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## ADMINISTRATIVE EXCELLENCE AND PUBLIC POLICY: REVISITING KRISHNADEVARAYA'S STATECRAFT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper studies the system of governance used by Krishnadevaraya, who ruled the Vijayanagara Empire from 1509 to 1529 CE. He is widely considered one of the greatest kings in Indian history. His book on kingship and statecraft, called *Amuktamalyada*, along with many historical records, shows a detailed and thoughtful system of running a kingdom. This paper looks at how he organized his government, made policies for the people, managed the economy, traded with other countries, and kept law and order. It also compares his ideas with modern ideas about good governance. Using primary texts, records from foreign travelers, and modern historical research, this paper argues that Krishnadevaraya's way of ruling has lessons that are still useful today for public administration and policy-making.

**Keywords:** Krishnadevaraya, Vijayanagara Empire, *Amuktamalyada*, Indian statecraft, public administration, decentralized governance, South Indian history.

## **1. Introduction**

In the study of history and governance, few rulers from ancient or medieval times created such a well-organized and people-centered system of government as Krishnadevaraya of the Vijayanagara Empire. He ruled from 1509 to 1529 CE and led his kingdom to its highest point of power, cultural growth, and economic success (Sastri, 1955). His era, often called the 'Golden Age' of South India, was not just about military victories or beautiful buildings. It was also about smart and caring governance that touched the daily lives of ordinary people.

Krishnadevaraya is remembered for many things. He was a warrior who never lost a battle. He was a poet who wrote in multiple languages. But most importantly for this paper, he was a ruler who deeply thought about how a king should govern. His major work in Telugu, *Amuktamalyada* (which means 'She Who Wears the Garland She Once Wore'), is partly a devotional poem and partly a book about kingship. In this book, he gives advice about how to treat ministers, how to care for farmers, how to manage trade, and how to keep the people happy (Wagoner, 1996).

Scholars have studied the Vijayanagara Empire from the point of view of art, religion, and military history. However, not many papers have focused closely on Krishnadevaraya's administrative ideas as a complete system of governance. This paper tries to fill that gap. It looks at specific examples from his reign and his writings, compares them to the ideas in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (an earlier Indian text on statecraft), and connects them to modern ideas about what makes a government work well.

The paper is organized into six main sections. After this introduction, Section 2 gives the historical background of the Vijayanagara Empire. Section 3 discusses the structure of Krishnadevaraya's administration. Section 4 looks at his economic and agricultural policies. Section 5 examines his trade policies and relations with foreign countries. Section 6 discusses justice, law, and welfare. Section 7 connects his ideas to modern governance. The paper ends with a conclusion and a list of references.

## **2. Historical Background: The Vijayanagara Empire**

The Vijayanagara Empire was founded around 1336 CE by two brothers named Harihara and Bukka, who set up their capital on the banks of the Tungabhadra River in present-

day Karnataka, India (Stein, 1989). The name Vijayanagara means 'City of Victory' in Kannada and Sanskrit. The empire lasted for about 230 years and at its peak covered most of South India, including present-day Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and parts of Kerala and Odisha (Sewell, 1900).

The empire came to power during a time when the Deccan Sultanates in the north were expanding southward. The Vijayanagara kings saw themselves as protectors of Hindu culture and society, though in practice they hired soldiers and officers from all religions (Eaton, 2006). They managed to hold off the Sultanates for over two centuries through a mix of military strength, diplomatic alliances, and strong internal governance.

Krishnadevaraya belonged to the Tuluva dynasty, the third ruling family of the empire. He came to power in 1509 after a period of political instability and quickly proved himself to be an outstanding leader. The Portuguese traveler Domingo Paes, who visited the empire during Krishnadevaraya's reign, wrote that the king was 'the most feared and perfect king that there could be' (Sewell, 1900, p. 254). Another traveler, Fernao Nuniz, recorded that the king was tall, well-built, and always accessible to his people.

Krishnadevaraya fought and won wars against the Bahmani Sultanate, the Sultanate of Bijapur, the Gajapati kings of Odisha, and other neighboring rulers. His greatest military victory came in 1520 when he captured the fort of Raichur from the Sultan of Bijapur (Longhurst, 1917). But what made him truly great was not just his skill in war. It was his ability to govern the large territory he controlled and to make policies that helped his subjects live better lives.

### **3. Structure of Administration: The Ashta Pradhana and Beyond**

#### **3.1 The Council of Eight Ministers (Ashta Pradhana)**

One of the most important features of Krishnadevaraya's administration was the Ashta Pradhana, which means 'Council of Eight Ministers.' This was a cabinet of eight high-ranking officials, each responsible for a specific area of government (Nilakanta Sastri & Venkataramanayya, 1946). The eight ministers were:

1. Pradhani or Maha Pradhana – the Prime Minister, who coordinated all government work

2. Dandanayaka – the Commander-in-Chief of the army
3. Sabhapati – the head of the royal court
4. Amatya – the finance minister responsible for revenue and accounts
5. Karnadhara – the minister in charge of the king's personal matters
6. Raya Vachaka – the royal secretary who recorded orders and messages
7. Sumanta – the minister for foreign affairs and diplomacy
8. Antahpuradhi – the head of the royal household

This system of shared responsibility among specialized ministers is similar in some ways to modern cabinet systems of government. Each minister was an expert in his area and was accountable both to the king and to established rules of conduct. Krishnadevaraya himself wrote about the qualities a good minister should have. In the *Amuktamalyada*, he said a king should choose ministers who are honest, knowledgeable, and who care about the welfare of the people (Wagoner, 1996).

### **3.2 Provincial and Local Administration**

The Vijayanagara Empire was divided into several large provinces called Rajyas or Mandalas. Each province was governed by a Nayaka (also spelled Naik), who was appointed by the king (Stein, 1989). The Nayaka system was a form of delegated governance. The Nayakas had significant power in their regions. They collected taxes, maintained law and order, commanded local armies, and were responsible for public works like building temples, digging tanks (water reservoirs), and constructing roads.

Below the Nayakas, there were smaller administrative units. The Naadu was a group of villages, and the Sthala was a single village or a small group. At the village level, the Gramapanchayat (village council) handled local matters. These councils were made up of respected village elders who settled disputes, managed common land, and organized local festivals (Nilakanta Sastri & Venkataramanayya, 1946). This is a clear example of what modern political scientists call decentralized governance or grassroots democracy.

The idea of giving power to local bodies while keeping central oversight is a principle that is very much alive in modern governance. India's current Panchayati Raj system, established by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, follows a similar logic of decentralization. Krishnadevaraya's system showed that such decentralization could work effectively even in a large and diverse empire.

### **3.3 The Role of the King**

Krishnadevaraya believed very firmly in the concept of Dharma Raja, meaning a king who rules according to moral duty and righteousness. In his book *Amuktamalyada*, he devoted several sections to describing what a good king must do. He must wake up early, pray, listen to wise advisors, check on the welfare of his subjects, and be accessible to complaints from ordinary people (Subrahmanyam, 1997). He compared the king to a farmer who must always tend to his crop, meaning the people.

He also emphasized the concept of *Praja Palana*, which means 'care of the subjects.' A king who did not look after his people, according to Krishnadevaraya, was no better than a thief. This idea that political power brings responsibility, not just privilege, is a foundational concept in modern democratic theory as well (Kulke & Rothermund, 1998).

## **4. Economic and Agricultural Policies**

### **4.1 Revenue System and Taxation**

The Vijayanagara economy under Krishnadevaraya was complex and well-organized. The main source of government income was land revenue, which was collected in a system called *Kattubadi*. This was a fixed assessment based on the quality and productivity of the land (Stein, 1989). Farmers paid a portion of their harvest, typically one-sixth of the total produce, to the government. This fraction was based on ancient Hindu texts about fair taxation, which said a king should take no more than one-sixth of produce as tax (Kautilya, trans. Olivelle, 2013).

There were also various other taxes such as *Sunkam* (trade and market tax), *Kodigai* (tax on livestock), and *Vivaha Sunkam* (marriage tax). The Portuguese traveler Barbosa noted that the markets of Vijayanagara were full of goods and that trade was very active, suggesting that the tax system did not crush commerce (Barbosa, trans. Dames, 1921).

Importantly, Krishnadevaraya showed flexibility in taxation during hard times. Records from his reign show that he gave tax relief to farmers during droughts and floods. This practice of adjusting taxes to help people during natural disasters is similar to what modern governments call countercyclical fiscal policy, where government spending and tax relief are used to help the economy during difficult periods.

#### **4.2 Irrigation and Agricultural Development**

Krishnadevaraya understood that agriculture was the backbone of his economy. Without good harvests, his people would starve and his treasury would dry up. He invested heavily in irrigation infrastructure. The Vijayanagara Empire is famous for its complex system of tanks, canals, and dams that brought water to dry areas (Morrison, 1995).

One of the largest water projects built during his era was the Hiriya canal, which diverted water from the Tungabhadra River to irrigate fields around the capital city. Inscriptions from his time also record the construction of many smaller tanks, called Kere in Kannada, across his kingdom. Local nobles and rich merchants were encouraged to build tanks as acts of charity, and those who did so were honored by the king and given titles.

This public-private partnership in infrastructure development is a model that modern development economists recommend for developing countries. The king provided the vision and some funding, while local elites and communities contributed money and labor. The result was a network of water storage that made South Indian agriculture much more reliable even in years of low rainfall (Morrison, 1995).

#### **4.3 Support for Merchants and Artisans**

Beyond farming, Krishnadevaraya actively supported the merchant and artisan communities. The empire had a powerful group of merchants called the Ayyavole (also called the Five Hundred Lords of Ayyavole), a famous trading guild that had operated in South India for centuries (Abraham, 1988). Krishnadevaraya gave them protection and privileges to help them trade both within the empire and internationally.

Artisans, including weavers, metalworkers, and stonecutters, were organized into guilds called Shrenis. These guilds had their own rules, collected their own fees, and often acted as small self-governing bodies. The king recognized their rights and did not interfere in

their internal affairs, as long as they paid their taxes and did not break the law. This is similar to the modern concept of self-regulation in professional associations.

## **5. Trade Policy and Foreign Relations**

### **5.1 The Port of Calicut and Maritime Trade**

Krishnadevaraya's era saw a great expansion of overseas trade. The western coast of India, including the ports of Calicut (Kozhikode), Cannanore, and Quilon, were major centers of trade with Arabia, Persia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia (Subrahmanyam, 1990). Although these ports were not always under direct Vijayanagara control, the empire's stability and prosperity helped keep trade flowing.

The empire exported cotton cloth, iron, steel, spices (especially pepper), precious stones, and agricultural goods. It imported horses (especially from Arabia and Central Asia for the army), copper, silk, gold, and luxury goods. The horses were a strategic import because South India did not breed good war horses, and a strong cavalry was essential for military power (Subrahmanyam, 1997).

### **5.2 Relations with the Portuguese**

One of the most important diplomatic relationships of Krishnadevaraya's reign was with the Portuguese, who had established trading posts on the Indian coast after Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498. The Portuguese controlled the port of Goa from 1510, just one year after Krishnadevaraya came to power.

Krishnadevaraya maintained a pragmatic and friendly relationship with the Portuguese. He needed horses for his army, and the Portuguese could supply them from their trade networks. The Portuguese, on the other hand, needed the support of a powerful inland empire to protect their coastal trading posts from the Deccan Sultans. This mutual benefit led to a de facto alliance. Portuguese governors wrote respectfully about Krishnadevaraya, and the king gave Portuguese traders certain privileges and protections in his territory (Subrahmanyam, 1997).

This example of trade-based diplomacy, where political relationships follow from economic interests, is a principle that is still central to modern international relations and

foreign policy. It shows that Krishnadevaraya was a pragmatic leader who could set aside religious or cultural differences when practical interests were at stake.

### **5.3 The Concept of Panchasheela in Diplomacy**

While the specific term Panchasheela is associated with modern Indian foreign policy (proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954), the underlying principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and non-interference were present in Krishnadevaraya's diplomatic conduct. He sent ambassadors to neighboring kingdoms, maintained peace treaties, and avoided wars when diplomatic solutions were possible (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955).

He also practiced the ancient Indian diplomatic method of Saptanga theory, which recognized seven elements of a kingdom: the king (Swami), the ministers (Amatya), the territory (Rashtra), the fortifications (Durga), the treasury (Kosha), the army (Danda), and the allies (Mitra). A strong king had to manage all seven well. Krishnadevaraya's foreign policy was aimed at strengthening each of these, particularly the treasury, army, and allies.

## **6. Justice, Law, and Public Welfare**

### **6.1 The Judicial System**

Justice under Krishnadevaraya was administered at multiple levels. At the village level, the Gramapanchayat handled small disputes. At the district level, the Nayaka or his appointed judge settled more serious cases. At the top, the king himself was the final court of appeal. Accounts from Portuguese travelers describe Krishnadevaraya as a king who personally listened to complaints and gave justice without delay (Sewell, 1900).

The legal system drew on the ancient Dharmashastra texts, which laid out principles of Hindu law. These included fairness, hearing both sides of a dispute, punishment proportional to the crime, and special consideration for the weak and poor. Krishnadevaraya's Amuktamalyada specifically warned against judges who took bribes or favored the rich over the poor (Wagoner, 1996).

The emphasis on impartial justice and accessibility of courts to ordinary people reflects what modern legal theorists call the rule of law, the idea that everyone, including powerful people, must follow the same laws. While Krishnadevaraya's system was not perfect and still



reflected the inequalities of the caste system, his emphasis on fairness and accountability was notable for his time.

## **6.2 Public Works and Urban Planning**

The capital city of Vijayanagara, known today as Hampi, was one of the largest cities in the world during the early sixteenth century. Estimates from historical and archaeological research suggest it may have had a population of between 500,000 and one million people at its peak (Fritz & Michell, 2001). The city had wide streets, busy markets called Hampi Bazaar, public baths, parks, and elaborate religious temples.

Krishnadevaraya invested heavily in building and maintaining this city. He constructed the famous Vittala Temple complex, the Hazara Rama Temple (which served as the royal chapel), and several large water tanks and gardens (Fritz & Michell, 2001). These were not just symbols of royal power. They also served practical purposes: temples provided welfare services like free meals (called Anna Dana, meaning gift of food) to pilgrims and the poor; tanks provided water for drinking and farming; and roads made trade and movement easier.

This integration of religion, culture, and practical governance is a distinctive feature of Krishnadevaraya's statecraft. He understood that people needed both material welfare (food, water, safety) and spiritual and cultural life. Modern scholars of public policy would recognize this as a broad, holistic understanding of human development that goes beyond just economic growth.

## **6.3 Care for the Poor and Vulnerable**

Krishnadevaraya's governance showed genuine concern for poor and vulnerable people. In the *Amuktamalyada*, he described the duty of a king to protect farmers, artisans, women, children, and religious scholars (Wagoner, 1996). He gave land grants to temples and mathas (religious institutions) that provided social services. He built choultries, which were free rest houses for travelers, along the main roads of his empire.

He also practiced the tradition of Tulabhara, in which a king was weighed against gold or other goods, which were then distributed to the poor. These were not just ceremonial acts. They were part of a culture of royal charity that was expected of a legitimate ruler. A king who did not give generously was seen as unworthy of his throne (Kulke & Rothermund, 1998).

These ideas about the duty of the state to care for the poor are the foundation of modern welfare state theory. While the institutional forms are very different, the underlying moral logic, that those with power and resources have a duty to help those without them, is the same.

## **7. Krishnadevaraya's Statecraft and Modern Governance: Connections and Lessons**

### **7.1 Decentralization and Local Self-Governance**

Perhaps the most striking connection between Krishnadevaraya's administration and modern governance is his use of decentralization. The Nayaka system, the village panchayats, and the merchant guilds all show a ruler who understood that a large and diverse empire cannot be run well from a single center. Power must be shared, and local communities must be given the authority to manage their own affairs within a larger legal and policy framework (Stein, 1989).

Modern public administration theory, particularly the New Public Management approach developed in the 1980s and 1990s, also emphasizes decentralization, local accountability, and citizen participation (Hood, 1991). The parallels are not coincidental. They reflect a basic truth about governance: people are best served by systems that are close to them and that respond to their specific needs and conditions.

### **7.2 Transparency and Accountability**

Krishnadevaraya's insistence on regular reviews of his ministers' performance, his practice of listening to complaints from ordinary subjects, and his warnings against corruption in the Amuktamalyada all reflect a concern with transparency and accountability. He wrote that a king must not trust any single minister too much, but must always check the work of his officers (Wagoner, 1996).

In modern governance, transparency and accountability are considered fundamental principles of good administration. Institutions like independent audit agencies, parliamentary oversight committees, and Right to Information laws are all tools for achieving the same goals that Krishnadevaraya sought through personal royal oversight. The means are different, but the principle is the same.

### **7.3 Economic Policy and Development**

Krishnadevaraya's economic policies, particularly his investment in irrigation, his support for trade, and his flexible approach to taxation, show a ruler who thought carefully about long-term economic development. He understood that a prosperous kingdom required not just military strength but also productive agriculture, active trade, and a satisfied population of farmers, merchants, and artisans.

Modern development economics, particularly the work of scholars like Amartya Sen, emphasizes that development is not just about GDP growth but about expanding the capabilities and freedoms of people (Sen, 1999). Krishnadevaraya's holistic approach to governance, which combined military security, economic productivity, cultural life, and social welfare, anticipated this broader understanding of what it means for a society to flourish.

### **7.4 Diplomatic Pragmatism**

Krishnadevaraya's relationship with the Portuguese shows a ruler who was willing to work with foreign powers when it served his interests, regardless of cultural or religious differences. This pragmatic approach to foreign relations is the foundation of modern realist theory in international relations (Morgenthau, 1948). At the same time, his treatment of foreign traders and his reputation for fairness show that he understood the importance of soft power, the ability to attract and influence others through reputation and cultural appeal, as well as hard military power.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper has examined the administrative system and public policies of Krishnadevaraya, the great ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire (1509-1529 CE). By looking at his council of ministers (Ashta Pradhana), his provincial governance through the Nayaka system, his agricultural and irrigation policies, his trade and diplomatic strategies, his judicial system, and his welfare programs, we can see a ruler who combined practical intelligence with moral seriousness.

Krishnadevaraya's system of governance was not perfect. It operated within the social inequalities of his time, including the caste system and patriarchal norms. But within those limits, he created a system that was remarkably well-organized, flexible, and attentive to the

needs of ordinary people. His book *Amuktamalyada* remains a rich source of political and administrative wisdom that has not received the attention it deserves from scholars of governance and public policy.

The connections between his statecraft and modern principles of governance are real and significant. His use of decentralization, his concern for transparency and accountability, his broad approach to economic development, and his pragmatic diplomacy all find echoes in contemporary theories of good governance. This does not mean that we should try to copy a sixteenth-century system. Rather, it means that the challenges of governance are in some ways timeless, and that different civilizations have found different but comparable solutions to these challenges.

Revisiting Krishnadevaraya's statecraft is valuable not just for understanding South Indian history, but for enriching our understanding of governance itself. His example shows that thoughtful, moral, and well-organized administration is possible in large and complex societies, and that leaders who combine vision, wisdom, and care for their people can create conditions in which society truly flourishes. As the *Amuktamalyada* teaches, a king, or by extension any leader, must be like a good gardener, always tending, always attentive, and always working for the growth of what has been entrusted to his care.

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