

The Great Battle (1565) Battle of Rakkasa-Tangadi/Talikota and its implications

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Abstract

Around 450 years ago, the destruction of the medieval city of Vijayanagara, in today's Hampi, Karnataka, India, would have ended. According to records, the city of Vijayanagara was destroyed over a period of five months after the defeat of its army at the fateful Battle of Talikota on January 26, 1565.

Survey accounts of Indian history—both Indian and Western—usually focus primarily on the great pan-Indian empires based in Northern India, much to the neglect of West, East, and South Indian history, which are just as important in India's development. At the time of the Battle of Talikota, the Mughal Empire was expanding under its famous Emperor Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar, so it is easy to overlook what was going on elsewhere in the subcontinent. In any case, the Battle of Talikota is one of the most important battles in South Asia's long history and the Vijayanagara Empire that it impacted, extremely significant to Indian history. The Vijayanagara Empire was established in 1336 C.E. during a turbulent period in India's history, and eventually grew to encompass all of South India. The old order in South India was being swept away during this time by the invasions of the Delhi Sultanate, which itself had only been established in 1206 C.E. in North India due to the invasions of Muhammad of Ghor in today's Afghanistan. In South India, many ancient dynasties collapsed during the early 14th century like the Tamil Pandyas, the Andhra Kakatiyas, and the Kannadiga Hoysalas due to Muslim invasions (the invading Tughluq dynasty of Delhi itself collapsed in decades due to overreach). However, Hindu rule over South India was preserved and consolidated under two brothers who first swore allegiance to Delhi and then rebelled: Harihara and Bukka. Within a century, Vijayanagara would grow to be South India's largest empire.

Oddly enough, the notables of the Vijayanagara and its rulers fled in the aftermath instead of attempting to hold their capital. The city of Vijayanagara was systematically destroyed and plundered in the course of the next five months and is today mostly a ruin. The empire managed to survive until 1646, but much of it either fragmented into independent kingdoms like Mysore and Madurai or came under Islamic rule; most of the region was absorbed into the Mughal Empire in any case within a century. The fall of Vijayanagara ushered in the end of the distinct and separate political and cultural evolution of South India separate from North India.

Key words: Vijayanagara, Talikota, Rama Raya, the Deccan sultanates, Krishnadevaraya

Introduction

The Battle of Talikota (23 January 1565) was a watershed battle fought between the Vijayanagara Empire and the Deccan sultanates. The battle took place at Talikota, today a town in northern Karnataka, about 80 kilometres (50 mi) to the southeast from the city of Bijapur. The treacherous defeat of Vijayanagara Empire, followed subsequent destruction and looting which became short lived before the successors of Rama Raya. The Muslim Sultanates to the north of Vijayanagara united and attacked Aliya Rama Raya's army, on 23 January 1565, in an engagement known as the Battle of Talikota. The armies clashed on the plains near the villages of Rakkasagi and Tangadigi (it is also known as the Battle of Rakkasa-Tangadi).

The Vijayanagara army was winning the battle, state Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, but suddenly two Muslim generals of the Vijayanagara army switched sides and turned their loyalty to the united Sultanates. They captured Aliya Rama Raya and beheaded him on the spot, with Sultan Hussain on the Sultanates side joining them. The beheading of Rama Raya created confusion and havoc and in the still loyal portions of the Vijayanagara army, which were then completely routed. The Sultanates' army plundered Hampi and reduced it into ruins.

Objective:

This paper seeks to outline the course and outcome of the Battle of Talikota, battle that hanged the Course of Indian History

Partial picture of an empire in decline

We can reasonably trace the seeds of this Sunset Battle to "Aliya" (literally: son-in-law) Rama Raya, the son-in-law of Krishnadevaraya. Rama Raya was a valiant commander, a tactful warrior who led several successful campaigns under Krishnadevaraya, an able administrator, and a skillful diplomat.

He was also endowed with a fatal flaw: an unquenchable thirst for power, haughtiness and overconfidence in his own abilities. He was also given to excessive sensual indulgence. After Krishnadevaraya's death, the throne passed on to his younger brother, Achyuta Raya who died in 1542 CE. His nephew, Sadashiva Raya was then a minor. Rama Raya seized this opportunity and eventually put Sadashiva Raya under virtual house arrest. Acting as regent, he quickly took control of state power and replaced officers in important positions with people personally loyal to him. However, till the end, he could not become king because he was perceived to be not of royal lineage. To his credit, Rama Raya was a shrewd political operative. Surrounded by the five hostile Bahamani kingdoms, he constantly pitted one Sultan against the other and in the process ensured two things: one, he extended the borders of the Vijayanagara Empire occupying territories north of the Krishna river and two, he kept Vijayanagara secure by capitalising on the incessant enmity between the Bahamani Sultans. However, his luck did eventually run out when the Sultans realised that they had a common foe in Rama Raya.

Germination of the Battle of Talikota

Upon the request of Ali Adil Shah, Rama Raya marched against the Ahmednagar kingdom and successfully raided it. Equally, on occasion, the Nizam of Ahmednagar and Qutub Shah of Golconda had sought Rama Raya's assistance to teach Ali Adil Shah a lesson.

In that instance, Rama Raya successfully wrested the Raichur doab on behalf of these two kings, angering Ali Adil Shah who then sought the advice of his close aides. Two of these aides, Kishwar Khan Lary and Abu Turab Shirazi recommended an alliance of all the Bahamani kings after setting aside mutual hostilities. And further that this grand alliance should march against Rama Raya. As we've seen, Qutub Shah of Golconda and Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmednagar had tasted bitter defeat at the hands of Rama Raya on several occasions. Indeed, after Rama Raya's successful campaign against him on behalf of Ali Adil Shah of Bijapur, Nizam Shah was so stricken with mortal fear that he abandoned even the thought of marching against Adil Shah. And so, the Sultans of Bijapur, Ahmednagar and Golconda entered into a joint pact. Accordingly, Chand Bibi (popularly known for her defence of Ahmednagar against the forces of the Mughal emperor, Akbar), daughter of Hussain Nizam Shah was married to Ali Adil Shah I of Bijapur. Equally, Murtajabiz the son of the Sultan of Ahmednagar, was married to Adil Shah's sister. It was agreed upon by all parties to wage war against Vijayanagara after the marriage celebrations were over. That done, Adil Shah sent an emissary to Rama Raya's court with a message: to give up the key forts of Raichur and Mudgal. Rama Raya sent the emissary back with a contemptuous refusal. The same contempt was reserved for the emissaries that followed.

The stage was now set. The combined forces of Bijapur, Ahmednagar and Golconda began to march towards Vijayanagara. Because Bidar's Sultan Burhan ImadulMulk was a sworn enemy of Hussain Nizam Shah, he refused to join the coalition. The coalition army eventually reached and set up camp at a spot near Talikota, which fell under the domain of the Bijapur Sultan. The battle that followed occurred at Tavarekere (today's Tangadi or Rakkasatangadi), southwest of Talikota.

A battle of stealth

The Sultans assembled at Talikota didn't immediately start war preparations. They indulged in merry-making for several days as a mark of more firmly cementing their circumstance-forged, superficial unity, and resealed their alliance against their common but far superior enemy. And then they began their battle march. Meanwhile, a supremely overconfident Rama Raya was unperturbed. He didn't perceive this as a threat of any consequence and began to make his own preparations. It is estimated that he sent a contingent of twenty thousand horseback soldiers and a lakh and fifty thousand elephants as advance force under the leadership of his brother Tirumala Raya. He followed this up with another force of sizable strength and numbers. Historians peg the total strength of the Vijayanagara military force as comprising one lakh horsemen and five lakh infantry. The task of the advance contingent was to prevent the Bahamani forces from crossing the Krishna river. The force had massive canons forming the leading front. Additionally, sturdy forts at strategic points along the Krishna river

were designed to impede the enemy's attempts at crossing it. Spies of the Bahamani force reported that there were some places situated about two-three miles along the river line that were unguarded and could help the army cross the river.

Adil Shah conferred with his allies and sought their permission to conduct the war by stealth because whatever Rama Raya's other faults, the Vijayanagara army was a fearsome fighting machine, and all of his adversaries had tasted defeat at his hands in the past. Accordingly, Adil Shah ordered his men to adopt this strategy: pretend to attempt crossing the river at a few points and then turn back and then actually try to cross the river from a different place. When the Vijayanagara army witnessed this, they realised that the enemy's attempts were futile and abandoned their existing positions, thereby falling neatly into the enemy's trap. Adil Shah's strategy proved hugely successful. The Bahamani army quickly tied up the canons with strong chains. In his certainty that this was a minor battle, Rama Raya had not even made a Plan B, forget a contingency plan. Neither did he learn any lesson when he saw that he was outwitted. He led from the front and ordered his army to randomly attack the Bahamani force. There was no strategy, no discipline. Even worse, he didn't heed the advice of his ministers to mount a horse, and instead sat in his throne on the elephant. He bombastically motivated his soldiers with the war cry, "We are not cowards to be scared of this insignificant war! Go on, fight!" That didn't work. The random manner in which his soldiers fought began to take its toll. Rama Raya quickly realised this, dismounted, and spread out a vast heap of enormous quantities of gold, precious stones, and coins and declared that the one who displays the maximum valour would be rewarded with untold wealth and would be royally honoured. This motivation helped breathe fresh zest into the soldiers who began hacking their way into the Bahamani force. The left flank of the Bahamani force was decimated and what was left of it began to retreat.

The fall of Rama Raya

This turn of events greatly worried Nizam Shah, Qutub Shah and Ali Barid. Nizam Shah put up the "Rahtaanat" sign in front of his tent. This sign signifies a holy oath that the Muslim soldier would die in jihad and attain jannat (heaven). As was customary, Nizam Shah's personal entourage was accompanied by hundreds of women of his harem. The chief guard of the harem, a eunuch bearing the title of "Khwajasara" was given strict instructions: in the event that the Khwajasara fell in danger, he was to first slaughter all the women in the harem before taking any other action. And so, the combined forces of Nizam Shah, Qutub Shah, Ali Adil Shah and Ali Barid attacked the "Hindu army which was continually gaining an upper hand". Ali Adil Shah managed to chase away Rama Raya's brother, Tirumala Raya all the way up to Kanauj [it is unclear which place this refers to]. He then turned his attention to Rama Raya. He attacked Rama Raya from the rear while Qutub Shah and Nizam Shah faced him head on. Even as the battle raged on, an enormous chunk of Muslim soldiers in Rama Raya's army either defected to the enemy camp or became deserters by refusing to fight on the side of the "Hindu" army. This was apparently motivated by the notorious Gilani brothers who were among Rama Raya's trusted commanders. There are varying versions of this slice of the battle but constraints of space don't permit discussing this aspect in any detail. The reader is referred to the references at the end of this essay. Equally, panic struck Rama Raya when he realised that there was

no force defending his right flank. Some historians aver that this was because he was unaware of Tirumala Raya's flight away from the battle.

Meanwhile, a lowly officer (havaladar) named Rumi Khan fired two canons at the Vijayanagar force, taking a heavy toll and scattering the soldiers. He then climbed up his elephant and charged at Rama Raya's elephant. In the ensuing fight, Rama Raya's bodyguard was killed and the 90-year old head of the Empire fell down from his palanquin, wounded. He was surrounded by enemy soldiers who didn't know who he was. Even Rumi Khan realised who he had toppled when the Brahmin Dalapatiraya yelled, "Stop! Don't you dare harm Rama Raya!" Rumi Khan then had Rama Raya lifted by the trunk of his elephant and presented him before Nizam Shah. The Sultan, in a bid to humiliate Rama Raya, offered him a seat and mocked, "All well?"

The nonagenarian said nothing; he merely touched his forehead (indicating that fate had reduced him to this). At this point, the court physician Hakim Kasim Baig stormed into the tent and said, "What! Exchanging pleasantries with a captured prisoner? Kill him now! If the Bijapur Sultan comes here, he will spare him."

Nizam Shah chopped off Rama Raya's head, affixed it to the tip of a spear and had it paraded outside. It is said that Rama Raya's severed head was thrown in a gutter in Bijapur; other accounts hold that it was sent to Kashi. The sight of the slain Raya's head put the Vijayanagara force in full-blown retreat. However, they were unable to flee very far. "The warriors of Islam chased them and slaughtered everyone in sight. An area spanning about twenty miles was littered with dead bodies, the earth bloody. The victorious soldiers of Islam took untold riches in the form of coins, jewelry and slaves: both male and female." One account says that it took 12 days to count the dead bodies that lay in the region from "Ali Kandi" to Vijayanagara and pegs the number of people killed at 10 Lakh.

The wasteland of Hampi

The Sultans prayed to Allah for this grand victory and remained at the scene of the battle for 20 days. Once the wounds had healed, they marched to Hampi vowing vengeance. They decimated the tall, grand buildings, temples, burned everything in sight and plundered Vijayanagara's wealth with abandon.

In the six months that the Bahamani coalition was camped in Vijayanagara, every single house, temple, building and habitation in a radius spanning twenty leagues was burned down. Hampi was reduced to a wasteland: even today, it is known by the Kannada moniker, "HaaluHampi" (Ruined Hampi). And so, the glory that was scripted (among others) by Kumara Kampana's exploits ended, more than two hundred years later, in the desolation of Hampi.

Conclusion

According to Shastri, the greatest factor was the betrayal of the Vijayanagara Army by two Muslim commanders (Gilani Brothers). At the critical point of the war, Muslim officers in the Vijayanagara army launched a subversive attack. Suddenly Aliya Rama Raya found himself surprised when the two Muslim divisions in his ranks turned against him.

Robert Sewell, in his book *The Forgotten Empire*, concludes thus – "With fire and sword, with crowbars and axes, they carried on day after day their work of destruction. Never perhaps in the history of the world has such havoc been wrought, and wrought so suddenly, on so splendid a city; teeming with a wealthy and industrious population in the full plenitude of prosperity one day, and on the next seized, pillaged, and reduced to ruins, amid scenes of savage massacre and horrors beggaring description.

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