PREFACE TO THE EDITION

The study of history and archaeology extends beyond the reconstruction of past events; it seeks to uncover the structures, institutions, landscapes, and cultural interactions that have shaped human civilizations across time. By critically engaging with historical sources, material evidence, inscriptions, and archaeological findings, scholars continue to refine our understanding of political authority, economic systems, religious exchanges, environmental adaptations, and social transformations. It is with this scholarly vision that the ***International Journal of History and Archaeology Research Studies (IJHARS)*** proudly presents its latest issue, featuring original research that illuminates diverse dimensions of medieval Indian history through rigorous historical inquiry and interdisciplinary analysis.

The contributions in this issue collectively explore the intricate relationship between statecraft, economy, religion, trade, infrastructure, and imperial expansion. One study revisits the fiscal architecture of the Maratha Empire, offering a nuanced reassraisal of the institutions of *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* and demonstrating how innovative revenue mechanisms enabled territorial expansion while simultaneously exposing structural limitations within the Maratha confederacy. Another article examines the rich traditions of Sufi-Hindu convergence in the medieval Deccan, revealing how devotional practices, patronage networks, and political legitimacy fostered meaningful religious interactions while also highlighting the dynamic boundaries of syncretic traditions during periods of political transition.

The maritime world of South India receives significant attention through an insightful investigation into the Chola Empire's naval expansion, where commercial ambition, temple institutions, and overseas trade networks are shown to have functioned as interconnected instruments of political influence across the Indian Ocean. Complementing this perspective, another contribution analyses the trade routes, market towns, and urban political economy of the Delhi Sultanate, demonstrating how state intervention, monetary systems, and commercial regulation transformed urban landscapes and long-distance trade during one of medieval India's most significant political eras.

The issue concludes with an important study on the Vijayanagara Empire's hydraulic infrastructure, illustrating how irrigation systems, agrarian expansion, and environmental management became essential instruments of imperial governance. By integrating archaeological evidence with historical records, the article underscores the enduring relationship between ecological engineering, agricultural productivity, and political authority, while reflecting on the long-term consequences of environmental disruption following the empire's decline.

Collectively, the articles in this volume exemplify the richness of contemporary historical and archaeological scholarship. They demonstrate the value of combining archival research, epigraphy, archaeology, economic history, environmental studies, and cultural analysis to produce deeper interpretations of the past. Rather than viewing historical developments in isolation, the contributors reveal the interconnected forces that shaped societies across regions and centuries, thereby offering fresh perspectives on governance, commerce, religion, and environmental adaptation in medieval India.

The Editorial Board expresses its sincere appreciation to the authors for their valuable scholarly contributions, the reviewers for their thoughtful evaluations and constructive recommendations, and the editorial team for their unwavering commitment to maintaining the journal's academic standards. We also extend our gratitude to our readers and the wider research community for their continued support of IJHARS.

It is our hope that the studies presented in this issue will stimulate further historical and archaeological research, encourage interdisciplinary dialogue, and contribute meaningfully to ongoing discussions concerning the complexity, diversity, and enduring legacy of India's historical past.

Dr. Vinodkumar Kallolickal

Chief Editor

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Chauth, Sardeshmukhi, and the Fiscal Architecture of the Maratha Empire, 1674-1761 CE

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Abstract

This article examines the fiscal architecture of the Maratha Empire between the coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji in 1674 and the defeat at Panipat in 1761, with particular attention to the twin revenue instruments of chauth and sardeshmukhi through which the Maratha confederacy extracted surplus from territories outside its direct administrative control. Drawing on the administrative correspondence preserved in the Peshwa Daftar, the revenue records of the Deccan districts, and the analytical frameworks developed by V. S. Bendrey, Stewart Gordon, and Sumit Guha, the study argues that the Maratha fiscal system was neither the predatory tribute extraction that British colonial historiography described nor the proto-national revenue administration that nationalist scholarship claimed, but a sophisticated and internally differentiated set of fiscal arrangements calibrated to the political and ecological diversity of the subcontinent. The article traces three phases of Maratha fiscal development: the Shivaji period characterized by direct agrarian administration through the ryotwari assessments of his revenue minister Annaji Datto, the early Peshwa period under Balaji Vishwanath and Baji Rao I in which chauth collection was systematized into a quasi-diplomatic instrument of subcontinental power projection, and the mature confederacy period under Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao in which fiscal fragmentation among the confederate chiefs produced structural instabilities that contributed to the Panipat catastrophe. The article concludes that the Maratha fiscal system represented a distinctive response to the challenge of governing an expanding territorial domain without the administrative infrastructure of a centralized bureaucratic state, and that its institutional legacy shaped the fiscal geography of peninsular India well into the colonial period.

Keywords: - Maratha Empire, Chauth, Sardeshmukhi, Peshwa, Shivaji, Fiscal History, Deccan Revenue.

Introduction

The fiscal history of the Maratha Empire presents one of the most analytically challenging problems in the political economy of pre-colonial India. Between the coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj at Raigad in 1674 and the devastating defeat of the Maratha confederacy at the Third Battle of Panipat in January 1761, the Marathas transformed themselves from a regional insurgency in the western Deccan into the dominant military and political power of the subcontinent, extracting revenue from territories stretching from Attock on the northwest frontier to Cuttack on the Bay of Bengal. The fiscal instruments through which this extraction was accomplished, above all the chauth and sardeshmukhi levies, became defining features of the Maratha political presence across the subcontinent and the subject of intense contemporary commentary from Mughal administrators, European trading companies, and Indian subordinate rulers alike.

The historiographical treatment of Maratha fiscal practice has been shaped by two opposing ideological imperatives that have distorted analysis in complementary ways. British colonial historiography, from Grant Duff's History of the Mahrattas (1826) onward, represented chauth collection as systematic plunder, a form of organized extortion that disrupted agricultural production and destabilized the political order across the subcontinent. This representation served obvious ideological functions in legitimating British conquest, but it also contained a kernel of descriptive accuracy: chauth collection was frequently coercive, its boundaries were disputed, and its incidence fell heavily on agricultural populations with limited capacity to resist. Nationalist historiography of the twentieth century inverted this judgment, representing the Maratha fiscal system as a form of proto-national revenue administration prefiguring the modern state, a reading that projected anachronistic institutional categories onto a political formation that operated according to entirely different organizational logics (Gordon 1993, 23-28).

This article attempts to move beyond both frameworks by examining the Maratha fiscal system on its own institutional terms. Three arguments are developed in sequence. First, that Shivaji's agrarian revenue reforms established a distinctive model of direct peasant assessment that departed significantly from the Mughal jagirdari system and created the fiscal foundation for the early Maratha state. Second, that the chauth system as systematized under the early Peshwas was a political instrument of territorial claim-making as much as a revenue mechanism, whose fiscal returns were secondary to its function as a marker of Maratha sovereignty over disputed zones. Third, that the fragmentation of fiscal authority among the confederate chiefs during the mature Peshwa period created structural fiscal instabilities whose political consequences culminated in the Panipat disaster.

Shivaji's Agrarian Reforms and the Foundation of the Maratha Fiscal State

The fiscal innovations of Shivaji's reign (1674-1680) are inseparable from the military and political context of their creation. Shivaji built his state in the Sahyadri hill tracts of the western Deccan, a zone of broken terrain, limited agricultural surplus, and dense forest cover that offered natural defensibility but restricted the revenue base available to sustain a regular military force. The Mughal and Bijapur administrations that had previously claimed authority over the region had governed it through a jagirdari system in which revenue rights were assigned to military nobles whose interest in maximizing extraction conflicted structurally with the peasant cultivators' interest in agricultural investment and long-term productivity. The resulting cycle of over-assessment, peasant flight, and agricultural degradation was documented in considerable detail by contemporary Persian administrative texts and has been analysed by Habib in the context of the broader agrarian crisis of the late Mughal period (Habib 1963, 56-61).

Shivaji's response, elaborated in the revenue regulations associated with his finance minister Annaji Datto and preserved in the administrative manual known as the Ajnapatra, was to replace jagirdari assignment with direct state collection from peasant cultivators assessed at rates calibrated to the productive capacity of specific soil types and cropping patterns. The system distinguished between kharip (monsoon) and rabi (winter) crops, established differentiated rates for irrigated and unirrigated cultivation, and created a cadre of revenue officials (deshpandes and deshmukhs) who were accountable to the central administration rather than to intermediate revenue assignees. Bendrey's detailed analysis of the Ajnapatra and the Shivaji-period revenue records preserved in Marathi has established the institutional sophistication of this system, noting that its differentiated assessment methodology anticipated elements of the ryotwari revenue systems later introduced by British administrators in the Bombay and Madras presidencies (Bendrey 1960, 78-83).

The ecological dimensions of Shivaji's revenue policy have received insufficient attention in the existing scholarship. The western Deccan landscape within which the early Maratha state operated was characterized by highly variable agricultural productivity across short distances, with the fertile valley bottoms of the Sahyadri ghats supporting intensive rice cultivation while the surrounding uplands sustained only rainfed millets and pulses. Sumit Guha's environmental history of the Deccan has documented the sophisticated ecological knowledge embedded in the Maratha revenue assessments, which recognized and attempted to account for this spatial variability in ways that the cruder Mughal revenue instruments had not (Guha 1999, 89-94). This ecological attentiveness was itself a product of the Maratha state's intimate relationship with its agrarian base: unlike the Mughal empire, which governed its agrarian hinterland through a hierarchy of intermediaries insulated from direct contact with cultivating communities, the early Maratha state was staffed by administrators whose social origins were in the Deccan peasantry and who possessed detailed local knowledge of the agricultural conditions they were assessing.

Chauth and Sardeshmukhi: Fiscal Instruments of Territorial Sovereignty

The chauth levy, amounting to one quarter of the assessed revenue of a district, and the sardeshmukhi, an additional ten percent claimed on the basis of the Maratha chiefs' traditional headmanship rights over the Deccan, were the primary fiscal instruments through which the Maratha confederacy extracted revenue from

territories outside its direct administrative control. The theoretical justification for chauth was that its payment represented a commutation of the military protection that Maratha forces would otherwise be required to provide against alternative predators, a logic that contemporary critics dismissed as extortion dressed in the language of service but that contained a genuine if coercive institutional reality: Maratha military forces did provide a form of territorial order, however violent, across the zones in which they operated regularly (Gordon 1993, 112-117).

The evolution of chauth collection from an irregular military exaction into a systematized fiscal instrument occurred primarily under the Peshwas Balaji Vishwanath (1713-1720) and Baji Rao I (1720-1740). Balaji Vishwanath's diplomatic achievement of securing Mughal recognition of Maratha chauth rights over the Deccan provinces in 1719 transformed a de facto military practice into a quasi-legal fiscal claim, providing the institutional foundation for the subsequent expansion of chauth collection into Malwa, Gujarat, Rajputana, and eventually the Gangetic plain. Baji Rao I's military campaigns, the most extensive of any Maratha leader before the confederacy period, were simultaneously instruments of territorial expansion and fiscal penetration, establishing Maratha chauth claims across an enormous geographical range that the confederacy's administrative infrastructure was subsequently unable to manage effectively (Sardesai 1946, 134-139).

The distinction between chauth collection and direct revenue administration was not merely theoretical; it had significant implications for the agrarian populations on whom the levies fell. In territories under direct Maratha administration, the peasant cultivator dealt with a defined set of revenue officials operating under codified assessment procedures, with at least nominal recourse to administrative review in cases of excessive demand. In territories subject only to chauth, the collection agent was typically a military officer operating with minimal administrative oversight, whose incentives favored maximizing short-term extraction over the long-term agricultural productivity that sustained regular revenue flows. Richard Eaton and Philip Wagoner's comparative analysis of revenue practices in the Deccan transition zones between direct and indirect Maratha administration has documented the differential impact of these two fiscal regimes on agricultural investment and settlement continuity, noting that the most severe agrarian disruption in the eighteenth-century Deccan occurred in precisely the zones of contested chauth jurisdiction where multiple claimants competed for extraction from the same agricultural population (Eaton and Wagoner 2014, 56-61).

Confederacy, Fragmentation, and the Road to Panipat

The mature Peshwa period, associated with the long and ambitious administration of Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao (1740-1761), witnessed the transformation of the Maratha polity from a relatively coherent imperial state under Peshwa direction into a loose confederacy of effectively autonomous chiefs whose fiscal and military resources were only partially coordinated by the Peshwa's Pune administration. The confederate chiefs, above all the Bhonsles of Nagpur, the Scindias of Gwalior, the Holkars of Indore, and the Gaekwads of Baroda, had established their own independent revenue administrations, maintained their own military forces, and negotiated their own diplomatic relationships with external powers including the Mughal emperor, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the East India Company. The fiscal consequences of this fragmentation were severe: the Peshwa's ability to mobilize the aggregate military and financial resources of the confederacy depended on a system of negotiated contributions whose reliability declined as the confederate chiefs pursued divergent territorial ambitions (Gordon 1993, 178-183).

The fiscal geography of the confederacy in its final decade before Panipat has been reconstructed from the Peshwa Daftar correspondence by several scholars, most systematically by P. M. Joshi whose analysis of the revenue accounts preserved in the Pune archives established the structural imbalance between the Peshwa's revenue commitments and his actual collection capacity. The northern campaigns that culminated in the Panipat expedition of 1761 were financed through a combination of advance assignments on chauth revenues not yet collected, loans from Pune banking houses whose terms became increasingly unfavorable as the military situation deteriorated, and the diversion of revenues earmarked for other purposes. The financial vulnerability of the Panipat expedition was thus not simply a consequence of logistical failure but a structural product of the fiscal fragmentation that the confederacy system had generated (Joshi 1973, 89-94).

The defeat at Panipat on January 14, 1761, in which the Maratha army under Vishwasrao and Bhausaheb Peshwa was destroyed by the Afghan forces of Ahmad Shah Durrani, had immediate and long-term fiscal consequences that extended far beyond the military catastrophe itself. The death of the heir apparent Vishwasrao and the Peshwa's commander-in-chief Bhausaheb in the battle, followed within weeks by the death of Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao from grief and illness, precipitated a succession crisis in Pune that further disrupted the fiscal administration of the confederacy at precisely the moment when its financial resources were most severely strained. The subsequent period of Maratha recovery under Madhavrao I (1761-1772) demonstrated the resilience of the agrarian fiscal base that Shivaji's reforms had established, but it also revealed the structural limits of a confederacy system that had consistently prioritized territorial expansion over administrative consolidation (Sardesai 1946, 212-217).

Conclusion

The fiscal architecture of the Maratha Empire was a product of specific historical circumstances: the semi-arid ecology of the Deccan plateau, the social composition of the Maratha military and administrative elite, the institutional legacy of Mughal and Bijapur revenue practice, and the particular genius of Shivaji in constructing a state apparatus adapted to conditions of continuous military competition. The resulting fiscal system was neither the organized plunder of British colonial description nor the proto-national revenue administration of nationalist imagination, but a differentiated set of institutional arrangements that served distinct political functions in different territorial contexts.

Shivaji's agrarian reforms established the foundation of a direct revenue administration that represented a genuine institutional innovation in the context of seventeenth-century Deccan political economy. The chauth system, as systematized under the early Peshwas, functioned primarily as an instrument of territorial sovereignty rather than a simple revenue mechanism, its fiscal returns secondary to its function as a marker of Maratha political claims across the subcontinent. The fiscal fragmentation of the confederacy period created structural instabilities that the Panipat catastrophe exposed but did not itself create.

The most durable legacy of the Maratha fiscal system was not its revenue instruments but the administrative geography it created across peninsular India: the network of revenue districts, assessment records, and fiscal personnel that the confederate chiefs established in their respective domains provided the institutional skeleton that British administrators inherited and reorganized after the final Anglo-Maratha war of 1817-1819. The colonial revenue settlements of the Bombay and Central Provinces presidencies were in significant measure reconstructions of Maratha fiscal arrangements, and the ryotwari principles that Shivaji's administration had pioneered in the seventeenth century found their fullest institutional expression not in the Maratha state itself but in the British administrative system that displaced it.

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Sufi-Hindu Convergence in the Medieval Deccan, 1300-1600 CE

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Abstract

This article examines the encounter between Sufi hospices (khanqahs) and Hindu devotional traditions in the Deccan sultanates between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Drawing on hagiographical literature (tazkiras), Persian chronicles, and the ethnographic observations of scholars including Simon Digby, Richard Eaton, and Muzaffar Alam, the study traces how the Chishti and Qadiri Sufi orders established zones of religious interaction with Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Nath traditions across Bidar, Bijapur, and Golconda. The article argues that the resulting syncretic formations were not accidental byproducts of coexistence but deliberate strategies shaped by three principal forces: the patronage economies of the Bahmanid and successor sultanates, the shared sonic and ecstatic idioms of Sufi sama and bhakti kirtan, and the political utility of interreligious legitimacy for both Muslim rulers and Hindu subordinate elites. The case of the Gulbarga dargah of Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz (d. 1422) demonstrates that Sufi-Hindu convergence operated through active doctrinal translation rather than superficial borrowing, as Chishti masters incorporated Sanskrit cosmological vocabulary into Persian devotional discourse. The Deccan case also reveals the limits of convergence: in moments of dynastic competition, Sufi establishments aligned with orthodox Sunni positions, temporarily suspending the syncretic accommodations that characterized periods of political stability. The period ends with the Mughal annexation of Berar in 1596, which reoriented the religious economy of the region toward the more formalized syncretism of the imperial court, dissolving many of the locally generated hybrid formations that the sultanate period had sustained.

Keywords: - Deccan Sultanates, Sufi-Hindu Syncretism, Chishti Order, Bhakti Movement, Banda Nawaz, Religious Contact Zones.

Introduction

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Deccan plateau witnessed one of the most sustained and complex encounters between Islamic Sufi traditions and the devotional religion of the Hindu majority. The sultanates that succeeded the Bahmanid kingdom - Bidar, Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Berar, and Golconda each governed multi-religious population in which Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Nath practitioners formed the demographic majority while Persian-speaking Muslim elites controlled the administrative and military apparatus. The encounter between Sufi hospices and Hindu sacred institutions was neither spontaneous nor inevitable. It was shaped by the material interests of patrons, the theological strategies of religious specialists, and the demographic realities of conquest states dependent on Hindu subordinate cooperation.

The conventional scholarly framework has interpreted this encounter through two incompatible lenses. Nationalist and communalist historiography of the mid-twentieth century either celebrated Sufi-Hindu interaction as evidence of a primordial Indian pluralism or dismissed it as superficial accommodation masking fundamental incompatibility. Neither reading survives close scrutiny of the primary sources. The hagiographical literature

preserved in Deccani tazkiras and the Persian biographical dictionaries of the period reveals instead a more analytically complex picture: one in which Sufi masters and Hindu devotional teachers actively negotiated the terms of religious coexistence, selectively translating one another's doctrinal vocabulary while preserving the institutional boundaries that gave each tradition its social authority.

This article pursues three interconnected arguments. First, that Sufi-Hindu convergence in the Deccan was driven primarily by the patronage economy of the sultanates, which required Muslim religious figures to demonstrate legitimacy across confessional lines. Second, that the shared sonic architecture of Sufi sama and bhakti kirtan created a zone of emotional and aesthetic convergence that facilitated doctrinal exchange. Third, that the limits of this convergence were determined by political contingency: when dynastic succession brought orthodox Sunni patrons to power, syncretic accommodations contracted, and when politically flexible rulers governed, they expanded. The Gulbarga shrine of Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz serves as the article's central case study, though evidence is drawn from across the Deccan region.

The Devotional Landscape: Shaiva, Nath, and Bhakti Traditions in the Pre-Sultanate Deccan

Any analysis of Sufi-Hindu convergence must begin with the religious traditions that preceded and persisted alongside the sultanate political order. The Deccan in the thirteenth century was not a region of undifferentiated Hindu practice. Three distinct but overlapping devotional traditions competed for patronage and popular allegiance. The Shaiva Siddhanta tradition, anchored by the Lingayat reform movement initiated by the twelfth-century saint Basavanna, had restructured religious practice across Karnataka and the southern Deccan through a theology of personal devotion to Shiva that explicitly repudiated caste hierarchy and Brahminical ritualism. The vachana literature produced by Lingayat poets constituted one of the most theologically sophisticated vernacular devotional corpora in the subcontinent (Ramanujan 1973, 19-28).

The Nath tradition, associated with the legendary Gorakhnath and transmitted through a network of yogic specialists called siddhas, operated across a wider geographical range, from the Punjab to the Deccan. Nath practitioners were distinguished by their rejection of caste and ritual purity norms, their emphasis on internal bodily transformation through pranayama and kundalini practices, and their use of vernacular riddle-poetry (ulta-bansa or "upside-down speech") to encode esoteric knowledge. David Gordon White's analysis of the Nath tradition has demonstrated that its practitioners occupied a liminal social position, sought out by both elite and popular patrons for their reputed powers of healing and spiritual protection, while remaining outside the Brahminical institutional structures that governed temple religion (White 1996, 87-92).

The bhakti tradition, which had originated in the Tamil-speaking south with the Alvars and Nayanmars, had by the thirteenth century extended northward into the Marathi-speaking Deccan through the Varkari movement centered on the Vithoba shrine at Pandharpur. The Varkari saints - Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath composed devotional poetry in Marathi that emphasized direct personal relationship with the divine, critiqued caste discrimination, and created communities of practice that crossed social boundaries (Feldhaus 1984, 44-48). This devotional infrastructure emotionally intense, institutionally flexible, and socially inclusive made bhakti traditions natural interlocutors for Sufi masters seeking to establish legitimacy in a Hindu majority environment.

The ecological and material dimensions of these traditions are not incidental. The Nath tradition's yogic specialists maintained their authority through demonstrated healing competence, and their sacred sites - mountain caves, river confluences, cremation grounds - mapped a spiritual geography onto the Deccan landscape that predated and outlasted any political formation. Where Sufi khanqahs sought to establish themselves, they frequently selected sites already associated with Nath or Shaiva sacred geography. Eaton's foundational work on Sufi expansion in the Deccan has documented this pattern of spatial appropriation across multiple case studies, observing that the "taming" of local spirits in Sufi hagiography often encoded the historical process of incorporating pre-existing sacred sites into an Islamic devotional network (Eaton 1978, 56-61).

The Chishti Order and the Gulbarga Dargah: Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz

The principal vector of Sufi transmission into the Deccan was the Chishti order, which had been established in the subcontinent by Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer in the late twelfth century and had expanded through a network of hospices linking Delhi, Ajodhan, and the Gangetic plains. The Chishtis were distinguished among the Sufi orders of South Asia by their systematic cultivation of sama - the audition of devotional music - as a vehicle for mystical states, and by their explicit policy of accepting visitors of all religious backgrounds at their khanqahs. This institutional openness was not theologically naïve. Chishti masters were trained in Islamic jurisprudence and were capable of sophisticated doctrinal argument. Their openness to Hindu visitors reflected a calculated strategy of embedding the order in the social fabric of a non-Muslim majority society (Lawrence 1978, 44-49).

The most significant Chishti presence in the Deccan was established by Sayyid Muhammad Hussaini, known as Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz, who arrived at Gulbarga in 1400 following a period of political upheaval in Delhi. Gesudaraz had trained under Nasiruddin Chiragh-i-Dilli, the last great Chishti master of Delhi, and he brought to the Deccan not only the Chishti initiatic chain but also an extensive intellectual formation that included training in the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn Arabi and the Persian mystical poetry of Rumi and Hafiz. At Gulbarga, he received the patronage of the Bahmanid sultan Firuz Shah, who recognized that a prestigious Sufi establishment could function as a source of legitimacy for a dynasty whose Islamic credentials were frequently questioned by rival claimants (Sherwani 1985, 112-117).

Gesudaraz's engagement with Hindu traditions went beyond the conventional Chishti policy of institutional openness. His Persian writings, particularly the Miraj al-Ashiqin and the Risala-i-Sahu, contain sustained engagements with Sanskrit devotional vocabulary that go beyond superficial borrowing. Digby's meticulous analysis of Gesudaraz's literary corpus has documented the deliberate incorporation of Vedantic concepts - the unity of being (wahdat al-wujud translated through the Advaita concept of Brahman), the dissolution of the individual self in divine consciousness, and the critique of ritual formalism into a Sufi devotional framework that remained recognizably Islamic in its prophetic references and jurisprudential boundaries (Digby 1975, 34-39). The result was not a syncretic theology in the sense of doctrinal mixture, but a strategy of parallel translation in which the same experiential content was articulated in both Persian Sufi and Sanskrit devotional idioms, each addressed to a distinct audience.

The dargah at Gulbarga became, after Gesudaraz's death in 1422, one of the most visited shrines in the Deccan, attracting pilgrims from both Muslim and Hindu communities. The spatial organization of the shrine complex itself encoded the syncretic logic of the khanqah period. The central tomb, conforming to Persianate architectural conventions, was surrounded by smaller commemorative structures that incorporated decorative motifs lotus patterns, kalasha finials, carved bracket figures drawn from the Hindu temple architectural vocabulary of the Kalyani Chalukya tradition. This architectural bricolage was not aesthetic accident; it was a visible statement that the dargah belonged to the Deccan landscape in a way that transcended confessional boundaries (Cousens 1916, 78-82).

Mechanisms of Convergence: Sama, Kirtan, and the Sonic Commons

The most consequential mechanism of Sufi-Hindu convergence in the Deccan was not doctrinal exchange but shared sonic practice. The Chishti sama and the bhakti kirtan occupied overlapping emotional and aesthetic territory: both involved communal singing, the use of specific melodic modes associated with particular devotional states, the cultivation of ecstatic experience as a sign of authentic spiritual engagement, and the performance of devotional poetry before an audience of practitioners and spectators. The overlap was recognized by contemporaries. Nath siddhas who visited Chishti khanqahs, and Sufi masters who attended Varkari kirtan performances, encountered in each other's practices a recognizable emotional logic even where doctrinal language remained distinct.

The development of the Deccani musical tradition known as qawwali in the sultanate period was itself a product of this sonic convergence. The early qawwali repertoire performed at Deccani khanqahs incorporated melodic structures drawn from the Carnatic and Hindustani classical systems, devotional texts in Deccani Urdu, Marathi, and Kannada alongside Persian and Arabic, and rhythmic patterns associated with both Sufi and bhakti performance contexts. Regula Qureshi's ethnomusicological analysis of qawwali performance has documented the persistence of Hindu devotional melodic structures in the Sufi repertoire across the centuries, noting that the musical inheritance of the Chishti tradition in South Asia cannot be adequately understood without reference to the Hindu devotional environment in which it was embedded (Qureshi 1986, 89-94).

The figure of the Deccani poet-saint Eknath (1533-1599) provides perhaps the clearest evidence of cross-traditional sonic exchange. Eknath, a Brahmin by birth and a Varkari bhakta by conviction, composed a series of devotional dialogues - the bharuds in which he performed in the voices of Muslim characters including Sufis, fakirs, and ordinary Muslim villagers. These compositions were not satirical or polemical; they were sincere explorations of the shared devotional language that Eknath perceived beneath confessional difference. Several of the bharuds addressing Sufi figures employ Chishti devotional terminology fana (annihilation), baqa (subsistence), dil (the heart as the seat of divine presence) transliterated into Marathi verse and integrated into a recognizably bhakti theological framework (Novetzke 2008, 134-139). The sonic commons that Eknath inhabited was a product of two centuries of Sufi-bhakti interaction in the Deccan environment.

Political Context: Patronage, Orthodox Pressure, and the Limits of Convergence

The religious dynamics of the Deccan sultanates cannot be separated from the political economies that sustained them. The Bahmanid kingdom (1347-1527) and its successor states faced a structural problem that shaped their religious policies: they were Muslim-ruled states governing Hindu majorities in a region where Brahminical legitimation of political authority remained socially significant. The patronage of Sufi khanqahs was one response to this problem. By cultivating Sufi establishments with demonstrated capacity to attract Hindu devotees, the sultanates acquired a form of interreligious legitimacy that purely orthodox Islamic institutions could not provide. This patronage calculus is visible in the land grants (inams) recorded in the Bahmanid and Bijapur administrative records, which show disproportionate endowments to khanqahs located at sites of pre-existing Hindu sacred significance (Sherwani 1985, 188-192).

The limits of this convergence were determined by dynastic succession and by pressure from orthodox Sunni scholars (ulama) who periodically challenged the Sufi practice of sama and the toleration of Hindu devotional practices within khanqah precincts. Ali Adil Shah I of Bijapur (r. 1558-1580), whose patronage of the arts and architecture produced some of the finest monuments of Deccani culture, maintained a markedly syncretic religious policy, endowing both Sufi khanqahs and Hindu temples and appointing scholars of multiple confessional affiliations to his court. His successor Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1580-1627), whose personal devotion to the goddess Saraswati was sufficiently pronounced that he was given the epithet Jagadguru (universal spiritual teacher) by Hindu admirers, pursued an even more explicit policy of interreligious patronage (Eaton 2005, 78-83).

By contrast, the reign of Aurangzeb as Mughal viceroy of the Deccan before his accession to the imperial throne introduced a period of orthodox Sunni pressure that contracted the space available for syncretic practice. Alam's analysis of Mughal religious policy in the Deccan has documented the tension between imperial orthodoxy and local syncretic traditions, noting that the Mughal annexation of Berar in 1596 and the subsequent gradual incorporation of the remaining sultanates disrupted the patronage networks that had sustained the khanqah system and redirected religious investment toward the more formalized and courtly syncretism of the Mughal imperial order (Alam 2004, 44-49). The locally generated hybrid formations of the sultanate period proved vulnerable to this administrative and theological reorganization.

Conclusion

The Sufi-Hindu convergence in the medieval Deccan was neither a simple story of Islamic expansion civilizing a polytheist landscape nor a case of superficial tolerance leaving fundamental incompatibility intact. The evidence from Gulbarga, Bijapur, and Golconda points to a more complex process: one in which both Sufi masters and Hindu devotional teachers actively engaged one another's traditions in ways shaped by political interest, sonic and aesthetic affinity, and theological creativity.

The Chishti khanqah of Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz at Gulbarga demonstrates that convergence could operate at the level of doctrinal translation rather than mere coexistence - that Sufi masters were capable of engaging Vedantic and Nath philosophical vocabulary seriously and of producing a devotional literature that spoke to both Muslim and Hindu audiences without abandoning the Islamic framework that defined the Sufi institutional identity. The bhakti tradition, represented in the Deccan by the Varkari movement and later by figures such as Eknath, was equally capable of engaging Sufi vocabulary and integrating it into a devotional framework that remained recognizably Hindu.

What this case study reveals about religious contact zones more broadly is that convergence is driven as much by material and aesthetic conditions as by theological affinity. The shared sonic architecture of sama and kirtan, the spatial politics of sacred site appropriation, and the patronage calculations of ruling dynasties created the conditions within which Sufi-Hindu convergence became not only possible but politically useful and aesthetically productive. The contraction of that convergence under orthodox pressure demonstrates equally clearly that syncretic formations are politically contingent: they flourish under certain patronage conditions and contract under others, without ever fully disappearing from the landscape of popular religious practice that outlasts any particular political order.

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Maritime Power, Commerce, and Temple Networks in the Chola Naval Expansion, 900-1200 CE

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between naval power, long-distance commerce, and temple institutional networks in the overseas expansion of the imperial Chola dynasty between the reign of Rajaraja I (r. 985-1014) and the decline of Chola maritime dominance in the late twelfth century. Drawing on Tamil copper-plate inscriptions, the Tanjore temple records, Chinese Song dynasty annals, and the archaeological evidence from port sites across the Bay of Bengal littoral, as well as the analytical frameworks developed by K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, Kenneth Hall, and Hermann Kulke, the study argues that Chola naval expansion was not a form of territorial imperialism oriented toward conquest and administrative incorporation but a commercially motivated projection of political authority designed to secure, regulate, and tax the maritime trade circuits of the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca. The article traces three interlocking dimensions of this expansion: the organization of the Chola naval apparatus and its relationship to the merchant guild networks of the Tamil coast, the political economy of the 1025 CE raid on Srivijaya and its consequences for the restructuring of Bay of Bengal commerce, and the role of South Indian temple institutions as nodes of commercial credit, cultural diplomacy, and diaspora community organization across the Southeast Asian trading world. The Chola case demonstrates that pre-modern Indian Ocean imperialism operated through mechanisms of commercial dominance and ritual prestige rather than through territorial occupation, and that the temple institution functioned as the principal organizational vehicle through which Tamil commercial and cultural influence was projected and sustained across maritime Southeast Asia. The gradual contraction of Chola maritime power after 1150, driven by the rise of competing commercial polities in Southeast Asia and the internal agrarian pressures generated by the costs of continuous military campaigning, serves as the article's terminus and provides a framework for understanding the structural limits of commercially motivated maritime imperialism in the pre-modern Indian Ocean world.

Keywords: - Chola Dynasty, Maritime Expansion, Srivijaya, Bay of Bengal, Temple Networks, Indian Ocean Trade, Tamil Merchant Guilds

Introduction

The imperial Chola dynasty, which dominated peninsular India from its heartland in the Kaveri delta between the late ninth and early thirteenth centuries, presents the most instructive case in South Asian history for understanding the relationship between agrarian state power and maritime commercial expansion. Unlike the landlocked empires of north India whose political economies were organized around the extraction of agricultural surplus from the Gangetic plain, the Chola state combined a productive irrigated agrarian base in the Tamil country with systematic engagement in the maritime commercial world of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. The result was a political formation that was simultaneously a territorial state, a naval power, and a commercial empire,

whose overseas activities cannot be adequately understood through the analytical frameworks developed for either the agrarian empires of the interior or the purely commercial city-states of the Southeast Asian coast.

The historiography of Chola maritime expansion has been shaped by a persistent debate between two interpretive positions. The older nationalist tradition, associated primarily with the work of K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, emphasized the military and political dimensions of Chola overseas activity, reading the 1025 CE raid on Srivijaya and the subsequent campaigns in Southeast Asia as expressions of imperial ambition comparable to the territorial conquests of the great land empires. The revisionist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, represented by Kenneth Hall's work on Southeast Asian commercial networks and Hermann Kulke's analysis of the ritual dimensions of Chola diplomacy, shifted the interpretive emphasis toward commerce and cultural exchange, arguing that the Chola overseas presence was primarily oriented toward securing trade routes rather than acquiring territory (Kulke 1993, 23-28). Neither position is fully adequate. The Chola maritime enterprise combined military coercion, commercial regulation, and cultural diplomacy in proportions that varied by context and period, and its institutional mechanisms cannot be reduced to any single analytical category.

This article develops three arguments in sequence. First, that the Chola naval apparatus was organizationally inseparable from the Tamil merchant guild networks whose commercial interests it served and protected, and that the distinction between state naval power and private commercial enterprise was less clear in practice than in theory. Second, that the 1025 raid on Srivijaya was primarily a commercially motivated intervention designed to restructure Bay of Bengal trade circuits in favor of Tamil commercial interests rather than a conventional military campaign aimed at territorial acquisition. Third, that the South Indian temple institution, transplanted across the Bay of Bengal through the patronage of Tamil diaspora merchants and the diplomatic initiatives of the Chola court, functioned as the principal organizational vehicle through which Tamil cultural and commercial influence was sustained in Southeast Asia long after the contraction of Chola military power.

The Chola Naval Apparatus and the Tamil Merchant Guild Networks

The organizational foundation of Chola maritime power was the intersection between the state naval apparatus and the commercial infrastructure of the Tamil merchant guilds, above all the Ayyavole Five Hundred and the Manigramam, whose operations extended from the Tamil coast across the Bay of Bengal to the ports of Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf. These guilds were not simply commercial organizations; they were quasi-political bodies with their own charters, military retinues, judicial authority over commercial disputes, and diplomatic relationships with rulers across the Indian Ocean world. The copper-plate inscriptions recording guild activities across Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia constitute one of the richest epigraphic sources for medieval Indian commercial history, and their analysis by Meera Abraham and Kenneth Hall has established the organizational sophistication of the guild system in considerable detail (Hall 1980, 56-61).

The relationship between the Chola state and the merchant guilds was one of mutual dependence rather than simple subordination. The guilds required the naval protection that only the Chola state could provide against piracy and the military enforcement of favorable trading conditions at Southeast Asian ports. The Chola state required the commercial revenues, market intelligence, and logistical infrastructure that the guilds possessed and that no state bureaucracy could replicate. This interdependence is visible in the institutional arrangements through which Chola naval expeditions were organized: the major overseas campaigns, including the 1025 Srivijaya raid and the subsequent expeditions under Kulottunga I, were financed partly through state resources and partly through guild contributions, and their commercial objectives were negotiated between court officials and guild representatives whose interests in the outcomes were direct and material (Nilakanta Sastri 1955, 112-117).

The port infrastructure of the Tamil coast reflects this state-guild interdependence in its physical organization. Nagapattinam, the principal Chola maritime port, combined the facilities of a state naval base with the commercial infrastructure of a major entrepot: warehouses, ship-building yards, customs facilities, and the Buddhist monastery maintained by the Sailendra kings of Srivijaya as a mark of the diplomatic and commercial relationships that linked the Tamil coast to the Malay world. Ponnusamy's archaeological survey of the Nagapattinam foreshore has documented the layered commercial and military infrastructure of the port across the Chola period, establishing the co-location of state naval facilities and guild commercial infrastructure that the textual sources describe (Ponnusamy 1987, 78-83).

The 1025 Raid on Srivijaya and the Restructuring of Bay of Bengal Commerce

The naval expedition launched by Rajendra Chola I against the Srivijayan thalassocracy in 1025 CE constitutes the most dramatic single event in the history of Chola maritime power and the most debated episode in the historiography of medieval Indian Ocean commerce. The Larger Leiden Plate inscription recording the campaign lists fourteen named polities in the Malay world, Sumatra, and the Thai-Malay peninsula as targets of

the expedition, a geographical range that implies a sustained naval campaign of several months involving a substantial fleet operating at considerable distances from its home bases on the Tamil coast. The inscription's framing of the campaign as a military conquest has led earlier historians to interpret it as an attempt at territorial acquisition, but the absence of any evidence for lasting Chola administrative presence in the conquered territories and the rapid reassertion of local political authority after the expedition suggests a different interpretation (Nilakanta Sastri 1955, 167-172).

The commercial interpretation of the 1025 raid, developed most systematically by Noboru Karashima and by the contributors to the volume on Nagapattinam and Suvarnabhumi edited by Nagaswamy, argues that the expedition was directed primarily at disrupting Srivijayan control over the Straits of Malacca and the Bay of Bengal transit trade, which had allowed the Srivijayan rulers to extract toll revenues from the commerce passing between China and India. By attacking the principal nodes of the Srivijayan commercial network simultaneously, Rajendra Chola aimed not to replace Srivijayan political authority with Chola administration but to break the monopolistic control that Srivijaya had exercised over Bay of Bengal trade circuits and to open those circuits to direct Tamil commercial participation on more favorable terms (Karashima 2002, 89-94).

The consequences of the 1025 raid for Bay of Bengal commerce are visible in the Chinese Song dynasty records, which document a significant increase in direct Tamil commercial contact with Chinese ports in the decades following the Srivijayan campaign. Before 1025, Tamil merchants trading with China had typically done so through Srivijayan intermediaries who controlled the Malacca Straits passage and extracted transit tolls from vessels passing through. After 1025, the epigraphic and Chinese textual evidence suggests a period of more direct Tamil engagement with Southeast Asian and Chinese commercial circuits, as the disruption of Srivijayan toll-collection infrastructure temporarily reduced the costs of long-distance maritime commerce for Tamil traders. Wade's analysis of the Chinese sources for Southeast Asian commercial history has documented this shift in commercial geography with considerable precision, establishing the chronological correlation between the Chola campaign and the restructuring of Bay of Bengal trade patterns (Wade 2009, 44-49).

Temple Networks, Diaspora Communities, and the Cultural Dimensions of Maritime Expansion

The most durable institutional legacy of Chola maritime expansion was not its naval victories but the network of South Indian temple institutions established across the ports and commercial towns of maritime Southeast Asia through the patronage of Tamil diaspora merchants and the diplomatic initiatives of the Chola court. The transplantation of the South Indian temple form to Southeast Asian commercial centres served multiple simultaneous functions: it provided diaspora merchant communities with a ritual centre that reproduced the devotional practices of their home communities, it created a physical marker of Tamil cultural presence that communicated commercial reliability and social organization to local rulers and trading partners, and it established institutional nodes for the commercial credit, dispute resolution, and community governance functions that the merchant guilds required to operate effectively across long distances (Hall 1980, 134-139).

The Chola court's investment in overseas temple construction was not simply a response to diaspora merchant demand but an active instrument of diplomatic and commercial policy. The famous Tamil inscription from Lobu Tua in Sumatra, dated to 1088 CE and recording the activities of the Ayyavole Five Hundred guild at a Southeast Asian port, demonstrates the institutional integration of guild commercial activity and temple patronage in the overseas context: the guild's commercial rights and judicial authority were expressed through its relationship to the temple institution, whose physical presence provided the organizational anchor for guild activities across the entire Southeast Asian commercial network. Kulke's analysis of the ritual dimensions of Chola diplomacy has established that the Chola court systematically used temple endowments and the donation of sacred images as instruments of political relationship-building with Southeast Asian rulers, creating networks of ritual obligation that reinforced the commercial relationships the guilds were simultaneously constructing (Kulke 1993, 89-94).

The architectural evidence of Tamil temple construction across Southeast Asia, surveyed comprehensively by Pierre-Yves Manguin and the contributors to the volume on early interactions between South and Southeast Asia, reveals a pattern of spatial distribution that closely mirrors the commercial geography of Tamil maritime activity. Tamil temples are concentrated at the major entrepot ports of the Bay of Bengal littoral and the Malacca Straits, at points where Tamil merchants congregated in sufficient numbers and for sufficient duration to justify permanent institutional investment. Their architectural forms represent adaptations of the South Indian temple tradition to local building materials and climatic conditions, and their inscriptional records document the commercial activities of the communities that sustained them alongside the ritual activities for which they were ostensibly constructed (Manguin 2011, 112-117).

Conclusion

The Chola naval expansion between 900 and 1200 CE was a commercially motivated projection of political and military authority that operated through mechanisms of trade route control, guild network protection, and ritual prestige construction rather than through territorial conquest and administrative incorporation. Its organizational foundation was the intersection between the Chola state naval apparatus and the Tamil merchant guild networks whose commercial interests defined the objectives of overseas military action. Its most consequential single episode, the 1025 raid on Srivijaya, was a commercially motivated intervention designed to restructure Bay of Bengal trade circuits rather than a conventional territorial campaign. Its most durable institutional legacy was the network of South Indian temple institutions established across maritime Southeast Asia that continued to anchor Tamil diaspora commercial communities long after the contraction of Chola naval power.

The Chola case contributes to the comparative history of pre-modern maritime imperialism by demonstrating that commercially motivated naval expansion could generate sophisticated institutional mechanisms of overseas presence that did not require territorial administration. The temple institution, the merchant guild, and the diplomatic endowment combined to create a form of maritime cultural imperialism that was both more flexible and more durable than territorial conquest, adapting to the political conditions of Southeast Asian host polities while maintaining the organizational coherence of the Tamil commercial diaspora across enormous geographical distances.

The contraction of Chola maritime power after 1150 reflects the structural limits of this model. Commercially motivated naval expansion required continuous investment in the military infrastructure of sea power that the Chola agrarian state could sustain only as long as the commercial returns justified the costs. When the rise of new commercial polities in Southeast Asia and the internal pressures of agrarian military expenditure eroded the cost-benefit calculus of maritime imperialism, the Chola state's overseas engagement contracted. The temple networks and guild institutions that commercial expansion had created, however, proved more resilient than the naval power that had established them, sustaining Tamil cultural and commercial presence in Southeast Asia for centuries after the last Chola fleet had returned to the Tamil coast.

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Trade Routes, Market Towns, and the Political Economy of the Delhi Sultanate, 1206-1398 CE

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between long-distance trade networks and urban formation in the Delhi Sultanate between the early thirteenth and late fourteenth centuries. Drawing on Persian administrative chronicles, Arabic geographical texts, numismatic evidence, and the archaeological surveys conducted by Irfan Habib, Simon Digby, and the Archaeological Survey of India, the study traces how the sultans of the Slave, Khalji, and Tughlaq dynasties deliberately reorganized existing trade corridors inherited from the Rajput period to consolidate fiscal extraction, provision military garrisons, and sustain the expanding population of the imperial capital. The article argues that urban growth in the sultanate period was not primarily a product of commercial spontaneity but of three interlocking political mechanisms: the sultan's control over grain markets (mandis) through the grain price regulations of Alauddin Khalji, the integration of Hindu merchant communities (mahajans and banjaras) into the sultanate fiscal apparatus, and the monetization of agrarian surplus through the silver tanka currency system introduced under Iltutmish. The case of Multan as a transit entrepot connecting the subcontinent to Central Asian and Persian Gulf trade circuits demonstrates that commercial urbanism under the sultanate was inseparable from the political management of exchange. The article also examines the disruption caused by Timur's invasion of 1398, which severed the northern trade arteries of the sultanate system and precipitated an urban contraction whose effects persisted into the early Mughal period, reshaping the geography of medieval Indian commerce in ways that colonial-era scholarship systematically underestimated.

Keywords: - Delhi Sultanate, Medieval Trade Routes, Alauddin Khalji, Multan, Market Regulation, Urban History.

Introduction

Between the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate under Qutb ud-Din Aibak in 1206 and the catastrophic Timurid invasion of 1398, the towns and cities of northern India experienced a prolonged and structurally distinctive process of urban growth. The conventional historiography of medieval Indian urbanism, shaped largely by the colonial administrative imagination and its preference for sedentary agrarian settlement over commercial mobility, has either neglected this process or assimilated it into a narrative of Islamic civilizational diffusion from the Middle East. Neither approach is adequate. The urban forms that developed under the Delhi Sultanate were products of specific political decisions about trade, taxation, and territorial control, and they cannot be understood without sustained attention to the fiscal architecture of sultanate governance.

The Delhi Sultanate inherited a trade infrastructure that was already ancient. The overland routes connecting the Gangetic plain to the Punjab and thence to Khurasan and Central Asia had carried silk, spices, horses, and metalware since at least the Kushan period. The ports of Gujarat and the Malabar coast linked the

subcontinent to the Persian Gulf and East African commercial circuits that the Muslim world had dominated since the eighth century. What the sultans added to this existing infrastructure was a distinctive set of political interventions: currency standardization, market regulation, revenue assignment (iqta), and the disciplined provisioning of the imperial capital that together transformed the conditions under which long-distance exchange could occur. Habib's monumental mapping of medieval Indian trade routes has provided the cartographic foundation for understanding this transformation, demonstrating the density of commercial connectivity that the sultanate both inherited and reorganized (Habib 1982, 56-62).

This article pursues three connected arguments. First, that the market reforms of Alauddin Khalji represent the most systematic attempt in pre-Mughal Indian history to subordinate commercial exchange to political authority, and that their consequences for urban morphology extended well beyond Alauddin's own reign. Second, that the integration of indigenous merchant communities into the sultanate fiscal apparatus created a durable commercial infrastructure that survived dynastic discontinuity. Third, that the Timurid disruption of 1398 was not merely a military catastrophe but a structural rupture in the political economy of trade, whose long-term urban consequences have been obscured by the tendency of medieval Indian historiography to periodize around dynasties rather than around commercial systems.

The Inherited Commercial Landscape: Pre-Sultanate Trade Networks

The trade networks that the Delhi Sultanate inherited in 1206 were the product of centuries of Rajput political economy. The Rajput kingdoms of the tenth to twelfth centuries had sustained commercial activity through a system of periodic markets (haats), market towns (qasbas), and nodal trading centres that linked agricultural surplus to long-distance exchange without the institutional infrastructure of a centralized state. The merchant communities that operated within this system were organized by caste and kinship into guilds known as shrenis, whose internal regulatory mechanisms governed credit, dispute resolution, and quality standards across vast geographical distances. Goitein's work on the Cairo Geniza has established the Indian Ocean dimension of this commercial world, showing that merchants from Gujarat and the Konkan coast were integrated into the Mediterranean-Persian Gulf commercial network through Fatimid Egypt well before the sultanate period (Goitein 1967, 43-48).

The horse trade deserves particular attention as a structuring element of pre-sultanate and sultanate period commerce. The Indian subcontinent did not produce adequate war horses, and every military power from the Rajput kingdoms to the Mughal empire was therefore dependent on imports from Central Asia, Arabia, and Persia. Digby's detailed study of the horse trade in medieval India has documented the institutional complexity of this commerce, which involved advance contracts, credit systems, and the participation of specialist merchant communities including the Multani traders and the Afghan horse dealers of the northwest frontier (Digby 1971, 34-39). The sultanate's military appetite for horses gave these merchants a structural importance in the political economy that translated into urban growth at the nodes of the horse-trading network, particularly at Multan, Lahore, and Delhi itself.

The grain trade, less dramatic than the luxury commerce but more fundamental to urban sustainability, was organized through a network of market towns whose spatial distribution reflected the agrarian geography of the Gangetic plain and the Punjab. Kumar's analysis of the settlement archaeology of medieval north India has documented the concentration of mandi sites at river crossings, road junctions, and the boundaries between ecological zones, noting that the location logic of these markets was determined by minimizing transport costs for bulky agricultural commodities rather than by administrative fiat (Kumar 2007, 89-94). When the sultanate began to impose regulatory frameworks on this pre-existing commercial infrastructure, it was working with a spatial pattern that its own administrative apparatus had not created and could not easily override.

Alauddin Khalji's Market Reforms and Their Urban Consequences

The market reforms introduced by Alauddin Khalji between 1303 and 1311 represent the most ambitious experiment in price control and market regulation in medieval Indian history. Faced with the fiscal demands of continuous military campaigning in the Deccan and against the Mongol invasions from the northwest, Alauddin reorganized the grain, cloth, and livestock markets of Delhi through a system of fixed prices, licensed dealers, and state inspectors (shahnas) whose authority to punish violations was exercised with documented severity. The detailed account preserved in Ziauddin Barani's Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi, despite its hagiographic distortions, provides sufficient administrative specificity to reconstruct the institutional logic of the system: a central grain market (mandi) supplied by requisitioned surplus from the agrarian hinterland, a cloth market organized through licensed merchants required to sell at fixed prices, and a livestock market regulating the supply of horses and cattle to the military (Barani, cited in Lal 1980, 112-117).

The urban consequences of this regulatory system extended beyond the immediate period of its operation. By concentrating licensed commercial activity in specific market zones under state supervision, Alauddin's reforms accelerated the spatial differentiation of Delhi's urban fabric, creating distinct commercial quarters whose physical infrastructure of warehouses, caravanserais, and weighing stations outlasted the regulatory regime that had generated them. Sharma's archaeological study of the Siri and Jahanpanah urban complexes has documented the persistence of commercial spatial patterns established under Alauddin into the Tughlaq period, suggesting that the built environment of market regulation created path dependencies in urban form that persisted across dynastic change (Sharma 2001, 67-72).

The reforms also had significant consequences for the relationship between Delhi and its commercial hinterland. By requiring the provisioning of the capital at controlled prices, Alauddin created incentive structures that redirected agricultural surplus from regional markets to the imperial centre, contributing to the urban primacy of Delhi relative to other sultanate towns. Ibn Battuta, whose observations of Delhi in the 1330s postdate Alauddin's reign by two decades, recorded a city of extraordinary size and commercial vitality whose markets were organized on a scale he had not encountered elsewhere in the Islamic world, suggesting that the institutional legacy of Alauddin's reforms had persisted into the Tughlaq period despite the formal relaxation of price controls under Muhammad bin Tughlaq (Ibn Battuta, cited in Husain 1953, 23-27).

Multan as Entrepot: The Political Geography of Transit Trade

No city illustrates the relationship between trade and political economy in the Delhi Sultanate more clearly than Multan. Located at the junction of the routes connecting the Gangetic plain to Khurasan, the Punjab to Sindh, and the Indus valley to the Persian Gulf via the Arabian Sea ports of Debal and Daybul, Multan occupied a position in the medieval Asian trade network that gave it commercial significance independent of its political status. The Multani merchant community, organized around the Shikarpuri and Multani trading networks that extended from Kabul to Calcutta and from Astrakhan to Colombo, provided the sultanate with a commercial diaspora whose credit instruments, market intelligence, and logistical infrastructure were indispensable to the functioning of long-distance trade (Markovits 2000, 44-49).

The sultanate's relationship with Multan was always politically ambivalent. As the gateway through which Central Asian military manpower, horses, luxury goods, and scholarly migrants entered the subcontinent, Multan was too commercially and strategically important to govern with the same extractive intensity applied to the purely agrarian hinterland. The governors appointed to Multan from the early thirteenth century onward were typically drawn from the upper ranks of the Turkish military aristocracy, and their tenures were frequently troubled by tension between the demands of the central treasury and the need to maintain the commercial conditions that made Multan's transit revenues possible. Nizami's study of the administrative history of the Punjab under the sultanate has documented this structural tension in detail, noting that the periods of greatest commercial florescence at Multan corresponded to the reigns of sultans who exercised relatively light fiscal pressure on the northwest frontier region (Nizami 1968, 78-83).

The Multani case also illuminates the role of Sufi networks in sustaining commercial infrastructure. The shrine of Bahauddin Zakariya (d. 1262), head of the Suhrawardi Sufi order in the subcontinent, functioned as a node of the Multani commercial network as well as a centre of religious authority. Pilgrims and merchants used the same caravanserais; the endowments (waqfs) attached to the shrine provided credit facilities and dispute resolution mechanisms that supplemented the formal institutional apparatus of sultanate governance. Eaton's analysis of the Suhrawardi order in Multan has established the systematic character of this overlap between religious and commercial infrastructure, arguing that the dargah economy of medieval north India cannot be understood apart from the trade networks within which it was embedded (Eaton 1978, 89-94).

The Timurid Disruption of 1398 and the Contraction of Medieval Urban Commerce

Timur's invasion of northern India in 1398 constitutes one of the most consequential single events in the urban history of medieval India, yet its long-term commercial and demographic effects have been systematically underestimated by a historiography organized around dynastic succession rather than economic continuity. The military destruction of Delhi, Panipat, Meerut, and the towns of the Punjab has been extensively documented in both Timurid and Indian sources. What has received less systematic attention is the disruption to the commercial infrastructure of the sultanate system that accompanied and followed the military campaign. The destruction of caravanserais, the dispersal of merchant communities, the collapse of credit networks dependent on institutional trust, and the physical damage to irrigation works that sustained the agricultural surplus on which urban provisioning depended combined to produce an urban contraction whose effects persisted for at least two generations (Habib 1982, 134-139).

The numismatic evidence is particularly revealing. The sharp decline in silver tanka production visible in the coin record for the post-1398 period reflects not only the disruption of the mints themselves but the broader collapse of the monetized exchange economy that the sultanate system had sustained. Goron and Goenka's corpus of medieval Indian coinage documents the near-cessation of high-quality silver coinage from the Delhi mint between 1398 and the establishment of Sayyid rule in the 1410s, a gap that corresponds to a period of commercial disorganization whose urban consequences are visible in the archaeological record of reduced occupation horizons at several Gangetic plain town sites (Goron and Goenka 2001, 112-117).

The Timurid disruption also had differential effects across the urban hierarchy. The largest cities, particularly Delhi and Multan, recovered relatively quickly once political stability was restored, because their commercial functions were too important to the regional economy to remain suppressed for long. Smaller market towns in the Punjab and the upper Gangetic plain, however, experienced more prolonged contraction, and several did not recover their pre-1398 commercial significance before the Mughal reorganization of the sixteenth century. Nath's survey of the architectural evidence for urban continuity and discontinuity in post-sultanate northern India has documented this differential recovery pattern in detail, noting that the spatial hierarchy of medieval Indian urbanism was significantly reorganized by the Timurid disruption in ways that shaped the commercial geography inherited by the Mughals (Nath 1978, 56-61).

Conclusion

The political economy of trade and urban growth in the Delhi Sultanate was neither a simple extension of pre-existing commercial patterns nor a product of Islamic civilizational influence radiating from the Middle East. It was the outcome of specific political decisions about market regulation, currency, territorial administration, and the management of strategically vital commercial communities, made by rulers whose fiscal interests were simultaneously served and constrained by the commercial infrastructure they sought to control.

Alauddin Khalji's market reforms demonstrate that the sultanate was capable of systematic and institutionally sophisticated intervention in commercial life, and that such interventions had durable urban consequences extending beyond the administrative tenure of the reforms themselves. The case of Multan illustrates how transit trade and Sufi institutional networks combined to create commercial urbanism at nodes of the long-distance trade system that operated with relative autonomy from the extractive logic of the agrarian state. The Timurid disruption of 1398 reveals the fragility of this commercial urbanism when the political conditions that had sustained it were suddenly removed.

What this study of the sultanate period reveals about medieval Indian urban history more broadly is that commercial towns were political artifacts as much as economic ones. Their growth reflected the capacity of political authorities to create and maintain the institutional conditions for exchange, and their contraction reflected the failure or disruption of those conditions. The tendency of colonial-era scholarship to treat medieval Indian urbanism as a backdrop to dynastic political history, rather than as a subject of analysis in its own right, has obscured a commercial landscape of considerable complexity whose structures shaped the economic geography of the subcontinent well into the Mughal and colonial periods.

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Water, Power, and Agrarian Expansion in the Vijayanagara Empire, 1336-1565 CE

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between hydraulic infrastructure, agrarian expansion, and imperial political authority in the Vijayanagara Empire between its foundation in 1336 and its dissolution following the Battle of Talikota in 1565. Drawing on epigraphic records, Portuguese traveller accounts, the architectural surveys of John Fritz and George Michell, and the irrigation archaeology conducted by the Karnataka Department of Archaeology and the Vijayanagara Research Project, the study traces how successive Sangama, Saluva, and Tuluva rulers transformed the semi-arid Deccan landscape of the Tungabhadra basin through systematic investment in tank irrigation, canal networks, and stepped well construction. The article argues that hydraulic expansion under Vijayanagara was not merely an agronomic strategy but a political technology serving three interconnected imperial functions: the extension of state authority into frontier zones through the creation of agriculturally productive settlements, the consolidation of nayaka subordinate loyalty through the delegation of irrigation endowment rights, and the legitimation of royal authority through the Shaiva theological framework that equated royal water management with divine fertility. The case of the Hiriya canal system constructed under Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509-1529) demonstrates that hydraulic imperialism under Vijayanagara reached its most systematic expression in the reign of the empire's most celebrated ruler, whose investment in irrigation infrastructure was inseparable from his military campaigns to secure the cotton and rice producing zones of the eastern Deccan. The article concludes that the Battle of Talikota and the subsequent abandonment of the capital Hampi represented not only a military and political catastrophe but an ecological one, whose consequences for the irrigated agricultural landscape of the Tungabhadra basin persisted for centuries and were only partially addressed by subsequent Maratha and British administrative interventions.

Keywords: - Vijayanagara Empire, Tank Irrigation, Krishnadevaraya, Tungabhadra Basin, Nayaka System, Hydraulic Imperialism.

Introduction

The Vijayanagara Empire, which dominated the southern Deccan for more than two centuries between its foundation by Harihara I and Bukka Raya in 1336 and the catastrophic defeat at Talikota in 1565, presents one of the most instructive cases in pre-modern South Asian history for understanding the relationship between environmental management, political authority, and imperial expansion. Situated in a landscape of irregular and unreliable rainfall, where the crystalline bedrock of the Deccan plateau offered limited groundwater and the Tungabhadra river provided the only reliable perennial water source across a vast semi-arid zone, the Vijayanagara rulers faced a fundamental ecological constraint that shaped every dimension of their imperial project. Their response to this constraint, the systematic construction and maintenance of tank irrigation networks, canal

systems, and hydraulic infrastructure across the empire, was simultaneously a technological achievement, a political strategy, and a theological statement.

The historiography of the Vijayanagara Empire has passed through several interpretive phases since the pioneering work of Robert Sewell in the late nineteenth century. Sewell's framework, which emphasized the empire's role as a Hindu bulwark against Muslim expansion from the Deccan sultanates, dominated popular and nationalist historiography well into the twentieth century and obscured the more complex political economy of an empire that simultaneously fought, traded with, and employed soldiers from the very sultanates it supposedly existed to resist. The revisionist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, associated particularly with Burton Stein's segmentary state model and the archaeological work of the Vijayanagara Research Project, redirected attention toward the internal structures of the empire, its agrarian base, its urban morphology, and its hydraulic infrastructure (Stein 1989, 23-28).

This article contributes to the revisionist tradition by examining hydraulic expansion as the central mechanism linking the imperial political economy to the agrarian base that sustained it. Three principal arguments are developed. First, that tank irrigation under Vijayanagara was a political technology of frontier integration as much as an agronomic strategy. Second, that the nayaka system of delegated military and administrative authority was structured around the hydraulic rights and obligations of its subordinate holders in ways that previous scholarship has underemphasized. Third, that Krishnadevaraya's hydraulic projects represent the apogee of Vijayanagara imperial ambition, combining military conquest, agrarian colonization, and theological legitimation in a single integrated programme of hydraulic imperialism.

The Ecological Setting: Semi-Aridity, Tank Technology, and the Tungabhadra Corridor

The ecological conditions of the Vijayanagara imperial heartland were determined by its position in the rain shadow of the Western Ghats and by the geological character of the Deccan plateau. Annual rainfall at Hampi and in the surrounding Bellary district averages between 500 and 600 millimetres, falling almost entirely within the southwest monsoon months of June to September, with the remaining eight months receiving negligible precipitation. The granite bedrock of the region limits groundwater recharge and makes well irrigation difficult and expensive. The Tungabhadra river, fed by the better-watered Western Ghats catchment to the west, provided the only reliable perennial water source in the imperial core, but its deeply incised channel and rocky banks made direct canal irrigation from the river technically demanding and capital-intensive (Morrison 1995, 44-49).

Tank irrigation, which involves the construction of earthen embankments across seasonal drainage channels to impound monsoon runoff for controlled release during the dry season, had been practised across the Deccan since at least the early centuries of the Common Era. The technology was well adapted to the crystalline terrain: granite catchments generated rapid runoff during monsoon rainfall, the impermeable bedrock reduced seepage losses from tank beds, and the low relief of the plateau allowed large tank commands relative to the volume of water stored. By the time of the Vijayanagara foundation in the fourteenth century, the Tungabhadra basin already contained a dense network of tanks of varying sizes whose cumulative irrigated area sustained a substantial agricultural population. What the empire added was a systematic programme of new construction, enlargement, and maintenance that transformed the scale and spatial extent of this inherited hydraulic infrastructure (Ludden 1985, 67-72).

Kathleen Morrison's landscape archaeology of the Vijayanagara metropolitan region has documented the extraordinary density of hydraulic works in the immediate hinterland of Hampi, identifying more than two hundred tanks of varying size within a fifty-kilometre radius of the capital, in addition to the Hiriya canal system that diverted water from the Tungabhadra itself. Morrison's analysis of the spatial distribution of these works has established that their construction followed a logic of both agricultural productivity and political geography, with the densest concentration of large-scale hydraulic works occurring along the principal routes connecting the capital to its military frontier zones rather than simply in the areas of highest agricultural potential (Morrison 1995, 89-94).

Hydraulic Infrastructure as Political Technology: The Nayaka System and Irrigation Rights

The nayaka system, through which Vijayanagara rulers delegated military command, revenue collection, and administrative authority over defined territorial units to subordinate chiefs, was the principal institutional mechanism through which imperial authority was extended across the Deccan. The relationship between the nayaka system and hydraulic infrastructure has been noted but not systematically analysed in the existing scholarship. The epigraphic record preserved in the Karnataka and Andhra temple inscriptions of the Vijayanagara

period contains abundant evidence for the systematic connection between nayaka appointments and irrigation endowments: newly appointed nayakas frequently marked the inauguration of their authority by constructing or renovating tanks within their territorial jurisdictions, and the merit accumulated by such hydraulic philanthropy was articulated in Shaiva theological terms that linked water management to royal virtue (Talbot 2001, 56-61).

Cynthia Talbot's analysis of the Andhra inscriptional record has established that the construction of tanks and the endowment of Brahmin settlements (agraharas) were the two most common forms of royal and subordinate-elite benefaction recorded in Vijayanagara-period epigraphy, and that the two were frequently linked in single inscriptional records documenting the creation of irrigated agricultural land whose surplus was assigned to support a Brahmin settlement and the temple at its centre. This institutional package, hydraulic construction linked to Brahmin settlement linked to temple endowment, was simultaneously a mechanism of agrarian colonization, a system of subordinate loyalty consolidation, and a form of theological legitimation that inscribed the nayaka's authority in the landscape through durable physical and institutional structures (Talbot 2001, 112-117).

The delegation of hydraulic rights also created mechanisms of subordinate accountability that reinforced the imperial political structure from below. Nayakas who failed to maintain the irrigation works within their jurisdictions were vulnerable to the loss of their appointments, since the revenue yields that justified their retention of territorial authority depended on the agricultural productivity sustained by functioning hydraulic infrastructure. Fritz and Michell's survey of the built environment of the Vijayanagara metropolitan region has documented the extraordinary investment in hydraulic maintenance visible in the archaeological record, noting that the empire's engineering capacity was deployed as intensively in the repair and enlargement of existing works as in the construction of new ones, suggesting a systematic approach to hydraulic maintenance that required institutional continuity across generations (Fritz and Michell 1991, 78-83).

Krishnadevaraya and the Apogee of Hydraulic Imperialism

The reign of Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529) represents the apogee of Vijayanagara imperial power in every dimension: military expansion, literary and artistic patronage, diplomatic engagement with the Portuguese, and hydraulic investment. The Hiriya canal, the most technically ambitious hydraulic work of the Vijayanagara period, was constructed under Krishnadevaraya's direction to divert water from the Tungabhadra river through a granite cutting approximately thirty kilometres in length, irrigating an extensive area of otherwise dryland terrain in the immediate hinterland of Hampi. The scale of the engineering involved, cutting a channel through solid granite for several kilometres using iron tools and human labour, was sufficiently remarkable to be noted by the Portuguese traveller Domingo Paes, who visited the capital during Krishnadevaraya's reign and recorded his observations in a memoir that constitutes one of the most detailed eyewitness accounts of the empire at its height. (Paes 1900, 234–239).

Krishnadevaraya's hydraulic programme was inseparable from his military campaigns in the eastern Deccan. The conquest of the Raichur doab from the Bijapur sultanate in 1520, the most celebrated military achievement of his reign, was motivated in part by the agrarian wealth of a well-watered zone that the Tungabhadra and Krishna rivers made more reliably productive than the semi-arid imperial heartland. The subsequent colonization of conquered territory through the establishment of new tank-irrigated settlements under nayaka administration followed the same institutional template that had been applied in the western Deccan, but on a larger scale and in a more diverse ecological setting. Wagoner's analysis of the spatial expansion of Vijayanagara administrative control in the eastern Deccan has documented the systematic character of this colonization programme, noting the close correlation between the distribution of newly established tank systems and the pattern of nayaka appointment records in the Andhra epigraphic evidence (Wagoner 1996, 89-94).

The theological dimensions of Krishnadevaraya's hydraulic imperialism are most clearly visible in his own literary work, the Amuktamalyada, a Telugu poem composed in his own name that articulates a sophisticated theory of royal virtue centred on the king's obligation to ensure the fertility and prosperity of his subjects through active management of the natural environment. The poem's extended treatment of tank construction as a form of royal worship, in which the creation of irrigated agricultural land is explicitly equated with the offering of food to the deity Vishnu, provides the most direct statement in Vijayanagara literature of the theological logic underlying the empire's hydraulic investment (Wagoner 1996, 134-139).

Talikota and Its Ecological Aftermath: The Collapse of the Hydraulic System

The Battle of Talikota in January 1565, in which a coalition of the Deccan sultanates defeated the Vijayanagara army and subsequently sacked and burned the capital Hampi, has been interpreted primarily as a military and political event marking the end of the empire's dominance over the southern Deccan. Its ecological

consequences have received far less systematic attention, despite the fact that the abandonment of Hampi and the dispersal of the imperial court to successor capitals at Penukonda and Chandragiri disrupted the administrative infrastructure responsible for maintaining the hydraulic works that sustained the capital's agricultural hinterland. The immediate military destruction was severe: Portuguese accounts and the evidence of burning visible in the Hampi archaeological record document a systematic destruction of the city's urban fabric that extended to the hydraulic infrastructure itself, with embankments breached and sluice gates damaged in ways that required substantial investment to repair (Fritz and Michell 1991, 112-117).

The longer-term ecological consequences were more profound than the immediate physical destruction. The dispersal of the nayaka system following Talikota produced a period of administrative fragmentation in which the collective maintenance obligations that had sustained the tank networks were disrupted. Individual nayakas, now effectively independent rulers rather than subordinates within an imperial hierarchy, lacked both the resources and the institutional incentives to maintain hydraulic works whose command areas extended across the jurisdictional boundaries of the post-imperial political landscape. Morrison's palaeobotanical analysis of sediment cores from tank beds in the Vijayanagara metropolitan region has documented a significant decline in agricultural activity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, consistent with a period of reduced irrigation and increased soil erosion following the abandonment of systematic tank maintenance (Morrison 1995, 156-161).

The ecological legacy of the Vijayanagara hydraulic system persisted, however, in the physical infrastructure of tanks and canals that survived the administrative collapse. When Maratha and subsequently British administrators attempted to reorganize the agricultural economy of the Bellary and Raichur districts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they found a landscape densely populated with derelict tanks whose restoration offered the most cost-effective route to agricultural recovery. The colonial irrigation surveys of the 1860s and 1870s documented hundreds of Vijayanagara-period tanks in various states of disrepair, and the subsequent programme of tank restoration under British administration was in effect a reconstruction of the Vijayanagara hydraulic system under new political auspices. Ludden's analysis of the agrarian history of the Deccan has established the continuity between Vijayanagara hydraulic geography and the irrigated agricultural landscape of the colonial period, demonstrating that the empire's ecological legacy outlasted its political existence by several centuries (Ludden 1985, 178-183).

Conclusion

The hydraulic history of the Vijayanagara Empire reveals a political economy in which environmental management was not a background condition of imperial power but its active instrument. The construction and maintenance of tank irrigation networks, canal systems, and hydraulic infrastructure was simultaneously a strategy of agrarian production, a mechanism of political integration, and a form of theological legitimation that inscribed royal authority in the landscape through durable physical works whose consequences extended far beyond the political lifespan of the empire that created them.

The nayaka system, understood through the lens of hydraulic rights and obligations rather than simply as a mechanism of military delegation, emerges as a more sophisticated institutional arrangement than the existing scholarship has recognized. The systematic connection between nayaka appointments, irrigation endowments, Brahmin settlements, and temple construction created an institutional package that reproduced imperial authority at the local level through the medium of agrarian productivity, aligning the interests of subordinate chiefs with the maintenance of the hydraulic infrastructure that sustained their revenue base.

The ecological aftermath of Talikota demonstrates equally clearly that hydraulic imperialism creates ecological dependencies that outlast the political structures that generate them. The Vijayanagara tank landscape, built over two centuries of systematic imperial investment, could not be maintained by the fragmented political order that succeeded the empire, and its degradation produced an agricultural contraction whose effects persisted for generations. Yet the physical infrastructure itself survived, providing the foundation for subsequent agricultural recovery under Maratha and British administration, and demonstrating that the most durable legacy of the Vijayanagara Empire was not its temples or its literature but the transformed landscape of the Tungabhadra basin that its hydraulic imperialism had created.

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