



# The Role of Rituals in Vijayanagara Polity

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## Abstract:

The plane on which the king occupies the center in Vijayanagar is the ceremonial and ritualistic, and it is here, undoubtedly, that the king's role as witnessed by the chroniclers is most spectacular and opulent. The chroniclers' tone of incredulity and awe is most apparent in their accounts of the rituals. The writers view what they see through the lens of oriental despotism, that is to say what they see makes sense to them in the context of an "all-powerful autocrat" at the center commanding those around him. As opposed to an oriental despotism model, I argue in this section that the festivals should be understood in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar. The grandest of Vijayanagar's rituals, the yearly mahanavami festival, in particular, was designed to overwhelm the senses and communicate to all players within Vijayanagar that the king was in command. All the opulence, all the spectacle, all the ceremony makes perfect sense when understood in this framework.

## INTRODUCTION

### MAHANAVAMI AS DEPICTED BY DOMINGO PAES

I first draw on the accounts of Domingo Paes to describe the details of the mahanavami festival. It is during this festival, more than any other period, that one can best observe the king's role at Vijayanagar's ceremonial center. The king reinforces his position as the ceremonial center to strengthen his administrative legitimacy, reminding all captains and courtiers that he is firmly in control. I conclude the section by looking at passages from Nuniz and „Abd al-Razzāq, examining how their narratives, as well, reinforce the king's ceremonial centrality. The largest ceremony of the year, and the one which most reinforced the king's position at the center of Vijayanagar's ceremonial plane, was the mahanavami festival. The festival occurred at the end of the rainy season, during the month of September, and lasted for nine days. Beyond its purpose of highlighting the king's central ceremonial role in the kingdom, the festival also had religious, political, and financial meaning (Fritz and Michell, 32). On a religious level, the festival marked the victory of the god Rama over the demon Ravana. On a political level, the festival marked the beginning of the kingdom's yearly military campaigns, and was designed to celebrate victory and "infuse the royal throne and weapons with cosmic energy" (Fritz and Michell, 32). On a financial level, the festival represented an infusion of funds into the kingdom's treasury, as all the captains were required to pay their taxes to the king. Domingo Paes provides the most complete and detailed descriptions of the daily activities of the festival. As mentioned above, the festivities took place in the royal center of Vijayanagar. On the top of a large flat, multistoried platform, workers constructed an additional dais and arches where the king sat. Every morning, the king occupied himself with religious worship. He worshipped an idol in a sacred room on the platform and witnessed the sacrifice of sheep and buffaloes (266-267). The afternoon festivities started at approximately 3 pm, according to Paes. At that time the wrestlers, women dancers, nobles, and others entered the main arena area in front of the large multistoried platform and arranged themselves. After everything was arranged, the king entered and sat down on the dais, accompanied by other dignitaries. Paes describes the king's opulent dress as such: "there the king sits, dressed in

white clothes all covered with (embroidery of) golden roses and wearing his jewels – he wears a quantity of these white garments" (269). At this point, the captains entered, paid their respects to the king, and took their positions. Paes is extremely careful to note that most attendees of the festival are forced to stand, only being allowed to sit if the King desires: "the wrestlers seat themselves on the ground, for these are allowed to remain seated, but no other, howsoever great a lord he be, except the king so commands" (269). Once all the captains entered, the women began to dance, and Paes marvels at the opulence of their dress: Who can fitly describe to you the great riches these women carry on their persons? - collars of gold with so many diamonds and rubies and pearls, bracelets also on their arms and on their upper arms, girdles below, and of necessity anklets on the feet (270) Once the dancing concludes Paes describes spirited matches between the wrestlers that take up the rest of the afternoon (271). After sunset, Paes notes that workers light torches "in such a way that the whole is as light as day" (271). The evening's activities continued with feasts, plays and other performances designed to please the king. „

### VIEWS OF ABDALRAZZAQ ON MAHANAVAMI CELEBRATIONS

Abd al-Razzāq, in his account, marvels at the tricks performed by the entertainers. He describes how an elephant climbed boxes stacked by the performers, balancing itself on the top box on only one foot and raising and lowering its trunk to the beat of the music (314). This part of the daily festivities closed with an elaborate display of fireworks. Next, the king's horses entered and conducted two laps around the arena before, as Paes notes, "placing themselves in the middle of the arena . . . all facing the king" (274). Paes then describes in great detail the entrance of the queens' maids of honour. He focuses on their opulence, particularly their "fine silk cloths," their "jewels of gold very richly set with many emeralds and diamonds" and the lamps they carry in "vessels of gold each as large as a small cask of water." Paes comments "who is he that could tell of the costliness and the value of what each of these women carries on her person?" (274). The evening concludes with the departures of the women, the horses and elephants, and finally the king. These activities were repeated each of the nine days and Paes' descriptions of the festival build to a grand crescendo, culminating in his description of the king's

audit of his armed forces, an event that took place immediately upon the conclusion of the festival: Thus accompanied the king passed along gazing at his soldiers, who gave great shouts and cries and struck their shields, the horses neighed, the elephants screamed, so that it seemed as if the city would be overturned, the hills and valleys and all the ground trembled with the discharge of arms and musquets; and to see the bombs and fire-missiles over the plains, this was indeed wonderful. Truly it seemed as if the whole world were collected there (278-279). The passage above accomplishes the goal of conveying the king's power through the use of awe-inspiring imagery. Paes elevates the king beyond the commander in chief of all subjects in his kingdom, to the commander of all creatures: as the king rides by not only do all his soldiers respond but his horses "neigh" and his elephants "scream." Even the "ground trembles" upon the king's observation. There is no doubt from these descriptions that the king is God, at the center of the Vijayanagar's "ceremonial plane" and seemingly to Paes, the center of the "whole world." To Paes, the king is the "all powerful autocrat" of the oriental despotism model.

### **PURPOSE OF THIS FESTIVAL**

In understanding the motivations of the king in staging such a grand finale to the festival, it is important to remember the mutually dependent relationship between the courtiers and the monarch. The king used overwhelming spectacle and powerful ceremonial imagery to communicate to his nobles, captains, subjects, and animals that he was firmly in command, and that their recognition of him as their God (and ceremonial center) was not misplaced. Here, the king is immensely powerful. While the act of assessing the armed forces may, at first blush, appear mundane and "administrative" in nature, it is anything but that in this instance. The king uses this audit as an opportunity to remind the entire kingdom that he is firmly in control at the center. Unpacking Paes's narrative of the mahanavami festival reveals the ceremonial centrality of the king in many other ways. In terms of spatial orientation within the arena, the author notes repeatedly that the king is at the center of all activities, whether procession or performance. Paes even notes that when the horses enter they all line up "facing the king." Performances center around the king; as Paes describes "artists only approach where the king is and then go out" (271). The fact that no lord "howsoever great he be" can sit down without the permission of the king emphasizes the king's centrality to the event, and indeed his power in the entire empire.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SALAAM-RESPECTFUL FORM OF GREETING TO KING**

One ceremonial activity, which appears repeatedly in Paes's narrative, is that of salaam. The word "salaam" in Arabic means peace, and is usually associated with a respectful form of greeting. It's quite interesting that this word was used by Paes in his description, and supports Phillip Wagoner in his argument that the kingdom of Vijayanagar was not – as Robert Sewell argued – a Hindu "bastion" against Muslims from Northern India, but rather a kingdom that incorporated many Islamic influences, in this case language: [In the morning]: As soon as he is here all the captains and chief people come and make their salaam to him (267) [Before the start of the afternoon festivities]: After all this is done and arranged the king goes forth and seats himself on the dais I have mentioned, where is the throne and the other things, and all those that are inside make their salaam to him . . . the captains . . . make their entrance . . . they approach and make their salaams to the king (269 - 270) [At night]: When these women retire the horses

also go, and then come the elephants, and after making their salaam they too retire (274) The fact that a respectful, ceremonial, gesture like the salaam is fundamental to the start or finish of any activity in Vijayanagar further shows the centrality of the king on Vijayanagar's ceremonial plane. It's interesting to note that even animals such as elephants, trained by their masters to lift their trunks, make "salaam" to the monarch. Clearly the king is the "icon" described by Waghorne above, using his position as the ceremonial center to underscore his own power. By forcing his captains, in particular, to make salaam to him, the king is emphasizing his centrality and reminding his captains that their legitimacy and power only comes within the context of the monarch himself. Nuniz's detailed accounts of the mahanavami festival also centralize the king in a ceremonial context, emphasizing the role of pleasure: "In this way during these nine days they are compelled to search for all things which will give pleasure to the king" (378). The quoted passage immediately follows a discussion regarding the entrance of the king's most "beautiful" wives at the festival. Thus, the immediate subject of the statement ("they") could be interpreted to mean the king's wives, however I believe that the word "they" extends further to include all those who partake in the festival: the king's ministers, his captains, and his subjects. The "pleasure" to which Nuniz refers is the greater pleasure that the king receives from the event: monetary, gastronomical, and of course sexual. Though his approach differs from Paes's, Nuniz nevertheless still reflects the centrality and power of the king through his discussion of the festival. Nuniz's narrative emphasizes the role of the king as a divine ruler, with all subjects finding a way to "please" him. Similar to the other chroniclers, Nuniz places the king firmly at the center of the kingdom, with all attention focused on him. „Abd al-Razzāq, as well, dedicates a section of his narrative to the mahanavami festival, in which he discusses the ceremonial centrality of the king: The king of Vijayanagar ordered that from all his realms, which would take three or four months to cross, the leaders and chieftains should come to court. They brought a thousand elephants roaring and raging like mountains and thunderclouds, adorned with weaponry and embellished with howdahs, with acrobats and pyrotechnists (313) The image evoked is of a powerful force at the center drawing in his subordinates from around the empire, as a large magnet draws in all smaller magnets to the center. By quantifying the time it takes to cross the empire ("three or four months" each way) ,, Abd al-Razzāq is demonstrating the king's reach (or to continue the analogy above, the "strength" of the magnetic field). What allows the king to be able to place such onerous demands on his captains, forcing them to come to the center every year to pay tribute (both financially and socially)? The answer, I argue, has to do with the king's role as the divine ruler, and by extension is ceremonial legitimacy. The divine role provided the king with tremendous legitimacy in the eyes of the Vijayanagar people: he was the embodiment of God on earth. A captain seen to be disobeying the king by not attending the ceremony would be disobeying God in the eyes of people. A disobedient captain would be quickly replaced (and probably killed for treachery), and this action, in the eyes of the Vijayanagar public would be in perfect harmony with the dharmic ideas of the kingdom. A reader of ,, Abd al-Razzāq's account has to wonder, however, why the king would "order" his leaders to spend up to 66% of their time every year attending this festival. Wouldn't their time be better spent in their districts, protecting the citizens from attack and attending to other administrative matters? There are two ways to approach this question. First, the mahanavami festival serves

as a reinforcement of the centrality of the king in Vijayanagar. The king orders the captains to come to the center because he can. Given the unstable nature of the political game in Vijayanagar, it was tremendously important for the king to remind the captains that he was firmly in control. The overwhelming ceremonial imagery witnessed by chroniclers like Paes and „Abd al-Razzāq served to remind the Vijayanagar public that the king was God, and to reemphasize to the captains that the king possessed this divine legitimacy. Thus, this festival, for the king represents control and power. If loyalty was the fundamental strategy of the game, then the king’s ability to wield and demonstrate power was a fundamental component in his ability to generate loyalty from his advisors and his captains. If the captains believed for one instant that the king had started to lose his divine legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the king would lose their support. The captain’s presence at the mahanavami festival, therefore, was necessary as a measure to prevent treachery and to remind the captains that the king continued to occupy firmly the position of divine ruler in Vijayanagar. By witnessing the king as the ceremonial center, the idea of him at the administrative and power centers was also reinforced. The second reason why the king mandated his captains to attend the festival has to do with simple realpolitik. The king (and most importantly his ministers) recognized the tremendous political instability in Vijayanagar. By requiring his captains to spend so much time in travel to and from the “center,” the king prevented his captains from establishing strong power bases of their own. This mitigated the threat of a serious challenge to his power.

## II. CONCLUSION

The objective of this PAPER is to illustrate how the mahanavami festival made sense in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar. While the tone of incredulity and awe in the chroniclers’ accounts reveals a bias of oriental despotism, I argue that a better explanation for what they are seeing is the fact that the king must use overwhelming imagery to reinforce the dual aspects of power he commands from the center: the divine and the worldly. The accounts of the chroniclers of the mahanavami festival illustrate the ways in which the entire ceremony revolved around the king. The festival provided the king an excellent opportunity to remind his captains, courtiers, and subjects that he was firmly in control of the empire, and to reinforce his own position as the ceremonial center.

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