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**KAKATIYA POLITICAL CULTURE: WARRIOR NETWORKS AND SOVEREIGN
AUTHORITY IN MEDIEVAL TELANGANA (1175-1323)**

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Abstract

This paper examines the political culture of the Kakatiya dynasty (1163-1323 CE), which unified the Telugu-speaking region of Andhra for the first time under a single ruling house. Through analysis of inscriptional evidence and existing scholarship, the study addresses the question: How can we best characterize Kakatiya political culture, and what does it reveal about state formation in medieval South India? The findings challenge both feudal and segmentary state models, instead revealing a distinctive warrior-based network polity held together by personal ties of military service and loyalty. Four defining characteristics emerge: a militaristic ethos that prioritized martial values over ritual sovereignty; remarkable social inclusivity that drew warrior elites from diverse backgrounds including Shudras; regional integration achieved through military expansion, agrarian development, and cultural patronage; and network-based governance operating through layered personal loyalties rather than bureaucratic hierarchies. This patrimonial system facilitated rapid expansion and social mobility but remained vulnerable when subordinate loyalties fractured. The Kakatiya model represents a significant variant of premodern state formation that influenced subsequent Deccan polities including Vijayanagara.

Keywords: Kakatiya Dynasty, Political Culture, Medieval South India, Warrior Networks, Patrimonialism, State Formation, Andhra History, Feudalism, Segmentary State, Nayankara System.



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Introduction

The Kakatiya dynasty (1163-1323 CE) represents a transformative epoch in the history of the Telugu-speaking region, marking the first time much of Andhra was politically unified under a single ruling house. Emerging from humble origins as feudatory chiefs serving the Rashtrakutas and later the Western Chalukyas, the Kakatiyas crafted a distinctive political order that would shape regional identity for centuries to come. Their capital at Warangal (Orugallu) became the center of a expansive network that stretched across the Deccan, incorporating diverse ecological zones from the dry uplands of Telangana to the fertile coastal deltas.

Yet despite the dynasty's historical significance, scholars have long debated the fundamental nature of Kakatiya political culture. Was it a centralized bureaucratic state on the model of earlier imperial formations? A loosely integrated "*segmentary*" system held together primarily by ritual authority? Or something altogether different that defies conventional taxonomic categories? These questions are not merely academic exercises—they speak to larger theoretical debates about the nature of premodern state formation in South India and the mechanisms through which political authority was constructed, maintained, and contested.

This study addresses the following research question: How can we best characterize the political culture of the Kakatiya dynasty, and what do the mechanisms of Kakatiya rule reveal about state formation in medieval South India? By examining the relationships between the Kakatiya overlords and their diverse subordinates, the ideological frameworks that legitimated their authority, and the material practices through which power was exercised, this paper argues that Kakatiya political culture is best understood as a dynamic warrior-based network held together by personal ties of military service and loyalty—a patrimonial system that was simultaneously socially inclusive, militaristic, and regionally integrative.

Literature Review

The scholarly interpretations of Kakatiya political culture have indeed undergone considerable transformation in the last fifty years, influenced by evolving perspectives in the study of medieval South Indian history. The discourse around Kakatiya polity is primarily shaped by three dominant models, each reflecting different analytical frameworks and historiographical concerns.

The Feudal Model

The early historiography of the Kakatiya period often framed the polity within the model of feudalism. Historians have long studied the Kakatiya era through



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the lens of “feudalism.” This is a very familiar narrative: a strict pyramid of power in which local lords pay soldiers in land, and a warrior class lounging on top of a struggling peasant class. Even the very detailed work of P.V. Parabrahma Sastry, which carefully charted the complex structure of the Kakatiya government, seemed to support this view, even if Sastry himself did not necessarily intend to apply the feudalism moniker.

However, the “stagnant” view of history is being increasingly discredited. The problem with applying the feudalism tag to the Kakatiyas is that it is a huge simplification that completely misses what was going on. Real feudalism always implies a complete stagnation of society—imagine economic collapse and oppressed farmers. The Kakatiya period was the complete reverse. This was a period of huge agricultural growth, a thriving urban culture, and surprisingly high social mobility. A dynamic, rapidly changing society that simply does not fit into a neat feudal framework.

The Segmentary State Model

Though Burton Stein’s “segmentary state” is still an enormous force in South Indian history, its usage is not absolute. Stein’s main point, based almost entirely on the Chola experience, is that politics was more about religious spectacle than actual political power. Here, the nadu (the local segments) administered themselves, and the king contributed a kind of “ritual glue” to keep the map intact.

However, Cynthia Talbot finds this particular model of politics to be a very weak fit for the Kakatiyas. She points out that Stein effectively relegated the Telangana area to secondary status, designating it a kind of “shatter region” on the periphery of politics rather than a central participant. By examining the particular details of the Kakatiya domain, Talbot shows the opposite: their politics was actually highly integrated. They were more than a decentralized network of local chieftains; they were a highly functional state that disproved the “segmentary” model of politics in the South.

The Integrative and Patrimonial Models

The historiographical trajectory of medieval South Asian state formation has undergone a significant revisionist turn, increasingly distancing itself from static, institutionalist paradigms in favor of processual and dynamic frameworks. At the heart of this transformation is the “integrative polity” paradigm developed by Hermann Kulke, which seeks to reimagine the state not as a static administrative entity, but as an ongoing process of incorporation. By integrating local cults and



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regional lineages into an ever-expanding ritual and political geography, Kulke has shown that the medieval state was in fact a dynamic system of assimilation rather than a predetermined administrative framework.

This theoretical paradigm is most fully realized in the work of Cynthia Talbot, who applies her framework to a comprehensive prosopographic study of some 450 Kakatiya-period inscriptions. By dismantling the territorial assumptions of the past, Talbot has shown that the Kakatiya domain was in fact a “fluctuating political network,” with a sophisticated system of power that combined horizontal connections to integrate geographically separate localities with vertical connections to ground the central polity in the granular socio-political life of villages and towns.

Crucially, Talbot’s results fill a gap between epigraphic research and sociological theory by linking the Kakatiya data to Max Weber’s patrimonial system. Under this system, the state is essentially personalized, with power mediated not through legal-rational systems but through a class of dependent functionaries whose legitimacy was necessarily dependent on their direct personal tie to the ruler. Ultimately, this reading highlights the necessarily contingent nature of Kakatiya politics, where the “state” was clearly a process of negotiating personal loyalties rather than a fixed territorial space.. This study builds upon Talbot’s insights while extending her analysis to consider how the Kakatiya network model illuminates broader patterns of state formation in medieval India.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative historical analysis of primary and secondary sources relating to the Kakatiya dynasty. The primary source base consists of inscriptions—the dominant form of historical evidence for pre-1500 Andhra. As Talbot notes, “inscriptions are virtually the only sources we have from Andhra before 1500 that allow us to reconstruct some of the actual workings of the political system”.

The Kakatiya period is notable for its extensive inscriptional record, with roughly 1,000 stone inscriptions and 12 copper-plate inscriptions surviving, particularly concentrated between 1175 and 1324 CE. These inscriptions primarily document religious endowments, including temple donations, construction of irrigation tanks, and grants to religious figures. Beyond their religious content, they provide rich incidental insights into political relationships, social identities, and ideological frameworks of the time. Three types of inscriptional evidence are especially valuable for understanding Kakatiya political culture:



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- 1) **Sovereignty Acknowledgments:** Many inscriptions explicitly name the Kakatiyas as the ruling dynasty, often using a formulaic phrase such as “while the Mahamandaleshvara Kakatiya X Maharaja was ruling the earth enjoying friendly interchanges.” Given that Andhra inscriptions did not employ regnal dating systems, these voluntary acknowledgments serve as significant indicators of political allegiance and affiliation.
- 2) **Donor Identities:** Donor names frequently include titles and familial or political relationships that link individuals to the Kakatiya political network, providing evidence of the social composition and reach of the polity.
- 3) **Merit Transfers:** Donors often assign the spiritual merit accrued from their gifts to Kakatiya overlords, suggesting that religious patronage also served political objectives by reinforcing loyalty and authority.

In addition to inscriptions, secondary sources such as modern scholarly works by Cynthia Talbot, P.V.P. Sastry, and others contribute to the understanding of Kakatiya political culture. Literary texts from the Kakatiya and post-Kakatiya periods—like *Prataparudriyam*, *Krida-bhiramamu*, and various chronicles—also offer valuable historical and cultural context. This study adopts a thematic analytical approach, organizing evidence around key dimensions of political culture: the structure of the ruling elite, ideological frameworks, mechanisms of integration, and relationships between central and local authority.

Findings

Analysis of inscriptional and literary evidence reveals several distinctive features of Kakatiya political culture.

A) The Structure of the Political Elite

The Kakatiya political elite underwent a significant transformation over the dynasty’s history. The internal evolution of the Kakatiya state was marked by a decisive structural pivot: the systemic displacement of entrenched hereditary elites in favor of a more contingent, meritocratic military aristocracy. While the dynasty’s formative phase relied upon the co-optation of regional chieftains and local dynasts, the mature Kakatiya polity increasingly bypassed these traditional lineages. In their stead, a “more humble class of warrior officers” emerged, signaling a deliberate administrative strategy to insulate the central authority from the centrifugal pressures of the established nobility.

This nascent elite—defined by titles such as *nayaka*, *lenka*, and *banṭu*—functioned as the primary scaffolding for the Kakatiya administrative and



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military apparatus. The term *banṭu* is particularly illuminating in this context; etymologically rooted in a "personal oath of allegiance," it underscores a shift toward a volitional and highly personalized bond between the sovereign and the subaltern. This was not merely a feudal obligation of birth, but a contractual and ritualized loyalty that redefined the parameters of political belonging.

Perhaps the most radical departure from the contemporary North Indian kshatriya-centric paradigm was the socio-political fluidity inherent in this warrior class. The Kakatiya inscriptions reveal a remarkably porous elite structure where *nayaka* status was decoupled from varna restrictions, allowing for a heterodox social composition. This inclusivity was not a peripheral phenomenon but was mirrored at the highest levels of the state. The Kakatiya rulers themselves frequently asserted a Shudra identity, reinforcing these claims through strategic marital alliances with other Shudra lineages. Such evidence complicates traditional caste-based models of medieval Indian statecraft, suggesting instead a polity where political legitimacy was negotiated through martial merit and personal fealty rather than primordial status.

B) Ideological Foundations: Martial Prowess and Personal Loyalty

The ideological framework of Kakatiya political culture diverges significantly from models that emphasize ritual sovereignty and Brahmanical legitimation. The ideological landscape of the Kakatiya period is perhaps most vividly articulated through the ubiquitous deployment of martial *birudas* (titles) and *prasastis* (eulogies). A systematic interrogation of these epigraphic records reveals a decisive departure from traditional orthogenetic markers of legitimacy—such as ritual purity or primordial genealogical prestige—in favor of a discourse centered on militarized heroism. Epithets like *calamarti-gaṇḍa* ("the hero who is the abode of prowess") and *jagadāla* ("ruler of the world") are not merely honorific flourishes; they signify a conceptual shift where political authority was predicated on demonstrated valor and the physical reality of the battlefield.

This martial ethos served as the structural scaffolding for the Kakatiya political order. As Cynthia Talbot cogently argues, the centrality of military service in these records directly challenges the prevailing historiographical emphasis on "ritual sovereignty." By de-emphasizing the role of royal religious patronage as the primary constitutive element of the state, Talbot's analysis suggests that power was synthesized through a more secularized and



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transactional medium: the bond of personal loyalty forged in the crucible of military conflict. Consequently, while the ritual sphere remained a significant site of cultural expression, the functional architecture of the Kakatiya polity was essentially built upon a relational network of martial prowess and military dependency. That said, religious patronage was certainly present and significant. The Kakatiyas built and endowed numerous temples—most notably the Thousand Pillar Temple at Hanumakonda and the Svayambhudeva temple at Warangal. However, rather than serving primarily as instruments of ritual legitimation, these temples functioned as centers for redistribution and network-building within the polity. They helped reinforce political and social ties, complementing but not supplanting the martial foundations of Kakatiya authority.

C) Mechanisms of Integration: The Nayamkara System

The Kakatiyas developed institutional mechanisms to integrate their far-flung territories and diverse subordinate elites. The most significant of these was the Nayamkara system, a form of military assignment that appears to have been an early precursor to the better-known nayankara system of the Vijayanagara Empire.

Under this system, the ruler assigned fiefs (manyam or nayamkara) to warriors in lieu of salaries, and the recipients were obliged to maintain specified contingents of soldiers, horses, and elephants for royal service. This system accomplished multiple objectives simultaneously: it provided for military mobilization without requiring a large standing army funded by cash revenues; it integrated local warrior elites into the broader political network through ties of obligation and reward; and it extended royal authority into localities through loyal partisans rather than hereditary local lords. The Kakatiyas also maintained a standing army under commanders directly responsible to the ruler, suggesting a dual structure combining direct royal forces with contingent forces provided by subordinate nayakas. Forts played a crucial role in this military system, with inscriptions referring to multiple types of fortifications: hill forts (giridurga), water forts (jaladurga), and land forts (sthaladurga).

D) Social Mobility and Regional Integration

The Kakatiya political system generated remarkable opportunities for social mobility. The recruitment of peasants into military service created “a new warrior class” and facilitated “social mobility” on a significant scale. This



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process simultaneously extended the dynasty's influence "into areas of its kingdom that previously would have been untouched". The expansion of agrarian society accompanied and enabled this political integration. The Kakatiya period witnessed extensive construction of irrigation tanks—around 5,000 such reservoirs were built by warrior families subordinate to the Kakatiyas—which "dramatically altered the possibilities for development in the sparsely populated dry areas". This agrarian expansion provided the material foundation for the new warrior class and integrated previously marginal areas into the political and economic networks of the kingdom.

Perhaps most significantly, the Kakatiya period saw the emergence of a unified Telugu cultural identity. The dynasty's expansion brought together "the distinct upland and lowland cultures of Telugu lands," producing "a feeling of cultural affinity between those who spoke the Telugu language" where none had previously existed. This cultural unification was the dynasty's "most significant political achievement, achieved through a process of binding many locally powerful figures in allegiance to the empire".

E) The Limits of Kakatiya Power

Despite these integrative achievements, Kakatiya political culture retained important limitations. The network-based structure of Kakatiya authority meant that the ruler's power was exercised indirectly through multiple layers of subordinates. As one analysis observes, "the subordinates were allowed to have their freedom in all respects except military matters. The only concern for the king was to check their overgrowth in power." This arrangement inherently produced tensions within the polity.

In the later Kakatiya period, these tensions manifested in significant challenges posed by powerful subordinates, such as the Kayastha chief Ambadeva, who notably defeated and killed Queen Rudramadevi. Such episodes reveal the underlying vulnerability of a political system heavily reliant on personal loyalties and networks rather than on institutionalized, centralized bureaucratic control. Ultimately, the dynasty's downfall was caused by external conquest rather than internal disintegration. The Delhi Sultanate's successful subjugation of Warangal in 1323—following a failed attempt in 1303—



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highlighted the limitations of Kakatiya military strength when faced with a more centralized and resourceful adversary. This conquest marked the end of Kakatiya rule and underscored the challenges of maintaining a decentralized, loyalty-based polity in the face of emerging imperial powers.

Conclusion

The political culture of the Kakatiya dynasty represents a distinctive and significant variant of premodern state formation in South India. Neither a centralized bureaucratic empire nor a loosely integrated segmentary state, the Kakatiya polity is best understood as a dynamic warrior network held together by personal ties of military service and loyalty. The Four key characteristics define this system are: A) Militaristic ethos, B) Social inclusivity, C) Regional integration, D) Network structures.

The Kakatiya model of political culture provides important comparative insights into state formation in medieval India. It demonstrates that patrimonial network states—characterized by personal loyalties, martial values, and social inclusiveness—offered a viable and dynamic alternative to both highly centralized bureaucratic states and segmentary ritual polities. The later adoption of similar structures by the Vijayanagara Empire, notably the *nayankara* system, indicates that the Kakatiya model significantly influenced subsequent political formations and helped shape enduring patterns of warrior-based state organization in the Deccan region. Future research could beneficially investigate several areas to deepen understanding of this legacy: the persistence and transformation of Kakatiya political institutions in successor states; the connections and contrasts between Kakatiya political culture and earlier Chalukya models; and comparative studies with contemporaneous polities such as the Hoysalas and Yadavas. These lines of inquiry would enrich our appreciation of the distinctive contributions of the Kakatiya political experiment within the broader historical and political landscape of medieval India.

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