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KINGS AND THEIR PATRONAGE OF TELUGU POETS: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF ROYAL COURTS AND LITERARY DEVELOPMENT IN TELUGU LITERATURE

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Abstract: *The history of Telugu literature is closely connected with the political, cultural, and religious institutions of South India. From the Eastern Chalukya dynasty of the eleventh century to the Vijayanagara Empire, the Qutb Shahi Sultanate, and the Nayaka kingdoms, rulers played an important role in supporting poets, scholars, and literary traditions. Royal patronage provided poets with financial assistance, social recognition, land grants, and opportunities to compose literary works. It also encouraged the development of Telugu as a language of classical poetry, religious expression, political communication, and cultural identity. This paper examines the relationship between kings and Telugu poets across different historical periods, focusing on notable rulers such as Rajaraja Narendra, the Kakatiya rulers, the Reddi kings, Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara, and the Qutb Shahi sultans. It discusses the contributions of poets including Nannaya, Tikkana, Errana, Srinatha, Pothana, Allasani Peddana, Nandi Timmana, and Dhurjati. The study also considers the political purposes of literary patronage, the influence of religious institutions, and the continuation of Telugu literary traditions under regional rulers. It argues that royal patronage was a major factor in the historical development of Telugu literature, although poets, religious communities, and literary traditions also played independent roles in shaping its evolution.*
Keywords: *Telugu literature, royal patronage, Telugu poets, Eastern Chalukyas, Kakatiyas, Vijayanagara Empire, Krishnadevaraya, Qutb Shahi dynasty, literary history*.

Introduction

Telugu literature has a long and distinguished history in the cultural landscape of South India. Its development was influenced by linguistic change, religious movements, political transformations, literary innovation, and the support of ruling dynasties. Among these influences, royal patronage occupied a significant position because kings and regional chiefs provided resources and recognition that enabled poets and scholars to produce literary works.

In premodern South India, royal courts functioned as important centres of literary production. Kings supported poets through gifts, land grants, positions at court, and other forms of material assistance. In return, literary works frequently celebrated royal achievements, established dynastic genealogies, expressed religious ideals, and communicated political legitimacy. However, the relationship between rulers and poets was not simply one of financial dependence. Poets could also influence the cultural reputation of rulers and contribute to the formation of regional literary identities.

The history of Telugu literary patronage can be traced through several important political formations. The Eastern Chalukya period witnessed the emergence of Telugu as a major language of classical literary composition. The Kakatiya and Reddi periods contributed to the expansion of epic, devotional, and courtly traditions. Under the Vijayanagara Empire, particularly during the reign of Krishnadevaraya (1509–1529), Telugu poetry received extensive royal attention. Later, the Qutb Shahi sultans and the Nayaka rulers of southern India continued to support Telugu writers and helped preserve and extend the language's literary traditions. Scholarly studies of classical Telugu poetry demonstrate that courtly patronage and the cultural authority of poets were closely interconnected throughout these periods.

This paper investigates the historical relationship between kings and Telugu poets, the forms of patronage they provided, and the influence of that patronage on the growth of Telugu literature.

Objectives of the Study

The principal objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the historical development of royal patronage in Telugu literature.
2. To identify important rulers who supported Telugu poets and literary scholars.
3. To analyse the contributions of prominent poets associated with royal courts.
4. To understand the relationship between literature, religion, politics, and cultural identity.
5. To assess the long-term significance of royal patronage in preserving and developing Telugu literary traditions.

Research Methodology

This paper follows a historical and descriptive research methodology. It draws upon published scholarly studies of Telugu literary history, academic research on classical Telugu poetry, and historical accounts of South Indian dynasties. Literary works and traditions associated with particular rulers are examined to understand the relationship between political power and literary production.

The study uses a chronological approach, beginning with the Eastern Chalukyas and proceeding through the Kakatiyas, Reddi rulers, Vijayanagara Empire, Qutb Shahi Sultanate, and Nayaka kingdoms. It distinguishes historically documented relationships between rulers and poets from later literary traditions and legends. This distinction is particularly important when discussing famous courtly groups such as the Ashtadiggajas of Krishnadevaraya's court.

Early Foundations: The Eastern Chalukyas and Nannaya

The Eastern Chalukya dynasty played a foundational role in the history of classical Telugu literature. During the eleventh century, the Telugu-speaking regions of the eastern Deccan witnessed the growing use of Telugu for sophisticated literary composition.

One of the most significant figures of this period was Nannaya Bhattaraka, traditionally regarded as the *Adi Kavi*, or first poet, of Telugu literary history. Nannaya was associated with the court of the Eastern Chalukya ruler Rajaraja Narendra, who ruled approximately from 1018 to 1061 CE. According to the literary tradition, the king encouraged Nannaya to render the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* into Telugu.

Nannaya's *Andhra Mahabharatamu* was a landmark in the development of Telugu literature. His composition combined the narrative resources of the Sanskrit epic with the expressive possibilities of Telugu. His highly structured prose and verse helped establish literary conventions that influenced later generations of writers. The surviving work covers the opening portion of the epic, including the *Adi*, *Sabha*, and part of the *Aranya* Parvas.

The association between Nannaya and Rajaraja Narendra demonstrates the importance of royal encouragement in the emergence of Telugu as a prestigious literary language. The translation of a major Sanskrit epic into Telugu also carried cultural and political significance: it connected regional linguistic expression with an influential pan-Indian literary tradition.

Nevertheless, the importance of Nannaya cannot be reduced to the wishes of his patron. His literary achievement helped establish the cultural reputation of both Telugu poetry and the court that supported it. Thus, patronage operated in both directions: the king provided a setting for literary production, while the poet contributed to the enduring cultural memory of the ruler and his kingdom

The Kakatiya Dynasty and the Expansion of Telugu Literature

The Kakatiya dynasty, which established its power in the Telugu-speaking regions of the Deccan, was associated with the growth of literary, religious, and artistic activity. Its rulers and subordinate chiefs supported scholars and writers in Telugu and Sanskrit, while temples and other religious institutions provided additional settings for literary production.

Tikkana and the Telugu Mahabharata

Tikkana Somayaji was one of the most influential poets in the continuation of the Telugu *Mahabharata*. He lived in the thirteenth century and was associated with Manumasiddhi, the ruler of Nellore. Manumasiddhi's political connections extended into the wider network of Kakatiya power.

Tikkana translated most of the remaining books of the *Mahabharata*, beginning with the *Virata Parva*, continuing the work initiated by Nannaya. His contribution helped transform the epic into one of the central works of Telugu literary culture.

Tikkana's literary career illustrates that Telugu poets did not depend exclusively on the most powerful imperial courts. Regional rulers also provided opportunities for literary activity. Such relationships enabled smaller kingdoms to participate in broader cultural developments while establishing their own political and intellectual identities.

Palkuriki Somanatha and Religious Literature

Palkuriki Somanatha was an important Telugu religious poet whose works include *Basava Puranamu* and *Panditaradhya Charitramu*. His writing contributed to the spread of Virashaiva religious ideas and demonstrated the importance of accessible Telugu expression in religious communication.

The growth of devotional and religious literature indicates that the literary history of the Kakatiya period extended beyond the direct celebration of kings. Religious communities, teachers, temples, and local patrons also contributed to literary production.

Literary Patronage and Political Culture

The Kakatiya period demonstrates how literary patronage formed part of a wider cultural system involving royal courts, subordinate chiefs, religious institutions, and learned communities. Courtly literature could celebrate political authority, while devotional literature addressed religious beliefs and ethical questions.

Consequently, the development of Telugu literature during this period should be understood as the result of several interconnected forms of support rather than the activity of a single royal institution.

The Reddi Kingdoms and Srinatha

The Reddi kingdoms, which emerged in the Telugu-speaking regions during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, made important contributions to the continuation of Telugu literary traditions. Regional political centres became spaces in which poets could obtain recognition, compose literary works, and participate in intellectual life.

Srinatha: A Celebrated Court Poet

Srinatha was one of the most prominent Telugu poets of the fifteenth century. He was known for his mastery of poetic composition, rhetorical skill, and ability to adapt classical literary forms to Telugu. His works include *Sringara Naishadhamu*, *Haravilasamu*, and *Bhimeswara Puranamu*.

Srinatha was associated with several rulers and regional courts, and his literary career illustrates the mobility of poets in medieval South India. Poets could move between courts in search of support, recognition, and opportunities to present their works. Patronage was therefore not always a permanent relationship between one ruler and one poet.

The traditions surrounding Srinatha describe the honours and material rewards that prominent poets could receive from kings and chiefs. Although individual anecdotes require careful historical evaluation, they reveal the importance attached to literary accomplishment and the prestige associated with maintaining a distinguished poet at court.

The Significance of Regional Patronage

The Reddi period demonstrates that the development of Telugu literature was not confined to large imperial capitals. Regional rulers helped maintain literary activity during periods of political

competition and change. Their support enabled poets to compose works that combined classical literary conventions, religious themes, and regional cultural concerns.

The relationship between rulers and poets also contributed to the circulation of literary styles across different parts of the Telugu-speaking world. Through courtly gatherings, literary dedications, and the transmission of manuscripts, works could influence writers beyond the political boundaries of their original patrons.

Pothana and the Relationship Between Royal Power and Devotion

Pothana, commonly known as Bammera Pothana, occupies an important position in the history of Telugu devotional literature. He is celebrated for his Telugu rendering of the *Bhagavata Purana*, known as *Andhra Mahabhagavatamu*.

Unlike poets whose literary identities are primarily associated with royal courts, Pothana is remembered particularly for his devotional commitment to Lord Rama. A popular Telugu literary tradition holds that he declined to dedicate his *Bhagavatamu* to a king and instead offered it to the deity. This story has become central to his image as a poet whose religious convictions took precedence over worldly recognition.

The historical details surrounding this tradition must be treated cautiously. Nevertheless, the story raises an important question about the relationship between literary patronage and artistic independence. Royal support could provide poets with material security, but devotional traditions also offered alternative sources of authority and motivation.

Pothana's poetry demonstrates that Telugu literary development cannot be explained exclusively through royal sponsorship. Religious belief, temple culture, oral transmission, and the participation of wider communities also helped preserve and popularise literary works.

His *Andhra Mahabhagavatamu* became an influential work of Telugu devotional literature. Its enduring popularity shows that a literary work could acquire a cultural life extending far beyond the circumstances in which it was composed.

The Vijayanagara Empire: A Major Centre of Telugu Literary Patronage

The Vijayanagara Empire, founded in 1336, became one of the most important political and cultural powers in southern India. Its rulers supported literature, architecture, music, religious institutions, and other artistic traditions. The empire's extensive political networks brought poets and scholars into contact with different linguistic and cultural communities.

The reign of Krishnadevaraya, from 1509 to 1529, is particularly significant in the history of Telugu literature. His court became a major centre of literary production, and Telugu acquired considerable prominence in royal cultural life. Scholarly research identifies this period as an important stage in the development of classical Telugu *kavya*, or courtly poetry.

Krishnadevaraya as a King and Poet

Krishnadevaraya was not merely a patron of literature; he was also a literary author. His Telugu work *Amuktamalyada* narrates the story of Andal, the Tamil Vaishnava saint, and explores themes of devotion, kingship, ethics, and religious culture.

The composition of *Amuktamalyada* demonstrates that literary patronage and literary authorship could coexist within the same ruler. Krishnadevaraya's engagement with Telugu helped establish the language as a significant medium for sophisticated courtly expression.

His literary activities must also be understood within the wider cultural environment of Vijayanagara. The empire supported works in multiple languages, including Sanskrit, Kannada, and Tamil. Telugu's prominence at the royal court did not mean that other literary traditions were excluded; rather, the court participated in a multilingual cultural world.

Allasani Peddana

Allasani Peddana is widely regarded as one of the major poets associated with Krishnadevaraya's court. His celebrated work, *Manucharitramu*, is an important example of classical Telugu narrative poetry.

Peddana's writing displays sophisticated narrative construction, elaborate descriptions, and an effective combination of literary conventions derived from Sanskrit and Telugu traditions. His work helped establish the prestige of the Telugu *prabandha*, a form of extended narrative poetry.

Literary tradition associates Peddana with exceptional royal honours. Historical and literary accounts describe the king's recognition of his talent, including the grant of a village. Such accounts illustrate how patronage could involve not only financial rewards but also public distinction and social status.

Peddana's literary reputation also strengthened the cultural image of Krishnadevaraya. The relationship between the two exemplifies a recurring pattern in South Indian history: the king supported the poet, while the poet's work contributed to the lasting fame of the court.

Nandi Timmana

Nandi Timmana was another important poet associated with Krishnadevaraya. His work *Parijatapaharanamu* narrates the episode of Krishna bringing the celestial parijata tree to earth.

The work combines mythology, romantic elements, and poetic craftsmanship. Its dedication to Krishnadevaraya provides evidence of the relationship between the poet and the royal court.

The historical association between Timmana and the king is better established than some of the elaborate anecdotes later attached to the literary traditions of Vijayanagara. His career demonstrates the role of courtly dedication in connecting literary composition with royal prestige.

The Ashtadiggajas Tradition

The Ashtadiggajas, conventionally described as the eight great poets of Krishnadevaraya's court, occupy a prominent place in Telugu literary memory. The traditionally cited names are:

1. Allasani Peddana
2. Nandi Timmana
3. Dhurjati
4. Madayyagari Mallana
5. Ayyalaraju Ramabhadrudu
6. Pingali Surana
7. Ramarajabhushana
8. Tenali Ramakrishna

These poets are remembered for their contributions to narrative poetry, devotional composition, literary experimentation, and courtly culture. Their works helped establish Telugu as a language capable of expressing complex narratives and sophisticated poetic ideas.

However, historians must distinguish the cultural significance of the Ashtadiggajas tradition from the claim that all eight poets formed a precisely documented group working together at the same time. Modern scholarship suggests that the familiar collective image may have been shaped by later literary traditions. The individual careers of the poets and their works therefore provide a more reliable foundation for historical analysis than every anecdote associated with the group.

The Wider Effects of Vijayanagara Patronage

The influence of Vijayanagara literary culture extended beyond the lifetime of Krishnadevaraya. Telugu poets and scholars travelled to other courts, while the literary conventions developed under imperial patronage influenced subsequent generations.

After the political fragmentation of the Vijayanagara Empire, Telugu literary production continued under regional rulers, including the Nayakas of Madurai and Thanjavur. These courts supported poets, performers, and scholars, contributing to the development of what historians often describe as the southern school of Telugu literature.

Telugu Literary Patronage under the Qutb Shahi Sultans

The Qutb Shahi dynasty of Golconda, which ruled from the early sixteenth century until the late seventeenth century, formed another important part of the history of Telugu literary patronage. The dynasty governed a culturally diverse region in which Persian, Dakhni, Telugu, and other linguistic traditions interacted.

Although Persian held an important position in courtly administration and literary culture, Telugu continued to receive support from certain rulers and members of the political elite. This demonstrates that literary patronage was not restricted to rulers belonging to Telugu-speaking Hindu dynasties.

Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah

Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah, who ruled from 1550 to 1580, is associated with an important period in the development of Telugu literary activity in the Golconda kingdom. Historical accounts describe his interest in Telugu and his patronage of Telugu writers, including figures associated with the regional literary tradition.

His reign illustrates the interaction between political authority and linguistic culture in the Deccan. Patronage of Telugu literature could serve as a means of strengthening relationships with Telugu-speaking subjects and regional elites.

Such support should not be interpreted as evidence that Persian or other languages lost their importance. Rather, it reflects the multilingual character of the Qutb Shahi state and the coexistence of different literary traditions within its political boundaries.

The Cultural Significance of Golconda

Golconda and Hyderabad developed as important centres of political and cultural activity. Telugu literary production continued alongside Persianate and Dakhni traditions, creating opportunities for interaction among writers, scholars, and court officials.

The Qutb Shahi example broadens the historical understanding of royal patronage. It shows that the development of Telugu literature was shaped by a range of political institutions and that the language's literary significance could cross religious and dynastic boundaries.

The Nayaka Courts of Madurai and Thanjavur

Following the weakening and fragmentation of Vijayanagara power, regional Nayaka rulers emerged as important patrons of the arts in southern India. The courts of Madurai and Thanjavur supported literary composition, music, dance, drama, and other cultural activities.

Telugu-speaking scholars, poets, performers, and administrators travelled to these centres, particularly during periods of political instability in the Telugu-speaking regions. Their migration contributed to the spread of Telugu literary traditions beyond the geographical boundaries of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Literary Patronage and Migration

The movement of Telugu intellectuals to southern courts demonstrates that literary culture could survive political change through migration. Rulers who welcomed poets and scholars helped establish new centres of Telugu literary production.

Patronage could include financial rewards, appointments, grants of land, and opportunities to dedicate literary works to the ruling family. These arrangements encouraged writers to produce courtly narratives, religious poetry, historical compositions, and literary works based on established classical traditions.

Historical and Literary Composition

Telugu works produced under the Nayaka rulers frequently included accounts of royal genealogies, political achievements, military campaigns, and religious affiliations. Such works are valuable sources for historians, although their descriptions of kings and their accomplishments often contain conventional praise and exaggeration.

A critical historical reading therefore requires comparison with inscriptions, administrative records, and other independent evidence. Despite these limitations, the literary works of the Nayaka period demonstrate the continued importance of Telugu as a language of political representation and cultural expression.

Forms and Functions of Royal Patronage

The historical examples discussed above reveal that royal patronage operated through several interconnected mechanisms. Understanding these mechanisms helps explain how rulers influenced literary production and how poets contributed to political and cultural life.

Financial Assistance and Material Rewards

Kings and regional chiefs provided poets with money, valuable gifts, land grants, and other forms of material support. These resources enabled writers to devote time to literary composition and scholarly activity.

Land grants could also establish long-term relationships between poets and their patrons. In certain cases, poets received rights or privileges that enhanced their economic position and social standing. However, the precise form of support varied according to the ruler, the period, and the individual poet.

Court Positions and Social Recognition

Appointment to a royal court could bring poets prestige, access to influential individuals, and opportunities to present their works before educated audiences. Literary recognition was often expressed through honorific titles, ceremonial honours, and the public celebration of poetic achievements.

Such recognition could increase a poet's reputation beyond the immediate court and encourage the circulation of literary works among other rulers and scholars.

Religious and Cultural Support

Rulers frequently supported temples, monasteries, religious scholars, and educational institutions. These institutions provided environments in which literary works could be composed, recited, preserved, and transmitted.

Religious patronage was particularly important for the development of devotional literature. Telugu works devoted to Shiva, Vishnu, and other religious figures became influential in regional cultural life. Their circulation was supported not only by royal institutions but also by temple communities and religious networks.

Political Legitimacy and Dynastic Memory

Court poets often composed works that praised kings, described military achievements, celebrated dynastic genealogies, and connected rulers with religious or moral ideals.

Such compositions helped rulers communicate their political authority and preserve their reputations. At the same time, they provided historians with valuable evidence about the political culture and ideals of the periods in which they were produced.

Literary praise, however, should not automatically be treated as an objective record of historical events. Poetic conventions frequently encouraged exaggeration, idealisation, and selective representation.

Literary Innovation

Royal courts brought poets into contact with other writers, scholars, and intellectual traditions. These interactions encouraged experimentation with poetic forms, narrative structures, metres, and literary themes.

The development of Telugu *prabandha* literature during the Vijayanagara period illustrates how courtly environments could support complex literary experimentation. Patronage thus contributed not only to the quantity of literary production but also to the evolution of literary styles.

Comparative Overview of Major Rulers and Poets

Dynasty or kingdom	Important ruler or patron	Associated poet or writers	Major literary contribution
Eastern Chalukyas	Rajaraja Narendra	Nannaya	Beginning of the classical Telugu *Mahabharata*
Kakatiya-era political networks	Manumasiddhi	Tikkana	Continuation of the Telugu *Mahabharata*
Regional Deccan courts	Various regional patrons	Srinatha	Development of classical narrative and courtly poetry
Devotional literary traditions	Religious and regional patrons	Pothana	Telugu *Bhagavatamu*
Vijayanagara Empire	Krishnadevaraya	Allasani Peddana	*Manucharitramu*
Vijayanagara Empire	Krishnadevaraya	Nandi Timmana	*Parijatapaharanamu*
Vijayanagara Empire	Krishnadevaraya's courtly tradition	Dhurjati and other major poets	Devotional and narrative poetry
Qutb Shahi Sultanate	Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah	Telugu writers associated with Golconda	Continued Telugu literary activity in a multilingual court
Nayaka kingdoms	Rulers of Madurai and Thanjavur	Numerous Telugu poets	Courtly, historical, devotional, and dramatic literature

The Limitations and Complexities of Royal Patronage

Although royal patronage played an important role in the development of Telugu literature, its influence should not be overstated.

First, literary activity was not limited to royal courts. Religious institutions, local chiefs, scholars, and communities also supported writers and helped transmit their works.

Second, the relationship between a poet and a ruler was not always permanent or uncomplicated. Poets could move between courts, pursue religious interests, or establish reputations that exceeded the influence of their original patrons.

Third, royal patronage could influence the themes and forms of literary production. Court poets were often expected to praise their patrons, present dynastic histories favourably, or connect political authority with religious ideals. Such expectations created opportunities for literary achievement but could also shape what was written and preserved.

Finally, the historical record is uneven. Some rulers and poets are documented through inscriptions and identifiable literary works, while other relationships are known primarily through later biographies, anecdotes, or oral traditions. The Ashtadiggajas tradition, for example, remains culturally significant even though its familiar collective form requires careful historical qualification.

These limitations do not diminish the importance of patronage. Instead, they demonstrate that Telugu literary history developed through the interaction of political institutions, individual creativity, religious communities, and changing cultural circumstances.

The Legacy of Royal Patronage in Telugu Literature

The legacy of royal patronage remains visible in the continued importance of classical Telugu works. The *Andhra Mahabharatamu*, *Manucharitramu*, *Parijatapaharanamu*, and *Andhra Mahabhagavatamu* continue to occupy important positions in Telugu literary and cultural memory.

Royal courts helped create conditions in which poets could develop sophisticated literary forms and gain recognition. The circulation of their works contributed to the establishment of Telugu as a language capable of expressing epic narratives, religious philosophy, political thought, and refined poetic aesthetics.

The history of Telugu literature also reveals that political power and cultural achievement were mutually influential. Kings supported literary activity to strengthen their reputations and cultural authority, while poets helped preserve the memory of rulers and gave expression to the linguistic and religious identities of their communities.

The eventual transition from royal patronage to modern literary institutions, publishing, education, and organised literary societies changed the conditions under which Telugu literature was produced and circulated. Nevertheless, the classical works supported by earlier rulers continued to influence later writers and literary scholarship.

Conclusion

The history of kings and their patronage of Telugu poets demonstrate the close relationship between political authority and literary development in South India. From the Eastern Chalukyas to the Vijayanagara Empire, the Qutb Shahi Sultanate, and the Nayaka kingdoms, rulers and regional elites provided opportunities for poets to compose, preserve, and circulate literary works.

Rajaraja Narendra's association with Nannaya represents an important stage in the establishment of Telugu as a classical literary language. The literary activities of Tikkana and Srinatha illustrate the significance of regional courts and political networks. Pothana's devotional tradition demonstrates that religious conviction could provide an alternative source of literary authority. Krishnadevaraya's reign illustrates the considerable influence of royal patronage on the development of classical Telugu poetry, while the Qutb Shahi and Nayaka examples demonstrate the adaptability of Telugu literary culture across dynastic and geographical boundaries.

The contributions of these rulers and poets extended beyond the production of individual literary works. They helped establish literary conventions, preserve cultural traditions, strengthen the prestige of Telugu, and shape the historical memory of their societies.

At the same time, royal patronage was only one element in a broader cultural process. The creativity of individual poets, the support of religious institutions, the circulation of manuscripts, and the participation of literary communities were equally important to the long-term survival of Telugu literature.

In conclusion, the history of Telugu literary patronage is best understood as a relationship of mutual influence between rulers and writers. Kings provided resources and recognition, while poets transformed those opportunities into literary works that frequently outlived the political institutions responsible for their creation. Their combined legacy remains a significant part of the cultural and literary heritage of the Telugu-speaking people.

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