



## The representation of women of South Canara in the European travelogues

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**Abstract:** This article tries to show how women of South Canara were represented in the European travelogues. For this study the writings of the travellers of Vijayanagara, travelogue of Della Valle and the accounts of the Buchanan are analyzed. The European travellers, irrespective of the group or nation they belonged to, had a curiosity to know about the native women. The travellers of the mercantile phase offer similar, diverse and contradictory images of the native women. The woman as a ruler, as a queen, the divisions between the Hindu and the Muslim women, the religious customs like devadasi, and Sati were narrated by the travellers. Sati was the favourite topic which was considered by them as a superstitious act and they offer eyewitness accounts of the same. They also had a curiosity about the female sexuality of the native women and the customs related to it. It gave way to fantasizing of the native women. The travelogues of Buchanan as a representative of colonial authority differs in depicting the native women and offer only limited representations. It was during this period that the women were viewed through the lenses of administration.

**Key Words:** Women, Queen, Devadasi, Sati

European travelers visited South Canara as adventurers, merchants, curious pilgrims, missionaries and as colonial officials and left valuable accounts. This article tries to present how the women of South Canara were depicted in the European travelogues. It argues that the travellers accounts of the mercantile phase offer diverse images of the native women.<sup>1</sup> During the imperial phase, travellers as colonial officials strictly following the colonial policy, distanced themselves from the liberal portrayal of the native women.

### Rulers, Queens and the Social Customs

The travelogues of Vijayanagar depict the queens and their harem, the social customs and specific practices of the region like devadasi, and sati. The restricted entry to the

palace makes Paes feel deprived of his role as an observer, hence he fails to provide a detailed description of it. Nuniz provides inner details of the palace though he also mentions that the entry of the palace was strictly guarded.<sup>2</sup> Barbosa informs that to win over the favour of the king, queens quarrel among themselves, on certain occasions they even try to kill the opponents or poison themselves.<sup>3</sup> The use of women as courtesans during war is also depicted by the travelogues. For example, Barbosa states that, the Vijayanagara army was accompanied by five to six thousand women whom the king distributes among the soldiers.<sup>4</sup> About marriage, Barbosa opines that, the king of Vijayanagara and the natives marry in a similar fashion as Europeans and had their own marriage laws, yet he finds that polygamy was also popular.<sup>5</sup> In the native women, they first notice the religious differences. For Barbosa, the Hindu women were not like the Muslim women and their faces were uncovered like the Europeans.<sup>6</sup> Here the Hindu and the Muslim women were considered as different groups but the former was equated with the Europeans. For Niketin, all the native women were harlots, witches, thieves and cheats who not only poisoned their masters, but also were available for the foreign white men.<sup>7</sup> Peitro Della Valle, the Italian traveller who visited South Canara in the early part of the seventeenth century provides detailed information about the women as queens, rulers and follower of different religious customs. He knows the valiant exploits of Rani Abbakka against the Portuguese while he was in Persia. He depicts Rani Abbakka as any other native woman quite opposite to the image of the queen. He describes the appearance of the queen of Ullala as ‘dirty kitchen wench’ or ‘laundress than a delicate and noble queen’. Yet he states that in her behaviour, she was quite graceful, prudent and judicious. The conversation between Rani Abbakka and Della Valle reveals much about the author than the Queen.<sup>8</sup> The queen of Ikkeri, Badramma is referred by Della Valle as a woman of high character and virtue. He mentions that the Moorish woman was responsible for the break-up of conjugal relationship between the king of Ikkeri Venkatappa Nayaka and the Queen Badramma, but he does not provide much detail about the Moorish woman.

### **Devadasi, Sati and other practices.**

The travelogues of the mercantile phase consider that religion dictated the life of the native women. To prove this point devadasi, sati and other religious practices are cited and narrated by them. Barbosa states that in the name of religion the native women do terrible things.<sup>9</sup> According to him, many women dedicate the maidenhood of their daughters to one of their idols and in relation to it, they perform a festival, which had a concealed ritual where the daughter takes her own virginity in front of the idol.<sup>10</sup> The devadasi system is also narrated by the travellers of Vijayanagara. According to Barbosa, those who fail to perform sati, if they are young, as a favour to

them, are sent to the temple where they earn money for the temple with their bodies. He further states that some unmarried women become devdasis's with their own will. These devadasi's are forced to play and sing before the idols for certain hours of every day.<sup>11</sup> Paes also narrate about the women who dance before the idol in the temple and live in the best streets in the city.<sup>12</sup> The influence of religion is also stressed by Della Valle and offers a detailed description of the ritual where women transform as devadasis. He narrates the ritually possessed woman as devil possessed woman. The nineteenth century account of Buchanan, though offers detailed information on other aspects, mechanically narrates the position of women under various castes and states that they were bound by the caste rules and were punished for opposing the same. He portrays Tipu's cruelty against women and his zenana is considered as prison. According to Buchanan the comfort of having children, however, is the general pleasure that married women in India enjoy.

The travellers' provide eyewitness accounts of the practice of Sati. As eyewitnesses the travellers' observe personally and verifies the fortitude of woman and authenticate the unbelievable act.<sup>14</sup> Nicolo Conti describes it as a custom where women follow their husbands at their death adding spectacle to the funeral ceremony.<sup>15</sup> He further states that one who shows timidity was thrown into the fire. Barbosa states that sati was an 'abominable practice' and a 'frightful thing'.<sup>16</sup> Those who do not perform sati hold in great dishonour and their heads are shaved by their relatives and turned away as disgrace and shame to their families. When the King dies, four or five hundred women burn themselves with him. Many men intimate to the king are also burnt with him.<sup>17</sup> Barbosa narrates the difference between performing sati by the poor and the rich women. The poor women perform sati without any fanfare while the rich women of high rank perform sati with all the pomp.<sup>18</sup> He further states the rich women perform all the rituals of sati with a cheerful expression as if she is not going to die.<sup>19</sup> Barbosa and Nuniz narrate about performing sati by burying.<sup>20</sup> For this similarity the editor of Barbosa's work charges Nuniz of borrowing from Barbosa's account on Sati ceremony.<sup>21</sup> Among Lingayats and the telugu castes, the wives were buried alive with their husbands at the later's death.<sup>22</sup> Della Valle considers sati as barbarous and states that one who performs it is praiseworthy. He also played the failed role of saving a sati. Giaccama, the low caste telugu woman performs sati in Ikkeri, Della Valle by conversing with her tries to stop her from performing sati. But when he fails to convince her, he decides to make her name immortal by composing a sonnet in her name.<sup>23</sup> He states that, the Sati was not permitted in the territory controlled by the Portuguese. Buchanan opines that, sati was rarely practiced and if anyone performed sati, that place was considered as a place of worship.<sup>24</sup> He also states that there were instances to show that the widow and divorced women were allowed to marry again.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the mercantile phase, travellers' depicted sati as superstitious, barbarous, unbelievable and yet some treated it with compassion. But

in the early nineteenth century colonial accounts, including travelogues, sati becomes an administrative issue where questions were raised about its religious sanctions. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century and starting decades of the nineteenth century that the colonial and native officials, scholars, missionaries and social reformers took part in a discourse to decide whether sati was legal or not.<sup>26</sup> In this discourse on sati, the participation of women was negligible. As a performer of sati she was recorded only in numbers in relation to caste and region. It is interesting to note that, apart from the conversation with Queen Abbakka and sati Giaccamma, no other woman becomes the source of information for these travellers. Thus, the travelogues of South Canara offer diverse images of women during the mercantile phase, but in the imperial phase her representations becomes limited.

### **End notes:-**

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16. Dames M.L., ed., op.cit., p. 216
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18. Ibid., pp. 213-217
19. Ibid., p.215
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21. Ibid., p. lix-lx
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