

Lords of the Deccan

The history of the vast Indian subcontinent is usually told as a series of ephemeral moments when a large part of modern-day India was ruled by a single sovereign. There is an obsession with foreign invasions and the politics of the Gangetic plains, while the histories of the rest of the subcontinent have been reduced to little more than dry footnotes. Now, in this brilliant and critically acclaimed debut book, Anirudh Kanisetti shines a light into the darkness, bringing alive for the lay-reader the early medieval Deccan, from the sixth century CE to the twelfth century CE, in all its splendour and riotous glory.

Kanisetti takes us back in time to witness the birth of the Chalukyas, a dynasty that shaped southern India for centuries. Beginning at a time when Hinduism was still establishing itself through the Deccan, when the landscape was bereft of temples, he explores the extraordinary transformation of the peninsula over half a millennium. In vivid and colourful detail, Kanisetti describes how the mighty empires of medieval India were made: how temple-building and language manipulation were used as political tools; how royals involved themselves in religious struggles between Jains and Buddhists, Shaivas and Vaishnavas; and how awe-inspiring rituals were used to elevate kings over their rivals and subjects. In doing so, he transforms medieval Indian royals, merchants and commoners from obscure figures to complex, vibrant people. Kanisetti takes us into the minds of powerful rulers of the Chalukya, Pallava, Rashtrakuta and Chola dynasties, and animates them and their world with humanity and depth.

It is a world of bloody elephant warfare and brutal military stratagems; of alliances and betrayals; where a broken king commits ritual suicide, and a shrewd hunchbacked prince founds his own kingdom under his powerful brother's nose. This is a world where a king writes a bawdy play that is a parable for religious contestation; where the might of India's rulers and the wealth of its cities were talked of from Arabia to Southeast Asia; and where south Indian kingdoms serially invaded and defeated those of the north. This painstakingly researched forgotten history of India will keep you riveted and enthralled. You will never see the history of the subcontinent the same way again.



Praise for *Lords of the Deccan*

‘Rarely has the history of peninsular India, of this period, been told as anything more than a dry and ceaseless monotony of battles between obscure and unimaginable rulers. Anirudh Kanisetti’s *Lords of the Deccan* has lifted the history of south India out of the dusty archives of Indian archaeology and epigraphy. Meticulously researched and narrated with a style that is at once lively and judicious, *Lords of the Deccan* synthesizes a wide array of innovations in recent scholarship with the older tradition of political history. Kanisetti harnesses his impressive skills as a storyteller to breathe new life into his subject, deftly interweaving the careers of individual kings, the structures and networks of noble families, and the great transformations in religious, cultural and literary life into a single coherent and riveting account of south India in this crucial period, which saw the region enter historical centre-stage and take on many contours still palpable today.’

– Daud Ali, Associate Professor, University of Pennsylvania
and author of *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*

‘This is one of the most unputdownable history books you will ever read.’

– Krish Ashok, Global Head of Digital Workplace, TCS
and author of *Masala Lab*

‘Kanisetti’s union of historicity and narrative non-fiction will be a tough act to follow.’

– *Biblio: A Review of Books*

‘[Kanisetti] writes as if he is speaking directly to you, telling you a story, and taking you places . . . a magnificent book.’

– *Business Standard*

‘*Lords of the Deccan* is the completely thrilling and game-changing debut of a major new talent. Anirudh Kanisetti is a superb writer and a talented storyteller as well as an impressively judicious and subtle historian. He breathes life into the rajas, scholars and soldiers of two nearly forgotten medieval

dynasties and resurrects for us a whole extraordinary world with flair, nuance, clarity and sophistication.'

– William Dalrymple, author of *The Anarchy*

'Delightful . . . a model of how one can write a ripping read while still following historical practice.'

– Rohit De, Associate Professor, Yale University and author of
A People's Constitution

'[A] remarkable debut book. Quite unlike drab history tomes.'

– Bibek Debroy, Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to
the Prime Minister

'An important and beautifully written book that sheds new light on the history of the Deccan and its peoples in a period too often either taken for granted or ignored. A stunning debut.'

– Peter Frankopan, Director, Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research
and author of *The Silk Roads*

'A sprawling and riveting saga of a region that has often been overlooked in popular Indian history . . . Kanisetti has . . . [written] a highly readable book without, to his credit, sacrificing robust historical research.'

– *Frontline*

'The book does much to highlight the historical significance of a region that does not figure prominently in the popular imagination of India's medieval past . . . an erudite, popular history . . .'

– *India Today*

'Kanisetti's blistering book might be the pioneering force in unraveling many more legends of the Deccan . . . brushed off the dust from several unopened chapters of Indian history, where the myths of the subcontinent reside.'

– *Los Angeles Review of Books*

Lords of the Deccan is an assured and supremely entertaining account of a clamorous, tumultuous and little-known period of Indian history – the early medieval Deccan period. Navigating these uncharted waters with considerable confidence and panache, Anirudh Kanisetti brings to vivid light both the savagery and the song of these riotous five hundred years. He does so, moreover, by dismantling the opaque language of historiography for the lay-reader and giving them the tools to truly understand the dialect of power – the temple building, the ode-writing, the painting and even the very manipulation of language and religion. With *Lords of the Deccan*, Kanisetti has claimed for himself a place of pride in the cartography of Indian history writing.’

– Ira Mukhoty, author of *Daughters of the Sun*

‘In prose that is lucid, witty and entertaining Kanisetti has created a mesmerising world, every bit as seductive as any Netflix offering.’

– *Open*

‘Do yourself a favour – particularly you lot banging on about how you only learned about Mughals in school – and read Kanisetti’s *Lords of the Deccan*.’

– Prem Panicker, journalist and editor

‘Ambitious in its scope and rich in depth and detail, *Lords of the Deccan* is an outstanding debut. With his evocative retelling, Anirudh Kanisetti restores medieval south India to the prominence and centrality it deserves in general imagination – marrying old learning to new perspectives on everything, from kingship to the evolution of religions.’

– Manu S. Pillai, author of *Rebel Sultans*

‘In shining a light on the Deccan in the second half of the first millennium, Anirudh Kanisetti has given us a marvellous book. It brings to life the Chalukyas, the Pallavas, the Cholas, the Rashtrakutas and others, and in the process gives us a peninsular perspective of Indian history. This is also a story of imperial achievements in which language, literature, faith, sculpture and

artistic achievement weld seamlessly with political and military stratagems. A wonderful read.'

– T.C.A. Raghavan, former diplomat and author of *History Men*

'Anirudh Kanisetti takes us on a fascinating journey into the past to revive five hundred years of glorious rule of early medieval Deccan rulers and brings the Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas and Cholas back into popular historical consciousness. Kanisetti's engaging narrative style and lively account brings to life the triumphs, defeats and rivalries of those lords and ladies of the Deccan who have left behind a legacy of magnificent architecture and sculpture; sumptuous textiles and jewellery; evocative poetry and literature.'

– Rana Safvi, author of *Tears of the Begums*

'A blood and guts retelling of the Chalukyas . . . vividly recreates an era from medieval south India . . . erudite and knowledgeable but has the pace and suspense of a novel.'

– Scroll

'Designed to capture the imagination of the reader and keep them turning the pages right till the end . . . a testament to Anirudh Kanisetti's extraordinary knack for storytelling and announces the arrival of an ambitious new voice in the genre of Indian history writing.'

– *Telegraph India*

Lords of the Deccan

Southern India from the Chalukyas
to the Cholas

Anirudh Kanisetti

 juggernaut

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And to the generations who have shaped the world before us.



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Introduction

Every monsoon, rain clouds bathe the cool, dark surfaces of an ancient temple in Ellora, Maharashtra. Peals of thunder echo in its cavernous halls, like the bells that once greeted throngs of devotees.

There's something dazzlingly different about this gigantic temple. You see, it isn't a building of the kind you and I might be used to. It wasn't assembled bottom up from the ground, brick by brick, stone by stone.

It was *excavated*.

It is called the Kailashanatha, the Lord of Kailasha, because generations of awestruck visitors have seen it as a manifestation of the mountain upon which the god Shiva lives. To fashion it, thousands of sculptors carved up an enormous basalt cliff face, removing two *million* cubic feet of rock (enough to fill two Olympic-sized swimming pools). They did so in barely twenty years in the ninth century CE, with a plan breathtaking in its scale and attention to detail, leaving behind a monolith the size of a football field and about half the height of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. A monolith in the shape of a spectacular south Indian temple, with the weight of its superstructure cascading down in wider and wider tiers, decked with sculptures of frolicking deities. The Kailashanatha is a *single sculpture* so large that it approaches the size of modern buildings. As a monolithic structure, it is unlikely to be matched in size and beauty for the rest of human history.

This extraordinary edifice was made by people who thought themselves every bit as modern as you or I. They were a vibrant, warlike, sophisticated people. They were ruled by men who claimed the majestic title of Sri-Prithivi-Vallabha, the Beloved of Sri (the goddess of fortune) and Prithivi (the goddess of Earth). Their empire dominated the ancient Deccan plateau at the heart of India, especially the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka, today an area almost as large as Germany and many times more populous. At their peak, these Vallabha emperors received the prostrations of hosts of vassal kings from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra, Telangana and Tamil Nadu, and dominated most of India south of the Narmada river. One Arab merchant, visiting this medieval superpower in the ninth–tenth centuries, mentioned the lord of the Deccan in the same breath as the Abbasid caliph, the emperor of China, and the Byzantine emperor.¹ Another visited the glittering capital of the Deccan, Manyakheta, and left us with an account of its wonders:

... in that city there are for the ordinary people one million elephants which carry the merchandise ... In this temple there are about twenty thousand idols made of a variety of precious metals, and carved stones mounted with artistically-worked precious jewels ... [There] is an idol whose height is twelve cubits and is placed on a throne of gold in the centre of a golden cupola, the whole of which is set with jewels like white pearl, ruby, sapphire, blue and emerald stone.²

Both these accounts – even allowing for some exaggeration – leave no doubt that in the eyes of the medieval world the Deccan was the wealthiest and most powerful of all the kingdoms of the Indian subcontinent.

This book is a story about this time when the Deccan ruled India: an epic journey through five hundred years of a history that has long been forgotten.



Our tale begins in the sixth century CE, a few decades after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in Europe, only a few years after the disintegration of the Gupta empire of northern India. In the dry and arid heartland of the Deccan, cattle raids, banditry and abduction were ubiquitous. Here, an obscure clan of *chalke* (crowbar)-wielding agriculturists or pastoralists³ learned the difficult lessons of war and diplomacy, and began to battle their way up the shifting hierarchies of India's kingdoms. Within the space of three generations, they declared themselves a new imperial dynasty – the Chalukyas – established a mighty citadel in the sandstone cliffs of Vatapi in northern Karnataka, and exploded on to the historical stage by defeating the dominant ruler of north India. That collision, which occurred in 618 CE on the shores of the Narmada river, is where this book begins. It will set the stage for a half-millennium of Deccan dominance.

In the first part of this book we will watch these Chalukyas, masters of medieval Indian geopolitics, at work. They understood very well that there was little wealth to be scratched out of the arid lands of the Deccan. Soon after their emergence on the medieval Indian stage, they went to war north, south, east and west, ruthlessly raiding their wealthier neighbours and breaking into the networks of the Indian Ocean trade. We will watch how an empire was made, attempting to peek, through the dust of centuries, into the minds and hearts of the men and women at its centre. We will accompany them in these wars, gaining a singular look into the machinations of medieval Indian power, and the glories and tragedies associated with it. We'll see how this power shaped and was shaped by the turbulent religious and social tides of medieval India, observing these upstart Chalukyas – constantly looking for new propaganda to rally their unruly vassal chiefs and subjects – ally with the rising tides of *bhakti* devotion to Shiva the Destroyer; patronize the use of Sanskrit literary texts in south India; and embark on a wave of monumental building projects, establishing some of the oldest surviving temples in the subcontinent.

By the mid-eighth century, this project of dynastic aggrandizement had elevated the Chalukyas to the heart of a sprawling network of vassal kings, governors, trading ports and pilgrimage sites that dominated the Deccan plateau and much of India's western coast. A cadet Chalukya line ruled a kingdom of their own in Andhra, on India's east coast. This vast agglomeration of people could mobilize resources of such a scale that a Chalukya vassal, acting on his own initiative, was able to smash the Umayyad Caliphate's attempt to conquer Gujarat in 737 CE, defeating a seemingly invincible army that had seized Sind and parts of Gujarat, and even reached the outskirts of Ujjain in modern-day Madhya Pradesh.

In the second part of this book, as the world changes, we will watch the Vallabha emperors of the Deccan – a title now held by a clan called the Rashtrakutas – lead the plateau to a splendid apogee. During their time, the Abbasid Caliphate in the west and the Tang dynasty of China to the east oversaw an age of flourishing trade with the Indian subcontinent. The cities of the arid plateau and the ports of western India, under Rashtrakuta control, began to trade in everything from indigo and perfumes to exotic poisons, fruits, animals and spices. The Rashtrakutas took advantage, inviting Arab merchants to serve as the governors of harbours humming with activity, ordering fine Sanskrit verses to be composed in their honour, and importing the finest horses in the world to serve in their armies. We will follow them as they project this power into the rest of the subcontinent. They will lead armies of marauding south Indians into the Gangetic plains, nearly a millennium before the rise of the Marathas. They will manipulate the politics of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu from their seats of power in Maharashtra and Karnataka, moving pawns around a vast geopolitical chessboard. We will watch them compile great grammatical treatises in Kannada, and hear how their poets mounted the first serious challenge to literary Sanskrit, once India's dominant language of power and prestige. We will watch them commission the dazzling

Kailashanatha temple and the splendid imperial city of Manyakheta, projects that cost tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars in that day's currency. And we will see how, like their predecessors, they used religion as royal propaganda, patronizing a unique form of Jainism that once ruled south India as the equal of Hinduism.

However, the rest of India did not sit idly by as the Deccan threw its weight around the subcontinent. In the third and final part of this book, we will see how the rise of new challengers to its dominance left the medieval Deccan world in burning ruins. We will watch the military disasters that led to the collapse of the Rashtrakutas – easily some of the most calamitous upsets in Indian history – and observe how, in the bloody anarchy that followed, the Chalukyas returned to once again restore order to the Deccan. Their return came not a minute too soon. In the deep south, a new power rose to challenge them: the imperial Cholas, perhaps the most famous of all south Indian dynasties today. Over the course of twenty years, we will accompany the terrified courts of the Deccan as they watched the Cholas burn and conquer kingdoms through India's east coast and attack Indonesia, an unheard-of feat for any medieval Indian polity. And we will see how those bloodthirsty conquerors finally met their match in the gritty, determined Chalukya Vallabhas of the Deccan. We will witness the clash of these two south Indian superpowers, the culmination of centuries of social and political evolution in the Deccan and the Tamil country. Both commanded armies numbering in the tens of thousands, both ruled enormous, sophisticated courts in jewelled temple-studded capitals. Both hated each other with a burning passion that razed cities to the ground, tore families apart, killed kings and left kingdoms in ruins.

In the midst of this chaos, a new generation of Chalukyas and Cholas tried, at last, to put an end to the violence. Betraying his father and brother, a new Vallabha, wiser and warier than his predecessors, backstabbed his way to power with the help of a Chola ally. But just

when it seemed that – at long last – peace would return to the land, one of the most shocking political upsets of south Indian history unfolded in the Tamil country, ending any hope of peace and reconciliation between the two great geopolitical regions. As vassals of the Chalukyas rose to challenge their dominance across the Deccan, we will leave the plateau on the brink of a century of renewed war, that would only end with Delhi's invasions of the south and the rise of Vijayanagara and the Deccan Sultanates.



Most Indians today are unaware that the Deccan has such a dramatic and world-changing past. Our understanding of the history of this vast, diverse subcontinent is based on an obsession with ‘imperial moments’ – often fleeting moments in history when north India is able to impose its dominance over other regions. In our school textbooks – which retain a disproportionate influence in shaping our identities and sense of the past – we leap five hundred years from the Mauryas of the second century BCE to the Guptas of the third century CE. We then jump six hundred years from the end of the Gupta empire directly to the arrival of the Turkic sultans in north India in the twelfth century, and thence move neatly to the Mughals, the British and then Independence. Somehow, in this subcontinent that is as large as, more populous than and exponentially more diverse than western Europe, we are used to ignoring the histories of entire peoples, eras and regions when thinking about how India became India.

This is a ludicrous way to contemplate the subcontinent's history. Ignoring the history of the Deccan in recounting the history of India is like ignoring the history of France or Germany in telling the history of Europe.

This book aims to do something about that. It is the story of India between two north Indian ‘imperial moments’, the half millennium

or so after the end of the Gupta empire and before the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. In order to do so, it roots itself unabashedly in the Deccan. Yet it does not seek to replace a north Indian ‘imperial moment’ with a south Indian one, but instead seeks to develop a more complicated and interconnected narrative of the history of this enormous and diverse land between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean.

Our modern obsession with ‘imperial moments’ makes it difficult to appreciate the scale and uniqueness of the subcontinent’s history. By now, every region of India has its legends of great and glorious monarchs who ‘made contributions’ to a medieval or ancient culture implicitly connected to a contemporary political identity. This view reduces our past to a stale series of moralistic stories and figures who serve black-and-white conceptions of linguistic, regional or religious glory. In this view, Indian kings were not living, breathing human beings like you or I, but flawless paragons, images based on little more than tiresome sermonizing as to what constitutes ‘greatness’.

On the other hand, a new trend in popular history attempts to paint them as sexy influencers similar to what one would find in HBO’s *Game of Thrones*; another makes them out to be enlightened crusaders for human rights a thousand years before the concept existed. These caricatures are boring substitutes for the vibrant and diverse lives that our ancestors actually lived.

This book takes a somewhat different approach to thinking about and writing about the past.

Imagine that somehow, in the year 3020, all that remains of India from 2020 are ads issued by the Union government in newspapers in Uttar Pradesh; Instagram posts from posh art galleries in New Delhi; and recordings of grand galas attended by the who’s who of society, industry and the art world in Mumbai. Future historians decide to engage with this evidence from their past in three ways. One group diligently collects the government’s ads into a neat chronology,

declaring it the most effective government that ever existed, the most flawless and intellectual political leadership ever, an exemplar in pandemic management, economic recovery and social harmony for all who came after. Another pores over the Instagram posts and waxes eloquent about the amazing art that filled the museums and dreams, starry-eyed, of the generous patrons who must have showered money upon the talented artists who created them. Another fashions gorgeously produced sensory experiences that hardly anyone can afford to purchase, filled with tear-inducing nostalgia about the lavish events and luxurious clothing of this long-forgotten golden age. Crowds of people shake their heads sadly and yearn to go back to those days.

Under such circumstances, it would be easy to ignore the humdrum struggles of the millions of other people who lived in India in the 2020s and didn't get to leave behind the fragments of evidence that our imaginary thirty-first century historians are so enamoured with. It would be easy to forget about Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad.

This – fragmentary evidence fit into feel-good nationalist sermons or feel-cool romantic narratives – is the state of popular writing about medieval India today. A thousand years on, we have forgotten how to imagine a past India as searing and *real* as the India we inhabit today.

So how will this book be any different? We cannot magically conjure up more evidence than actually exists from more than a thousand years ago. Not a lot survives from the time this book explores, partially due to the lack of systematic archaeological study. As far as actual evidence goes, we're mostly stuck with royal land grants full of kingly boasts of generosity, religiosity, and administrative, sexual, artistic and military prowess. We have imposing temples covered with sculptures. We have literary and sculptural portraits of glittering court life. Like our imagined 2020–3020 scenario, a thousand years on, all the evidence we have from this distant time was shaped by a tiny and supremely well-off social elite and their self-promotion. If

we are to have a realistic understanding of our history, we need to interpret this keeping in mind that these are mere fragments of a vast and complicated world similar to ours, inhabited by individuals who shared the same fundamental human impulses – including the urge to pretend they were less imperfect than they actually were.

And so the kings and queens you will meet in this book are neither flawless paragons nor sexy influencers. Instead, they are much like people you might see around you today. This book will help you understand their activities – war, politics, intrigue, patronage – as they were intended and as they were perceived at the time, from battlefield savagery to temple building to literature and sculpture. The book has no heroes or villains, no ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ regions or cultures or morals. Instead, it is a tale of the grand forces of nature and randomness, and the tiny humans who dare to make history out of it all. It will explore the complexity of power and people in medieval India, so similar to our India. We will discern a close alliance of religion and politics; ruthless violence against dissenters and rivals; relentless narcissism and ambition; stark inequality; monumental architecture; seductive glamour; and ravishing, unparalleled, immortal art. It is not a dull, comforting history, but a vivid, fascinating past far closer to the reality we inhabit.



The five hundred years of history through which we'll journey are among the most misunderstood in our modern understanding of the past. Of late, it has become fashionable to accept a colonial-era tripartite division of India's history: a 'Hindu' period, a golden age, called 'ancient'; a 'Muslim' period, a dark age, called 'medieval'; a 'British' period, enlightened, modern. The archaeological and academic consensus does not support this simplistic division. Since the early twentieth century at least, generations of scholars have excoriated it

as a deliberate fabrication intended to portray the British as ‘rescuing’ a Hindu India from ‘Mahomedan’ tyranny. This image comes across very clearly in works such as Robert Sewell’s *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagara – A Contribution to the History of India*, which remain popular today for lack of accessible modern writing about the period.

Just like the stereotypes of the rich and powerful which we saw above, this tripartite division obscures a past that is far more complicated than we might think. Historical India is a unique and fascinating world, with features far more profound than the religion a bunch of royals happened to follow. Drawing on more systematic and objective appraisals of the evidence, the scholarly consensus now recognizes an ‘ancient’ period stretching from the third century BCE to the fifth–sixth centuries CE, involving a deep connection to Central Asia coupled with religious and political efflorescence. This era gradually transitioned into an ‘early medieval’ period during the seventh to twelfth centuries, associated with radically new ways of organizing politics and societies in the subcontinent, as international trade grew and religions became vastly more complex and politically involved. This was followed by a ‘late medieval’ period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries involving deeper cultural, political and religious engagement with the Persianate world. The epoch transitioned into one of increasingly powerful and globalized states in the ‘early modern’ period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, finally bringing us to the ‘modern’ period of the subcontinent’s history with the onset of colonialism.

Over the time this book covers – the early medieval period, roughly the seventh–twelfth centuries CE – the courts and battlefields of India witnessed events contemporaneous with the most dramatic changes in global history: the birth of Islam in Arabia, the Abbasid ‘Golden Age’ in Iraq, the formation of the Holy Roman Empire in Germany, the Great Schism between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, the Song dynasty’s economic revolution in China, the rise of neo-Confucianism,

high chivalric courtly culture, and the Norman conquest of England. Through this time, India saw supremely important and influential developments in religion, art, architecture, literature and political economy. The major geopolitical regions of this subcontinent – the mountains of the Himalayas, the Gangetic plains, the coasts of Odisha and the Tamil country, the arid pastures of Rajasthan, the Malwa plateau, and of course the Deccan – saw new forms of political, social and religious organization, and developed increasingly complex interrelationships within themselves and with each other. These new ways of doing things would shape the subcontinent into a form we can recognize today.

Hundreds of new cities and towns grew during the medieval period, and rose to prominence. Many of them still survive in some form today: the cities of Dhara, Kalyana, Vatapi, Thanjavur, Kanchi, Old Goa, Banavasi, Mamallapuram, Khajuraho, Warangal, Halebidu and Kannauj. Salons and courts reverberated with the recitation of marvellous literature. Artisans made sumptuous textiles, paintings and jewellery. Their products adorned the bodies of cultured aristocrats and talented dancers participating in rich, diverse and sophisticated material cultures. Thousands of elaborate sculptures and temples were assembled in increasingly complex and awe-inspiring forms. They were paid for by the wealth that perfumed lords and ladies wrung from a growing population of emaciated agriculturists.

All this was nourished by trade and cultural exchange with the rest of the world: and the drama, depth and spectacle of medieval India is easily on par with the global events mentioned above. India had its own William the Conqueror equivalents who invaded ancient island kingdoms and made them their own; its own religious movements whose waves of devotion transformed the lives of millions; its own charismatic, ruthless emperors who remade entire countries in their images; its own powerful, uncompromising religious sects drawing on centuries-old philosophical traditions, whose struggles for power

and influence led to the making and breaking of kingdoms. Yet their relationship with the rest of the world – or even their relationship with the rest of Indian history – is poorly understood, at least in the domain of popular history.

This book seeks to remedy this gap in our conception of our past, because no story of these transformations that shook India and the world can be told without giving the medieval Deccan the centrality it deserves.



The erasure of the Deccan from our historical consciousness is one of the strangest reversals of fortunes in Indian history, especially given what its contemporaries thought of it.

Think about the last major Indian empire before this period, that of the Guptas. The Guptas are increasingly present in popular ‘historical’ fiction in India, always a good metric of the recognizability of a historical dynasty to a general audience (not coincidentally, Maratha, Mughal, Rajput and Chola fiction are also high up on the bestseller list). The Guptas are often thought of as *the* Indian Golden Age, the pinnacle of India’s religious history before the coming of the Turks, as well as the apogee of Indian architecture and martial power and art and poetry. Yet on every one of these counts they pale in comparison with their successors in medieval India in general, and the medieval Deccan in particular.

At their peak, almost the entirety of India south of the Narmada would pay the Vallabhas tribute and acknowledge their overlordship – a record matched by no Deccan or south Indian polity before or since. In comparison, Gupta influence was predominantly felt in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, though they exercised some control in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat and may have received tribute from as far away as regions in modern-day Pakistan in the northwest of the subcontinent. These north Indian kings only ever managed to attack

southern India once, under the reign of the ruthless Samudragupta. Compare him to the *five* Deccan Vallabhas who attacked north India, one (Indra III) reaching as far as Kannauj. One (Vijayaditya I) may have made it as far as the Ganga before being captured, another (Dhruva I) smashed two of north India's most powerful armies near the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna. At least two (Krishna III and Someshvara I) sacked, burned and subjugated Madhya Pradesh before turning their attentions elsewhere. To the medieval Deccan mind, the Gangetic plains were little more than a stage for the display of their intimidating military might before the shocked eyes of the subcontinent's other kings.

And who were these other kings? Barely a century after the collapse of the Guptas, their political legacy in north India almost completely vanished, to be replaced by other dynasties – the Maukharis, the Pushyabhutis, the Palas, the Pratiharas and, later, the Chandellas, the Paramaras, the Gahadavalas, the Chahamanas and many others – some of whom we will meet through the course of this book. Many of these medieval dynasties arguably left a far deeper imprint on India's literary and aesthetic culture than the Guptas ever did.

Yet all of them pale before the extraordinary power and influence of the emperors of the Deccan, who shaped the fate of many modern-day Indian states, some of which exceed the size and population of European countries. The Kakatiyas of Telangana and the Hoysalas of Karnataka, both of whom still occupy a hallowed place in regional memory, were vassals of the Deccan Vallabhas; they broke free in the chaos that engulfed the Deccan in the thirteenth century, before the invasions of the Delhi Sultanate. The Kadambas and the Shilaharas, their vassals in Goa, founded the great port of Gopakapattinam, which would eventually draw the avarice of the Portuguese and form the nucleus of what is now Old Goa. The bloodthirsty campaigns of the Vallabhas even, inadvertently, led to the emergence of the famous imperial Cholas of the eleventh century. How ironic that when south

India is remembered at all in popular Indian history it is only the Cholas who feature in it, totally overshadowing the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas, their accidental preceptors and deadliest rivals.

All this is just the tip of the iceberg, a simplistic comparison of the military and political aspects of power that loom so tall in our modern historical consciousness. You'll see here, as we explore the other aspects of medieval Indian power, that the lords of the Deccan really *made* India.

Hinduism as we know it in southern India might not have existed if not for them. Think of temple visits, for example: when the Deccan began its long trek to imperial power, the idea of enshrining Hindu gods in temples was still new, and primarily a north Indian one. As part of their propaganda projects, Chalukya kings lavished patronage on this new 'Puranic' form of Hinduism, creating a religious practice focused on pilgrimages and on ritual worship at temples built by kings. This decision was hugely significant in the fractious religious landscape of medieval south India, where religious sects professing many different rituals and routes to salvation competed for influence, land, patrons and devotees. The patronage of the Chalukyas, and kings like them, would swing the balance of power decidedly in favour of the many religious practices that we now call Hindu. But in the Deccan, this 'Hinduism' coexisted with an innovative form of Jainism that drew on a similar set of practices: organized monasteries, temples, public rituals, pilgrimage. South Indian Jainism, patronized by the Chalukyas' successors to Deccan overlordship, the Rashtrakutas, was a unique, warlike form of this ostensibly peaceful religion, and was very popular with the Deccan's glamorous military aristocracy. The staggering plurality and contestation that marks medieval Deccan religion is an important counterpoint to our popular notion of India as an eternally or unchangingly Hindu country.

As with religion, so with many other aspects of medieval India. The Deccan, as the subcontinent's dominant power, straddled axes

of exchange stretching from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Sind to Bengal. Ideas and migrants poured in, drawn by the Vallabhas' wealth, and they mingled with the peoples of the heart of the subcontinent, arriving at uniquely Deccan forms that would in turn spread out to influence the rest of India.

For example, the earliest Deccan temples – some of which are the oldest still-standing temples in the subcontinent today – freely took elements from both north and south India. But Deccanis soon began to innovate entirely new plans of their own. As the Deccan grew ever more socially and politically complex and more influential, we begin to see Deccani temple design elements as far away as Madhya Pradesh, and vice versa. As part of a broader medieval Indian trend towards more elaborate temples based on iterations of simple patterns, the Deccan began to build spectacular star-shaped shrines that have never been equalled since.

The Chalukya emperors also adapted and reworked north Indian Sanskrit political propaganda to suit the Deccan, sparking off generations of imitations and a feverish era of Sanskrit literary production across southern India. Over the centuries, as south India's cities and courts grew ever larger and wealthier, its aesthetics and its grand religious and poetic ideas, enriched the vibrant intellectual culture of Sanskrit, adding to the corpus of thousands of texts on everything from grammar to architecture to political theory. The successors of the Chalukyas, the Rashtrakuta emperors, turned this dynamic on its head: they took a south Indian Sanskrit grammatical treatise and used it to create a grammar for Kannada, the language of the people of Karnataka, the heart of their empire. In doing so, they set off an explosion of regional literature that lasted off and on for a thousand years – the first time any vernacular language successfully challenged Sanskrit's dominance of court culture. If not for their activities, it is doubtful that many south Indian languages (with the exception of Tamil) would have the hallowed literary tradition they now do.

And so on, and so on. Through this book, we will delve into the lives of the men who ruled the Deccan and the complex ways in which this region changed over half a millennium. We will explore how art, literature, religion and architecture were influenced by these stories, holding these fragments of history up as a mirror to a dazzlingly complicated past. And we'll maybe begin to fill in that all-important gap in our concept of what Indianness should mean to us and to the rest of the world.

Though modern Indians have forgotten the Deccan, early modern Indians – in particular, the people of the Deccan Sultanates and Vijayanagara – looked to its ancient emperors for inspiration. The awe-inspiring temples they built across the land impressed many an Adil Shahi sultan, who built palaces in the Chalukya capital of Kalyana and commissioned texts drawing on the culture of their courts, attempting to connect themselves to the Chalukyas' prestige. The rival kings of Vijayanagara used the Chalukya dynastic crest, the boar, as their imperial standard; a Vijayanagari dynasty explicitly claimed the title of 'Chalukya Chakravarti' (Chalukya emperor) for some of its members, and attempted to directly or indirectly control Kalyana; and the empire even reassembled a full-fledged Chalukya temple tank in the royal centre of the city as a sign of its great antecedents.

All this goes to show that the lords of the Deccan were supremely influential people in Indian history. They are worth understanding on their own terms, as the proud rulers of a proud empire untouched by twentieth-century ideas of how a single 'Indian' history should look. But I should clarify again that this book is not a panegyric to them, and that medieval India was a dark, violent and unequal place. The medieval lords of the Deccan were not saintly devotees or noble conquerors or brilliant masterminds. They were human beings doing the best they could, responding to personal disasters, trying to get rich and be happy and find companionship and see beauty in a difficult

world. Changing the course of human history was just an unplanned side effect of all that.



A few brief words on the research that went into this book: It began through a quest to understand the history of Andhra and Karnataka, the states where I was born and live in respectively. I was driven to write it by the strange lack of any accessible modern writing on this period.

I am a researcher, writer and digital public humanities scholar, and still a historian-in-training. I would not have been able to write this book without the efforts of generations of academics who have unravelled various aspects of Deccan history. I've read them as comprehensively and critically as I can in order to assemble their insights here in an attempt to bring the medieval Deccan to life in a way that resonates with modern readers. The works of Daud Ali, Durga Prasad Dikshit, A.S. Altekar, G. Yazdani, Adam Hardy, Sheldon Pollock, Shonaleeka Kaul and Whitney Cox were integral to this project. I used studies of inscriptional evidence and medieval texts by Cynthia Talbot, Ronald Inden, Richard H. Davis, K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, Noboru Karashima and Y. Subbarayulu; studies of the interactions between India and the eastern Indian Ocean by Tansen Sen, Hermann Kulke and Kenneth R. Hall; translations of medieval Kannada texts by R.V.S. Sundaram; works on the political economy of medieval south India by Jayashri Mishra, R. Champakalakshmi, R.N. Nandi, Aruna Pariti and Meera Abraham; and my own critical study of inscriptions from the period, as collected in the *Epigraphia Indica*, *Epigraphia Carnatica* and *Indian Antiquary*.

A limitation of my research has been my lack of knowledge of Sanskrit and Old Kannada, which has forced me to rely on translations. Scholars have also tended to focus on textual evidence to understand

this period, partially due to the lack of systematic archaeological excavations – an issue highlighted by Jason Hawkes and Derek Kennet. As a partial remedy, I have attempted to use materials from art history to trace out social, political and economic trends. I offer challenging reinterpretations of existing evidence and complicate the romantic portrayals and misconceptions we have of medieval India, and I explain the reasoning and the evidence for doing so in detail in my notes.

Some of what I have chosen to depict may be difficult to establish definitively, given the highly fragmentary state of the evidence. In particular, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the lived experiences of people from the period, which has forced me to indulge in reasonable speculation. In general, I try to phrase these speculations as tentatively as possible, usually in the form of questions. Explanations and evidence supporting these speculations can be found in the notes. In general, they are based on comparative study from other parts of the medieval world as well as inferences from Sanskrit literature and inscriptions from across southern India. I do not claim that my narrative is definitive or the last word on the subject: this is, first and foremost, a work of popular history.

But I have kept you here for too long. Can you hear a great drum beating, the sounds of a forest in panic as animals flee from the approach of thousands of people? The Vallabha calls for our attention. A terrible battle is about to unfold, and we must witness it. In our ears are the faint echoes of trumpets, horns and the roar of armies. Our time here in the twenty-first century is drawing to a close. Let us rush to medieval India, a world that is in some ways forgotten, but in many more ways a world that is all around us.