INTRODUCTION

> There is properly no history; only biography.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841)

In early January 1996, a fierce blizzard had just blanketed Washington DC in snow. Icy winds howled outside the narrow, Gothic windows that encircled my tiny study, perched high up in one of the fairytale towers of the Smithsonian Castle. While I tried to stay warm in that dilapidated but charming relic of the nineteenth century, my mind was a world away. I was pondering "the social history of the Deccan" on a cold day, part of a year spent as a fellow with the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars.

I first had to resolve some knotty conceptual problems, one of which was geographic in nature. Most historians of India write about, or simply presume, coherent core regions – that is, areas characterized by stable, long-term political and cultural institutions. Like magnets, nucleated political cores attract armies, scholars, foreign visitors, long-distance merchants, and crucially, court chroniclers. Ultimately, owing to the considerable data left behind by such groups, these regions also attract modern historians. This might explain why core areas like north India, Bengal, or the Tamil south are comparatively well covered in the historical literature.[1]

But the Deccan is a relatively understudied region, partly because it has no enduring political or cultural center. To be sure, one finds sporadic periods of imperial rule from capital cities like Kalyana under the Chalukyas, Bidar under the Bahmanis, or Vijayanagara under its first three dynasties. But in history's larger sweep, this dry and mainly undifferentiated upland plateau never possessed a single, perennial political core, no lasting hub of imperial rule on the order of Delhi or the Kaveri delta.

[1] Such centers also have an internalized conception of themselves as lying at the heart of cultural and/or political space, indeed, as having created such space. One need only think of the many chroniclers who wrote their histories while, as it were, peering out from the ramparts of Delhi's Red Fort, or from any of the other great forts of the Mughal heartland.

Indeed, this begs the nettlesome question of just what defines the Deccan and where exactly it is located. North Indians popularly conceive it as lying vaguely to the south of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, while Tamils and Malayalis just as vaguely locate it to the north of their native regions. Geographers have given precise-sounding definitions by using indices like rainfall, vegetation, soil type, and the like, or by citing prominent natural features such as the Narmada River or the Sahyadri Mountains (i.e., Western Ghats).[2] Ultimately, though, I settled on the reasoning of one of India's foremost chroniclers, Muhammad Qasim Firishta (d. 1611), himself a longtime resident of Bijapur. Ignoring physical geography altogether, Firishta mapped the region in terms of its vernacular languages, using for this purpose the metaphor of kinship. One of the four sons of India ("Hind"), he wrote, was "Dakan," who in turn had three sons: "Marhat, Kanhar and Tiling" – that is, areas native to speakers of Marathi, Kannada, and Telugu. "Presently, these three communities (*qaum*) reside in the Deccan."[3] For Firishta, as indeed for twenty-first-century residents when queried on the matter, the Deccan comprises the territory today constituted by three linguistically defined states: Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh.

There still remained the question of how to write a social history of a region lacking an enduring geo-political center. For without such a center, the Deccan also lacks a unified and coherent master narrative of the sort often told for north India, with its neat sequence of Delhi-based empires. What, then, would hold together a social history of the Deccan?

The question followed me as I left my Castle tower one wintry day and walked across Washington's Mall to the National Gallery, where the paintings of the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer (d. 1675) were on special exhibit. As I joined the throngs of people who stood outside, shivering in the cold and waiting in what seemed an endless queue for admission, I wondered why Vermeer's art was attracting such avid interest. A solution suggested itself when, once inside the crowded galleries, I realized that most of the artist's work consisted of portraits of anonymous folk plucked from everyday life – a milk maid, a music teacher, a lace-maker, a student. It was not his several landscape paintings that drew most onlookers, but these finely crafted portraits with their distinctive

[2] On the problem of defining the geographical boundaries of the Deccan, see S. M. Alam, "The Historic Deccan – a Geographical Appraisal," in *Aspects of Deccan History*, ed. V. K. Bawa (Hyderabad, 1975), 16–31.

[3] *Dakan bin Hind-ra sih pisar ba vujud amada, mulk-i Dakan-ra ba ishan qismat numud. Va ism-i anha Marhat va Kanhar va Tiling bud. Va aknun ki in sih qaum dar Dakan maujud-and.* Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 2 vols. (Lucknow, 1864–65), 1:10.

play of light. In them, Vermeer seemed to have captured features and moods that, while true to the individuals he painted, were also instantly recognized as belonging to a shared, universal humanity. This, in turn, allowed viewers to identify with the artist's subjects in a direct and compelling way. It was as though, when examining his portraits, viewers were peering into mirrors, seeing themselves reflected in the fabric of other times, other people.

It also occurred to me that when he conceived and executed his portraits, Vermeer, though he wielded a brush and not a pen, was actually tapping into the power of biography. For, simply put, people are profoundly drawn to the personalities and life-stories of others, a truth known to any parent who has been asked repeatedly by a child, "read that story to me again." Wandering through the exhibit, I recalled how a student of mine once reacted to a text I much admire and had assigned – Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History*. Noting the absence of any life-narratives in the book, my student wickedly remarked that the book should have been entitled *Europe and the History without People*.

That indictment points to the very different histories of biographical writing in the popular and the academic worlds. In popular culture, fascination with life-narratives has never diminished. In one form or another the genre has endured across the planet and throughout time, impervious to the fickle fashions of the academic world. For India, one has only to think of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, Bollywood's blockbuster films, radio or television melodramas, or the standard fare available at bus, railway, or airport bookstalls. But in the academic world biography, though one of the oldest genres of history-writing, has had a more tortuous career. Just eighteen years after Emerson penned the dictum cited as the epigraph to this Introduction, Karl Marx signaled a virtual death sentence for the academic writing of biography. In 1859 he declared, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary it is their social existence that determines their consciousness."[4] Ushering in the advent of social history as a new and exciting subfield within the broader discipline of history, this manifesto encouraged many to explore the past not by tracing the lives of individual actors, but by studying vast socio-economic forces.[5] For more than a century, most social

[4] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1885; repr. Chicago, 1918), preface, 11–12.

[5] Focussed as it was on class analysis and modes of production, Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982) fits squarely within the tradition that had its roots in Marx. It is in no way a disparagement of Wolf's enormous achievement to observe that his insights might have been made more poignant, and accessible, had they been illustrated with life-stories.

historians would view biography with a degree of suspicion; even today, the genre is seldom found in doctoral dissertations submitted to departments of history.

But by the end of the twentieth century a new trend became visible. In the 1980s and '90s some scholars had begun to view biography not as a genre inherently antithetical to social history, but as a vehicle that could be recovered and mobilized for writing precisely such history.[6] Prompted by the truth of Emerson's dictum and the genius of Vermeer's art, I came to the same conclusion. Soon after returning from the Vermeer exhibit to my tower in the Castle, I resolved to write the present volume through the lives of several carefully chosen men and women.

There was yet another reason for embarking on this approach. By foregrounding the biographies of some of India's precolonial figures, one could also reclaim for history subject matter that, having been largely abandoned by professional historians, has been eagerly appropriated by politically motivated myth-makers. "One of the remarkable features of the recent spectacular burst of creativity among Indian writers," notes writer William Dalrymple,

> has been that few writers are drawn either to serious biography or narrative history. Though Indian historians produce many excellent specialist essays and numerous learned journals, it is impossible, for example, to buy an up-to-date biography of any of India's pre-colonial rulers.
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> Here perhaps lies one of the central causes of the current impasse. It is not just up to the politicians to improve the fairness and quality of India's history. Unless Indian historians learn to make their work intelligible and attractive to a wider audience, and especially to their own voraciously literate middle class, unhistorical myths will continue to flourish.[7]

There are, in short, compelling reasons why responsible historians should restore biography and narrative to their craft.

But how to do it? The aim in the present volume is to use the lives of vivid personalities as instruments to investigate and illuminate social processes fundamental to the history of the Deccan between the early fourteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. Such processes include, among others, colonization,

[6] See, for example, Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (Baltimore, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1983); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-century Lives* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York, 1994); Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (New York, 1996). For recent examples in South Asian history, see David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (New Delhi, 2004), and Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh Sharma, eds., *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives* (Mumbai, forthcoming).

[7] William Dalrymple, "India: the War over History," *New York Review of Books* 52, no. 6 (April 7, 2005), 65.

factional strife, élite mobility, slavery, inter-caste relations, and social banditry. It is not that the people whose lives I have chosen to highlight were the movers or the *causes* of such social processes. To argue in that manner would bring back the ghost of Great Man Theory, a kind of history-writing that one hopes is safely past. But individuals do embody microcosms of at least some, if not many, aspects of the social macrocosms in which they live. And since the individuals foregrounded in this volume lived through, and were thoroughly immersed in, particular historical processes, the aim has been to examine their lives with a view to elucidating those processes in a manner more tangible and accessible than is found in conventional social histories.

One should be clear, however, about the meaning of biography. Contemporary notions of the genre are shaped largely by positivist methodologies inherited from nineteenth-century Europe. The professional biographer of that era would have carefully assembled original sources – letters, memoirs, newspaper accounts, etc. – in an attempt to reconstruct a factual narrative of a person's life from birth to death. The product would be coherent, linear, tidy, and above all, "objective." Accounts of precolonial Indian figures, on the other hand, are in many cases not recorded or preserved by professional biographers, but live in the collective memory of communities. That is, they are socially constructed, meaning that a figure's life might be shaped to conform to a particular community's values or interests. When constructing a narrative of such a figure, then, one is to some extent also reconstructing the culture of the community that had preserved his or her memory.

Some might regard the recorded lives of precolonial Indians as hagiographies and not biographies, on the grounds that the lives of such figures have been, and continue to be, popularly mythologized, even sanctified.[8] But it would be wrong to neatly pigeon-hole the source material respecting the people discussed in this volume as belonging to either category to the complete exclusion of the other. It is perhaps best to view biography and hagiography as genres occupying opposite ends of a continuum. Plotting the eight persons highlighted in this volume along such a continuum, those discussed in chapters 1, 2, 6 and 7 – i.e., Pratapa Rudra, Gisu Daraz, Tukaram, and Papadu – would likely fall toward the hagiographical end, since much of what we know of their lives has been socially constructed. By contrast, those discussed in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 8 – i.e., Mahmud Gawan, Rama Raya, Malik Ambar, and Tarabai – would occupy

[8] For example, the very name of the popular comic series *Amar Chitra Katha* suggests that figures drawn from Indian history are in some sense immortal (*amar*), rather than finite characters firmly rooted in specific historical contexts.

points closer to the biographical end, inasmuch as much of what we know of their lives derives from sources independent of a community's collective memory. But they all would share at least some elements of each type.

The time period covered in the study is informed by one over-arching theme. As noted, the Deccan has no master narrative of its own. But it did have intense interaction with the peoples, cultures, and states of north India, which during our period became a sort of alter-ego for societies south of the Narmada River. Individuals, communities, and whole states defined their identity with respect to this colossus of the north, sometimes in opposition to it, sometimes in imitation of it. Indeed, the chronological limits of the study, 1300 and 1761, are defined by two profoundly important moments in the history of this interregional interaction: the ascendency of the Delhi Sultanate in Deccani affairs, and the defeat of the Marathas in the Third Battle of Panipat. Between these two moments there occurred a range of interactions between north India and the Deccan, but through it all, the preponderance of influence flowed from north to south, rather than the reverse. In fact, the careers of fully five of the eight figures in this study were defined by their relations with Delhi. Only that of Gisu Daraz served to connect Delhi with the Deccan in a creative way. The other four – Pratapa Rudra, Malik Ambar, Papadu, and Tarabai – all suffered invasions from the north, which for two of them proved disastrous.

Several considerations guided the selection of the figures whose careers are foregrounded in the volume. The first was that they represent as wide a spectrum of the total society as the source materials would permit: a maharaja, a Sufi shaikh, a long-distance merchant, a generalissimo, a slave, a poet, a low-caste rebel, and a dowager. Second, that they represent different subregions of the Deccan; there are two from Andhra, and three each from Karnataka and Maharashtra. Third, that their lives be distributed across the entire four-and-a-half centuries covered in the volume; at least one of the eight was alive during any given year between 1300 and 1761 (excepting several decades in the mid-seventeenth century). But the most important consideration was the degree to which their life-stories could shed light on some particular social process. These processes form the subject-matter of the eight chronologically arranged chapters.

The first chapter discusses the settling of the interior plateau by pioneering cultivators who, between the twelfth and early fourteenth centuries, displaced or incorporated indigenous pastoral groups. It then analyzes the diffusion into the Deccan of a new sort of state system, the transregional sultanate, which arrived with the conquest of the region by armies of the Delhi Sultanate in

the early fourteenth century. Following that conquest, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq attempted to colonize the Deccan with immigrants transplanted from Delhi. Chapter 2 explores that process, together with the roles played by Sufi shaikhs in providing an ideological and juridical rationale first for Tughluq colonialism in the Deccan, and later, for the successful revolt against Tughluq rule led by those same colonists and their descendants. That rebellion led to the establishment of an independent Deccani sultanate, the Bahmani kingdom.

Chapter 3 examines the incorporation of the Deccan into global regimes of commerce in the fifteenth century, especially the networks that connected the Deccan with the Iranian plateau. The negative side of this early form of "globalization" was the emergence of a rift between "Deccanis" – i.e., descendants of north Indian migrants who had been born and raised in the Deccan – and chauvinistic "Westerners," mainly Iranians, who hailed from points beyond the Arabian Sea. This rift would lead to the disintegration of nearly every Deccani sultanate between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Our knowledge of the southern Deccan has vastly increased in recent decades, thanks to the profusion of recent monographs on the state of Vijayanagara. But these studies tend to view that state in isolation from the rest of the Deccan plateau, in this respect following more than a century of Orientalist and Indian nationalist scholarship that walled off the study of the southern from the northern Deccan. Implicitly or explicitly, scholars writing within those traditions assumed that the state of Vijayanagara represented a Hindu bulwark against an expansive Muslim north, and that prior to the Battle of Talikota (1565) the peoples of the northern and southern plateau inhabited separate socio-cultural worlds. Investigating the processes of élite mobility and the diffusion of Persian culture across the plateau in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Chapter 4 questions the validity of these assumptions. In this way it urges the academic reintegration of the Deccan's northern and southern halves, which have experienced more than a hundred years of scholarly apartheid.

Chapter 5 takes up the badly understudied topic of Afro-Indian relations, and more specifically, Africa's role in the rise and fall of military slavery in the Deccan between the mid-fifteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. Tracing the career of a single slave from Ethiopia to Baghdad to Ahmadnagar, the chapter asks how the commercial system of the Arabian Sea basin, combined with the political system of the Deccan sultanates, supported the trafficking of military labor from Africa to India. It also examines why that trade began when it did, why it ended when it did, and what ultimately happened to the many military slaves imported to the Deccan.

Chapter 6 looks at the social base of non-Brahmin devotional cults, in particular the Varkari movement centered on Pandharpur, Maharashtra. In part, the aim here is to use the work of the devotional poet Tukaram to explore relations between Brahmins and non-Brahmins in the early seventeenth century. Beyond that, the chapter focuses on how vernacular devotional literature and the sultanates' use of vernacular records in their revenue and judicial systems contributed to the formation of linguistic communities. For in the Marathi-speaking western Deccan, precisely such processes helped lay the groundwork for the appearance of a new political entity – Shivaji's Maratha kingdom.

Chapter 7 shifts attention to Telangana, focusing on the brief and stormy career of a low-caste toddy-tapper who turned brigand during the chaotic aftermath of the Mughal conquest of Bijapur and Golkonda. This episode, it is argued, illustrates a phenomenon some historians have called "social banditry." Moreover, inasmuch as examples of subaltern resistance to larger regimes of power are seldom documented before the nineteenth century, the case affords a rare glimpse of a precolonial counter-hegemonic movement. Along the way, it reveals much about caste, class, and communal relations at the micro-level of Telangana society.

The volume's final chapter traces the rise of coastal Brahmins in the central institutions of the Maratha state founded by Shivaji, as well as the changing meaning of the term "Maratha" – and the social groups included within that category – during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both of those phenomena were related to the eruption of Maratha armies into the heart of the decaying Mughal empire in the eighteenth century – a movement that reversed a pattern of more than four centuries of north Indian pressure on the Deccan. The book closes with the culmination of that movement, the Third Battle of Panipat, which proved to be a turning point for both regions.

The debacle at Panipat also coincided with the growth of European power in South Asia, a phenomenon that would open up another, but not the last, chapter in the social history of the Deccan.

CHAPTER 1

PRATAPA RUDRA (R. 1289–1323): THE DEMISE OF THE REGIONAL KINGDOM

With all these people of various skills serving him, and surrounded by five thousand attendants who showered him with gold and riches and sprinkled him with scented water from golden bottles, Prataparudra sat in the great assembly and ruled the kingdom, considering the petitions of the local lords and entertaining the requests of ambassadors.[1]

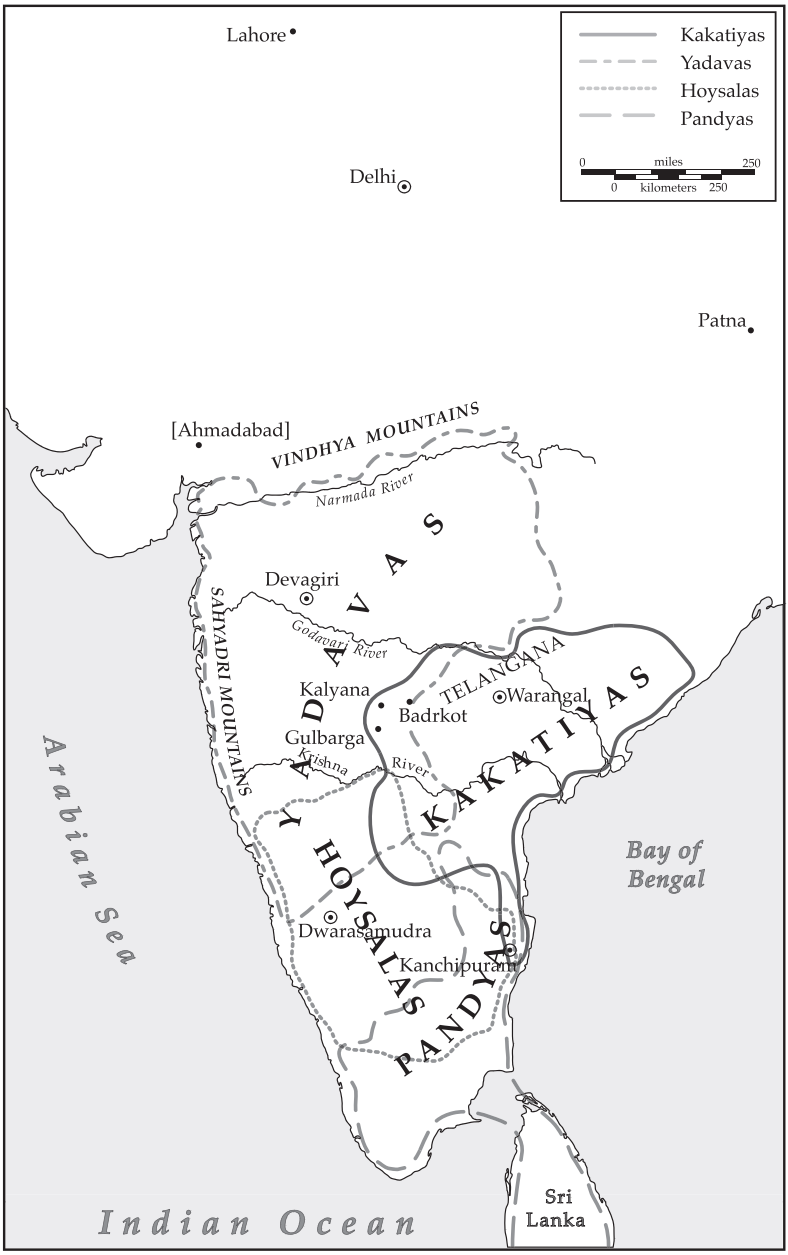
Prataparudra Caritramu (early sixteenth century)

THE RAJA'S NEW CLOTHES – AND TITLE

A broad geo-cultural axis stretches along the spine of South Asia from Lahore to Delhi to Hyderabad in the central Deccan plateau, with extensions running from Delhi east to Patna and southwest to Ahmadabad (see Map 1). Forged by ancient trade and migration corridors linking South Asia with the Iranian plateau, this axis facilitated the flow of cultural currents that greatly accelerated over the course of the past millennium. As a result, there emerged along these corridors a set of related traits that have persisted down to the present: Persian styles of architecture, music, art, dress, technology, cuisine; and a history of the Persian language used for administrative purposes, often followed by forms of spoken Urdu. Not least, new ideas of political and social organization were carried along the corridors of this Indo-Persian axis.

The story of Pratapa Rudra, the last sovereign of the Kakatiya dynasty in the eastern Deccan (1163–1323), forms in a sense the first chapter in the larger story of the extension of this axis from Delhi to the Deccan plateau. For this king's extraordinary career, and tragic fate, bridges the appearance of two very different kinds of state system in Deccani history. One of these was the "regional kingdom," the sort of polity found on the Deccan between *c.* 1190 and 1310, and represented by the Kakatiyas under Pratapa Rudra and his dynastic predecessors. The other was the "transregional sultanate," a type of

[1] From Phillip B. Wagoner, "Modal Marking of Temple Types in Kakatiya Andhra: Towards a Theory of Decorum for Indian Temple Architecture," in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization, In Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, ed. David Shulman (Delhi, 1995), 465. Wagoner's translation.



Map 1. Regional kingdoms of the Deccan, 1190–1310.