

Rebel Sultans

Praise for the Book

‘Defly and with great vividness, Manu S. Pillai takes us through 400 years of roiling history and returns the Deccan to the centre of our attention – where it belongs’ **Sunil Khilnani**

‘Minutely researched and yet instantly accessible . . . *Rebel Sultans* will bring the fascinating history of the medieval Deccan to a whole new generation of readers’ **William Dalrymple**

‘In this lively study, Manu S. Pillai does a superb job of re-orienting the narrative of late medieval and early modern South Asia towards the Deccan’ **Muzaffar Alam**

‘In *Rebel Sultans*, the Deccan is presented in seven engaging chapters, each focused on a pivotal moment, character or symbol, that together trace the dynamic history of the region and convey its unique flavour’ **Navina Najat Haidar**

‘Impressive . . . dazzling storytelling. Pillai has employed an extraordinarily powerful imagination and a prodigious talent with words to write a genuine thriller that is near impossible to shut before reaching the end’ *Indian Express*

‘*Rebel Sultans* provides the much-needed bridge between the isolated world of academia and wider public audience . . . Writing in an eloquent and lucid style, Pillai holds his readers spellbound through a sweeping narration’ *The Hindu*

‘One of India’s finest young historians’ *Open*

‘One of the brightest young writers in India today’ **DailyO**

‘Engaging . . . *Rebel Sultans* is a remarkable, daring book’ *Hindustan Times*

‘A fascinating book, with delectable minutiae in practically every page . . . Manu Pillai’s volume tells us, succinctly but with sufficient weight, the turbulent history of 500 years of the Deccan . . . [in] elegant, illuminating prose’ *Outlook*

‘Explores the rich tapestry of historical figures with nimble prose that in no way compromises on academic rigour; the result is an enjoyable, illuminating journey into the middle India of yore’ *Week*

‘[A] fine book . . . [Pillai’s] approach is nuanced . . . He is convincing when he is assertive . . . [this] is scholarship’ *Business Standard*

‘Positively racy . . . a fast-paced greatest hits of the region’s medieval roller-coaster ride’ **Scroll**

‘For all its meticulous detail, *Rebel Sultans* is an enjoyable read’ *India Today*

‘A historian of note’ *Mid Day*

‘An engaging narrative, replete with riveting tales and compelling characters’ **SouthWord**

Rebel Sultans

The Deccan from Khilji to Shivaji

Manu S. Pillai

 juggernaut

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Chronology of the principal events mentioned in this book

- 1206:** Founding of the Delhi Sultanate
- 1296:** Alauddin Khilji's triumph over the Yadavas of Devagiri
- 1308:** Second invasion of Devagiri by Malik Kafur
- 1310:** Malik Kafur's triumph over the Kakatiyas of Warangal
- 1311:** Malik Kafur's triumph over the Hoysalas of Dwarasamudra
- 1313:** Annexation of Devagiri by Malik Kafur
- 1318:** Rebellion of Prataparudra of Warangal quashed
- 1320:** Rise of the Tughluq dynasty in Delhi
- 1321:** Defeat of Sultanate forces at Warangal
- 1323:** Prataparudra is defeated and Warangal is annexed
- 1325:** Muhammad bin Tughluq becomes Sultan
- 1327:** Daulatabad (formerly Devagiri) named capital of the Tughluqs
- 1335:** Tughluqs resume ruling from Delhi
- 1336:** Harihara I, son of Sangama, launches the Vijayanagar empire
- 1342:** The last Hoysala sovereign is hanged in Madurai

- 1345:** Amirs of the Deccan rebel against the Tughluqs
- 1346:** Sangama brothers celebrate their conquests in the south
- 1347:** Hasan Gangu crowned first Bahmani Sultan in Daulatabad
- 1347:** Gulbarga becomes the Bahmani capital
- 1351:** Death of Muhammad bin Tughluq
- 1352:** Sangama brothers first start using the title 'Sultan among Hindu Kings'
- 1356:** Death of Harihara I in Vijayanagar
- 1358:** Death of Hasan Gangu
- 1363:** Kapaya Nayaka presents the Bahmani Sultan the Turquoise Throne
- 1370:** Vijayanagar annexes the short-lived Madurai Sultanate
- 1378:** Bahmanis are defeated by Vijayanagar; a Sultan is murdered
- 1397:** Firoz Shah Bahmani prevails at court and becomes Sultan
- 1406:** Firoz Shah marries a Vijayanagar princess after a military victory
- 1418:** Defeat of the Bahmanis by Vijayanagar
- 1422:** Firoz Shah dies and Ahmad Shah becomes Sultan
- 1425:** Devaraya II succeeds in Vijayanagar and opens an age of glory
- 1427:** Bahmani Sultanate moves its capital to Bidar
- 1430:** Vijayanagar absorbs large numbers of Muslim cavalrymen
- 1443:** Assassination attempt against Devaraya II
- 1445:** Abdur Razzak Samarqandi visits Vijayanagar as ambassador of the Persian Shah
- 1446:** Death of Devaraya II; a slow crisis begins in Vijayanagar

- 1453:** Mahmud Gawan arrives in the Deccan from Persia
- 1460:** Arrival from Persia of the future Yusuf Adil Shah
- 1463:** Mahmud Gawan becomes premier of the Bahmani Sultanate
- 1470:** Sultan-Quli, the future Qutb Shah of Golconda, arrives in the Deccan
- 1472:** Mahmud Gawan captures Goa
- 1481:** Execution of Mahmud Gawan; decline of the Bahmanis begins, the Sultan politically emasculated
- 1485:** Fall of the Sangama dynasty and rise of Saluva Narasimha in Vijayanagar
- 1489:** Bidar comes under the Barid Shahs; the Bahmani Sultan made their puppet
- 1490:** Nizam Shahi founded in Ahmadnagar
- 1490:** Adil Shahi founded in Bijapur
- 1490:** Imad Shahi founded in Berar
- 1502:** The Adil Shah declares his state a Shia polity
- 1505:** Tuluva dynasty (the Third dynasty) seizes power in Vijayanagar
- 1505:** Vijayanagar proposes a marital alliance with the King of Portugal
- 1509:** Krishnadeva becomes Raya of Vijayanagar and launches a second golden age
- 1510:** The Adil Shah loses Goa to the Portuguese
- 1518:** The Qutb Shah in Golconda becomes independent of the nominal sovereignty of the Bahmani Sultan
- 1520:** Krishnadeva conquers Raichur from the Adil Shah
- 1523:** Krishnadeva assumes the title of 'Restorer of Turkish Power'

1524: The Adil Shah and Nizam Shah seal a marital alliance but feud over territory

1526: Fall of the Delhi Sultanate and the rise of the Mughal empire in upper India

1527: The last Bahmani Sultan, Kalimullah, appeals to Mughal emperor Babur for help

1528: Kalimullah escapes Bidar and goes into exile in Ahmadnagar

1529: Krishnadeva dies in Vijayanagar; a period of crisis begins

1530: The Adil Shah resumes control of Raichur

1538: Kalimullah dies and the powerless Bahmani dynasty comes to an end

1542: Ramaraya becomes regent of Vijayanagar and centralizes power in himself

1543: Sultan Quli-Qutb Shah is assassinated; Jamshid becomes ruler; his brother Ibrahim goes into exile in Vijayanagar

1543: Miyan Ali of the Adil Shahi family goes under Portuguese protection

1545: Garcia da Orta comes to the Nizam Shah's court

1550: Jamshid dies and Ibrahim becomes the Qutb Shah in Golconda

1553: Husain Nizam Shah succeeds to the throne in Ahmadnagar

1555: Miyan Ali's attempt to seize the Adil Shahi throne with Portuguese aid fails

1558: Ali Adil Shah I comes to power in Bijapur and forms an alliance with Ramaraya of Vijayanagar against the Nizam Shahs

1561: Husain Nizam Shah sues for peace with Vijayanagar and the Adil Shah but resolves to fight again another day

- 1562:** Ramaraya becomes de facto emperor in Vijayanagar
- 1564:** The Qutb Shah, Adil Shah and Nizam Shah ally through marriage and form a league against Vijayanagar
- 1565:** Vijayanagar is destroyed after the 'Battle of Talikota'; Ramaraya is killed
- 1570:** The famous *Nujum al-Ulum* is produced at the Adil Shahi court
- 1571:** Malik Ambar arrives as a slave in the Deccan
- 1574:** The Nizam Shahs conquer Berar and the dynasty of the Imad Shahs ends
- 1580:** Ali Adil Shah is succeeded by Ibrahim Adil Shah II; Chand Bibi becomes regent
- 1582:** Chand Bibi retires to the Nizam Shahi court at Ahmadnagar
- 1588–91:** Succession disputes and rivalries in Ahmadnagar; a Nizam Shah is assassinated
- 1589:** The chronicler Ferishta arrives at the Adil Shahi court in Bijapur and writes his history
- 1591:** Mughal Emperor Akbar turns his attention to the Deccan; a new Nizam Shah succeeds in Ahmadnagar
- 1591:** The Qutb Shahs establish the city of Hyderabad outside Golconda
- 1595:** The Nizam Shah dies and Ahmadnagar descends into factional chaos after the brief reign of a half-African Nizam Shahi prince
- 1595:** Mughals lay siege to Ahmadnagar; Chand Bibi defends the city and terms are agreed
- 1596:** Farrukh Beg, the painter, commences his thirteen-year stay at the Adil Shahi court

1597: Chand Bibi, with the Qutb Shah and Ibrahim Adil Shah II, fight the Mughals but the allies are defeated

1599: Chand Bibi is assassinated; Ahmadnagar falls into Mughal hands

1599: Ibrahim Adil Shah II establishes the city of Naurasapur

1600: Ibrahim Adil Shah II and the Qutb Shah send presents to Emperor Akbar

1600: Malik Ambar begins his resistance against the Mughals on behalf of a Nizam Shahi prince; his daughter is married to the new Nizam Shah

1603: Persian Shah seeks a marital alliance with the Qutb Shah in Golconda

1604: Ibrahim Adil Shah II meets jeweller Jacques de Coutre

1604: An Adil Shahi princess is given in marriage to Emperor Akbar's son

1605: Emperor Akbar dies and the reign of Jehangir begins in Agra

1610: Ibrahim Adil Shah II completes his *Kitab-i-Nauras*; the painter Cornelius Heda arrives in Bijapur

1610: Malik Ambar establishes his capital in Khirki (later named Aurangabad by Emperor Aurangzeb)

1616: Malik Ambar loses a major battle against the Mughals

1617: Ibrahim Adil Shah II comes to terms with the Mughals

1619: The Barid Shahi is destroyed and annexed by the Adil Shahi state

1624: Malik Ambar defeats the Mughals and regains his former prestige and power

1626: Death of Malik Ambar

1627: Death of Emperor Jehangir; Shahjahan succeeds to the Peacock Throne in Agra

1627: Ibrahim Adil Shah II dies in Bijapur

1630: A terrible famine ravages the Deccan; Shivaji Bhonsle is born to Shahji and Jijabai

1633: Malik Ambar's son surrenders what remains of the Nizam Shahi state to the Mughals

1636: The Adil Shah and Qutb Shah acknowledge the suzerainty of the Mughal emperor through two 'deeds'

1642: Shivaji is presented at the Adil Shahi court by his father

1643: Mir Muhammad Said emerges as the real power in the Qutb Shahi court and is appointed mir jumla (chief minister)

1647: Shivaji begins to expand his power from Pune and launches what will become the Maratha Swaraj, at the expense of the Adil Shahi state

1655: Mir jumla is dismissed by the Qutb Shah; the former seeks Mughal protection and brings Emperor Shahjahan's son Aurangzeb to Golconda; terms are agreed and a Golconda princess is married to Aurangzeb's son

1656: Aurangzeb lays siege to Bijapur and terms are negotiated with the Adil Shah; Bijapur loses territory to the Mughals

1658: Aurangzeb deposes his father and becomes Mughal emperor after a war of succession in the north

1659: Shivaji kills the Adil Shahi general sent to destroy him; Maratha power grows

1664: Shivaji sacks the Mughal port of Surat; war with the Mughals is escalated

1665: The Mughals, under Jai Singh, defeat Shivaji and terms are agreed

- 1666:** The Mughals again lay siege to Bijapur but fail to take it
- 1666:** Shivaji visits Agra but is placed under house arrest; he escapes
- 1670:** Shivaji raids Surat again, swelling in power and wealth
- 1672:** Abul Hasan, the last of the Qutb Shahs, comes to power in Golconda; real power is surrendered to a Brahmin minister, Madanna
- 1674:** Golconda commences payment of protection money to the Marathas
- 1674:** Shivaji crowns himself sovereign of the Maratha Swaraj
- 1679:** Mughals return to Bijapur; terms are discussed and a princess is given in marriage to Emperor Aurangzeb's son
- 1680:** Death of Shivaji and the succession of his son Sambhaji
- 1685:** Madanna is assassinated in Golconda during a siege by the Mughals
- 1686:** The Adil Shahi dynasty comes to an end and Bijapur falls to the Mughals
- 1687:** The Qutb Shahi dynasty comes to an end and Golconda is annexed
- 1689:** Sambhaji, king of the Marathas, is executed; Maratha resistance continues
- 1707:** Emperor Aurangzeb dies; Mughal empire begins to decline

Introduction
Blood & Diamonds



Histories of the Deccan often begin with the story of Shivaji. But in this book Shivaji appears only at the end.

In 1630, when the Maratha noblewoman Jijabai brought forth the second of her two sons, little did she imagine that the boy would grow up to shatter forever the might of the Mughal empire. But the Deccan into which Shivaji arrived was already a fascinating place, populated by remarkable men and women who all claimed for themselves the esteem of posterity. In that very century, for instance, it had seen the daughter of an African slave become queen to a local potentate, cheerfully conspiring to murder a more favoured Persian wife. A few decades later, in another corner of the plateau, an ill-fated Brahmin minister curried favour with Aurangzeb, delivering to that emperor cartloads of mangoes, while plotting covertly to thwart His Majesty's imperial designs. The Deccan was that land where a Muslim prince warded off hysterical interventions by the orthodoxy when it was discovered that he exalted Hindu gods over the teachings of the Prophet. Saints and divines too solicited their share in this world of fortune, worshippers of Shiva descending every year upon a celebrated Muslim shrine. There were splendid palaces with golden thrones and forbidding fortresses with thunderous guns. Fine horses bred in Iraq trotted along the Deccan's roads, even as the region's elite succumbed to the sartorial fancies of their friends in Iran. Travellers from lands as diverse as Burma and France descended upon the Deccan's dusty plains, while its harems bewildered European doctors who encountered

begums with skin as pale as their own. The Deccan, to the world, was uniquely Indian; to India, however, it was a mirror of the world.

It is this chapter in India's history that this book seeks to bring back to life. Too often the Deccan has been reduced to a mere battlefield in that titanic clash between Aurangzeb and Shivaji, everything else languishing in the shadow of their sensational vendetta. To be sure it is a story that must be told: It was in the Deccan, after all, that fearsome Aurangzeb – descendant of Genghis Khan and Timur the Lame – arrived as king, only to preside over the beginning of the end for the emperors of the Peacock Throne. It was here too that the Maratha Swaraj was born, its warriors springing forth in a volcanic burst of fury, flying their flag from Tanjore to Gwalior and from Bengal to Punjab. But the Deccan was remarkable even *before* the advent of the Marathas, witness to a saga launched long in advance of the first Mughal conquests in India. It was a different cast of Muslim kings who guided the Deccan's destiny in this era, rebels who broke from Delhi to seize lands where once reigned houses called Hoysala and Kakatiya. Together these Rebel Sultans birthed a whole new universe, a horizon both of breathtaking achievements and startling contradictions. And while they often fought and challenged one another, in the end they shaped a land that became the envy of the early modern world and the object of many an emperor's doomed desire. The Marathas and the Mughals are certainly important, then, but the splendours that tempted the latter, and the fire that propelled the former, emerged in a previous time, in a different context: that is the world into which we travel through this book, and that is the past we seek in the pages to follow.

The story of the Deccan has its roots deep in Indian history. The earliest chroniclers of the subcontinent paused at the river Narmada, giving the plateau across the water the Prakrit name 'Dakhina'. This in Sanskrit became 'Dakshina', eventually evolving into the now-familiar 'Deccan'.¹ In the first century CE, the mysterious *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* named this triangular realm 'Dachinabades', the southern country, abundant in cotton and onyx, while the Chinese

dreaded it in the fifth as Ta-Thsin, a 'precipitous' landscape where the 'roads [were] dangerous and difficult to find'.² In Emperor Ashoka's day, the Mauryas exercised a fragile suzerainty over these parts, but soon after his demise the Andhras of the Deccan threw off the northern yoke, swelling in power as the empire collapsed. In the fourth century, Samudragupta, king of Pataliputra, penetrated as far as Kanchi on the edge of the Tamil country, but was wise enough to accept pretended pledges of fealty over actually subduing these alien lands. For there could be no lasting triumph in the south, and no distant overlord prevailed forever – four hundred years after Samudragupta, the Rashtrakutas turned the tables of history, taking fire and steel into the very heart of the Gangetic belt.³ Many were the twists and turns of time, but the Deccan remained unyielding in spirit and in its spine. To some it was a kingdom of tantalizing treasures and marvellous opportunity; to others, however, the Deccan became also something more sinister: the undoing of mighty kings, a graveyard of glorious empires.

To know India, then, we must know the Deccan. But to tell *all* its tales together is a daunting proposition – the land is rich, and a thousand pages would not suffice. The ambitions of the book you hold, therefore, are necessarily more modest. We begin in the age of the Sultans of Delhi, one of whom, Alauddin by name, marched to the south at the end of the thirteenth century, demolishing what lay accumulated from generations before. Heroic dynasties of whom we learn in ancient texts – Kakatiya, Yadava and Hoysala – were reduced to ashes, and the peninsula stood shaking at the crossroads of catastrophe. But from the ruins of that old world something new was created; something that endured for three and a half centuries, leaving an indelible mark on the destiny of the Indian people. It was from the ashes of that distant past, for example, that a band of brothers forged the kingdom of Vijayanagar, an empire painted as a bastion of Hindu resistance, when in fact it was something altogether more magnificent. The City of Victory, as we will see, was not a citadel of defensive orthodoxy but the seat of wondrous, brave innovation; its

rulers wallowed not in a sea of religious resentments, but grasped keenly the attractions of an eclectic future. Men from the world over arrived in their capital, bringing old customs astride bold ideas: patterns seen in Persepolis were replicated in the mammoth pavilions of Vijayanagar, characters from Turkey and Arabia enshrined in its temple columns forever. The gaze of the Deccan's rulers may have rested upon an Indian landscape, but their minds beheld the astonishing vastness of the world beyond. By this they were enriched, invigorating also that greater narrative that is the story of India.

The Bahmani Sultanate that emerged from the clash between the Delhi Sultanate and ancient houses of the Deccan straddled the northern half of the plateau, growing also, like southern Vijayanagar, into an extraordinary place. But when that grand enterprise crumbled to dust, there were born five successor states, three of them destined for greatness. From Ahmadnagar ruled the Nizam Shahs, one of whom rained vengeance upon Vijayanagar in a battle unlike any other. In Bijapur emerged the Adil Shahs, thirsting for books and flirting with apostasy. And in Golconda, surrounded by earth bursting with gems, reigned the Qutb Shahs, their riches animating minds even in faraway America. Many are the stories that took shape around these courts: where there were treacherous eunuchs drawing princely blood, there were also servants of the state devoted to the country. While factions jostled for ascendance and gain, there were also warrior queens who embraced valour and led from the front. It was in the Deccan, at Goa, that the Portuguese established their principal post in India, reincarnating Muslim Alis into Christian Fernandos. Despite the gore in which it lay drenched, the Deccan created art too of striking originality – a portrait of the goddess of learning, Saraswati, for instance, unprecedented in its Islamic form, or of a Hindu yogini bearing influences from countries as distant as China. And, thus, between everything else that occurred in the heartless sweep of time, this land left upon history a mark that transcended the impetuous doings of imperfect men, touching those higher realms

that revitalized an entire civilization. For this too, then, the Deccan must be recognized.

Death and damnation, of course, came to these dazzling kingdoms in the fullness of time, and friendless monuments are all that remain of them today. If you visit Golconda, for example, you will be greeted by a mountain of crumbling stone. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier saw a diamond worth half a million rupees in these parts,⁴ while Jean de Thevenot claimed the Qutb Shah 'surpasse[d] all the Kings of the Indies in precious stones'.⁵ Today the dungeons of Golconda are home only to colonies of bats, the graves of its former rulers awaiting vindication not in heaps of diamonds as much as mere coats of plaster and paint. But history is full of tragic tales – the real homage to the Deccan lies in learning from its exhilarating past. Free from prejudice, we discover, society can scale the heights of greatness. Divided and broken, on the other hand, doom is quick to ensnare. This was the curse of the Bahmanis and this too became the cancer which consumed our Rebel Sultans – united they could wreak destruction upon their common enemy in Vijayanagar in the south, but divided they fell, in the end, to the Mughals who were masters of the north. Their history is a mosaic of enduring wisdoms, a collective experience that is as much the Indian people's inheritance as those ruined edifices that amaze and astound. How we remember their lessons will vary, but remember them we must. For the Deccan was witness to the making of India, and the tribute India must pay is to remember and recall.



Archaeological Survey of India

Life-size bronze images of Krishnadeva, Raya of Vijayanagar, with his two queens at the Venkateshvara temple in Tirupati, c. 1516