Book Reviews


The Anglicised word Deccan has its ultimate origin in the Sanskrit word dakshina, meaning the South (hence the word like dakshinapatha, the Southern route). In the context of the geography of the Indian sub-continent, the Deccan denotes the table-land between the Eastern and Western Ghats, the Peninsula, south of the river Narmada.

For most of the historical period, Deccan has been divided into small kingdoms. So it was during the medieval times. Of these medieval kingdoms, only Vijayanagara was ruled by a Hindu dynasty whereas all others had Shi’ite Muslim rulers. Many of these rulers were great patrons of various art forms, like painting, architecture, music etc. But these arts of the region, although not completely ignored, had not been so thoroughly studied up to the last century. Then a team under the renowned art historian George Michell undertook a thorough survey of the architecture of the Vijaynagara Empire. Slowly, the arts of the Muslim kingdoms also began to arouse interest of a wider circle of scholars. The year 2008 has been especially beneficial in this context as two international conferences were organized focusing on the arts of the region. The first conference, under the title “Art, Patronage and Society in the Muslim Deccan from the Fourteenth Century to the Present Day” was hosted on 4-6 July 2008 at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford. And less than four months later, on 24-25 October 2008, a symposium was held on the theme “The Arts of India’s Deccan Sultanates” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Papers presented at each conference have been published in the form of a book. The book under review, The Visual World of Muslim India: The Art, Culture and Society of the Deccan in the Early Modern Era, edited by Laura E. Parodi, comprises the thirteen papers presented at the Oxford conference. All the papers are the outcome of deep and new research and not just rehashing of the old material.
In the book, the papers are classified into four parts. The first part, given the title *Shaping Factors in Urban Landscapes: Symbols, Rituals, and Practical Concerns*, has three articles. Of these, the first article “The Circular Cities of the Deccan” is by Marika Sardar. She begins with a survey of various circular sixteenth-century cities of the Peninsula in general, and the fortified city of Warangal in particular. Then she proceeds to search for the potential sources of inspiration for adopting this plan. In the last part of her article she tries to trace the possible practical reasons for adoption of the circular plan in numerous Deccan cities. In the process, she opines that “the form of the circular city might have been considered desirable in that it was generally seen as a local or ancient symbol connected with royal power.” In fact, she echoes the views of a Bijapuri courtier, writing in 978/1570-71 in his treatise called *Nujum al-Ulam* (The Stars of the Sciences) who had noted that “the round fort is one of the ideal types fitting of the chakravartin, the universal ruler of Indic belief.”

East Punjab too has at least one specimen of circular medieval fortification. It is Saifabad (near Patiala), founded by the Mughal noble Saif Khan in 1067/1656-57. Later, Maharaja Karam Singh (r. 1814-45) of Patiala remodelled it and gave it the new name of Bahadurgarh, after the ninth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur who had very cordial relations with Saif Khan.

The significance of the monuments of Golconda had been recognised during the early twentieth century. Since then, these have never been ignored in any history of Indo-Muslim architecture but micro-studies of its monuments reveal much more than merely their stylistic development. Robert Alan Simpkins, in his article “Golconda’s Mosques and Tombs: Distribution, Chronology and Meaning” has made an attempt to imagine the landscape of Golconda during the period of Qutb Shahi rule on the basis of the monuments associated with it. These structures also make known the ancient routes through the modern urban spaces.

Simpkin’s statement about the condition of the Golconda’s monuments—some structures have lost their original function and are used for residence, storage or livestock; some are even incorporated into new houses—is true for so many groups of monuments all over the Indian subcontinent.

The coastal town of Chaul, situated some 60 kilometres to the south of Mumbai, has been a principal port of Nizam Shahs of the kingdom of Ahmadnagar, for about one hundred and forty years. Pushkar Sohoni in his article “Medieval Chaul under the Nizam Shahs: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation” explores the archaeology and history of the town, between 1490 and 1636.
The author first briefly traces the history of the town and then examines the physical evidence surviving in the form of a caravanserai, a mosque, a hammam, a tomb, a few miscellaneous structures, and some archaeological artifacts. However, the author’s treatment of each monument is too brief.

The caravanserai was meant for itinerant merchants and travellers along the route connecting the town with the hinterland of the Deccan. But, as compared to almost contemporary Mughal caravanserais built along the Agra-Lahore Mughal highway, the size of this caravanserai is very small. Even the smallest caravanserai along the Mughal route is more than four times larger than the caravanserai at Chaul.

The mosque is five-aisled, each three bays deep. An inscription on it gives the name of Burhān Nizām Shah. Hammam is a really splendid structure. It is strange that the author makes no attempt to fix the chronology of these monuments on the basis of stylistic or literary evidence.

The second part of the book is given the title—Visual Testimonies: Identities and Beliefs in the Mirror of Art and Architecture. It has four articles. The first piece, by George Michell, is entitled “Migrations and Cultural Transmissions in the Deccan: Evidence of Monuments at Vijayanagara.” The author successfully refutes the long-standing view of Vijayanagara as “Hindu bulwark against Muhammadan conquest.” He builds his argument on the basis of a minute study of carved sculptures on the monuments at Vijayanagar, the mosque and tombs in the various Muslim quarters of the city, and its Bahmani-influenced courtly buildings. All this visual evidence amply confirms “the transformations of ideas, practices and architectural techniques from the Muslim courts of the Deccan to the Hindu capital.” In fact, religious affiliations of the Deccani rulers apart, their military expertise, courtly culture and architectural styles did not remain unaffected from each other.

George Michell mentions an inscription in Kannada language on a mosque at Vijayanagar, in which the structure is referred to as dharmasala. Interestingly, in some nineteenth century Gurmukhi inscriptions, gurdwaras, i.e., the Sikh places of prayer are also referred to as dharmasalas. In two early twentieth century gurdwaras at Faridkot, obviously built by Muslim masons, each has a mihrab in its western wall where to place the Guru Granth Saheb, the sacred book of the Sikhs. In fact, in the religious groups living together for centuries, exchange of ideas is inevitable.

In the next article “The Great Mosque at Gulbarga Reinterpreted as the Hazar Sutun of Firuz Shah Bahmani (r. 1397–1422),” its author Helen Philon proves that the Great Mosque inside the Gulbarga Fort was actually the audience hall of the Bahmani ruler Sultan Firuz Shah, which was at some later date converted into a mosque. Previously, an inscription fixed in the wall of its
northern gate, which mentions the date 769/1367 and the name of Rafi’ from Qazvin as the person responsible for its construction, made scholars believe that the building had actually been built as a mosque. Art historian and epigraphist Ziyaud-din Desai was the first to doubt the validity of the inscription and to prove that it was not in situ.

The article has two small factual errors. First, a baoli, cannot be translated as “well” as Philon has done. The word stepwell is more appropriate. Secondly, on the authority of Anthony Welch, she mentions a building called “Bijai Mandir.” But the building mentioned by Welch is “Bijai Mandel” wrongly translated by him as “Wonderful Mansion.” It appears that “Bijai Mandel” is actually a corrupted form of “Vijay Manzil,” i.e., “the mansion of victory.”

Kalaus Rotzer’s article “Deccani Guns: Features and Ornamentation” analyses the heavy pieces of ordinance created from about 1400 till 1687, the year by which the whole of the Deccan had been finally subjugated by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Actually the study is focused on five guns at Bidar, still lying in situ, four in the fort and one on a bastion of the city wall. Beautifully engraved epigraphs on these canons not only provide information about the date and place of their manufacture, titles of the reigning Barid Shahi rulers, but also the practical information about the weight of gunpowder for every shot, and the weight of the stone or iron ball to be thrown at the enemy. In one instance, the name of the calligrapher is also recorded. The author rightly wonders at “the poor military results of a huge stone ball hurled at rare intervals from a height towards and open ground.” Anyway, whatever was their effectiveness in the battlefield, some of these guns exhibit excellent inlaid ornamentation, the designs having been, most probably copied from contemporary textiles. However, the author’s view that this decoration had some magical purpose is doubtful.

Gijs Kruijtzer in his article “The Fighting on the Wall: Animal Symbolism of the Deccan in a Eurasian Perspective” discusses the depiction of the images of animals on the gates of Raigarh Fortress (c. 1670s), Sharza bastion of the Bijapur Fort, and the Patancheru Gate and Banjara Gate of the Golconda Fort (c. 1559). In fact these panels are allegorical representations reflecting “some of the multiple identities of Self and Other current at the time of their making.” The author arrives at the conclusion that such depictions of animal combats have a long and Eurasia-wide genealogy and that the “animal symbolism was always new and brimming with references to the social context of the particular time at which they were made.”

Although the author traces the ancestry of these animated panels in the whole of Eurasia, he does not make even a passing reference to the similar
panels carved during the period of the Delhi Sultanate or the Mughals. At least the following five such examples are known:

The earliest example appears on the Barsi Gate at Hansi (District Hisar, Haryana), built in 702/1302–03, and repaired in Dhū al-Qa’dah 928/1522. The gate has two panels. Each scene depicts a man, armed with a sword and a shield, fighting with a lion. In the left panel lion’s body appears to be bearing the head of a horse. The man here holds his sword (now damaged) in his left hand, probably due to the difficulty in depicting the figure having his sword in his right hand.

The second and third examples are seen on the City Gate and Delhi Gate (dated 1411) at Chanderi (District Ashoknagar, Madhya Pradesh). Each of the City Gate panels has a lion carved in it but in each panel on the Delhi Gate, a lion is shown subduing an elephant.

The fourth and fifth specimens are carved on the Talaqi Darwaza (Northern Gate) and Humayun Darwaza (Southern Gate) of the Old Fort at Delhi, built about 1533–34. In each panel on the Talaqi Darwaza, a mythical composite animal having the body of a horse and the head of a lion, is shown overpowering a man. Similarly, the Humayun Darwaza too, has two panels each depicting an elephant in it.

The third section of the book bearing the title “Dynamics of Court Art: Policy, Diplomacy, and the Visual,” has three articles. The first article in this section—“Variations on a Persian Theme: The Diwan of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah and the Birth of the Illustrated Urdu Diwan” is by Laura Weinstein. The piece is a study of the illustrated personal copy of the Diwan of Muhammad-Quli Qutb Shah (1580–1611) of Golconda, now preserved in the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad. It consists of 138 folios, all written in a beautiful hand, and scattered with eight brilliant paintings depicting “common subjects such as a polo game, a scene from the story of Yusuf wa Zulaykha, a king being entertained in his court, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba enthroned, and so on, which have little or no relation at all with the text they go together with.”

An interesting feature of the painting of Solomon is the use of the technique of appliqué. Some small pieces of marbled paper pasted onto the painting “to represent a variety of objects such as the wings of simurgh, the side of the vizier’s chair and the body of a peacock.”

Stylistically, the paintings are inspired by Persian works. But at the same time, these show that the Iranian “styles were not and could not have been transmitted unchanged from Iran to India.” The author concludes “that the artists of the Diwan, though clearly aware of iconic Persianate compositions, motifs and subjects... seem still to have been actively exploring Persian culture
Deborah Hutton and Rebecca Tucker in their joint article bearing the title “A Dutch Artist in Bijapur” trace the carrier of the early seventeenth century little-known Dutch Mannerist painter named Cornelius Claesz Heda who stayed at Bijapur between 1610 and 1622. Sadly none of his paintings have survived. However, it is probable that some Bijapuri paintings in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and British Museum, London, were directly or indirectly influenced by Heda’s work. The authors have built up an account of his career on the basis of the “information gleaned from surviving letters written by or about Heda to the VOC [Vereinigde Oostindische Compagnie], now housed in The Hague....”

Keelan Overton in her article “Vida de Jacques de Coutre: A Flemish Account of Bijapuri Visual Culture in the Shadow of Mughal Felicity” introduces the autobiography/travel account of Jacques de Coutre (c. 1575–1640), a native of Bruges, the capital and largest city of the province of West Flanders in the Flemish Region of Belgium. During the period 1603–23 de Coutre worked as a roving gem trader throughout the Deccan and South-east Asia. His autobiography, originally written in Spanish is preserved in the National Library of Spain in Madrid. He visited Bijapur intermittently on short term basis as he travelled between the cities and mines of the Deccan.

The last one-third of the article, in which the author, in his own words, “focus[es] on arguably the most compelling corpus of images produced in the context of the Jahangir-Ibrahim duet: the gifted royal portrait,” is hardly related to the first two-third. I wonder why the author has clubbed two unrelated studies in one article.

The last part of the book “Beyond the Court Boundaries: Market Goods, Folk Tales, and Popular Devotion” also comprises three articles. The first article in the section “Bidri Ware and the New Mughal Order” is by Laura E. Parodi who is also the editor of the book under review.

As is well-known, Bidri wares are small artifacts made of an alloy of zinc (approximately 90%) and copper. The bodies of the artifacts are burnished and inlaid usually with silver. The handicraft, as the name suggests originated in Bidar (now in Karnataka), during the medieval period. On the basis of the vegetal motifs on the wares, early Bidri specimens with floral decoration, and their supposed depiction in two paintings, are usually dated to the 1650s or sometimes even the 1630s. But the author Parody examines “the material record that has perhaps not been explored in its full potential” and arrives at the conclusion that it is “to the end rather than the middle of the seventeenth century that the globular Bidri hookahs and a number of stylistically related
objects ... should be dated.” She connects the popularization of the craft with the conquest of Deccan by Aurangzeb “which unified Mewar and the Deccan under the same rule, the metallic zinc extracted at Zawar would have been more readily and steadily available to Deccani craftsmen....” She considers it a contribution of Alamgir’s reign in the domain of the visual arts of the Deccan.

Local craftsmen associate the origins of the Bidri ware with the Sufi saint Muinuddin Chishti (d. 1230) of Ajmer. However, the author’s acceptance of the claim on the basis that “methods for the distillation of zinc oxide were devised in Iran around the same years as Muinuddin Chishti’s lifetime” appears far-fetched. It is doubtful if most of the now popular saints did enjoy similar popularity during their lifetimes. Usually, it is the accretion of lore during later times which heightens their fabled status. So associating significant historical events with popular saints is usually legendary.

The Urdu mathnawi titled Gulshan-i ’Ishq was written by Mulla Nusrati at the Bijapur court of Ali Adil Shah II (r. 1656–72) in 1657. Its theme originated from an earlier Awadhi poem Madhu Malati by Sayyid Manjhan Rajgiri. The popularity of the work can be judged from the fact that the Salar Jung Museum (Hyderabad) alone has in its collection no less than eight copies of the mathnawi. Navita Najat Haider in her article “Gulshan-i ’Ishq: Sufi Romance of the Deccan” analyses an illustrated copy of the manuscript dated 1742–43 from Hyderabad, now in the collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art. Scribed by the calligrapher Ahmad ibn Abdullah Nadkar, in bold naskh, the manuscript is adorned with no less than 97 richly coloured and gilded paintings. In the process, the author compares these paintings with those of the corresponding scenes from the dispersed c. 1710 manuscript (folios now in various collections) of the work.

Everything in the painting “Gesu Daraz enthroned” is royal and lacks the sobriety of a Sufi dervish. It appears that the painter has had a special devotion to the saint. Red border fences in two paintings “Raja Bikram’s alms are rebuffed” and “Bikram and the fairies” have something modern about them when elements carved on lathe began to be used, instead of carved stone lattices as shown in numerous Mughal and Pahari paintings. The dervish in the painting “Manohar meets a dervish” appears to be a human version of emaciated painted horses in Deccani paintings.

As seen from the paintings reproduced with the article, the outdoor scenes are painted in brilliant colours whereas those depicting interiors make use of a subdued palette.

The last article in the collection “Sacred Spaces and Objects of Popular Deccani Muslim Devotional Practices” is by Omar Khalidi. The author begins his piece with explanations of the common words like, dargah, ashurkhana,
qabr, mazar, ziyara, chaubhandi, sama’khana, khanqah, takiya, zawiya, chilla, ʿurs, fatiha, sandalmali, chiragan, dhikr, fana’, qawaali, etc., all associated with Islamic practices. Then he lists a few prominent ‘ashurkhanas of the Deccan, describes their functions, and the typical Deccani way of observing Muharram. He concludes the article with his comments about “continued resilience of the culture of shrines and sacred spaces.”

One of the Khalidi’s observations I would like to comment upon. He writes that “India’s lower castes and tribes, long excluded from Hindu temples, find the dargabs especially attractive given the egalitarian environment most intensely felt during canonical prayers.” But visiting dargabs is not limited to “India’s lower castes and tribes” only. I have the living experience of at least two Muslim shrines, namely the Dargah of Shaikh Hyder at Malerkotla and the Chilla of Baba Farid at Faridkot (both in East Punjab) where the Hindu and Sikh visitors outnumber the Muslim devotees. My view is that folk religion does not strictly adhere to religious boundaries. Common people start visiting any place (even sometimes associated with an imaginary personage who never existed, for example, the shrine of Baba Rode Shah on Faridkot-KotKapura Road, East Punjab) wherever they expect the fulfilment of their desires.

After the articles, an Appendix lists the dynasties and rulers of the Deccan. Such a collection of articles is usually bereft of a bibliography but the book in hand has an extensive one. The publication closes with three separate indexes of personal names, places and miscellaneous words.

The book besides containing scholarly articles has been produced so finely that it is a pleasure to hold it in one’s hands.

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