

Krishnadevaraya (reigned 1509–1529 CE) Presided Over the Vijayanagara Empire at its Height – An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract:

Krishnadevaraya (reigned 1509–1529 CE) presided over the Vijayanagara Empire at its height, a period marked by remarkable urbanization and economic development in South India. His reign combined political stability, military prowess, and visionary administration to create one of the most prosperous pre-modern Indian states. Urban centers under Krishnadevaraya, particularly the capital at Vijayanagara, grew into complex cities with organized marketplaces, fortified enclosures, sophisticated water management systems, and thriving artisan quarters. The expansion of trade networks, both domestic and international, stimulated commerce, connecting inland agricultural regions with coastal ports and fostering exchanges with merchants from Persia, Arabia, and Southeast Asia.

Agriculture formed the backbone of the empire, supported by extensive irrigation projects, improved land revenue systems, and crop diversification. Rural production sustained urban growth and trade, while surplus resources were mobilized for public works, temple construction, and cultural patronage. Temples and cultural institutions played dual roles as spiritual centers and economic hubs, managing land, craft workshops, and grain storage. Krishnadevaraya's patronage of art, literature, and architecture not only reinforced the legitimacy of his rule but also stimulated employment and industrial production across the empire.

The integration of administration, agriculture, trade, and culture created a self-reinforcing system of prosperity, making Vijayanagara a model of sustainable urban and economic development in the early sixteenth century. His reign exemplifies the ways in which political authority, infrastructural innovation, and cultural patronage can drive economic growth, urban expansion, and social cohesion.

Keywords: Krishnadevaraya, Vijayanagara Empire, Urbanization, Economic Development, South India, Trade Networks.

INTRODUCTION:

Krishnadevaraya was born in 1471 CE into the Tuluva dynasty, one of the prominent ruling families of the Vijayanagara Empire. Ascending the throne in 1509 CE, he inherited an empire facing both internal factionalism and external threats from the Gajapatis of Odisha, the Bahmani successor states, and regional chieftains. His early life was marked by rigorous training in administration, military strategy, and literature, shaping him into a ruler capable of balancing martial skill with intellectual sophistication. During his reign, Krishnadevaraya consolidated territorial control through military campaigns that expanded the empire's boundaries, securing key trade routes and coastal regions. Notable victories included campaigns against the Gajapatis and the Deccan Sultanates, which strengthened the empire's

political and economic foundations. He was renowned for his effective administration, which combined centralized authority with local autonomy, ensuring stable governance and efficient revenue collection.

Krishnadevaraya was also a celebrated patron of culture. His court attracted the *Ashtadiggajas*, eight eminent Telugu poets, and he encouraged literature, music, and temple architecture across the empire. Temples like the Vittala and Hazara Rama in Hampi stand as enduring monuments of his reign. His policies in agriculture, trade, and urban development fostered economic prosperity, making Vijayanagara a hub of commerce, industry, and culture. Krishnadevaraya's reign ended in 1529, leaving a legacy of political stability, cultural patronage, and economic innovation. His leadership transformed Vijayanagara into a cosmopolitan and prosperous state, demonstrating the integration of administrative acumen, military strategy, and cultural vision in South Indian history.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the Krishnadevaraya's Urbanization and Economic Development during Vijayanagara Empire in South India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

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

1. Administrative and Political Foundations of Economic Prosperity

The Vijayanagara Empire under Krishnadevaraya (1509–1529 CE) represented one of the most stable and prosperous periods in South Indian history. His administrative skill and political vision laid the foundation for strong urbanization and sustained economic growth. The empire, stretching from the Tungabhadra River to the Indian Ocean, was unified through an efficient system of governance that balanced central authority with local autonomy. Krishnadevaraya adopted a pragmatic approach: he strengthened royal control over key territories while allowing traditional village and temple institutions to manage local affairs. This dual system encouraged both administrative efficiency and economic participation.

Krishnadevaraya's governance rested on a strong bureaucracy divided into various departments—revenue, trade, military, irrigation, and justice. Each was managed by trusted nobles and officers who were accountable to the king. The revenue system, based primarily on land assessment, ensured a steady flow of income to the state. Taxation was flexible and often based on productivity rather than fixed quotas. This policy encouraged cultivators and traders to expand production and engage more actively in commerce. The emphasis on agrarian productivity not only increased state revenue but also supported urban growth by creating surplus wealth that could be invested in trade and infrastructure.

Political stability was another key driver of economic progress. Krishnadevaraya's military strength, backed by a disciplined standing army, secured internal peace and protected trade routes from banditry and invasion. His successful campaigns against the Bahmani successors and the Gajapati rulers of Odisha expanded Vijayanagara's borders and ensured access to important ports on the eastern coast. This territorial control allowed the empire to regulate

coastal trade and attract merchants from Persia, Arabia, and Southeast Asia. The secure environment encouraged local entrepreneurs, artisans, and merchants to settle in urban centers and invest in crafts and long-distance trade.

Krishnadevaraya also showed administrative foresight in maintaining a network of forts and garrisons that doubled as regional administrative hubs. These centers promoted the movement of goods, soldiers, and officials, strengthening both defense and commerce. The empire's judicial system maintained social order through a mix of royal decrees and customary laws, ensuring property rights and contractual security—two vital conditions for a functioning economy.

One of Krishnadevaraya's greatest achievements was his attention to infrastructure. He prioritized the construction and maintenance of roads, canals, reservoirs, and temples. These projects provided employment, improved agricultural yields, and supported the growth of markets and urban centers. The royal patronage of temples went beyond religion—they became centers of storage, distribution, and finance, often functioning as local economic institutions. Inscriptions from this period reveal the close relationship between temples, merchants, and the state, forming an integrated economic system. Through this combination of administrative stability, efficient taxation, and infrastructural development, Krishnadevaraya created the conditions for a vibrant and self-sustaining economy. His reign exemplified the effective use of political power to stimulate economic expansion, making Vijayanagara not only a political capital but also one of the most economically dynamic regions in pre-modern South Asia.

2. Urbanization and City Planning in Vijayanagara

The Vijayanagara capital was among the largest and most advanced cities of the premodern world. Under Krishnadevaraya, it reached the peak of its urban development, described by Portuguese travelers like Domingo Paes and Fernão Nunes as a magnificent metropolis with markets, palaces, temples, and gardens. Urbanization in Krishnadevaraya's empire was not accidental—it reflected deliberate planning, supported by economic resources, administrative foresight, and cultural ambition. Vijayanagara city was strategically located on the banks of the Tungabhadra River, surrounded by rocky hills that served as natural fortifications. The city's layout was sophisticated, divided into distinct zones for administrative, religious, military, and commercial purposes. The royal enclosure, with its audience halls and palaces, symbolized political authority, while the sacred center, dominated by the Virupaksha and Vittala temples, represented spiritual and cultural identity. Surrounding these were bustling marketplaces, residential neighborhoods, and artisan quarters, demonstrating a clear urban hierarchy and functional design.

The empire's urban planning extended beyond the capital. Regional centers like Hampi, Penukonda, Chandragiri, and Lepakshi also flourished as administrative and economic hubs. Each had a network of streets, bazaars, tanks, and temples, linking rural production zones to urban markets. Krishnadevaraya's administration encouraged migration of skilled artisans, goldsmiths, weavers, and merchants to these cities by offering land grants and trade privileges. This influx of talent diversified the economic base and strengthened local manufacturing. The infrastructure of Vijayanagara city reflected a combination of aesthetic sophistication and

engineering skill. The water management system, consisting of canals, tanks, and aqueducts, sustained both agriculture and urban life. The Kamalapura and Bukkaraya canals, for example, brought water to gardens and residential quarters, while large tanks ensured year-round supply. The city's road network, paved and well-maintained, connected major temples and markets, facilitating trade and communication.

Markets were central to urban life. Contemporary accounts describe rows of shops selling spices, jewels, textiles, and horses, frequented by traders from across the Indian Ocean. The city's bazaars operated as nodes in a wider commercial web, linking inland producers with coastal ports like Mangalore, Bhatkal, and Nagapattinam. The cosmopolitan nature of Vijayanagara was evident in its population diversity—Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and foreign merchants all coexisted, contributing to a vibrant urban economy. Urban development during Krishnadevaraya's reign also had a symbolic dimension. City planning was infused with ritual and cosmological significance, reflecting Hindu ideals of kingship and order. Temples were aligned with cardinal directions, and royal architecture followed precise geometric layouts. This integration of religion and space reinforced the emperor's authority as both a political ruler and a dharmic protector.

Krishnadevaraya's cities stood as symbols of prosperity and power. They were centers of production, exchange, and culture, embodying a model of urbanization that combined economic functionality with spiritual grandeur. The urban vision of Vijayanagara thus represented the highest expression of South India's premodern urban culture—organized, prosperous, and deeply connected to both land and trade.

3. Agriculture, Irrigation, and Rural Economy

The prosperity of Vijayanagara under Krishnadevaraya rested fundamentally on its agrarian base. Agriculture was the backbone of the empire's economy, supporting its urban centers, military, and administrative machinery. Krishnadevaraya understood this relationship clearly and invested heavily in irrigation and land management to expand cultivation and ensure food security. The empire's geography, marked by dry plateaus and seasonal rivers, made irrigation crucial. Krishnadevaraya revitalized ancient systems of tanks and canals and built new ones to extend arable land. The Basavanna Canal and the large reservoirs near Hampi are testaments to his irrigation policy. These projects were often carried out with local participation, combining royal initiative with community labor. This collaborative model increased agricultural productivity and tied villages more closely to the state.

Land revenue was the main source of state income, and Krishnadevaraya introduced reforms to make its collection efficient and fair. His revenue officers surveyed land and classified it based on fertility and crop type. Taxes were levied as a proportion of produce, ensuring flexibility during poor harvests. This system encouraged farmers to cultivate more land, knowing that the state's demands would not be arbitrary. Inscriptions from the period record royal orders reducing taxes after floods or droughts, reflecting a responsive administration. Agricultural diversity was another strength. Rice, millets, pulses, and sugarcane were grown extensively, while coconut, areca nut, and cotton supported specialized industries. The empire's agrarian surplus fueled trade in food grains and textiles, linking rural producers to

urban markets. Villages functioned as self-contained units with a mix of cultivators, artisans, and merchants, each contributing to the local economy. The presence of temple estates, maintained through royal grants, further supported rural employment and ensured redistribution of resources through charity and ritual.

Krishnadevaraya also encouraged the introduction of new crops and techniques through contact with foreign traders. Cotton and indigo production increased, while horticulture and floriculture gained prominence in areas around Hampi and the eastern coast. The empire's irrigation projects not only enhanced cultivation but also beautified the landscape with gardens and orchards, reflecting a blend of utility and aesthetics. The rural economy was tightly linked to the urban sector. Agricultural surplus was transported to cities through established trade routes, and village craftsmen produced goods for urban consumption. The temple played an intermediary role, storing grain, funding local festivals, and supporting artisans through endowments. This circular flow of goods and wealth maintained economic balance and social stability.

Under Krishnadevaraya, the agrarian sector achieved remarkable productivity, allowing the empire to sustain a large population and powerful army. His agricultural policies reveal a ruler deeply aware of the interdependence between land, people, and prosperity. Through irrigation, reform, and protection, he transformed the Deccan's semi-arid landscape into one of the most fertile and organized rural economies in precolonial India.

4. Trade, Commerce, and Industry

Trade and industry formed the dynamic engine of Vijayanagara's economic development under Krishnadevaraya. The empire's strategic location allowed it to control inland routes as well as maritime trade along both coasts. Krishnadevaraya actively promoted commerce, recognizing its potential to enrich the state and strengthen diplomatic relations. Domestic trade connected the interior agricultural regions with major urban and port centers. Markets were organized under royal supervision, with standardized weights and measures to ensure fairness. The state imposed moderate taxes on goods but protected merchants from extortion and theft. The highways were patrolled, and rest houses were built for travelers. This attention to infrastructure facilitated smooth movement of goods, from spices and textiles to metals and livestock.

The textile industry was one of Vijayanagara's most prosperous sectors. Cotton from the Deccan plains and silk from the southern regions were woven into fine fabrics that were in high demand across Asia. Weaving centers like Chitradurga and Madurai supplied both domestic and export markets. Similarly, metalworking, jewelry making, and sculpture were flourishing urban crafts. Artisans enjoyed royal patronage and often worked for temples and the court, blending economic production with cultural expression. Foreign trade expanded significantly during Krishnadevaraya's reign. The ports of Goa, Bhatkal, Honavar, and Machilipatnam were busy with ships from Arabia, Persia, Africa, and Portugal. The empire exported spices, textiles, precious stones, and horses, while importing copper, mercury, and luxury goods. Horses, crucial for the Vijayanagara cavalry, came mainly from Arabia and Persia through Portuguese

intermediaries. Krishnadevaraya maintained diplomatic ties with the Portuguese to ensure a steady supply and access to global trade networks.

Trade guilds, known as *nagaram* and *setti*, played an essential role in organizing commerce. They operated autonomously but under royal oversight, maintaining their own regulations and contributing taxes to the state. These guilds provided credit, managed shipping, and sometimes even maintained temples and schools. Their presence in inscriptions shows a sophisticated commercial culture that integrated business ethics with community responsibility. Krishnadevaraya's policies encouraged entrepreneurship and protected property rights. Merchants could own land, endow temples, and lend money, reflecting social mobility and economic diversification. The inflow of foreign silver and gold from trade enhanced monetary circulation and stimulated urban construction. This period saw the minting of gold coins bearing the king's image—symbols of wealth and stability. By linking agriculture, industry, and commerce, Krishnadevaraya created a self-reinforcing economic system. Trade profits funded temples and public works, which in turn supported artisans and cultivators. The empire's markets were vibrant, cosmopolitan, and interconnected with the broader Indian Ocean world. Vijayanagara's trade networks extended from Gujarat to Malacca, making it one of the most important commercial powers of the sixteenth century.

5. Cultural and Architectural Patronage as Economic Catalysts

Culture and economy were deeply intertwined in Krishnadevaraya's Vijayanagara. His patronage of art, architecture, and literature was not only an expression of devotion or royal pride but also a powerful driver of economic activity. Temples, festivals, and artistic commissions generated employment for thousands of craftsmen, sculptors, musicians, and laborers. Krishnadevaraya's reign witnessed the construction of monumental temples like the Vittala and Hazara Rama temples, which combined architectural innovation with intricate stonework. These projects required vast resources, skilled labor, and specialized artisans. The royal treasury funded quarrying, transport, and carving, stimulating industries related to stone, metal, and wood. Local guilds supplied materials and labor, creating a circular economy centered on cultural production.

Temples functioned as both religious and economic institutions. They owned land, received donations, and managed endowments, often lending money or grain to cultivators and traders. Large temples maintained granaries, irrigation works, and craft workshops. During festivals, markets thrived around temple premises, boosting trade and tourism. The flow of pilgrims and merchants through these centers made them vibrant nodes of economic exchange. Krishnadevaraya was also a great patron of literature, supporting poets in multiple languages, including Telugu, Sanskrit, Kannada, and Tamil. His court became a magnet for intellectuals, known collectively as the *Ashtadiggajas*. These scholars and poets enjoyed royal grants and public honors, which elevated the prestige of Vijayanagara's cultural life and indirectly stimulated education and book production. The demand for manuscripts, textiles, and decorative arts tied cultural activity to artisanal enterprise.

The king's architectural and artistic vision extended to urban beautification. Palaces and public buildings were adorned with sculpture and frescoes, while gardens and waterworks

transformed city spaces into living art. Such projects required continuous labor and material supply, integrating artisans into the economy year-round. The employment generated by cultural patronage helped sustain the urban population and reinforced loyalty to the crown. Cultural investment also had diplomatic and economic implications. By showcasing Vijayanagara's grandeur, Krishnadevaraya attracted foreign envoys and merchants who viewed the empire as wealthy and stable. This perception encouraged trade and alliance, enhancing both the state's prestige and its economy. In Krishnadevaraya's Vijayanagara, culture was not separate from commerce—it was its expression. The temples, literature, and arts of his reign stand as enduring evidence of an empire where creativity and economy grew together. His cultural policies transformed artistic ambition into a source of prosperity, making Vijayanagara a model of how spiritual and material development could coexist in harmony.

CONCLUSION:

Krishnadevaraya's reign represents the zenith of the Vijayanagara Empire, exemplifying the effective integration of political authority, economic management, and cultural patronage in premodern South India. His administrative acumen ensured stability, enabling urban centers to flourish and markets to thrive. The capital at Vijayanagara became a hub of trade, craft, and culture, attracting merchants, artisans, and scholars from across India and beyond. Agricultural expansion and sophisticated irrigation systems provided the foundation for surplus production, supporting both urban growth and long-distance commerce. Trade and industry under Krishnadevaraya were closely linked to state policies, with guilds, ports, and artisanal communities forming a robust economic network. Cultural investments, particularly in temples, literature, and architecture, not only enhanced the empire's prestige but also generated employment and stimulated economic activity, demonstrating the interdependence of culture and economy. By linking governance, urban planning, agriculture, trade, and cultural patronage, Krishnadevaraya created a self-reinforcing system of prosperity that elevated Vijayanagara to one of South India's most dynamic political and economic centers. The legacy of Krishnadevaraya highlights the potential of visionary leadership in shaping sustainable economic and urban development, offering valuable insights into the complex relationship between administration, society, and culture in historical South Asian contexts.

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