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Introduction

Cosmopolitanism, Courtliness and Ethics in the Deccani Sultanates

In the midst of a chapter dedicated to recounting various military campaigns of the Mughals and Safavids, the Bijapuri chronicler Rafi al-Din Shirazi (c. 1540–1620) abruptly interrupts his narrative with a lengthy description of the 'wonders and marvels of the buildings of Ellora-Daulatabad':

> . . . Having made another palace [. . .] and [having placed] the imperial throne at the front of the portico, they fixed the portrait of the emperor upon it [. . .]. Behind the head and shoulders of the emperor are servants, friends and relatives, each in the proper place. There are some watchmen holding swords with handkerchiefs in their hands, in the Deccan fashion. Waterbearers in their own manner and order hold vessels of water in their hands, and waiters hold a few flagons with cups in their hands. Winebearers, by which I mean betel-leaf servers, hold trays of betel leaf in their hands with suitable accompaniments, some trays having sweet scented things, for in each tray are cups of musk, saffron and other items. The saucers in those trays are made in the fashion of cups with pounded ambergris, sandalwood and aloes, and aromatic compounds are set forth and trays full of roses. This portico, which is subtler in arrangement than a rose is such that the description, beauty, workmanship and subtlety or workmanship in that assembly do not fit into the vessel of explanation.[1]

After several more paragraphs of similarly glowing description, Shirazi concludes his account by comparing Ellora to a monument with which his readers would surely have been more familiar:

> There are several constructions of similar form in the neighborhood of Shiraz, and that region is called Naqsh-i Rustam and the Forty Towers [Chihil Sutun, i.e. Persepolis]. In *The History of Persia*, it is well known that there were four such towers that Jamshid had made, and on top of all the towers he had made a single tall building so that these towers were pillars for that building. He spent most of his time in that building sitting on the seat of lordship and holding public audience.[2]

[1] TM(E), 314, cited in Carl Ernst, 'Admiring the Works of the Ancients: The Ellora Temples as viewed by Indo-Muslim Authors' in David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence (eds.), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 98–120, see pp. 105–6.
[2] Ernst, 'Admiring', 106.

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This description of the cave temple complex of Ellora (c. 600–1000) is, as Ernst points out, remarkable in several regards. Omitting almost any reference to Indian religions, Shirazi frames both the origin and the meaning of the monument in political terms, and repeatedly expresses his appreciation of it on an aesthetic level.[3] The statue of Shiva in the Kailas temple thus becomes an enthroned king holding court, surrounded by a recognisable cast of courtiers: servants, friends, relatives, bearers; and the material props of a courtly assembly: wine, betel, trays of flowers and bowls of perfumes. The political frame of this description is, moreover, underlined by an explicit comparison with the courtly assemblies held by the ancient Persian ruler Jamshid, at Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid empire, a site rich in associations – mythical, historical and literary – with powerful, wise and righteous kings and their courts.[4]

Ernst emphasises that Shirazi's political framing of a religious site, far from being an unusual intellectual strategy, is actually relatively common among Muslim visitors to this and other ancient non-Muslim sites, and serves as a reminder that ' . . . for premodern Muslims, the monolithic Islam defined by twentieth-century discourse was far from being the only or even the primary category of judgment'.[5] Beyond this important insight, what I find particularly striking about Shirazi's description, however, is the choice of 'the court' as the concept through which the unfamiliar is made familiar. Clearly, Shirazi could expect the procedures, participants and material paraphernalia of a courtly assembly to be instantly comprehensible to his readers and could draw a parallel with the pre-eminent Persian exemplar of courtly culture in order to express the magnitude and magnificence of this deeply unfamiliar monument, in the process reframing it in a familiar idiom. How had the ideas of 'the court' and 'courtliness' become so immediately recognisable across a wide geographic area, and so readily applicable – by Persians – to Indic culture? This book attempts to answer this question by investigating the idea of courtliness in the political, social and cultural worlds of the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Deccan sultanates.

Divided between six states competing for territory, resources and skills, the medieval and early modern Deccan was a region of striking diversity in

[3] Ernst, 'Admiring', 107–8.
[4] On Jamshid see Prod Oktor Skjaervo, 'Myth of Jamšid', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at www.iranicaonline.org (accessed 1 February 2017); Mahmoud Omidsalar, 'Jamšid in Persian Literature', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2012 (accessed 1 February 2017). On Persepolis see A. Shapur Shahbazi, 'Persepolis', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012 (accessed 1 February 2017).
[5] Ernst, 'Admiring', 99.

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ethnic, linguistic and religious terms. During this period, individuals of different backgrounds and cultures moved from across the Persian-speaking world to take up service at the courts of the Deccan sultanates, and between the Deccani courts with a facility that belies modern assumptions about the fixity of political and geographical boundaries on the one hand, and the incompatibility of Indic and Islamicate religio-cultural systems on the other. How did such individuals actively establish, negotiate and challenge networks of acceptable behaviour and knowledge in this Indo-Persianate courtly world? How did the varied cultural and religious traditions of the members of this courtly society – made up of individuals from the Deccan region, immigrants from north India, various parts of Iran and the Persian Gulf, Turkic tribesmen and slaves from Central Asia and slaves from Africa – promote or hinder a shared courtly culture?

In this book, I argue that Deccani courtly society was structured by an understanding of courtliness that had evolved and was broadly shared across the area that has become known as the 'Persian Cosmopolis'. This courtliness was not a precise set of skills but rather a particular disposition towards certain behaviours and domains of knowledge that could be mobilised in daily life to help negotiate the faction-filled, dynamic world of Persianate courts. At the same time, I argue, courtliness was also considered an ethical practice: in contemporary writing these same behaviours and domains of knowledge were considered tools that enabled a courtier to work towards the perfection of his own body and thus, according to contemporary philosophical ideas, the perfection of his soul. It was precisely such shared understandings that enabled individuals like Shirazi not only to make conceptual translations between Indic and Persianate cultures, but also, more mundanely, to move between Persia and India, and to 'live well', in both the worldly, and the ethical sense, wherever they found themselves.

The argument of this book is structured by theoretical understandings of three key terms: the court, ethics and the Persian Cosmopolis. Since I am using these terms in a specific way, I will discuss each in turn, before summarising the structure of the book. Firstly, however, a brief historical outline of the history of the Deccan is in order.

Historical Background

The area of South India known as the Deccan constituted one of the most dynamic and powerful macro-regions in medieval and early modern India. The geographical limits of this region are somewhat amorphous – although confined in most accounts to the region bounded by the

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Vindhya mountains in the north and the upper reaches of the Kaveri and the Mysore plateau in the south, in some accounts, the term encompasses the whole of peninsular India south of the Vindhya mountains and the Narmada river.[6] As Eaton has argued, the imprecise nature of the term is compounded by the lack of a single enduring political or cultural centre with which the region can be conveniently identified.[7] The chronicler Firishta (1560–1620) used linguistic rather than geographic markers, defining the Deccan as the region where Marathi, Telugu and Kannada were spoken.[8] Even this definition, characterised as it is by linguistic heterogeneity rather than homogeneity serves to underline the complexity of the region.

The advent of Tughluq rule in South India in the beginning of the fourteenth century, which incorporated the Deccan region into the Delhi sultanate, although of comparatively short duration, had far-reaching consequences, including the emergence of new political elites. Sometime between 1336 and 1346, as Tughluq power waned, the Vijayanagara Empire emerged in the western Deccan south of the Krishna river, founded by the Sangama brothers, local warriors formerly in the employ of Muhammad Tughluq.[9] Shortly afterwards, a rebellion by local military commanders of the Delhi sultanate in Daulatabad in 1345 eventually drew enough support to culminate in the establishment of the independent Bahmani sultanate in 1347, based in the western Deccan north of the Krishna river, under a leading rebel, who took the title Sultan Ala al-Din Hasan Bahman Shah (r. 1347–58). (See Figure I.1.) Although in popular narratives these two states are depicted as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' respectively, such essentialisations obscure the broad extent of shared social and political forms.

From 1347 until its extinction in 1528, eighteen sultans of the Bahmani dynasty ruled over a sultanate, which at its greatest extent in the late fifteenth century, is said to have stretched across the Deccan plateau from the western coast at Dabhol to the eastern coast at Rajahmundri. Soon after its establishment, the Bahmani sultanate moved its capital south from

[6] Imperial Gazetteer, XI, 205, quoted in P. M. Joshi, 'Historical Geography of Medieval Deccan' in H. K. Sherwani and P. M. Joshi (eds.), *History of Medieval Deccan (1295–1724)* (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1973), vol. 1, p. 3.

[7] Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 1.

[8] Eaton, *Social History*, p. 2.

[9] See H. Kulke, 'Maharajas, Mahants and Historians: Reflections on the Historiography of Early Vijayanagara and Sringeri' in A. L. Dallapiccola and S. Z. Lallement (eds.), *Vijayanagara: City and Empire: New Currents of Research* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1985), pp. 120–43 and Phillip Wagoner, 'Harihara, Bukka and the Sultan: The Delhi Sultanate in the Political Imagination of Vijayanagara' in Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond*, pp. 300–26.

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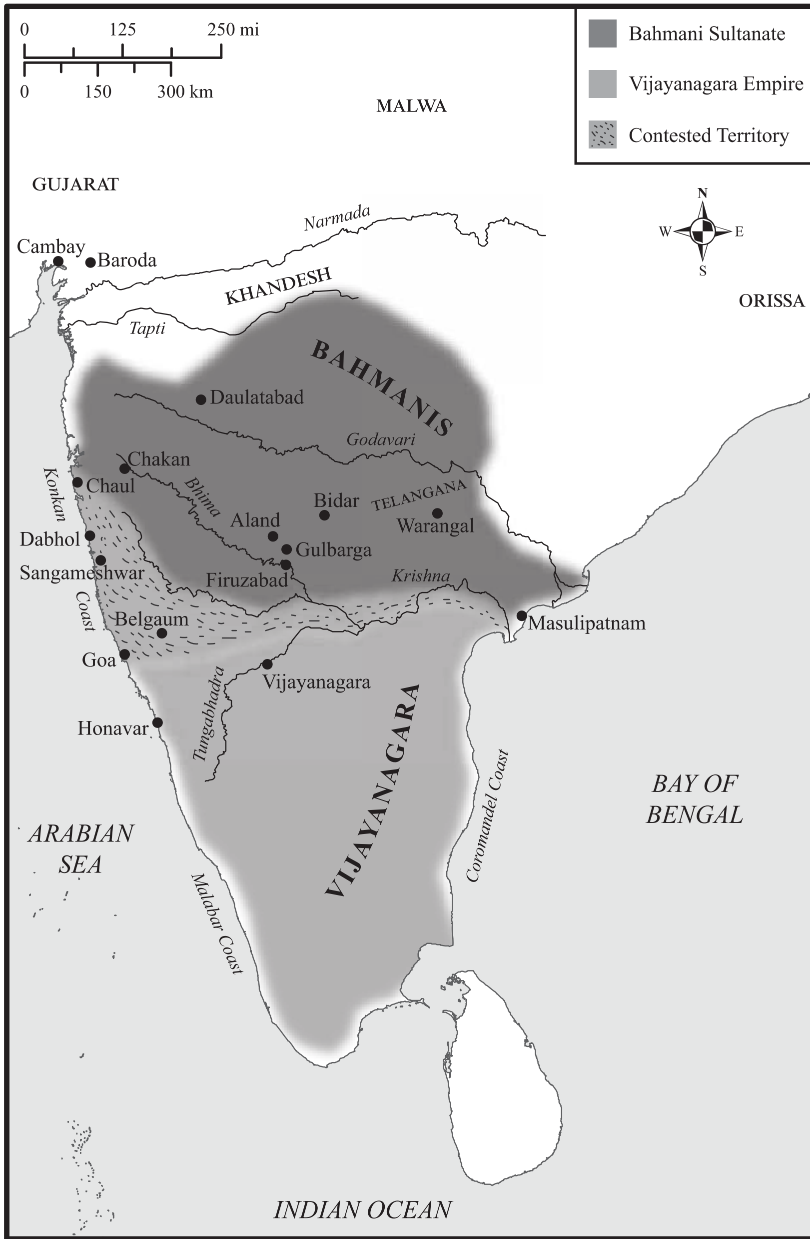

Figure I.1 Map of the Deccan in the Fifteenth Century, © Gabriel Moss.

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Daulatabad, first to Gulbarga, and then in the 1420s, to Bidar. Independence from Delhi isolated the Bahmani sultanate from the profitable source of slaves, war horses and trade routes that flowed through Central Asia to northern India, whilst pressure from the expanding Vijayanagara Empire to the south made the search for a reliable source of skilled manpower and horses more urgent. Maritime trade routes linking the peninsula's western littoral to the Persian Gulf thus promised a crucial lifeline for the fledgling sultanate; a fact recognised by Ala al-Din Hasan Bahman Shah, who launched a determined campaign to secure the Konkan ports of Chaul, Dabhol and Goa as soon as his possession of the throne was secure.[10] Competition to gain control of two particularly fertile areas, the Raichur Doab and the Krishna-Godavari delta, as well as the ports of the western coast and the military supplies of the Indian Ocean maritime trade kept conflict between Vijayanagara and the Bahmanis frequent. Although Indians always played a significant role in Bahmani administration, particularly individuals of the Brahmin and Kayasth castes who dominated the finance department, from the time of Muhammad Bahmani II (1378–97) onwards, inward elite migration via the sea route from the Persian Gulf was encouraged from Iran, the Arabian peninsular and the Central Asian lands. Immigration accelerated in the early fifteenth century, stimulated perhaps by the arrival of the descendants of the influential Sufi, Shah Nimatullah (1330–1431), in the new capital of Bidar, at the invitation of the sultan, Ahmad (r. 1422–36). By the mid fifteenth century, two powerful political factions had coalesced at court, membership of which, nominally at least, was based on origin: the *gharibi* (foreigners or westerners) group was mainly composed of Turks, Iranians, central Asians and Iraqis, while the *dakani* (Deccani) group consisted of earlier immigrants from sultanate North India, local Indians and African (*habshi*) slaves.[11] During the fifteenth century the balance of power swung, often violently, between factions, as various sultans, including Ala al-Din II (1436–58) and Humayun (1458–61), and powerful individuals, such as Mahmud Gavan, Bahmani vizier from 1466 to 1481, attempted to exploit or conciliate divisions for political and economic gain. By the reign of Mahmud Bahmani (1483–1518), the sultanate began to fragment as factional conflicts amongst the elite and weakening of the central authority enabled the provincial governors to assume greater autonomy and eventually act as de facto independent sovereigns, transforming their own *tarafs* (provinces) into five

[10] *IA(K)*, June 1899, 152.
[11] As Eaton points out, adherence to a faction seems to also have been a matter of choice, rather than the simple 'ethnic' determinism the names of the factions, originally given by late sixteenth-century chroniclers and adopted by twentieth-century scholars, suggest. Eaton, *Social History*, pp. 68–9.

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independent sultanates, named after their eponymous capitals.[12] (See Figure I.2.) Ahmad Nizam al-Mulk initiated the Nizam Shahi dynasty (c. 1490–1636), based at Ahmadnagar; Bijapur became the seat of the Adil Shahi dynasty (c. 1490–1686) under Yusuf Adil Khan Sevai and Berar became the seat of the Imad Shahi dynasty (c. 1490–1574) under Fath Allah Imad al-Mulk. Although he may never have actually declared independence from the Bahmanis, the governor of Golkonda, Sultan Quli Qutb al-Mulk, is considered the founder of the Qutb Shahi dynasty (c. 1501–1687) and Qasim Barid al-Mamluk, the *vakil* (prime minister) of the Bahmani sultanate, established a de facto dynasty known as the Barid Shahis at the erstwhile Bahmani capital of Bidar (c. 1492–1619) retaining the last four Bahmani kings as puppet rulers until 1526 when the final Bahmani king fled, first to Bijapur, then to Ahmadnagar.

The emergence of the five successor sultanates inaugurated about a century of rapidly changing political circumstances. Like the Bahmani sultanate, the five new successor sultanates, particularly the sultanates of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, suffered from court factionalism, often articulated through ethnic or regional nomenclature. In Bijapur, the frequent changes of sectarian affiliation between Sunni and Shia on the part of the sultan or regent were often accompanied by the rise to power of one elite faction adhering to the favoured sect and the demotion or even expulsion of individuals adhering to the other. In late sixteenth-century Ahmadnagar, sectarianism in the form of the Mahdavi sect coalesced with ethnic groupings, attracting particular support among the African slaves.[13] Throughout the sixteenth century, immigration to the Deccan from across the Persian Cosmopolis continued, but each sultanate also employed significant numbers of Indians, and political culture engaged deeply with local vernacular and cultural norms.

For the first six decades of the sixteenth century, in order to expand their own territory and influence, the five sultanates and the Vijaynagar Empire pragmatically formed and broke a series of alliances as circumstances dictated, neither motivated nor deterred by ties of religious or ethnic identity but by desire for political and economic gain. Particular flashpoints such as the Raichur Doab and the forts of Sholapur, Naldrug and Parenda changed hands with bewildering frequency, in part for economic and strategic reasons, but also, as Wagoner and Eaton have

[12] Other powerful contemporaries also attempted to establish independent domains, including Bahadur Gilani in the Konkan and Dastur Dinar Habshi in Gulbarga, but were ultimately crushed, and their territories subsumed, by their more powerful peers.

[13] Derryl MacLean, 'The Sociology of Political Engagement: The Mahdaviyah and the State' in Richard M. Eaton (ed.), *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–1750* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 150–66.

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Figure I.2 Map of the Deccan before 1565, © Gabriel Moss.

demonstrated, in an effort to secure access to powerful symbolic goods resonant with historical associations to earlier Deccani dynasties such as the Chalukyas and the Kakatiyas.[14] In an environment characterised by

[14] Richard Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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rapidly changing political situations both within particular kingdoms and across the region as a whole, the elite frequently moved between courts, lured by promises of better patronage, influential political positions, or pushed by court rivalry, political, factional or sectarian persecution.

In 1565, in an unusual turn of events, four of the five sultanates, Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Golkonda and Bidar, briefly formed a coalition and attacked Vijayanagara at the Battle of Talikota. As a result of significant developments in military technology undertaken by the sultanates in the preceding quarter century, the coalition gained the advantage, killed the regent Rama Raya, and occupied the capital. Following the defeat at Talikota, the Vijayanagara Empire was definitively weakened and by 1566 a greatly reduced state reconstituted itself with its capital at Penukonda, 120 miles to the southeast. Over the last third of the sixteenth century, the sultanates of Bijapur, Golkonda and Ahmadanagar emerged as pre-eminent among the five, and soon overpowered the remaining two: Berar was annexed by Ahmadnagar by 1574 whilst Bidar was effectively controlled by Bijapur by 1580, with the Barid Shahis acting simultaneously as puppet rulers and Adil Shahi courtiers; the sultanate was formally annexed in 1619. Unsurprisingly the three sultanates which emerged as pre-eminent were also those that had managed to gain control of raw materials, production and the lucrative internal trade routes connecting the capitals to the ports of the Indian Ocean. In the case of Bijapur and Ahmadnagar, both sultanates possessed key raw materials and production centres for high-demand or high-cost commodities: diamond mines in Bijapur, and textile production in Ahmadnagar. The expansion of Golkonda eastwards stimulated the development of the port of Masulipatnam, and the consequent control of trade routes from the eastern Indian Ocean, together with burgeoning textile production and possession of the world's most prolific diamond mines, enabled Golkonda to flourish.

Once the external borders of each of these three sultanates were more or less established, each sultan could concentrate on the adornment of his physical environment and his patronage of poets, artists, scholars and religious institutions. It was under Ali Adil Shah (1558–80), Ibrahim Qutb Shah (1550–80) and Husain Nizam Shah (1553–65) and their successors Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580–1627), Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1580–1611) and Murtaza Nizam Shah (1565–88) that some of the most significant architectural and literary achievements were made.

By the end of the sixteenth century, a new power was beginning to make itself felt in the region, as the expansive Mughal Empire pushed south, conquering the capital city of Ahmadnagar, weakened by elite factionalism, in 1600. The seventeenth century saw the hegemony and political

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power of the Mughals gradually encroaching throughout the Deccan, culminating in the conquest of Bijapur in 1686 and Golkonda in 1687 and the absorption of the Deccan into the Mughal Empire.

The Court, Courtiers and Courtly Societies

While a well-established topic of historical investigation in European history, courts have rarely been the object of sustained analysis in either the history of South Asia or of the Islamicate world, despite the substantial primary materials concerned with the society of the court and the behaviour of the courtiers. Until recently the overwhelming focus of historiography on medieval and early modern South Asia has been either on the person of the king or the process of state formation. Rooted in Orientalist understandings of 'traditional Indian society' as defined by the model of the caste system, much work on 'Indic' medieval South Asia has been dominated by an obsession with the 'institution of kingship'. As a consequence, the role of the king has been overemphasised and that of the court reduced to a mere backdrop. A similar overemphasis on the figure of the king has been evident in studies of Islamicate South Asia, reinforced by the reliance of scholars on Persian dynastic chronicles, whose aim of glorifying the author's royal patron and his dynasty often portray the king as the sole motor of political action. This trend was amplified by the collection and translation of these chronicles into English by nineteenth-century colonial scholar–administrators. Their translations inevitably reflected the exigencies of both the colonial project and contemporary understandings of history, which determined which passages should be translated and which summarised or ignored.[15] The definition of history as a series of military conquests and high politics meant that many of the descriptions of court protocol, festivities and celebrations were deemed unimportant anecdotes and were cut from the translations. And yet, as this book will demonstrate, such episodes are often the textual moments when the codes of behaviour and modes of acting of the courtly society become most evident, and as such, hold the key to comprehending the rules by which the world of the medieval and early modern courtiers operated.

When they were not ignored, descriptions of court protocol and celebrations were often mobilised in support of the intellectual rationalisation of British rule, as Hardy demonstrated in the case of Eliot and Dowson's

[15] Lithographed and early printed editions of Persian manuscripts were often edited by the same people who, on occasion, also cut out what they considered to be 'superfluous' passages from the originals.

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