

Indo-Persian Identities in Medieval Muslim Deccan

MARIUS LAZĂR

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Introduction

BETWEEN THE 14th and 16th centuries, the Deccan region of central India experienced an extraordinary period of cultural and artistic flourishing, as influences from Persia and Central Asia were implanted here by Muslim elites in a process of creative adaptation that increasingly left room for syncretism with local Hindu traditions. Less well known than their northern contemporary, the Mughal Empire, each of the Deccan sultanates nevertheless produced, as one scholar put it, “more history than it could consume locally.”¹ Neglected, or limited, more often than not, to a few paragraphs in general histories of the Indian world, they nevertheless constitute one of its most prestigious chapters, which has begun to be systematically studied only in recent decades, with their political, social, diplomatic and, above all, cultural and artistic history.²

Politically, like other contemporary Muslim or Hindu states in the region, they emerged in the context of the decline of the Delhi Sultanate in the second half of the 14th century, giving way in the Deccan to two new states,

Marius Lazăr

Lecturer at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. Co-author of the vol. **Secularism and Islam: State, Religion, and Modernity in the Muslim World** (2022).

one founded and ruled by Muslim elites, the Bahmani Sultanate, the other, the kingdom of Vijayanagar, being founded by Hindu elites regenerated from the former Hoysala Empire. Even though their rulers claimed different politico-religious identities, both states/empires were wide open to influences from the Persian world, where in the 15th century the “Timurid Renaissance” served as a source of emulation for much of the Muslim East, including the Indian world. The transfer of these cultural and artistic models from Persia to North India and the Deccan was, as we shall see below, brought about by a continuous flow of “Westerners” (*Gharbians*), men-at-arms, religious men, Sufi mystics, artists, craftsmen, intellectuals and men of culture, merchants, adventurers, etc., who headed for the princely courts of India in search of opportunities and seeking to exploit their personal talents. Persia was the main reservoir of these skilled personnel, along with Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, and, in the case of some sultanates opening onto the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, the East African coasts. Many of them were brought up in the Persian culture, which already served as a lingua franca in the eastern Muslim world and was used throughout the pre-modern history of Muslim India as the official and cultural language of successive dynasties.

As a result, what is referred to as the Persianate world,³ or Persian Cosmopolis,⁴ had some of the most developed and refined literary, intellectual and artistic expressions in South Asia, with the specificity that, forced to live within societies with their own indigenous traditions, the political, religious, intellectual and artistic elites of Persian culture inevitably left room for contacts and symbioses with these cultures. The five sultanates built on the ruins of the former Bahmanid Empire, largely destroyed as a result of rivalries between the “foreigners” (*Pardeshi*) and the “Deccanis” (*Dakhni*), revive and amplify this Indo-Muslim synthesis and, above all, the tradition of patronage by the princely courts of culture, the arts and architecture, to a level that exceeds even that of the Great Moguls.

In particular Bijapur and Golconda have the greatest achievements: while Persian still remains the traditional language of the court, the diplomacy and the culture of most elites in the sultanates (and in Muslim India as a whole), the sovereigns, in turn, are increasingly willing to show considerable goodwill, and even offer protection, to indigenous languages (Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Telegu) and, similarly, to the regional variant of the vernacular used by Indian Muslims, this Dakhni Urdu which will make a great literary career from this period onwards. Culture (primarily poetry, music, dance), arts and crafts (especially miniature, calligraphy, metalwork—the renowned Bidriware, which was the most famous specialty of the Bahmani Sultanate and then its successor, Bidar, weaving) and, perhaps most impressive and original, the exquisite and

monumental architectural and town-planning achievements, are all the result of continuous efforts, not only mimetic but above all creative and original, to adapt the Persian styles and heritage, imported from the Middle East and Central Asia, to the Indian world.

At the religious level, Islam remains, fundamentally, the doctrinal and political point of reference for the sultanates, with an extremely important role played by Sufi orders and eminent holy men and mystics, who contributed decisively to the legitimization of political regimes and especially to the spread of Islam among the populations, which led, here as well, to numerous encounters and spiritual, intellectual or artistic confluences with Hindu elements. This Indo-Muslim cosmopolitanism is attested, from medieval times to the present day, by the importance of pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to the shrines (*dargah*) of Sufi masters, which bring together Muslims and Hindus alike, and whose symbolic spiritual patronage of former Muslim capitals is still valued by the local populations long after the Islamic political monopoly disappeared from India. However, perhaps the most peculiar element in three of the sultanates (Ahmedabad, Bijapur, Golconda) is the decision of some sovereigns to claim Twelver Shi'ism as their official doctrine, in a break with the other Muslim states in India, which are attached to Sunnism. Here again, the motivation lies in the reverence these elites have for Persia, where the new Safavid dynasty had just been founded on the grounds provided by Imamite Islam; the result for the Deccan will be the genesis of a Shi'a community of its own, which survives to this day, and the Shi'ite coloring assumed by many of the artistic and architectural compositions patronized by these sultans.

Given the breadth of political, cultural and artistic realities in the three centuries of history of the Deccan sultanates, what we propose is rather an overview, building a general framework for understanding the processes by which these states, through their policies, not only brought the Persianate culture and arts within the Indian world, but above all made possible the multiple contacts and confluences between them.

The Making of Muslim India

ISLAM ESTABLISHED itself in the Indian Subcontinent starting with the 7th century, through a process of proselytism, commercial interactions and political-military expansion. Sindh was the first province to be conquered and annexed by Arab-Muslim troops after 712 under Muhammad bin Qasim; it would become part of the Umayyad Caliphate and, after its dissolution in 750, Sindh and Multan would become increasingly autonomous, with the new

Abbasid dynasty struggling to exert control on the eastern periphery of the empire.⁵

In the 10th century, however, the new empires founded by Turkish soldiers in Persia and Central Asia increasingly looked beyond the frontiers to the Indian world in search of wealth, prestige and sometimes the ambition to extend the Islamic religion to the Indian populations. Starting in particular from the territory of present-day Afghanistan, the inevitable transit area for all foreign invasions of India, the Ghaznavids, first under the leadership of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030), would conduct continuous military campaigns in the Indus and Ganges plains, weakening the Hindu states there and massively destroying the economic and cultural-religious infrastructure of the local populations.⁶

A century later, the successors of the Ghaznavis, the Ghurids, a Persian-speaking clan from central Afghanistan, founded their own empire in which, for the first time, the territories from northern India to Bengal would be integrated politically and administratively. The famous Muhammad al-Ghuri (1144–1206), surrounded himself with an officer corps of Turkish origin, with whom he would conduct his campaigns of occupation and management of northern India.⁷ After his death, and against the backdrop of the destruction of the Ghurid state by his Central Asian enemies—the (also Turkic) dynasty of the Khwarazmians—these officers succeeded in retaining the Indian possessions, which would henceforth become a separate Muslim state. The Delhi Sultanate was founded in 1206 by General Qutb al-Din Aibak (1150–1210), a military slave (Mamluk) of Turkic origin and former Ghurid governor of northern India.

The Delhi Sultanate lasted for more than three centuries, a politically and militarily turbulent period, but one that allowed a vast process of implantation of Islam in India.⁸ Politically, five dynasties succeeded one another at the head of the sultanate. The first was the one established by Qutb al-Din Aibak, hence the name “Mamluk dynasty” (1206–1290): with the exception of some notable descendants of the founder (Iltutmish, Ghiyas ud-din Balban and even a sovereign, Razia Sultana), the government during this period was plagued by power struggles between the various clans of the family, each supported by groups of Turkish officers and nobles, in a climate of violence and instability. The last sultan of the dynasty, Muiz-ud-din Qaiqabad, was overthrown in 1290 by one of his generals, Jalal -ud-din Firuz Khalji, who would henceforth lay the foundations for his own dynasty bearing his name. Also of Turkish origin, but assimilated into the Afghan world, with which they came to identify, the leaders of the Khalji clan left a dark image in the historical memory of the Hindu population, especially Ala ud-din Khalji (reigned 1296–1316), through their violent military campaigns against the Rajput and Hindu kingdoms of Gujarat, Malwa, Jaisalmer, Chittor, Siwana, Jalore and through their oppressive economic policy.

In the traditional manner of the culture of violence that dominated the management of power in the Muslim states of the Indian world, with rivalries between the various branches of the ruling family, generals, and indigenous Hindu elites converted to Islam, a few years of political turmoil followed the demise of Ala ud-din, with assassinations of his successors, until the rise of a general of Turkish-Mongolian origin, Ghyath al-Din Tughlaq, who, in 1320, established his own dynasty, which took his name—Tughlaq, and ruled an important part of the Indian subcontinent for almost a hundred years (until 1413). During the reign of his son, Muhammad ibn Tughlaq (1325–1351), the Delhi Sultanate reached its maximum territorial expansion, controlling, directly or indirectly, almost the entire Indian Peninsula, with the exception of the south and the tribal territories in the west.⁹ This contributed to the increasing strategic importance that the Deccan Plateau began to have, both for its resources and for its midland position, its control allowing Turkish-Muslim leaders access to South India. This, it seems, was the reason why, in 1327, Muhammad took the radical decision to move the imperial administration, along with the entire Muslim population of Delhi, to the Deccan city of Deogiri, renamed Daulatabad. Although the court remained here for only a short time (until 1334) and was later moved back to Delhi (mainly because of the difficult access to water in Daulatabad), this settlement of massive numbers of Urdu-speaking Muslims, especially a large number of members of the Sufi brotherhoods that gravitated to the power, played a decisive role in the genesis of a local Muslim elite that remained anchored in the region and would be the core of the future Bahmanid state. The political, religious and cultural establishment of Islam in central India (and, ephemerally, in the south) provoked the reaction of the Hindu elite: in 1336, two brothers, members of the Sangama family, founded a new dynasty that would take control of the whole of South India (except Kerala): the kingdom, and later the Vijayanagara Empire, would become, for more than two centuries, the geopolitical and religious rival of the new Muslim sultanates that surrounded the Deccan region. It must be said, however, that even the latter, although claiming a very strong Hindu identity, was permeated by Persianate cultural and artistic influences and fashion. In the mid-15th century, King Deva Raya II maintained diplomatic and commercial relations with the Timurid court, led by Shah Rukh, and, like his Muslim neighbors to the north, was inspired by the architecture, court rituals and sophisticated dress that gave prestige to the two capitals of the Timurid empire, Samarkand and Herat.¹⁰

The last years of Tughlaq's reign (whose rule was fundamentally authoritarian and violent) are marked by numerous revolts, which led to political and economic fragility and the loss of some provinces or vassal states. The most important setback would undoubtedly be the emergence of southern, eastern

and central India from the authority of the sultanate, leaving room for new state formations, some led by Hindu dynasties (Vijayanagar), others by Muslim dynasties (mostly founded by former rulers).

The first such state, short-lived (1335–1378), was the Madurai Sultanate, founded by former governor Jalaluddin Ahsan Khan, a *sayyid* (descendant from the line of the Prophet Muhammad) from the Delhi region, and whose elites were Muslims of Persian culture, with an assumed violent policy against the indigenous Hindu population: it would eventually be annexed by its expanding neighbor, Vijayanagar.

In Bengal, the three provinces of the Delhi Sultanate would also secede as early as 1338, with the governors here proclaiming themselves sultans; a few years later, in 1352, Ilyas Shah, the sovereign of Satgaon province, defeated the other two leaders and unified the entire Bengal region, founding the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, which would last until 1487. Despite several military campaigns, the Delhi sultans never succeeded in recovering the province, which became de facto independent after 1359, building its own empire, with several Hindu states becoming vassals, and an intense foreign policy towards both the Middle East and East Asia (China) and Southeast Asia. The leaders of the capital of the Bengal Sultanate (Pandua-Firuzabad, then Lakhnauti) would pursue the traditional policy of privileging the Persian language as the language of diplomacy and culture (tradition has it that Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah would even send an invitation to the great poet Hafez, who was in Persia, to come to his court) and, similarly, to patronize Sufi circles from Persia and Central Asia, used as vectors for legitimizing power and disseminating Islam among the indigenous population.¹¹ On the other hand, as some of the Deccan sultanates would do a little later with the Urdu language, the Muslim authorities would increasingly allow Bengali to enter official court forms, eventually adopting it as the language of the day, paving the way for the foundation of a Bengali culture and literature that would reach its peak with the Bengali Renaissance of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

In 1347, following an uprising led by emirs from the southern provinces of the Delhi Sultanate, the entire Deccan region broke away from the former tutelary power and gave birth to a new Muslim state, which would enjoy a prestigious political, cultural and artistic history—the Bahmani Sultanate. A few decades later, in the context of the shock of Timur Lenk’s military campaign against the Delhi Sultanate, two more of its southern provinces would secede, creating two new state structures: Malwa Sultanate (1392–1562) and Gujarat Sultanate (1394–1573), both later conquered by Mughal troops. As in all the other Muslim states of pre-Mughal India, we see here an extraordinary develop-

ment of culture, art and architecture, in the traditional influence of Persia and Central Asia, but combined with local styles and aesthetic sensibilities, producing many masterpieces of what is known as Indo-Muslim art.¹² Mandu (the capital of Malwa) and Ahmedabad and Champaner (the two capitals of the Gujarat Sultanate) still preserve the architectural memory of these refined and imposing constructions, especially the mosques (in Gujarat, the construction of tall, elongated minarets with richly ornamented balconies was favored). Many of the decorative formulas innovated or experimented with here would be taken up by the future sultanates of the Deccan and, above all, by the Mughal court. The official language in Malwa and Gujarat was, as elsewhere in Muslim India, Persian, in which we have a large number of historical chronicles and literary productions from the period.¹³ The manuscripts are richly illustrated with miniatures, inspired by the canons of the Timurid school; throughout the following centuries, miniature would become one of the most flourishing arts in the Indian world, not only at the courts of Muslim princes, but also in Hindu kingdoms such as the Rajput states of Rajasthan the Indian states of the southern Himalaya (Pahari painting).

As a result, therefore, by the time of the future Mughal military expansions after the 16th century, northern and central India would be controlled by these states ruled by Turkic-Afghan-Persian elites (and sometimes indigenous converts, who rapidly rose up the administrative and military hierarchies), with a Muslim model of government, and importing heavily into the Indian subcontinent elites and populations from the rest of the Islamic world, primarily Persia and Central Asia. Until its fall in 1526, the Delhi Sultanate never recovered its former provinces of Bengal, Deccan and Gujarat, plagued by continuing dynastic disputes, rivalries between the Turkish-Afghan military clans (to which were added, increasingly, the power ambitions of indigenous converts), economic mismanagement and popular uprisings.

Taking advantage of these weaknesses, in 1398 Timur Lenk invaded northern India, destroying the capital Delhi and all the regions along his route, then returning to Samarkand with a huge booty, wealth and slaves. The Timurid campaign would deal a final blow to the Tughlaq dynasty, the now much reduced territories of the Delhi Sultanate coming under the control of a new dynasty, the Sayyids (1414–1451) who, although they claimed the title by claiming descent from the line of the Prophet Muhammad, were apparently originally an indigenous clan from the Punjab region. With no real authority except around the capital Delhi, in a geopolitical context in which the new Muslim states of north and central India already had their own trajectory, the Sayyid dynasty lasted only a few decades, being dethroned in 1451 by the last dynasty to de-

cide the political destiny of the sultanate, the Lodi—a clan of Afghan (Pashtun) origin. Its success in recovering the old provinces was limited, however, and the sultanate's authority extended only to the upper Ganges basin.

In 1526, the last ruler of the dynasty, Ibrahim Lodi, was defeated and killed at the Battle of Panipat, on the outskirts of the capital, ending the three centuries of the Delhi Sultanate. This ushered in the new dynasty founded by the victor of Panipat, Babur (1483–1530), a prince of Turkish-Mongolian origin, in the line of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, driven out of the Fergana valley by the Uzbeks, and a refugee in Afghanistan. Leaving Kabul for Delhi, Babur brought with him to India the Persian cultural heritage in which he had been educated, and the nostalgia for the world of Central Asia, which would live on for a long time, even if his descendants would only know it indirectly, largely through the stories of the many people who would continually migrate to the Indian world throughout the centuries. In its heyday (1526–1707, the year of Aurangzeb's death), the Mughal dynasty would lavishly patronize an Indo-Persian cultural and artistic synthesis, part of a wider golden age of the Persianate. First of all, it is exemplified in Persia as such by the rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), which already takes up the achievements of the 15th century Timurid Renaissance and brings them to their apogee, especially artistically. At the same time, however, Persian culture was part of the cultural baggage of the Ottoman elites in the classical period of the empire,¹⁴ as it was within the Uzbek emirates of Central Asia, whose political leaders and administrative apparatus, even if of Turkic origin, were familiar with the Persian language and literary productions, especially since a good part of the bureaucracy, and of the commercial circles, were Tajik, i.e., Persian-speaking. In the Indian world, the Moghuls, the Muslim sultanates emerging after the 14th century, but also some Hindu dynasties, such as Vijayanagar, would value the Persian language, culture, and artistic references to such an extent that today the largest amount of documentary resources from the medieval Persian-speaking world is preserved in the South Asian region:

More Persian dictionaries were produced in India in the fifteenth century than in Iran, or for that matter in the entire world outside India. Although multilingual, these dictionaries used Persian as their medium, that is, the language to which others were made to relate. The large number of Persian dictionaries produced at India's provincial courts suggests a need for some pan-Indian cultural center of reference that might fill the void created by the loss of Delhi as a political one.¹⁵

Sultans, Sufis and “Foreigners”: The Bahmani Sultanate (1347–1527)

FOR OVER a century and a half, the central and western part of the Deccan Plateau was controlled by the Bahmani Sultanate, one of the three major Muslim states that existed in India at the time, along with the Delhi Sultanate and the Bengal Sultanate. As we have seen, it was the result of the dissidence of the emirs who remained in the short-lived capital Daulatabad after the return of the princely court to Delhi. Under the leadership of an Afghan-born general, Ismail Mukh, this insurrection eventually led to the break-up of the sultanate’s southern province of Delhi, and to the founding of a new state, ruled, in traditional fashion, by military elites with origins in the Turkish and Afghan migrants who had settled in the Indian world. The founder of the Bahmani Sultanate as such was Zafar Khan, a military adventurer from the Khorasan area, who, in the manner of many other personages in those centuries, went on to make a career in the territories so full of opportunities in India, rising to the position of governor of the Deccan under Muhammad ibn Tughlaq. A member of the rebellion of the emirs of Daulatabad, he would be left as ruler of the new state now dislocated from the Delhi Sultanate after the retirement of Ismail Mukh.¹⁶

In the traditional manner of many Muslim state structures in India, as in other parts of the Islamic world, Zafar Khan’s enthronement as sovereign, under the title of Ala-ud-Din Hasan Bahman Shah, was supported and religiously legitimized by the elites (sheikhs) of the Sufi Chistiyya order, the most important in medieval India. The order was founded by the mystic Abu Ishaq Shami in Chisht, a small town near Herat, around 930, and would first enjoy great prestige in the region of Afghanistan during the period when the capitals of the two Muslim empires of the early second millennium, the Ghaznavid and later the Ghurid, were located there. Their campaigns in India would in fact provide the opportunity for the brotherhood to establish itself here, the first, chronologically, to be followed later by the other Sufi orders from the Middle East and Central Asia that established themselves in the Indian world (Qadiriyya, Madariyya, Suhrawardiyya, Kubrawiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Qalandariyya).¹⁷ The most important and revered figure was, and remains to this day, the seventh shaykh of the order, Mu’in ud-Din Chishti (1143–1236). Born in Sistan in Persia, he went to India in the early years of the new Delhi Sultanate and settled in Ajmer, where his spiritual and intellectual qualities made him known throughout the region, leaving a strong impression on his contemporaries, Muslims and Hindus alike—many of the latter converting to Islam as a result of the contact

with the shaykh. From the time of his death until today, his tomb in Ajmer (*Dargah Sharif*) has remained the most important Muslim pilgrimage site in South Asia, with hundreds of thousands of Muslim and Hindu worshippers, especially during the annual commemoration of his death (*Urs Sharif*).¹⁸ Many other great mystics and spiritual masters settled or born in India will be attached to the Chishtiyya *tariqa* (religious order), such as the spiritual patrons of Delhi's capital, Nizamuddin Awliya (1238–1325) and Amir Khusrow (1253–1325), whose *dargah*, located next to each other, are also at the center of widespread popular piety.

Interested to religiously legitimize their rise to power, the Bahmani sultans supported the installation of eminent members of the brotherhood in the Deccan area, in addition to those already in Daulatabad since the Tughlaq period. Sultan Firuz Shah invited the great master Sayyed Muhammad Gesudaraz (1321–1422) to the capital of Gulbarga: even though relations between the two would cool over time, the mystic became the spiritual patron of the city and his tomb has been a place of veneration and pilgrimage ever since. Fluent and prolific in Arabic and Persian, the languages of religion and culture in the Muslim world, Gesudaraz is also considered to be the first author of spiritual texts in *Dakhni*, the version of Urdu developed in the Deccan on the foundations laid by the Muslim invaders from Delhi. The tensions between Firuz Shah and Gesudaraz are illustrative of the relations that have always existed in Islam between political/military leaders and the spiritual authorities: the former need the latter to religiously secure their power but, on the other hand, they are very sensitive to criticism from religious people who sometimes take a critical stance towards the actions of the sultans in the name of moral or doctrinal rigor.¹⁹

With its capital first at Gulbarga (1347–1425), then at Bidar (1425–1527), the Bahmani Sultanate became a herald of militant Islam during this period, with its violent policies against Hindus within the sultanate and the neighboring Hindu states (Khandesh, Malwa, and, above all, its great rival to the south, Vijayanagar). Taking advantage of the weakening of the Delhi Sultanate, the Bahmani leaders gained a military, political and cultural prestige that had a great echo in the regions of Central Asia and Persia, which had themselves entered the flourishing era of the Timurid Renaissance. As a result, in a traditional manner, significant segments of the Muslim societies outside India, who were in search of military, commercial, religious or cultural-artistic careers, would turn to the new state. Referred to at the time as *Gharbian* (Westerners), *Pardeshi* (foreigners), or *Afaqis* (settlers) they played a key role at the court of Gulbarga and later Bidar.²⁰ While in the Delhi Sultanate the politico-military aristocracy was made up primarily of Turks (*Turani*) and Afghans, in the Deccan sultanates these traditional clans were supplemented by those of the Persians (*Irani*), who

were largely Shi'ites and whose intellectual and practical qualities would grant them important positions in the bureaucratic (primarily the scribal guild) and administrative apparatus, as well as in international trade.²¹ Regardless of their origin, they were trained in the Persian language and culture, which had been shaping the elites and societies of the Middle East and Central Asia for centuries. In the Muslim states of the Deccan, the Bahmani Sultanate and later the five other successor states, the meteoric rise of these “immigrants,” who came in continuous waves during these three centuries, would provoke the envy and resistance of the “indigenous” *Dakhmis* (Deccanis) political and military elites, i.e., the descendants of previous generations of Muslims from the Delhi Sultanate period, some of whom were even Hindu converts to Islam, and who had managed to integrate and identify themselves with the official apparatus of the Muslim states of northern or central India.

In fact, this was to be one of the defining characteristics of all the Deccan sultanates: the massive number of people who acceded to positions in the state, or in fiscal and land management, at the territorial level, and who came from the indigenous populations, mostly converts to Islam, but with some, especially Brahmins, still attached to Hinduism. Unlike in the north, where the Delhi Sultanate had much more time to develop and build up a political, military and administrative system dominated by Turkish-Afghan-Persian elements, the Muslim elites who rule the Deccan states are a fast-rising minority who have to govern a majority Hindu population, with only small pockets of converts to Islam. The fact that a large proportion of the leaders and members of the state apparatus are recent entrants to the Indian world from Persia, Central Asia, the Arab world and, increasingly, East Africa (referred to as *Habshi*), contributes to their identity and cultural flexibility once in public office. The sultanates of the Deccan thus maintained a much wider and more assumed openness towards the indigenous cultural and artistic background, building a space of confluences between all these traditions, those brought from outside, and those found in the populations of the territories they manage. Thus, over the three centuries of the sultanates' history, a specific Indo-Muslim symbiosis emerged, which can be seen primarily in art and architecture, but which only serves to sublimate artistically the spirit and atmosphere of this refined, luxurious, sensualist and intellectual cosmopolitanism.

Shielded from the military campaign waged by Timur Lenk in the north against the Delhi Sultanate, the Bahmanid state drew massive inspiration from the model of political and cultural management initiated by the Timurids; artists, craftsmen, men of culture, all trained in the matrix and sensibilities of Persian styles, would be drawn from the Timurid empire to help build the new sultanate in the Deccan. The fifth sultan of the dynasty, Taj-ud-din Firoz Shah

(reigned 1397–1422), also known as Firuz Shah Bahmani, was one of the greatest patrons of this Persianization of the sultanate (a process which also involved the integration of Hindus into the administrative and military apparatus of the state). The two western ports, Dabhol and Goa, were the point of departure and arrival for the ships sent by the sultan to bring to the kingdom not only goods (primarily horses, which were of vital use in the sultanate’s military campaigns—and in competition with the great enemy Vijayanagar, also a massive importer of horses) but also skilled human personnel, which were of great use to the development of the state. A huge number of such figures (poets, mystics, Sufis, warriors, administrators, craftsmen) would build up important careers in the Deccan area—we shall soon refer herein to the exemplary figure of Mahmud Gawan (1411–1481).²² Firuz Shah built a palace complex (Firuzabad) south of Gulbarga, which served as a residence for his court and his numerous harem, imitating the monumental style developed for the Timurid buildings of Samarkand (from which he apparently took the decorative motif of the pairs of lions, the symbol of royalty, placed on the façade of the western gate of the city).²³ A generous patron who gathered scholars, mystics and religious men to his court, Firuz Shah was himself the prototype of the encyclopedic and polyglot Muslim sovereign, with interests in philosophy, astronomy (he built an observatory in Daulatabad), Sufism—he would distance himself from the great Sufi mystic Gesudaraz, who had disappointed him with his theoretical knowledge in exact fields such as mathematics and astronomy.

As already mentioned, one of the most exemplary biographies of these *gharbian*, Westerners, is that of Mahmud Gawan, “an Iranian aristocrat whose career epitomized Bahmani efforts to transplant Tumurid Central Asian culture into the heart of the Deccan plateau.”²⁴ Born in Gilan, in northern Persia on the edge of the Caspian Sea, he belonged to an aristocratic family that had a long experience in the bureaucratic and administrative apparatus of successive states in the region. We have already mentioned this exemplary characteristic of the Persian elites who inherited and perfected the old traditions of state management from the periods of imperial Persia, and which they also preserved within the Muslim caliphates, especially the Abbasid Caliphate. For hundreds of years, from the medieval period to the modern era, these secretaries (*munsbis*) and officials (who were essentially not just bureaucrats, but also men of culture to the highest degree, and promoters of culture—Persian, that is) provided the management and governance of the states and empires of the eastern Muslim world, starting with Abbasid Iraq (the Barmakid viziers’ dynasty at the time of the first Abbasid caliphs, the Persian dynasty of the Bouyid emirs between 1045 and 1055), then autonomous (Seljuks, Samanids, Ghaznavids) and independent (Ghurids, Khwarezmshahs, Ilkhans, Timurids, etc.) political structures. The Persian-speaking

East is full of such personalities with extraordinary biographies, changing destinies, meteoric and prestigious ascents, and often equally spectacular declines. Each has their own odyssey, migrating from one side of this vast world of eastern Islam to the other in search of opportunities that would make the most of their talents and ambitions. This category also includes Mahmud Gawan, who fled his native Persia amid political tensions in the Timurid world and, after journeys through various parts of Asia, arrived in India in 1453, first in order to trade. But after a visit to Bidar and a meeting with the Bahmanid Sultan of the time, Ahmad Shah II, his talents and, to a large extent, the prestige of his aristocratic Persian lineage, would weigh heavily in the sovereign's decision to keep him at court and make use of his qualities.

Thus began the prestigious career of this “emigrant,” installed in positions of military and political authority; after the death of Sultan Humayun Shah (1461), he became guardian of the Crown Prince Nizam Shah and, in fact, the strongman of the sultanate. His official position would also be confirmed after Nizam's early death (1463), and the installation as new sultan of his brother Muhammad III, also a minor: Mahmud Gawan would now hold the title of vizier. From this position, taking advantage of the sultan's inability to exercise their official prerogatives, Mahmud controlled the destiny of the Bahmanid state until his death.²⁵ The territory was expanded, following continuous military campaigns against neighboring Hindu states, primarily the great southern rival Vijayanagar. For this, huge numbers of horses were imported from the peripheral regions of the Indian world, primarily from Persia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf—from where they were shipped to the west coast of India. Equally essential was his cultural policy, first and foremost the construction in the capital Bidar of a huge institution of higher education bearing his name: Mahmud Gawan Madrasa. Scholars and religious men from the Indian world, or called in from the rest of the Muslim world, conducted teaching and research here, in the disciplines and spirit of the age, obviously, but which played a key role in implanting the sciences, culture and artistic values of the Middle East and Central Asia within the Deccan elite. The Madrasa itself was built, like many other religious or public buildings in the Bahmanid Sultanate, in an assumed imitation of what, at the time, were the aesthetic canons of art and architecture in the Muslim East, i.e., those developed in Timurid Persia.²⁶

But Mahmud fell victim to the envy of the court and to the aversion of the Deccanis to these intolerably brilliant and fast-rising *gharbians*—following fabricated accusations by his enemies that he was in league with the Hindu sovereign of Orissa, he was immediately dismissed by Sultan Muhammad Shah III, who ordered his execution in 1481. Mahmud's disappearance would have dramatic consequences for the fate of the Bahmani Sultanate: just a year later,

Muhammad Shah would also die. Like the Sultanate of Delhi a century earlier, the great Bahmani state would also succumb to power struggles between the various factions, particularly between the Deccanis and the Westerners, who took advantage of this in order to carve out territorial fiefdoms, which would later become the new successor sultanates: Ahmadnagar, Berar, Bijapur, Golconda, and Bidar.

Successor Sultanates: The Golden Age of the Indo-Islamic Confluences

THE AHMADNAGAR Sultanate was the first to break away, in 1490, when Malik Ahmad, Bahmani governor of Junnar province (in the north-western part of the Bahmani Sultanate), made it the territory of his own state, and founded the Nizam Shahi dynasty. Malik was the son of the former Vizier (Prime Minister) Nizam al-Mulk Malik Hasan Bahri, leader of the Deccani party (originally a Hindu Brahmin who converted to Islam), who, in the manner of his predecessor Mahmud Gawan, had succeeded in seizing the real exercise of power from the sultan. Nizam's assassination was the starting point for the disintegration of the Bahmani Sultanate. The break-up effected by his son, Malik Ahmad, was largely a reaction to this political violence against his father, hence the symbolic name that the new dynasty would henceforth assume.²⁷ Malik founded a new capital in 1494, which took his name, Ahmadnagar, and which, like all the courts of these medieval Muslim states, quickly became an environment of effervescent cultural and artistic patronage.²⁸

The political and cultural heyday of the sultanate came especially during the long reign of the second sovereign, Burhan Nizam Shah I (1508–1553). Through its ports on the Arabian Sea, particularly Bombay, the kingdom maintained commercial and human contacts with the Persian world, from which a massive number of new *Pardeshis* (foreigners) would come, attracted by the prestige and opportunities offered by the new sultanate. This reverence of the majority of the Muslim elite in India for everything that came from Persia most likely explains Burhan's decision to convert to Twelver Shi'ism, as it had recently been adopted as an official doctrine by the Safavid dynasty after 1501.²⁹ Shi'ism was already a long-standing presence in the Indian world in its various forms (Isma'ili, Imami/Twelver Shi'ism) and missionaries and believers of the various Shi'ite sects had been actively proselytizing for centuries, both among the Muslim populations in India as such, most of whom were Sunni, and among the natives, Hindus and Jains, especially in the merchant circles/castes in urban centers.

An important role in the rise of Shi'ism among Indian Muslim elites, especially in the Deccan, was played by the establishment here in the first half of the 14th century of the Sufi order Nimatullahiyya. It was founded, like many other Muslim mystical orders, in the Persian world, by Shah Nimatullah Wali (1330–1430), one of the great masters of Sufism in its classical period, who had an enormous influence at the time. Although Nimatullah was a Sunni, he lived in a cultural and religious context in which the confluences between Sufi and Shi'ite spirituality were very active, which would lead the order, after his death, to move more and more towards an identification with Twelver Shi'ism. This is what allowed its subsequent survival in Iran until the present day, after the Safavids and then the Qajars came to power, when Shi'ite theologians forced the disappearance of the Sunni Sufi confraternities in Persia. Succeeding his father as the new Shaykh of the order, Shah Khalil Allah first passed through the Timurid court in Herat, and then left, with his family and some of his followers, for the Deccan, in the Bahmani Sultanate, around 1432, at the invitation of Sultan Ahmad Shah, who wanted to find a new spiritual emir for the *Gharbians*, distancing himself from the tutelage of the Chishtiyya order, which was linked to the *Dekhanis* group.³⁰ For several generations, the leaders of the movement would remain in the Deccan, exercising great influence over part of the Bahmani aristocracy, then the successor sultanates, and contributing, as we have said, to the success of Twelver Shi'ism among them.³¹

Burhan's successor, his son Hussain Nizam Shah I (1553–1565), would return to Sunnism, and lead the coalition of Deccan sultanates against the great common enemy to the south, the Vijayanagar Empire. The reunited Muslim armies emerged victorious at the Battle of Talikota in 1565, when the Hindu strongman and regent himself, Rama Raya, was captured and beheaded—a key moment that would lead to the gradual decline of the empire in the decades to come. From the second half of the 16th century, Ahmadnagar came increasingly into conflict with the growing Mughal Empire to the north, which had ambitions to annex the rich territories of central and southern India. In 1600, the Mughals conquered Ahmadnagar: the last Nizam Shahi managed to hold on to some of the territory until 1636, when Aurangzeb (c. 1618–1707), viceroy of the Deccan at the time, ended the dynasty and annexed the sultanate to the Mughal Empire.

Berar, the northernmost of the five Deccan sultanates, broke away from the dying Bahmanid state almost simultaneously with Ahmadnagar, in 1490, and proclaimed its independence under the former Governor Fathullah Imad-ul-Mulk (himself from a family of Brahmins, converts to Islam, and members of the Deccani faction), establishing the local Imad Shahi dynasty. It was the most short-lived, lasting until 1572, being constantly coveted by its powerful south-

ern neighbor Ahmadnagar, who finally succeeded in conquering it after a final military campaign that ended the Imad dynasty.

The same pattern was followed by the governor of the southern Bahmanid province of Bijapur, also in 1490: Yusuf Adil Khan (1450–1510) founded his own dynasty here, Adil Shahi, which would last until 1686 and enjoy a brilliant military, artistic and cultural destiny. Like many of the Bahmanid elite, Adil was a *Gharbian*, according to some sources, originally a slave from the Caucasus region, bought to Iran by Mahmud Gawan, and later brought to India. However, according to other historians of the time (Mir Rafi-uddin Ibrahim-i Shirazi, official chronicler of the Adil Shahi family in the late 16th century, during the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II), he was in fact born in Persia, in Saveh. What is significant, however, apart from the traditional Persian cultural roots, is that Yusuf, like Burhan Nizam Shah of Ahmednagar, and his neighbors in Golconda, the Qutb Shahi dynasty, would fervently adhere to Twelver Shi'ism and proclaim it, as would the Safavid Shahs of Persia at the same time, as the official state doctrine.³²

This fascination with Shi'ism on the part of many leaders in the Deccan (it was much less common in the northern part of Muslim India, in the Delhi Sultanate and later in its successor, the Mughal Empire) was to a large extent the result of a phenomenon that had been a feature of Persia and eastern Anatolia since the time of the Mongol Ilkhans. The collapse of the Abbasid caliphate and the decline in the influence of official Sunnism led, in the centuries that followed, to a great effervescence of identity-seeking and doctrinal reorientation, with new religious movements, orders and popular movements inspired by and reinterpreting, often in heterodox formulas, the ideas of the Shi'ite currents. They would gain a strong foothold among Turkoman elites in the 13th–16th centuries, leading to the founding of the Safavid dynasty and state in Persia in 1501, or the founding of Sufi order in Anatolia, such as the Bektashi (which still retain traces of their Shi'ite origins even after their integration into the Sunni Ottoman system). The mimetic (and, for those who come from there, nostalgic) admiration that the elites of the Muslim sultanates of the Deccan have for the Persian world explains this continuous attempt to integrate into the official ideology and the whole culture developed in their princely courts, the themes, values and people linked to Persia.

By establishing Twelver Shi'ism as the official doctrine of the sultanate, Yusuf Adil Shah (and some of his followers who remain attached to this variant of Islam) shows his attachment to Iran but, on the other hand, this is also a form of ideological and geopolitical break with his Muslim rivals in the north, the Delhi sultans and later the Mughals.³³ His son Ismail Adil Shah (reigned 1510–1534) takes up this pro-Persian and pro-Shi'ite allegiance and even intensifies it: in

1519, the *qutba* (sermon at the Friday collective prayer) is delivered in the name of the Safavid Shah and the dress of the sultanate army is modelled on that of the Persian *Qizilbash*.³⁴ Lastly, all this amplified the traditional rivalry between the *Gharbians* and the *Dakhnis*: Ismail, who had many Iranians in his entourage and family, kept those of native origin away from the court and the administrative apparatus, be they Muslims who had settled in the Deccan generations ago or Hindu converts who had secured public and military positions in the previous period.

On the other hand, however, Ismail, like his father, and like all the sultans of the dynasty, who had an extraordinary cosmopolitan intellectual background, although obviously supporting Persian as the official language and culture, was equally open to the Dakhni Urdu language and the new literary productions it was beginning to produce (many sultans knew and often spoke, with those in their entourage who came from these communities, especially the women of the harem, the vernacular languages of the Deccan region: Marathi, Kannada, Telegu). This Deccani Urdu, or Dakhni, which was to become the lingua franca of the region during the Sultanate period, was built precisely through a large input of the local languages of the Deccan (Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Telegu), grafted onto the core Urdu brought by the Muslims on their arrival from the Delhi Sultanate, plus major influences from the Persian language.³⁵ While the sovereigns of the Bahmani Sultanate showed little openness towards Dakhni, being attached to the Persian language, a very rich literature was soon to develop, especially in Bijapur and Golconda sultanates, often under the patronage of the court, especially in the form of poetry—the most prized model in the medieval period (with eminent names such as San’ati, Muhammad Nusrati, Hashmi Bijapuri in Bijapur, and Ghwasi, Ibn-e-Nishati, Asadullah Wajhi in Golconda). Another important vector for the construction of a common linguistic and cultural space of the Dakhni language were the numerous Sufis who roamed the Deccan region in order to spread Islam among the local populations.³⁶

These constructions of identity by the political and cultural elites of Bijapur (and the other sultanates) thus involved a continuous takeover, assimilation and adaptation of the various traditions from which they drew inspiration (Persian, Central Asian), or within which they developed. Indo-Persian symbioses and confluences reached their maximum refinement in the period of the five Deccan sultanates, even if all these eminent achievements, primarily in art and architecture, are obscured by the much more visible and promoted Mughal heritage. For example, the third sultan of Bijapur, Ibrahim Adil Shah I (reigned 1534–1558), after breaking the pattern of his predecessors and returning to Sunnism (and to supporting Deccani elements at court), even seems to claim, symbolically, the earlier political legacy of the famous cluster of Hindu Chalukya dynas-

ties (6th–12th centuries) which, in its heyday (the Badami Chalukya Empire, 7th century) controlled the whole of central India and almost the entire south.³⁷

Ibrahim's son and successor, Ali Adil Shah I (reigned 1558–1579) took this sultanate's own imperial ambition further in concrete terms, participating with the sovereigns of the other sultanates (Ahmednagar, Golconda, Bidar) in the united military campaign against the southern neighbor, Vijayanagar. Defeated at the Battle of Talikota (1565), the Hindu state would lose most of its territory, including the capital, Vijayanagara (now Hampi), to Bijapur and Golconda. With the spoils of war and the enormous resources acquired here, the Muslim rulers of the sultanate would initiate vast building projects (mosques, palaces, citadels, funerary monuments—the most famous of which, the Great Mosque (Jami Masjid) and the Ibrahim Rauza complex (mausoleum and mosque—dubbed, by some historians, as “the Taj Mahal of the South”³⁸), making Bijapur one of the most flourishing and sprawling cities of the era (nearly a million inhabitants), competing with India's other great Muslim capital, Delhi.

Ali Adil Shah I, a sovereign with a passion for science and culture, returns to Twelver Shi'ism, but like his northern contemporary, the Great Mogul Akbar I (reigned 1556–1605), he shows a wide openness to all religious and spiritual traditions, even accepting Portuguese clerics at his court in Bijapur, who now come via Goa to bring the Christian faith to the Indian world. One of the eminent achievements of this climate of intellectual effervescence, under the benevolent and interested patronage of Ali Adil, was an illustrated encyclopedia, with over 800 miniatures, of astrology and magic, entitled *Nujum al-Ulum* (Stars of the sciences), a summa, written in Persian, which brings together a vast number of ideas and beliefs developed in the Muslim and Hindu traditions. Some scholars not only believe that the work was done under the direct patronage of Ali Adil, but even identify the sultan as the author of the text.³⁹

The enormous number of miniatures and images testifies to the high artistic level of the court masters of Bijapur. This “Deccan painting,” which, as we have seen, retains much of its Persian inspiration and heritage, will be one of the most specific forms of artistic expression in the five sultanates. It differs from contemporary schools in the Mughal Empire in particular in the emphasis on vivid and intense colors, the refinement of compositions, with an emphasis on “decadent luxury,” and in particular its inclination towards “a more inward journey, with mystic and fantastic overtones.”⁴⁰ The Mughal miniatures have a more realistic manner of depicting characters, with a predilection for court scenes, hunting scenes, depicting princely families and members of the aristocracy, whereas the Deccan miniatures are more lyrical, with themes of music, poetry, dance and love.⁴¹ This school of painting in Bijapur reached its peak during the long reign of Ali Adil's successor, his grandson Ibrahim Adil Shah II

(reigned 1580–1627)—himself a man of culture and a great lover of philosophy and Hindu music, with the most famous painter from the period of the Deccan sultanates, Farrukh Hussain (1547–1615), born in Persia, traveling to the Mughal courts in Kabul, Delhi, Agra, to finally arrive at Bijapur.⁴²

The next sultan, Muhammad Adil Shah (reigned 1627–1656), sponsored the construction in the capital of the most symbolic architectural landmark of the sultanate period, the famous Gol Gumbaz (Round Dome), a monumental structure whose dome was, at the time, the largest in the Muslim world (44 meters in diameter) built of brick.⁴³ It houses the remains of the sovereign, Muhammad Adil, and is very close to the tomb (*dargah*) of the great Sufi master Hashim Pir, a member of the Shattariyah order. The order originated in Persia in the 15th century as a local branch of the great Qadiriya order, but later it was implanted in India by Sheikh Abdullah Shattar, its members having great influence over the Muslim courts of the Indian world, from the Mughal to the Deccan sultanates. Muhammad Adil claimed to be a disciple of Hashim Pir, which explains his immense veneration for him and the reason for the construction of his burial mausoleum, Gol Gumbaz, near the tomb of his spiritual master.⁴⁴

The phenomenon of Sufism in Bijapur has been fairly well documented; we have, in particular, the already classic monograph by Richard Maxwell Eaton, an eminent American scholar, who devoted his research to the history of Islam in medieval India.⁴⁵ As we have already mentioned, they played a key role in the spread of Islam in the Indian world, either through proselytism and preaching or, sometimes, even through militancy, triggering violent confrontations with Hindu circles and populations. At the same time, through their immense prestige with the masses—Muslims, but also to some extent Hindus, impressed by their spiritual and often thaumaturgical qualities—many of the great Sufi masters gravitated towards sovereigns and princely courts, legitimizing those in power and thus benefiting from their good graces and generosity.⁴⁶ The cemetery that houses the tombs of these Sufi shaykhs, outside the medieval city walls, has for hundreds of years remained a place of pilgrimage for tens of thousands of believers, both Muslim and Hindu, who come here to seek the blessing (*baraka*) of the saint.

The last two sultans of Bijapur, Ali Adil Shah II (reigned 1656–1672) and Sikandar Adil Shah (reigned 1672–1686) had to cope internally with the emergence of a movement for independence from the sultanate by the Maratha population, led by Shivaji I (reigned 1674–1680), and externally with the increasingly insistent expansionist pressures of the Mughal Empire, which was led by Aurangzeb. Shivaji I laid the foundations of a state structure which, in the decades to come, taking advantage of the dissolution of the Deccan sultanates and the decline of the Mughal Empire after Aurangzeb's death (1707), would de-

velop into an empire controlling the whole of central and north-western India, rivaling, in the 18th century, Shah Durrani's Afghan Empire in the north and the British East India Company in the east. The Bijapur Sultanate ended its existence in September 1686, when the capital was invaded and conquered by Aurangzeb.

Beyond their common aversion to Vijayanagar, and the confrontations with neighboring Muslim and Hindu states, relations between the sultanates were not cordial either, and they were in constant rivalry. In 1619, the small Bidar Sultanate, which had retained its capital and the few territories around it that remained after the fragmentation of the Bahmanid Empire, was invaded and annexed by its larger neighbor to the south, the Bijapur Sultanate. Bidar has been ruled since its foundation in 1492 by the Barid Shahi dynasty, founded by Qasim Barid I, of Georgian or Turkish origin, who arrived as a slave in the Deccan and from there, like so many in his situation, climbed the rungs of public office through his talents and ambition.⁴⁷ As in all the other sultanates of the Deccan (and indeed in most of the Muslim states of medieval India), Persian was the language of court and culture, the language of official documents and correspondence. Though not as brilliant as their great neighbors Bijapur and Golconda, the Barid Shahi also patronized a Persian-speaking literature and art, being great lovers of poetry and of aesthetic and artistic models imported from the Iranian world.

Finally, perhaps the most Persianate of the Deccan sultanates, and the most prestigious, next to Bijapur, was the Golconda Sultanate, ruled by the Qutb Shahi dynasty. As with other sultanates, the founder of the dynasty and the state, Quli Khawas Khan Hamdani (1485–1543), was also of foreign origin, having been born in the Hamadan region of northwest Persia to the Qara Qoyunlu Turkmen clan (who had, in previous decades, founded a state at the confluence of eastern Anatolia, the southern Caucasus, northern Iraq and northwest Persia). Having gone to India while involved in one of the most flourishing economic exchanges between the Indian world and the Middle East, the horse trade, he arrived first in Delhi and then descended to the Bahmani Sultanate, which offered many more career opportunities for talented and experienced men like himself. When the Bahmani Empire disintegrated, he took advantage of his position as military ruler of the sultanate to take control of the eastern province of Golconda, taking the name Qutb Shah (from the honorific title he had held in the Bahmani Sultanate of *Qutb al-Mulk*—Pillar of the Kingdom).⁴⁸

The new sovereign brought with him not only his Persian cultural and linguistic heritage, but also his Twelver Shi'ite religious identity, which he established as the official doctrine of the state. These two references were to shape the sultanate's domestic and foreign policy for most of its first century. Internally, this meant, in this first half of the dynasty's history, an absolute domination of the Persian language—which is the official language of the state, and in which

literature and other forms of culture, religious and secular, are produced.⁴⁹ Close relations with the new Safavid state are a key contributor to this pro-Iranian favoritism, and the court attracts and recruits heavily from the Persian world, severely restricting the access of natives to positions in the state and even banning Hindu religious festivals. Attachment to Shi'ism, likewise, was the other factor that tightened relations with Persia: the Friday sermon (*khutba*) is delivered in the name of the Safavid Shahs, thus acknowledging their symbolic authority and, at the same time, building a space of pan-Shi'ite solidarity, alongside Bijapur, at times when the neighboring sultanate was ruled by Shi'ite sovereigns, useful in rivalries with the neighboring Sunni Muslim states, primarily the Mughal.⁵⁰ The proselytizing within the local populations is carried out in the name of Twelver Shi'ite Islam which, over time, has led to the emergence of an Imami community in this part of the Deccan, which preserves its identity elements and specific rituals, primarily collective commemorations on the occasion of major religious events (*Ashura*, *Arba'in*).⁵¹ Shi'ism survived after the dissolution of the dynasty and the integration of Golconda into the Mughal Empire in 1687, and the new dynasty that would control the region shortly afterwards, the Nizams of Hyderabad (1724–1948), although Sunni, still allowed Shi'ite rituals to continue.

With the reigns of Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah Wali (1550–1580) and his son Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1580–1612), however, power became more tolerant of Hindus and the second century of the dynasty saw an intense integration of the indigenous Telegu identity and culture into the court life and official culture patronized by the sultans. Persian loses its absolute monopoly as an official language, and Telegu begins to be used more and more in public documents, becoming privileged towards the end of the dynasty. The process is initiated by Ibrahim Quli who, to foil his brother Jamsheed's plan to assassinate him (as he had already done with their father, the first sultan, Quli Qutb), takes refuge at the court of Vijayanagar, where he lives for seven years (1543–1550). Here he will learn the Telegu language and familiarize himself with Hindu culture and traditions; when he returns as sovereign to Golconda, he brings with him and promotes this new identity, to which he feels very attached. On the other hand, Ibrahim would not hesitate to participate in the united military campaign of the Muslim sultanates of the Deccan against the man who had received and sheltered him in exile, the regent Rama Raya, the effective ruler of Vijayanagar—after the defeat at Talikota, Golconda would annex part of the territory lost to the Hindu kingdom, thereby further strengthening Ibrahim's project of placing himself in the extension of the old traditions of South India. He gathered at his court poets, scholars, artists, musicians from the Telegu and other regions of the Deccan (alongside whom, of course, the Persians were also present). His Hindu wife, Bhagirathi, whom he brought with him from his ex-

ile in Vijayanagar, was versed in the arts, very elaborate and long-established in South India, of music and dance. Their son, the future Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, thus grew up in this cosmopolitan atmosphere, where the Shi'a-Persian and Hindu-Telugu traditions mingled, and this was to have an impact on the spirit and plans of his reign. Like his father, he was intensely involved in the patronage of culture and the arts, poetry, calligraphy, painting, music and dance.⁵² He composed poems himself, in Dakhni Urdu, in Persian but also in Telegu, a language he had learned from his mother since his birth.⁵³

Finally, architecture was, as in the rest of the sultanate, the place par excellence where Persian and Indian elements met and merged. In 1591, on the anniversary of the beginning of the second millennium of the Islamic era, Muhammad decided to build a new, more lavish and extensive capital to free himself from the urban confines of the old fort, Golconda: called Hyderabad (“City of Haydar”), it evokes the Shi'a roots of the dynasty: the first Imam of Shi'ism, Ali, is also traditionally referred to by the nickname *Haydar*—lion. In the center of the city, whose plans were drawn up by architects brought from Persia (but also inspired by the layout of Hindu urban structures in the Deccan, such as the former capital of the Kakatiya dynasty, Warangal), was built what has since remained its symbol par excellence: the Charminar (“Four Minarets”), a masterpiece of Indo-Muslim architecture.⁵⁴ A few years later, in 1617, the new Sultan, Muhammad Qutb Shah, sponsored the start of the construction of the congregational mosque for the collective Friday prayer, the Makkak Masjid, itself one of the finest expressions of the meeting of Persian and Indian architectural and decorative styles; other representative monuments are the Toli Masjid, or the complex of mausoleums where the Shahs of the dynasty are buried.

This “Hinduisation” was not only linguistic, cultural and artistic, but also politico-military. Members of the Brahmin caste would gradually be integrated into the political and administrative apparatus, while Telegu leaders and fighters (*nayakas*) were used to defend the many forts throughout the state, and even conscripted into the royal guard. Hindu civil servants, mostly Brahmins, were the majority in the administrative system at the local level, primarily in the collection of land taxes—the main source of state revenue for all states in medieval India. In the case of Golconda, resources also came from the exploitation of diamond mines, which were a state monopoly, and which made the sultanate, and later its successor, the state of Hyderabad, the world's largest producer, bringing enormous benefits to the ruling families.

The reign of the last two Qutb Shahi sultans, Abdullah Qutb Shah (1626–1672) and Abul Hasan Qutb Shah (1672–1686), came under increasing pressure from Mughal expansionist projects towards the Deccan region, which was at the center of Aurangzeb's ambitions. For all the political and military di-

sasters of this twilight period—or, perhaps, because of them—it was equally marked by cultural and artistic achievements, in the same vein, of a creative takeover of Persian/Eastern and local/Hindu influences. Both were great lovers and patrons of poetry and music: Abdullah brought to court the most famous Telegu poet and composer of the age, Kshetrappa (1600–1680), while Abul Hasan, his son-in-law and the last sultan, became known as “Tana Shah” (King of Taste) for his penchant for beauty, luxury, gallant bliss and spiritual pursuits, in the good tradition of the Persian Sufi ethos, where the beauty of creation is seen as an epiphany of divine plenitude. The final destruction of what remained of Vijayanagar by Abdullah in 1633 and the occupation of the last capital of the Hindu kingdom, Vellore, brought new riches and further strengthened the court’s anchorage in the cultural and artistic heritage of South India. Abul Hasan would even take the decision, with ill-fated consequences, to appoint Hindu Brahmins, such as the brothers Akkanna and Madanna, to important ministerial posts, whose rise and influence provoked the dislike of the Muslim party, who appealed to Aurangzeb, already sovereign of the Mughal Empire. In 1687, just a year after annexing the neighboring sultanate of Bijapur, Mughal forces entered Hyderabad, arrested Abul Hasan (who would spend the last years of his life imprisoned in Daulatabad fort) and ended the Qutb Shahi dynasty, making Golconda one of the provinces of the Mughal state.⁵⁵

Conclusions

FOR ALMOST a hundred years, the Deccan sultanates resisted the expansionist projects of the Mughal Empire, after having been in constant rivalry among themselves or with other states in their neighborhood (Gujarat Sultanate, Vijayanagar Empire). Their occupation by the Mughals had, as a first consequence, the end of these refined and luxurious dynasties, which devoted, perhaps more than any others of the time, passion and resources to patronizing culture and the arts. Even though they fundamentally claimed their Persian cultural (and, for some, ethnic) identity, the elites who ruled and administered these states allowed themselves to be imbued with the spirit and traditions of the territories they came to govern, fostering the emergence of this Indo-Muslim cosmopolitanism, which is found, in specific forms, in all Muslim states in the pre-modern Indian world. Unfortunately, as I have already said, the achievements of the Deccan sultanates are constantly overshadowed by the much more mediatized and studied period of the Mughal Empire, although, to a very large extent, the biographies of the eminent personages of these states, their artistic and architectural achievements, their efforts to bring local cultures

into court life, all make the medieval Deccan one of the most extraordinary and brilliant phases in Indian history.

The Mughals, however, did not get to enjoy and exploit the territories and wealth of the former sultanates: only a few years after their disappearance, just after the death of Alamgir (Aurangzeb) in 1707, the Mughal Empire itself would rapidly disintegrate, giving way, in the Deccan, on the one hand, in the west and in the center, to a new confederation of Maratha clans, which was gradually reviving the idea of a Hindu political and identity revival, and, in the east, to a state built on the territory of the former Golconda Sultanate: the state of the Nizams of Hyderabad. To a very large extent the latter would take over a large part of the cultural and artistic heritage of the Indo-Persian cosmopolitanism built up by the sultanate (along with the new influences it received, primarily European), until its annexation to the Indian Union in 1948.



Notes

1. Evoked in Claude Markovits, ed., *A History of Modern India, 1480–1950*, translated by Nisha George and Maggie Hendry (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 35.
2. Among the reference works, we must mention here first and foremost: Emma J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Roy S. Fischel, *Local States in an Imperial World: Identity, Society and Politics in the Early Modern Deccan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar, eds., *Sultans of Deccan India 1500–1700, Opulence and Fantasy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2015); Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar, eds., *Sultans of the South: Art of India’s Deccan Courts, 1323–1687* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2011); Laura E. Parodi, ed., *The Visual World of Muslim India: The Art, Culture and Society of the Deccan in the Early Modern Era*, foreword by Richard M. Eaton (London–New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014); George Michell and Mark Zebrowski, *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates* (Oxford–New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, reprinted 2006).
3. The term “Persianate” was used by Marshall G. S. Hodgson in the second volume (*The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Period*) of his famous synthesis *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), in reference to the linguistic and cultural space built on Persian identities and traditions.
4. A term constructed by analogy with “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” (used by Sheldon Pollock), found, for example, in Richard M. Eaton: “The Persian Cosmopolis (900–1900) and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis (400–1900),” in *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere*, edited by Abbas Amanat, Assef Ashraf (Leiden–Boston: Brill,

- 2019), 63–83, and which, in Emma J. Flatt’s formulation, “was neither a political structure, nor a geographically bounded zone, and certainly not a homogeneous religious community, but a tradition dispersed over a vast area, which was defined by the use of Persian in political life,” *Courts of the Deccan Sultanates*, 18.
5. A good general history of Islam in India in the pre-modern period, even if already very old, remains Ishwari Prasad’s *A Short History of Muslim Rule in India: From the Conquest of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb*, 2nd edition (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1931).
 6. Ali Anooshahr, “The Ghaznavid Empire of India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 58, 4 (2021): 441–476.
 7. Richard M. Eaton, “The Ghurid Conquest of North India, 1192–1206,” in *India in the Persianate Age 1000–1765* (London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2019), 37–44.
 8. Fouzia Farooq Ahmed, *Muslim Rule in Medieval India: Power and Religion in the Delhi Sultanate* (London–New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016).
 9. Peter Jackson, “*Stupor mundi*: The Reign of Muhammad b. Tughluq,” in *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 255–277.
 10. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, p. 88.
 11. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1993).
 12. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, 119–127; Françoise ‘Nalini’ Delvoeye, “Indo-Persian Accounts on Music Patronage in the Sultanate of Gujarat,” in *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies*, edited by Muzaffar Alam, Françoise ‘Nalini’ Delvoeye, and Marc Gaborieau (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 253–280.
 13. Ziyauddin A. Desai, “Persian Sources of the Social and Cultural History of Medieval Gujarat,” in *Making of Indo-Persian Culture*, 393–406.
 14. Murat Umut Inan, “Imperial Ambitions, Mystical Aspirations: Persian Learning in the Ottoman World,” in *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, edited by Nile Green (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 75–92.
 15. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, 140–141.
 16. One of the very few general histories of the sultanate is Haroon Khan Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan: An Objective Study* (Hyderabad–Deccan: Manager of Publications Saood Manzil Himayatnagar, 1946).
 17. About the medieval history of the brotherhood in India, see especially the chapter “The Chishtis” in the reference work Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. 1, *Early Sufism and its History in India to 1600 AD* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1978), 114–189.
 18. P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu‘in al-dīn Chishtī of Ajmer* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 19. Richard M. Eaton, “Muhammad Gisu Daraz (1321–1422): Muslim Piety and State Authority,” in *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33–58.
 20. Roy S. Fischel, “*Ghariban* in the Deccan: Migration, Elite Mobility, and the Making and Unmaking of an Early Modern State,” in *Iran and the Deccan: Persian-*

- ate Art, Culture, and Talent in Circulation, 1400–1700*, edited by Keelan Overton (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020), 127–144.
21. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Iran and the Doors to the Deccan, ca. 1400–1650: Some Aspects,” in *Iran and the Deccan*, 77–104.
 22. A detailed presentation of these different categories and the ways of integrating in the court and in the state apparatus of the sultanates, in Roy S. Fischel, *Local States in an Imperial World. Identity, Society and Politics in the Early Modern Deccan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 106–148.
 23. George Michell and Richard Eaton, *Firuzabad: Palace City of the Deccan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
 24. Richard M. Eaton, “A History of the Deccan, 1500–1700,” in *Sultans of Deccan India 1500–1700: Opulence and Fantasy*, 4.
 25. Richard M. Eaton, “Mahmud Gawan (1411–1481): Deccanis and Westerners,” in *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761*, 59–77.
 26. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, “From Iran to the Deccan: Architectural Transmission and the Madrasa of Mahmud Gawan at Bidar,” in *Iran and the Deccan*, 175–202.
 27. As in the case of the other sultanates of Deccan, the monographs dedicated to the Ahmadnagar Sultanate are very few; useful information can be found in B. G. Kunte, “The Nizamshahi of Ahmadnagar,” in *History of Maharashtra: Mediaeval Period* (Bombay: Directorate of Government Printing, Stationery and Publications, Maharashtra State, 1972), 71–149.
 28. Pushkar Sohoni, “Ahmadnagar Under the Nizam Shahs (1496–1636),” in *Silent Splendour: Palaces of the Deccan, 14th–19th Centuries*, edited by Helen Philon (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2010), 56–65.
 29. Zainab Ahmadvand and Mohammed Zeinul Abedin, “The Review of Mutual Relationships Between the Nizām Shāhī Dynasty and the Safavids,” *Journal of Safavid Studies* 1, 1 (2022): 13–22.
 30. Jean Aubin, “De Kūhbanân à Bidar: La famille Ni’matullahi,” *Studia Iranica* 20, 2 (1991): 233–261.
 31. Haig Wolseley, “The Religion of Ahmad Shah Bahmani,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 56, 1 (1924): 73–80.
 32. Daniela Bredi, “Shiism’s Political Valence in Medieval Deccani Kingdoms,” in *Islam and Indian Regions*, vol. 1, *Texts*, edited by Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallemand (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 137–153.
 33. Juan R. I. Cole, “Iranian Culture and South Asia, 1500–1900,” in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, edited by Nikki R. Keddie and Rudi Matthee (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 26.
 34. Nazir Ahmad, “Adil Shahi Diplomatic Missions to the Court of Shah Abbas,” *Islamic Culture* 43, 2 (1969): 143–161.
 35. Maria Casadei, “From a Literary Language to an Oral Tongue: A Linguistic Overview of the Dakhni Language,” *Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society* 3, 3 (2023): 1–10.
 36. Shaguffa Shaheen and Sajjad Shahid, “The Unique Literary Traditions of Dakhni,” in *Languages and Literary Cultures in Hyderabad*, edited by Kousar J. Azam (London–New York: Routledge, 2018), 89–154.

37. Richard M. Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 126–130.
38. “The complex features bulbous domes with lotus petal bases, slim decorative minarets, broad cornices topped with finials, intricate brackets, and an abundance of calligraphic inscriptions, all carved from stone . . . One can trace the elements of this exuberant architectural style to a variety of sources, including local religious architecture serving both Hindu and Muslim communities.” Deborah Hutton, *Art of the Court of Bijapur* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.
39. Emma Flatt, “The Authorship and Significance of the *Nujūm al-‘ulūm*: A Sixteenth-Century Astrological Encyclopedia from Bijapur,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131, 2 (2011): 223–244.
40. Steven Kossak, *Indian Court Painting 16th–19th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 15.
41. “The imaginative style of Deccani court art has been admired for its poetic character and sense of fantasy. In painting these qualities are conveyed in part by a lyrical movement of line; a dark, mysterious palette or one with distinctive combinations of glowing color; enigmatic shifts of scale; and an emphasis on mood rather than reality, as the more widely known Mughal school is often thought to educe. Several factors influenced Deccani artists, including Hindu iconography, Persian painting, and European sources. . . . The view of Deccan art as otherworldly, as is frequently described, certainly captures its most seductive qualities.” Navina Najat Haidar, “The Art of the Deccan Courts,” in *Sultans of Deccan India 1500–1700*, 15.
42. Robert Skelton, “Farrukh Beg in the Deccan: An Update,” in *Sultans of the South: Art of India's Deccan Courts, 1323–1987*, 12–25.
43. Deborah Hutton, “Carved in Stone: The Codification of Visual Identity for the Indo-Islamic Sultanate of Bīdjāpūr,” *Archives of Asian Art* 55 (2005): 65–78.
44. Richard M. Eaton, “The Court and the Dargah in the Seventeenth Century Deccan,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 10, 1 (1973): 50–63.
45. Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996).
46. Simon Digby, “The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India,” in *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*, edited by Raziuddin Aquil (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 118–147.
47. G. Yazdani, *Bidar: Its History and Monuments* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 12.
48. For a general history of the dynasty, we have H. K. Sherwani's monumental work, *History of the Qutb Shāhī Dynasty* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1974).
49. T. N. Devare, *A Short History of Persian Literature: At the Bahmanī, the ‘Adīlshāhī and the Qutbshāhī Courts—Deccan* (London–New York: Routledge, 2018).
50. In a letter to the Safavid sovereign, Shah Abbas, the sultan Muhammad Quli wrote: “O protector of the faith, O, asylum of monarchs, the auspicious affairs of these regions about which His Majesty must have heard from the ambassadors of the court and travelers to those climes, have been for some time in a state of confusion and disorder due to wickedness of seditious people. My submission is that His Majesty's

noble attention be directed toward our affair more and more, for His Majesty's attention is sufficient to repel the said calamities in the best possible way." Cited in Rachel Parikh, "Faith and Fate: The Khalili *Fahnama* and Shi'i Identity in Golconda," in *Iran and the Deccan*, 231.

51. D. Bredi, F. Coslovi, and B. Scarcia Amoretti, "Shiism in the Deccan: A Hypothetical Study," *Islamic Culture* 57, 2–3 (1988): 97–112.
52. Narendra Luther, *Prince, Poet, Lover, Builder: Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, the Founder of Hyderabad* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2010).
53. Laura Weinstein, "Variations on a Persian Theme: The *Dīwān* of Muhammad-Quli Qutb Shah and the Birth of the Illustrated Urdu *Dīwān*," in *Visual World of Muslim India*, 179–204.
54. Phillip B. Wagoner, "The Charminar As Chaubara: Cosmological Symbolism in the Urban Architecture of the Deccan," in *The Architecture of the Indian Sultanates*, edited by Abha Narain Lambah and Alka Patel (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2006), 104–113.
55. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Deccan Frontier and Mughal Expansion, ca. 1600: Contemporary Perspectives," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47, 3 (2004): 357–389.

Abstract

Indo-Persian Identities in Medieval Muslim Deccan

Between the 14th and 17th centuries, the Deccan Plateau region saw the emergence of Muslim sultanates (Bahmani, Ahmednagar, Bidar, Golconda, Bijapur, Berar, Bijapur) whose political, religious, intellectual, and artistic elites are deeply imbued with the Persian language and culture. They thus continue a long tradition of the dynasties that appeared in the east of the Muslim world, since the 9th century (Samanids, Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Khwarazmshahs, Ilkhanids, Timurids), as well as the Muslim political power ruling northern India, between the 13th and the 16th centuries (Delhi Sultanate). In all of this, regardless of the origin of the political-military elites who were in power (Turks, Afghans, Caucasians, Iranians, Indians converted to Islam), Persian becomes both the political-administrative language and the language of culture. Our study aims to provide an insight into the ways in which this Persian reference was disseminated, developed, assumed in the Bahmani Sultanate, and then in the other five sultanates that emerged after its dissolution (1527). For over three centuries, the dynasties in power patronized a very rich cultural life, where traditional Persian elements, brought here by scholars, religious people, Sufis, poets, artists coming from the Middle East and Central Asia, were shaped and adapted to the realities of the Indian environment. These symbioses were especially visible in art (primarily in miniatures) and in the development of new artistic expressions within what is called Indo-Islamic architecture.

Keywords

Muslim sultanates, Persian language and culture, Indo-Islamic architecture