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0521266939 - The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara

Burton Stein

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY
OF INDIA

Vijayanagara

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF INDIA

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Although the original Cambridge History of India, published between 1922 and 1937, did much to formulate a chronology for Indian history and describe the administrative structures of government in India, it has inevitably been overtaken by the mass of new research published over the last fifty years.

Designed to take full account of recent scholarship and changing conceptions of South Asia's historical development, The New Cambridge History of India will be published as a series of short, self-contained volumes, each dealing with a separate theme and written by a single person. Within an overall four-part structure, thirty-one complementary volumes in uniform format will be published during the next five years. As before, each will conclude with a substantial bibliographical essay designed to lead non-specialists further into the literature.

The four parts planned are as follows:

- I The Mughals and their Contemporaries.
- II Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism.
- III The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society.
- IV The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia.

A list of individual titles in preparation will be found at the end of the volume.

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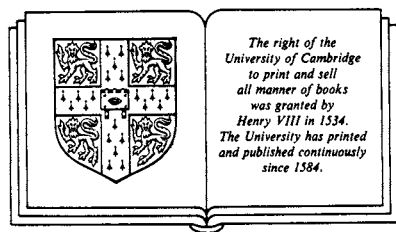
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I · 2

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Frontispiece: An image of Hanuman in front of
the gateway of the Hazara Rama temple.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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Frontispiece and plates 6–8 by courtesy of George Michell.

Plates 1–5 by courtesy of John Gollings.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Cambridge History of India covers the period from the beginning of the sixteenth century. In some respects it marks a radical change in the style of Cambridge Histories, but in others the editors feel that they are working firmly within an established academic tradition.

During the summer of 1896, F. W. Maitland and Lord Acton between them evolved the idea for a comprehensive modern history. By the end of the year the Syndics of the University Press had committed themselves to the Cambridge Modern History, and Lord Acton had been put in charge of it. It was hoped that publication would begin in 1899 and be completed by 1904, but the first volume in fact came out in 1902 and the last in 1910, with additional volumes of tables and maps in 1911 and 1912.

The History was a great success, and it was followed by a whole series of distinctive Cambridge Histories covering English Literature, the Ancient World, India, British Foreign Policy, Economic History, Medieval History, the British Empire, Africa, China and Latin America; and even now other new series are being prepared. Indeed, the various Histories have given the Press notable strength in the publication of general reference books in the arts and social sciences.

What had made the Cambridge Histories so distinctive is that they have never been simply dictionaries or encyclopedias. The Histories have, in H. A. L. Fisher's words, always been 'written by an army of specialists concentrating the latest results of special study'. Yet as Acton agreed with the Syndics in 1896, they have not been mere compilations of existing material but original works. Undoubtedly many of the Histories are uneven in quality, some have become out of date very rapidly, but their virtue has been that they have consistently done more than simply record an existing state of knowledge: they have tended to focus interest on research and they have provided a massive stimulus to further work. This has made their publication doubly worthwhile and has distinguished them intellectually from other sorts of reference book. The editors

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

of the New Cambridge History of India have acknowledged this in their work.

The original Cambridge History of India was published between 1922 and 1937. It was planned in six volumes, but of these, volume 2 dealing with the period between the first century A. D. and the Muslim invasion of India never appeared. Some of the material is still of value, but in many respects it is now out of date. The last fifty years have seen a great deal of new research on India, and a striking feature of recent work has been to cast doubt on the validity of the quite arbitrary chronological and categorical way in which history has been conventionally divided.

The editors decided that it would not be academically desirable to prepare a new History of India using the traditional format. The selective nature of research on Indian history over the past half-century would doom such a project from the start and the whole of Indian history could not be covered in an even or comprehensive manner. They concluded that the best scheme would be to have a History divided into four overlapping chronological volumes, each containing about eight short books on individual themes or subjects. Although in extent the work will therefore be equivalent to a dozen massive tomes of the traditional sort, in form the New Cambridge History of India will appear as a shelf full of separate but complementary parts. Accordingly, the main divisions are between I. *The Mughals and their Contemporaries*, II. *Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism*, III. *The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society*, and IV. *The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia*.

Just as the books within these volumes are complementary so too do they intersect with each other, both thematically and chronologically. As the books appear they are intended to give a view of the subject as it now stands and to act as a stimulus to further research. We do not expect the New Cambridge History of India to be the last work on the subject but an essential voice in the continuing discourse about it.

PREFACE

The Vijayanagara kingdom ruled a substantial part of the southern peninsula of India for three centuries, beginning in the middle of the fourteenth, and during this epoch this Indian society was transformed from its medieval past toward its modern, colonial future. At the same time that its kings, or 'Rayas', were peninsular overlords and their capital, 'the City of Victory', or Vijayanagara, was the symbol of vast power and wealth, lordships of all sorts became more powerful than ever before. This resulted from the martialisation of its politics, and the transfiguring of older economic and social institutions by the forces of urbanisation, commercialisation and monetisation. These changes were gradual and only dimly perceived during the time of its first dynasts, who were content to be conquerors whose *digvijaya*, or righteous conquests, in Tamil country left the ancient royal houses of the Cholas and Pandyas in their sovereign places, except that they were reduced by their homage to the Karnatak kings of Vijayanagara.

At the zenith of their power and authority during the early sixteenth century, Vijayanagara kings were among the greatest historical rulers of India. They had reduced to subjugation numerous royal and chiefly lineages that they did not uproot and had humiliated the several Muslim sultanate regimes of Deccan. Yet, even then, the sovereignty of the Rayas remained what kingship had long been, that is, ritual, so that, beyond the heartland of their kingdom, where their hegemony and resource commanded were formidable, they were content with the homage and occasional tribute of distant lords. Moreover, they forbore, if they did not actually foster, the creation by their nominal agents of a whole set of compact and clonal kingdoms – denominated as 'nayaka kingdoms' – whose competition later helped to destroy the kingdom. For the series of which it is part, this volume seeks to sketch – it can do little more – the broad development of society in South India from its medieval foundation to its late, pre-colonial, incipiently modern, era. Because of the temporal scope of The New Cambridge History of India, this analysis is most schematic for the early times of the

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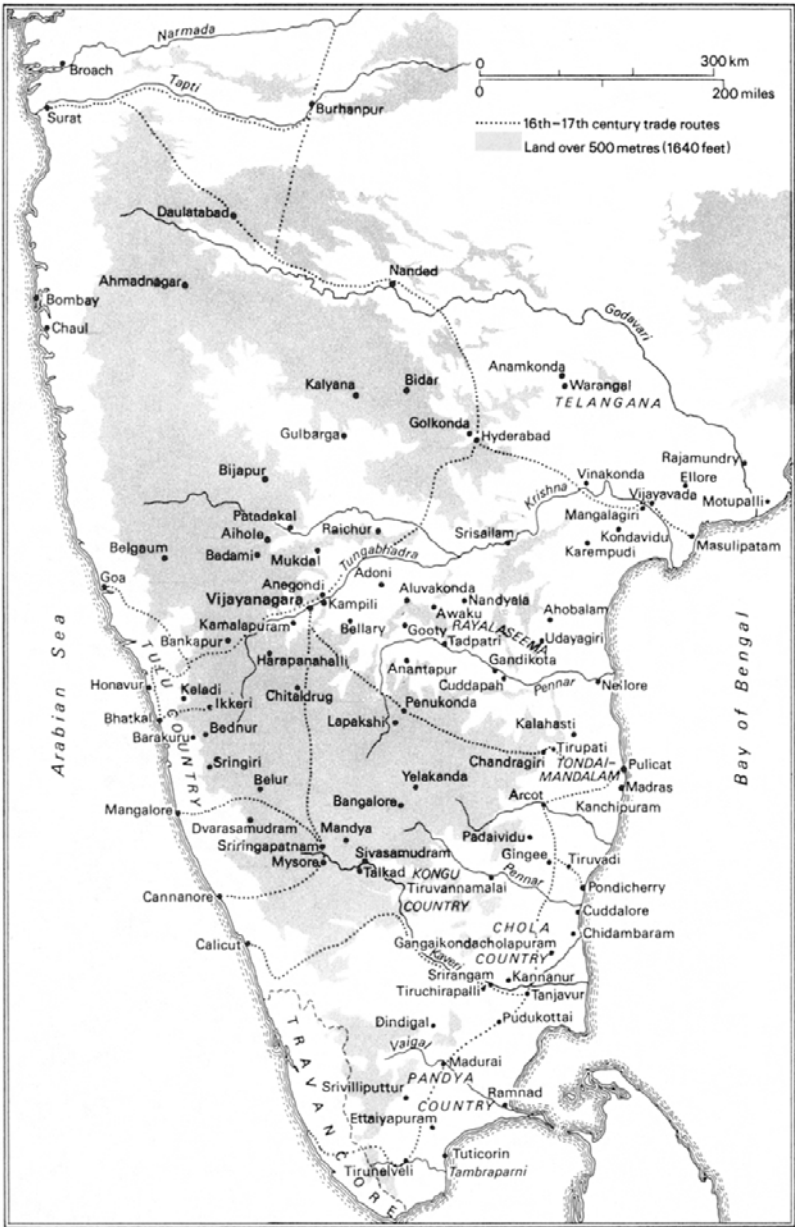
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PREFACE

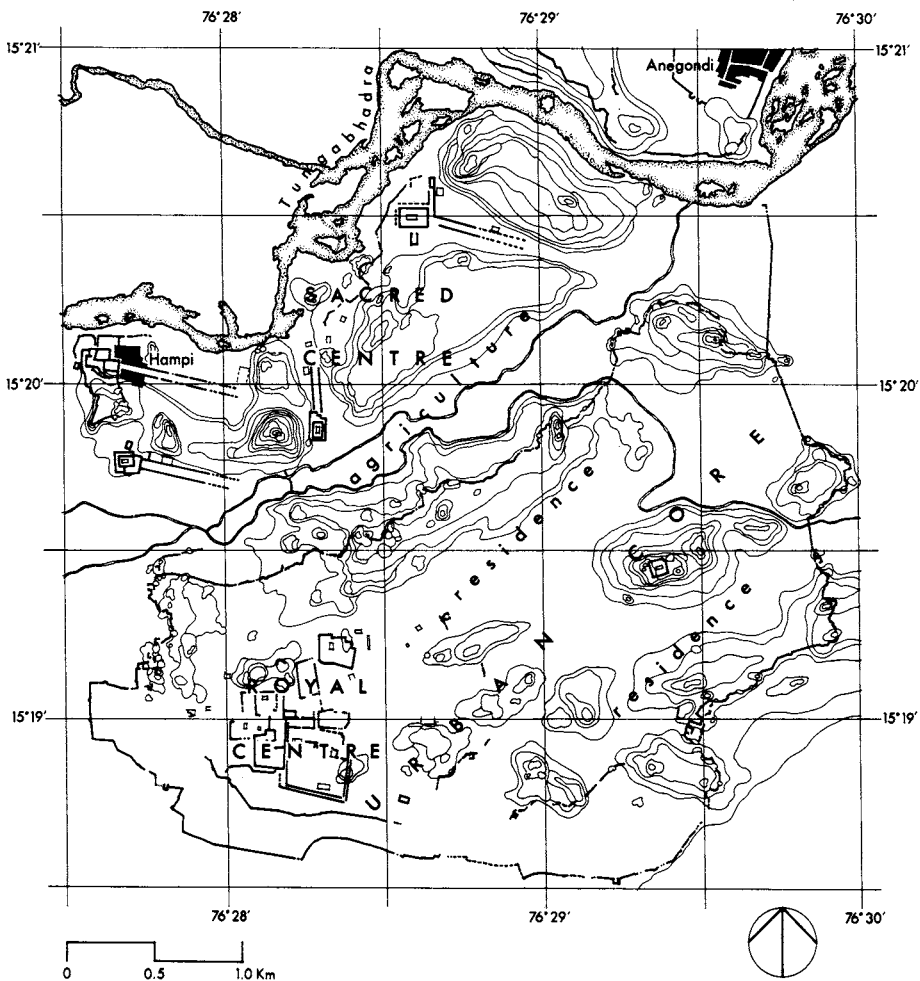
kingdom, hence several controversial, and the continually debated historiographical, issues are barely touched upon; these include the actual founding of the kingdom around 1340 and its ideological character then and later. Oriented as this book is toward later developments, with which other volumes of the series will be concerned, detailed and systematic treatment of the kingdom begins in the late fifteenth century and carries through the late sixteenth century. By that time, the kingdom was in crisis, unable to recover its early *élan* and overtaken by a whole set of new conditions. Yet, the idea and the structure of the Vijayanagara kingdom lived on in the smaller regimes spawned by the kingdom. These regimes and their little kingly rulers came to deny ever larger parts of the peninsula to the successors of its great sixteenth-century kings.

The Vijayanagara era was one in which I see a new form of polity, but one with important links to earlier polities in being segmentary in character and one in which kings continued to be essentially ritual figures rather than, like contemporaries in western Europe, autocrats ruling bureaucratised, absolutist regimes. But it is less in its political forms than in others, I believe, that the kingdom attains its primary historical importance. For this we must look elsewhere: to the massive architectural style that permeated all of the southern peninsula in the building and rebuilding of its temples and to the first, permanent, non-religious, or civil, buildings, including royal palaces; to the expansion of agrarian institutions as well as its new towns and its commerce over the whole of the peninsula; and to the proliferation of whole structures of local rights, or entailments, by all sorts of social groups who constitute the society over which the first of the colonial institutions came to be imposed, beginning in the late eighteenth century.

Inevitably, a work of this synthetic nature bears a large debt to the scholarship of others of which only some can be acknowledged in the text or the appended bibliographical note.



1 The southern peninsula, c. 1400–1500



2 The city and its zones