

VIJAYANAGARA'S DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE BAHMANI SULTANATE

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Abstract:

The diplomatic relations between the Vijayanagara Empire and the Bahmani Sultanate were marked by a complex interplay of conflict, negotiation, alliance, and cultural exchange, shaping the political landscape of medieval South India. Emerging almost simultaneously in the 14th century, these two powers contested control over strategic territories in the Deccan, especially the fertile Raichur Doab region between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers. Their relationship was defined by intermittent warfare punctuated by periods of uneasy peace and diplomatic engagement. While military confrontations such as the battles of Raichur and the pivotal Battle of Talikota in 1565 dominate historical narratives, their diplomacy extended beyond mere warfare. Both empires recognized the importance of economic interdependence, particularly in trade routes and the horse trade critical for military prowess. Consequently, temporary truces often coincided with commercial needs, reflecting a pragmatic approach to diplomacy.

Religion played a dual role in their interactions; it was a source of identity and rivalry but also an instrument of diplomacy. Both Vijayanagara's Hindu rulers and the Muslim Bahmani sultans employed religious patronage strategically, at times fostering coexistence and cultural patronage while also using religious legitimacy to strengthen their claims and resist each other. Espionage and intelligence gathering were sophisticated tools used to influence diplomatic negotiations and preempt conflicts. Through networks of spies, merchants, and emissaries, both courts maintained a flow of information that guided their diplomatic and military strategies.

Moreover, intellectual and cultural exchanges, including the movement of scholars, artists, and architects, acted as subtle channels of diplomacy, softening hostilities and fostering mutual respect. In summary, the diplomatic relations between Vijayanagara and the Bahmani Sultanate were multifaceted, blending warfare with negotiation, cultural

interaction with strategic alliance, and rivalry with pragmatism, significantly influencing the socio-political dynamics of the Deccan region during their coexistence.

Keywords: *Vijayanagara, Diplomatic Relations, Bahmani Sultanate etc.*

INTRODUCTION:

The Vijayanagara Empire was founded in 1336 CE by Harihara I and his brother Bukka Raya I, who established their rule over the southern Deccan region in India. Emerging during a time of political fragmentation following the decline of the Delhi Sultanate's influence in the south, Vijayanagara quickly became a powerful Hindu kingdom dedicated to protecting the region from invasions and fostering cultural revival. The empire's capital, Vijayanagara (modern-day Hampi), grew into a prosperous city known for its impressive architecture, vibrant markets, and patronage of arts, literature, and religion. Under rulers like Deva Raya II and Krishnadevaraya, Vijayanagara expanded territorially, consolidating power over much of South India. The empire was characterized by strong military organization, irrigation-based agriculture, and extensive trade networks that connected it to the rest of India and beyond.

The Bahmani Sultanate, established in 1347 CE by Ala-ud-Din Bahman Shah, was one of the first independent Muslim kingdoms in the Deccan region, breaking away from the Delhi Sultanate's control. Centered initially in Gulbarga and later Bidar, the Bahmani Sultanate grew as a major political and military force, engaging in frequent conflicts with neighboring Hindu kingdoms, including Vijayanagara. The sultanate was notable for its promotion of Persian culture, architecture, and administration, influencing the Deccan's political landscape. It also became a melting pot of Persian, Turkic, and local Deccan traditions. Under rulers like Firuz Shah Bahmani and Mahmud Gawan, the Bahmani Sultanate reached its zenith, marked by territorial expansion and administrative reforms. However, internal strife and factionalism eventually led to its fragmentation into five smaller successor states known as the Deccan Sultanates.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the Vijayanagara's Diplomatic Relations with the Bahmani Sultanate.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

VIJAYANAGARA'S DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE BAHMANI SULTANATE

The diplomatic relations between the Vijayanagara Empire and the Bahmani Sultanate were characterized by a complex interplay of warfare, territorial disputes, strategic alliances, and cultural exchanges. These two dominant powers of the Deccan region in medieval India engaged in a series of conflicts and negotiations that shaped the political landscape of the time. The genesis of the Vijayanagara-Bahmani rivalry can be traced to the mid-14th century, soon after the establishment of the Bahmani Sultanate in 1347 CE. The Vijayanagara Empire, founded in 1336 CE, had already asserted its dominance over the southern part of the Deccan plateau. The initial interactions between the two empires were marked by mutual recognition and cautious diplomacy. However, the fertile Raichur Doab, located between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers, became a contentious zone, leading to frequent skirmishes and full-scale wars.

The first major conflict erupted in 1367 when Bukka Raya I of Vijayanagara attacked the fortress of Mudkal in the Raichur Doab. This provocation led to a series of retaliatory campaigns by the Bahmani Sultanate, culminating in a protracted war that ended with a treaty restoring the status quo. Despite the treaty, the underlying tensions remained unresolved, setting the stage for future confrontations. In 1375, another significant war broke out when Bahmani Sultan Mujahid Shah demanded the cession of certain territories in the Doab region. Bukka Raya I refused, asserting his claim over the disputed areas. The ensuing conflict saw both sides employing strategic maneuvers, with Bukka adopting defensive tactics and Mujahid's forces ravaging the countryside. The war ended inconclusively, but it highlighted the persistent volatility of the region. The early 15th century witnessed a continuation of hostilities under the reign of Deva Raya I of Vijayanagara and Firuz Shah Bahmani. In 1406, the War of the Goldsmith's Daughter unfolded, wherein the Bahmani forces, supported by regional allies, launched multiple attacks on Vijayanagara. Despite initial resistance, Deva Raya suffered heavy casualties and was compelled to accept the terms imposed by the Bahmanis, including the cession of Bankapur in the Doab region.

The mid-15th century saw a brief period of relative peace, punctuated by diplomatic engagements and cultural exchanges. Notably, a marriage alliance was forged between Sultan Feroz Shah Bahmani and a Vijayanagara princess, symbolizing a temporary thaw in relations. This period also witnessed the flourishing of Indo-Islamic architecture and the patronage of arts and literature by both empires. However, the underlying competition for territorial and economic dominance persisted. The control of the Krishna-Godavari delta, with its strategic ports and fertile lands, became another focal point of contention. Both empires sought to dominate the lucrative horse trade routes passing through the region, further exacerbating tensions.

One of the most unique and understudied aspects of Vijayanagara–Bahmani diplomacy was the role of **religious diplomacy**, which, in this context, did not always mean tolerance or peaceful coexistence but rather calculated use of religious identities to either build bridges or draw lines. The Vijayanagara rulers, despite being Hindu kings, often showed remarkable pragmatism in their approach to the Islamic world around them. They extended patronage to Muslim merchants and allowed the construction of mosques in key trading towns under their rule. Similarly, certain Sufi saints and scholars found safe haven within Vijayanagara-controlled territories during periods of political instability within the Bahmani domain. On the other hand, Bahmani rulers used their patronage of Persian clerics and Islamic scholars as a way to create ideological legitimacy for their state and contrast their identity against Vijayanagara. However, in instances of need, both sides temporarily lowered the emphasis on religious distinction for the sake of diplomatic expediency. An excellent example is the temporary truce that followed Deva Raya II's appointment of Muslim archers into his service and his commissioning of Persian-speaking scribes in his court. These moves were not acts of assimilation but symbols of elite diplomacy that sought to placate or impress rival sultanates. Thus, religion, while being a defining factor of identity, was also an instrument in diplomatic signaling, used selectively depending on the strategic goal.

Another dimension often overlooked is the intricate web of **trade diplomacy** that underpinned relations between the two states. While warfare dominated their shared history, both the Bahmani Sultanate and Vijayanagara had vested interests in sustaining commercial ties, particularly in the lucrative horse trade and diamond markets. The Deccan plateau was a critical node in the overland and maritime trading routes that linked India to Central Asia and the Middle East. Horses, being vital for the military needs of both kingdoms, were imported

largely from Arabia and Central Asia through ports like Goa and Dabhol, often controlled by the Bahmanis, or through indirect Portuguese mediation. Vijayanagara, lacking a comparable maritime base for much of its history, had to resort to diplomatic entreaties and trade concessions to ensure access to these ports. Bahmani rulers, aware of their leverage, extracted payments and sometimes military neutrality in return for allowing Vijayanagara's horse merchants to pass through their territory. Moreover, Vijayanagara was a hub of diamond trade, especially from the mines at Kollur and Raichur. Bahmani officials often maintained trade agents or spies disguised as merchants in these mining towns, allowing both a flow of commerce and information. On several occasions, temporary ceasefires were declared not for religious festivals or seasonal cycles but to allow merchants to complete large transactions. The economic interdependence between the two states thus coexisted alongside military antagonism, suggesting that diplomacy also took place across bazaars and warehouses, not just in palaces and battlefields.

A third unique element was the use of **espionage and informant networks** as diplomatic instruments rather than mere tools of war. Both Vijayanagara and the Bahmani Sultanate maintained elaborate intelligence systems that infiltrated enemy courts, monitored border garrisons, and reported on troop movements. However, what distinguished their espionage tactics was their use in preemptive diplomacy. Intelligence was often used not to prepare for war but to avoid it. For instance, Vijayanagara's court records mention the use of coded messages delivered via astrologers and traders—two groups that could easily pass between enemy territories without raising suspicion. These spies were not just military observers; they also reported on court intrigues, succession disputes, and popular sentiments within the Bahmani Sultanate. Such intelligence enabled Vijayanagara rulers to exploit periods of internal strife, sometimes sending letters of support to rival claimants within the Bahmani court to destabilize the ruling sultan. Conversely, Bahmani sultans occasionally attempted to co-opt vassals of Vijayanagara, using information gathered by embedded merchants or even court musicians who traveled across borders. These covert interactions influenced open diplomacy by setting the tone of negotiations or justifying sudden breaches of treaty. Thus, espionage was not separate from diplomatic engagement; it was a parallel track of influence and maneuvering that shaped decisions in both capitals.

The fourth dimension, often buried under the narrative of conflict, was the presence of **intellectual and cultural exchanges** between the two courts, which at times softened

hostilities or served as back channels of diplomacy. The Bahmani Sultanate, particularly under Sultan Mahmud Gawan, became a center for Persianate scholarship, attracting poets, historians, and mathematicians. Similarly, Vijayanagara, under rulers like Krishnadevaraya, sponsored literature in Sanskrit, Telugu, and Kannada. Occasionally, scholars and artisans moved between the courts, not only as exiles or adventurers but as emissaries of goodwill. There are accounts of Persian medical texts being translated into Telugu, and of Hindu astrologers invited to advise Bahmani rulers. Likewise, Indo-Persian architectural motifs found in parts of Vijayanagara's urban landscape suggest a borrowing of aesthetic ideals that were carried through these human channels of diplomacy. The role of music and performance was also instrumental in this cultural conversation. Musicians trained in Hindustani and Dakhni traditions performed in the courts of Vijayanagara as part of peace delegations, while temple architects from the south contributed to mosque constructions in border towns. These cultural exchanges were subtle, not always officially recorded, but they provided a common ground—an acknowledgment of shared aesthetic and intellectual values, even amidst political rivalry.

One of the most intriguing and nuanced diplomatic strategies employed by both states was the use of **dynastic marriages as symbolic, rather than purely political, instruments**. While marriages between ruling houses of Vijayanagara and the Bahmani Sultanate were extremely rare due to religious differences, the concept of strategic marriage alliances still played a crucial role in broader diplomatic games. Vijayanagara kings often married into powerful South Indian chieftain families who controlled territories bordering the Bahmani Sultanate. By doing so, they secured loyalty and created buffer zones that checked Bahmani expansion. More subtly, the Bahmanis sometimes married their princes into local Deccan noble families who had ambiguous loyalties to Vijayanagara. These indirect marital alliances extended spheres of influence without direct confrontation. One exceptional case cited by some scholars is the marriage between a Vijayanagara princess and a noble from the Bahmani court, possibly during a phase of political pragmatism or to seal a temporary truce. Though rare, such acts demonstrated an elite understanding that familial bonds, even if symbolic, could temper hostility or at least delay it. These marriages were accompanied by lavish gift exchanges, shared festivals, and prolonged truces that enabled both empires to regroup or refocus their military energies elsewhere. Thus, dynastic marriages, even when not between

the principal ruling families, became proxies for diplomatic alignment, acting as both deterrents and bridges.

Taken together, these five unique aspects—religious diplomacy, trade relations, espionage networks, intellectual exchange, and dynastic marriage strategies—add rich layers to our understanding of the Vijayanagara–Bahmani relationship. They reveal that diplomacy in medieval South India was not merely reactive or conflict-driven but was shaped by a broad set of tools and strategies, some overt and others deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the time. This nuanced diplomacy was pragmatic rather than ideological, fluid rather than rigid, and multifaceted rather than singular. The Vijayanagara Empire and the Bahmani Sultanate, though fierce rivals, were bound by geography, commerce, culture, and politics in a dance of competition and cooperation that defies simplistic characterization. Through wars punctuated by negotiations, truces adorned by poetry, and treaties shadowed by spies, the two powers forged a relationship as complex as the Deccan itself.

The late 15th and early 16th centuries marked a resurgence of conflicts, with the Vijayanagara Empire under Krishnadevaraya achieving significant military successes. In 1509, the Battle of Diwani resulted in a decisive victory for Vijayanagara, consolidating its power over the Deccan region. These victories, however, were not sufficient to establish lasting peace. The culmination of the protracted rivalry occurred in 1565 at the Battle of Talikota. A confederacy of Deccan Sultanates, including the successors of the Bahmani Sultanate, united against Vijayanagara. The battle resulted in a catastrophic defeat for Vijayanagara, leading to the sacking of its capital and the eventual decline of the empire.

CONCLUSION:

The diplomatic relations between the Vijayanagara Empire and the Bahmani Sultanate represent a remarkable chapter in medieval Indian history, illustrating the complex interplay between rivalry and cooperation. Despite being fierce military adversaries, their interactions were shaped by pragmatic diplomacy that went beyond conflict to include trade, cultural exchange, religious negotiation, and strategic alliances. Both empires recognized the value of negotiation and temporary peace to sustain economic prosperity and political stability in a region marked by shifting power dynamics. Religious differences, while a source of tension, also provided opportunities for selective engagement and coexistence, revealing the nuanced approach both sides took to identity and statecraft. The use of espionage and intelligence

further highlights their sophisticated diplomatic practices, where information was wielded as a tool to influence outcomes without immediate recourse to war. Cultural and intellectual exchanges added a human dimension to their rivalry, allowing for shared artistic and scholarly achievements that enriched the Deccan's heritage. Even the rare dynastic marriages underscored how diplomacy extended into personal and familial spheres to secure peace.

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