit more). Then comes his English translation of Domingos Paes' chronicle of Krishna Deva Rhai's time of grandiose festival and feast. After that, Fernao Nuniz's chronicles of whole Vijaya Nagar empire traditional history gathered first hand. As a complete package, all of them had arranged themselves into an amazing read.

Sure, you can't go back to that period, but it makes you go visit those ruins!

Vishwak Narasimhan says

Nice read on the Vijayanagara Empire

Sabrina says

Not bad for a translation written in the 1800's but not the most exciting book in the world. I think I'd rather read in the original language or find a book that does more than practically dictate ambassador type reporting.

Hariprasad says

Excellent! Must read.

Sajith Kumar says

Robert Sewell (1845 – 1925) was a British civil servant employed at the Madras Record Office as a Keeper entrusted with documenting ancient inscriptions and remains in the region. This book is the first ever attempt to decipher the puzzle of history hidden in the stony ruins of Hampi. Basing his research mainly on three sixteenth century historians of the region, Sewell unveils a preliminary montage of a forgotten dynasty that fired up the imagination of folklore, but hardly left any historical references of its own. The author describes the birth of the empire in 1336 and its eclipse in 1565 in which the combined military might of the Deccani sultanates comprehensively decimated them at the Battle of Talikota. The two centuries of Vijayanagara prominence was a defining point in South Indian history, though they hardly made any impact north of the Vindhyas. The entire south accepted their tutelage and consolidation of Hindu monarchs helped stem the tide of Muslim invasions to a limited extent. Sewell's historiography might look a little odd in the light of present standards, as in its emphasis on religious differences between the winners and vanquished as the root cause

of all strife. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the book was written at the height of colonial power and his natural inclination was to paint the alien rulers in a better light when the reader is indirectly to make a comparison between the times his story narrates to the then existing conditions prevailing in British India.

Mohammed bin Tughlaq's invasion of Anegundi, which was the ancestral seat of the Sangama brothers who were ministers of the ruling monarch provided the spur for establishing the dynasty. Its early phase was marred with frequent collisions with Bahmani sultans who established their headquarters at Gulbarga. The invasions were frequent and every time we read about a debacle on the part of Vijayanagara rulers and their having to part with gold, jewels and their daughters to the sultans. The dynasty itself was also not free from internecine strife and fratricidal intrigues for obtaining the throne by deceitful means. Vijayanagara's star turned when Krishna Devaraya ascended the throne in 1509, who ruled till 1530. His rule was legendary and completely stemmed the alien tide as long as he reigned. Personal valour, efficient military administration and liberal assistance from the Portuguese with whom the King was in cordial relations helped him vanquish the opponents. The historical sky of Vijayanagara was illuminated by the lone star of Krishna Devaraya. The empire began to crumble right from his death. His successors were either weak or harsh on the nobles which drove them to sideline the monarch with titular powers. The haughty demeanour exhibited by Krishna himself prompted the five sultanates to join forces and defeat Vijayanagara in a convincing rout in the year 1565.

The writer leans on the historical narratives of two Portuguese historians Fernao Nuniz and Domingo Paes who travelled and wrote about Vijayanagara in 1535-37 and 1520 respectively. Being chroniclers of a foreign potentate, they look at the spectacle of Indian royalty with an open mind and makes frank comparisons with what they were familiar with, in Europe and elsewhere. Vijayanagara had a monopoly on buying horses traded by Portuguese ships which transported the animals from Yemen to Goa and then overland to Hampi. It is said that the demise of the empire after 1565 was one of the direct causes of the darkening of Portuguese prominence around this period. The sudden loss of a lucrative item of trade which never regained its old scale proved to be one of the nails in the Portuguese coffin.

Nuniz's description of the life in Vijayanagara makes interesting reading. Generally, it is believed that the upper castes among the Hindus observe a strict diet of vegetarianism. But what we learn from the traveler is quite contrary, as he asserts that "these Kings of Bisnaga eat all sorts of things, but not the flesh of oxen or cows, which they never kill in all the country of the heathen because they worship them. They eat mutton, pork, venison, partridges, hares, doves, quail and all kinds of birds; even sparrows, and rats, and cats, and lizards, all of which are sold in the markets of the city of Bisnaga (Vijayanagara)" (p.308). Would the present-day Hindu revivalists be able to 'stomach' these hard facts?

The book is highly recommended.

Rating: 3 Star

Harish says

Though written in academic tone, book immediately takes grip on your mind like suspense/thriller novel.

Dheeraj Putrevu says

Quite comprehensive. Chronologically confusing sometimes because the history is stitched from the accounts of various travelers of those times but you won't really be interested in the names and dates anyway. I personally wanted to read about the time of Sri Krishna Deva Raya, the greatest of them all. On that front and about the lives of people of that city during his reign, Sewell does a good job. The savageries of that time and the state of affairs of the Deccan kingdoms from the Bahmanis to the Shahs who rebelled from the former are all well documented too. The account of Domingo Paes (he came to India during KrishnaDevaRaya's reign) was the most interesting for me.

Aditya Kulkarni says

The Vijayanagara Empire was one of India's most glorious empires in history. It was founded by Harihara and Bukka under the guidance of Sri Vidyanaya in 1336. It rose from the ashes of the Hoysala and the Kakatiya empires, which had been destroyed by the Delhi Sultanate.

It went on to become one of India's greatest empires and reached the pinnacle during the reign of Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529). This book describes the empire in detail and its glories. It also describes the conflict of the empire with its arch rivals, Bahmanis and the Deccan Sultanate, the tragic defeat in the Battle of Talikota and the subsequent decline, and finally the end in 1642.

Robert Sewell was a British government official in India who wrote this epic work after coming across the ruins of Hampi. The book is a must read for all history lovers.
