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Nawabi Karnatak: Muhammad Ali Khan in the Making of a Mughal Successor State in Pre-colonial South India, 1749-1795

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PART II: The Making of the Karnatak State

The previous chapters focused on trans-regional matters, and particularly how Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan managed to defeat his external enemies and be acknowledged as ruler on an interstate level. In this second part, the internal challenges that the Nawab faced will be explored. After the Nawab-British alliance had eliminated Chanda Sahib and driven the prince of Mysore, Karachuri Nand Raj, out of his domains, in August 1755 the Nawab organized an extravagant ceremony to mark his re-entry into his capital city of Arcot, signaling the beginning of his rule. All of his family, subjects, and tributaries were summoned to demonstrate their allegiance to him.¹ This ceremony, full of pomp and circumstance, belied the true state of Karnatak in this period, as it was in an extremely fragile position. The Nawab was virtually penniless and most of his family and subjects had taken up arms against him, while his ally, the EIC, did not truly believe that he would be able to maintain his grip on power. Consequently, it tried every means possible to persuade the Nawab to step down, accept a handsome annual allowance for the upkeep of himself and his family, and hand over the management of his lands to the Company. This proposal was put forth at least twice, in 1757 and 1760, yet both times the Nawab, determined to set up his own independent state, obstinately refused.² The principal aim of the second part of this study is to explore the main consequence of the Nawab's tenacity: state-formation under his rule. It will investigate how the Nawab managed to rebuild his state during the second half of the eighteenth century.

I will explore the Nawab's efforts at state-formation through reference to four main pillars: 1) Nawabi dynasty; 2) Nawabi "sword"; 3) Nawabi "pen"; and 4) Nawabi religion. My choice of these four is principally inspired by the political theories and models of the renowned North African historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) on the development of early Islamic polities, in which these elements are deeply rooted. As is seen in his *Muqaddimah* and other writings, Ibn Khaldun's view was that a state or empire usually starts off with a strong military household. Yet their success in battle and in conquest rests not only on their martial talent but also on their loyalty to the group leader and a strong feeling of group cohesion, which he termed *asabiyya*. Two essential things that could help the group leader in strengthening *asabiyya* in his warband are "the intensity of their (common feeling of tribal) descent/pedigree (*li-tazahum al-ansab*)" and "the freshness of their religion (*ghadadat al-*

¹ Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, II: 475.

² IOR, P/240/18, MPP, Madras Consultation, 13 Jun. 1760, 310-313.

din).³ Group feeling leads to royal authority and a dynasty,⁴ something which is established “once leadership is firmly vested in the members of the family qualified to exercise royal authority in the dynasty” and “once (royal authority) has been passed on by inheritance over many generations, (then) the beginnings are forgotten, and the members of that family are clearly marked as leaders.”⁵ Ibn Khaldun repeatedly stressed the link between group cohesion, dynasty, and religion: “Dynasties of wide power and large royal authority have their origin in religion based either on prophecy or on truthful propaganda” and “religious propaganda gives a dynasty at its beginning another power in addition to that of the group feeling it possessed.”⁶ As is described in the *Muqaddimah*, to maintain his hold over the government and their own dynasty, he must seek assistance from others, who can help him “with the sword or with the pen,” hence “both ‘the sword’ and ‘the pen’ are instruments for the ruler to use in his affairs.”⁷ During the establishment of power at the beginning of a dynasty, as well as at its end, need for the sword is usually greater than need for the pen. However, when its power is firmly established, the ruler’s main objective is to maintain law and order, to collect taxes, to prolong the dynasty, and to compete the authority and fame of other dynasties. The pen is useful in all these matters, and the need for it increases during the middle period. In this period, therefore, the men of the pen have more, and more intimate, contact with the ruler and enjoy greater benefits.⁸

In my opinion, the four interlinked components of early Islamic states—dynasty, sword, pen, and religion—described by Ibn Khaldun are suitable as a set of analytical tools or a framework to capture the various political ideas and activities of the late-eighteenth-century Karnatak Nawab. They are probably even more apt than are other models or concepts that have been introduced by modern social scientists to study the early modern state, for several crucial reasons. First of all, Ibn Khaldun’s models focus on “personnel” elements—the groups of people surrounding the ruler—while many modern scholars, whose works I have discussed in the Introduction, focus mainly on institutions or administrative systems. There are several reasons to choose to focus on personal agency rather than institutions when studying Nawabi Karnatak. First, the sources used in this study do not permit the significant

³ David Ayalon, “Mamlūkiyyāt,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 342, 345, 347-348. These are passages written by Ibn Khaldun not in his *Muqaddimah* but in his *Kitab al-ibar*, and quoted by Ayalon. The term *Ansab* or *Nasab* has been translated by Ayalon and other scholars as either as descent, pedigree, lineage, or family.

⁴ Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 284-285.

⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, I: 314.

⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, I: 319-320.

⁷ Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, vol. II (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 4, 46.

⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, II: 46-47.

institutional changes that Karnatak underwent in the reign of Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan to be traced. Rajayyan, who has studied the Karnatak administrative system in detail, argues thus. According to him, throughout the course of the eighteenth century, the Karnatak Nawabs introduced no fundamental innovation to the administrative system that they inherited. Instead, they generally retained that system but replaced all the Mughal imperial officials with their own appointees, added ministerial offices at court, and forced them all to swear allegiance to the Nawab.⁹ On the other hand, the historical sources highlight many interesting changes in the groups of people who had the Nawab's favor, which are worthy of discussion.

Furthermore, while Ibn Khaldun categorized officials into those of the pen and those of the sword, he always emphasized the fluidity and possible overlap between these two groups much more than are allowed by more modern ideas of clear-cut civil (or bureaucratic) and military institutions. As Ibn Khaldun declares, in the pre-modern Islamic state it was always possible that a talented and trustworthy officer could be given many tasks, both military and civil, by his master, regardless of his "official" position (as "sword" or "pen"). For example, a military general could be appointed as a tax collector, the ruler's personal secretary, and an ambassador, either simultaneously or at different times. The ruler could also give the supervision of his whole realm, in both military and civil matters, to one favorite servant. Such a lack of delineation between the functions of sword and pen most often occurred at the early stage of a dynasty; when, later, the state expanded and thus became more complicated, sharp divisions and subdivisions in its administration had to be made. However, overlapping functions of or multiple roles within individual servants were still not uncommon.¹⁰ Ibn Khaldun's model is a useful reminder for modern scholars—myself included—who study pre-modern states and who, in so doing, frequently divide institutions or officials into military and civil (and their subdivisions, such as provincial governors, revenue collectors, or religious scholars) for the convenience of investigation. One needs to keep in mind that overlap, fluidity, and permeability of the boundaries between the functions and roles of officers were typical of the pre-modern state in general.

However, it should be noted that, while I use Ibn Khaldun's political models, I will also provide many of my own adaptations for the sake of convenience. For example, while Ibn Khaldun did not directly link the intensification of *nasab* with the establishment of a

⁹ Rajayyan, *Administration and Society in the Carnatic*, 21, 115.

¹⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, II: 3-18.

dynasty, I see the former as a crucial part of the latter process and will, therefore, discuss them together. Furthermore, unlike Ibn Khaldun, I will apply a “zooming out” approach in presenting the four pillars. In Chapter Three (on Nawabi dynasty), my main focus will be on the Nawab’s inner circle, i.e. his consanguineous and marital family. Then, in Chapter Four (on Nawabi sword) and Chapter Five (on Nawabi pen), I will move outwards to study the composition of his companions, servants, and court officials. Chapter Six (on Nawabi religion) will, to some extent, allow us to go one step further outside his court circle and observe the Nawab’s wider client and patronage networks, on both regional and interstate levels. The main issue that this study examines in each of these chapters is what the main strategies that the Nawab used to control and strengthen the four aforementioned pillars—and thereby to consolidate his own position—were, and attention shall be paid to both ideological and practical facets. The Nawab’s self-representation and his actions will both be discussed. While, in each chapter, I will provide analysis and relevant observations, in order to prevent unnecessary repetition and to allow comparisons and an overview to be made the main conclusions will be detailed at the end of Part II, after discussion of all four pillars.

Chapter Three’s main focus is on how the Nawab constructed his dynasty. Many scholars, including myself in the preceding chapters, take it for granted that the Walajah was the second “dynasty” of Nawabi Karnatak. However, there has never been a serious discussion of whether and, if so, how the Walajah Nawabs attempted to build their own unique dynasty and dynastic identity. According to the historians of dynasties Liesbeth Geevers and Mirella Marini, biological kinship ties of a prominent lineage, usually given by standard dictionaries, by no means fully cover how a dynasty can be defined, and the perception of rule is an important dimension to add.¹¹ According to another specialist, Jeroen Duindam, dynasty is commonly understood as “a ruling family” or “line of kings (i.e. rulers) or princes.” Dynastic power (rulership) emerged “as an extension of kinship” when a family or lineage imposed its supremacy over others while continuing to hold strong connections to its family and genealogy.¹² Both Duindam’s and Geevers-Marini’s meanings of dynasty correspond to Ibn Khaldun’s notion that “dynasty” vests leadership in the members of a family so that they can exercise royal authority and pass it on by inheritance over the course of many generations. In their discussions of dynasty formation, all four scholars see one specific aspect of this process as being of central importance, something they variously term

¹¹ Liesbeth Geevers and Mirella Marini, “Introduction: Aristocracy, Dynasty and Identity in Early Modern Europe, 1520-1700,” in *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Geevers and Marini (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 9, 13.

¹² Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power, 1300-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

as the intensification of nasab, the glorification of pedigree, or the creation of a dynastic history. According to Geevers and Marini, dynastic history functioned to indoctrinate its members about the family's (perceived) rightful position in society and its achievements in the past, which would legitimate their current status and strengthen group cohesion. One crucial aspect they underline is that dynastic history does not necessarily correspond to historical reality; dynasties usually adapted their family history to suit their needs at the time of writing or support their claims. Thus, their family history could be "historicized" by replacing indistinct and/or relatively recent family roots with the "discovery" of a longer line of descent, and certain individuals from the past could be connected to a family to magnify its position.¹³ In other words, the creation of a dynastic history is, I suggest, to a large extent a reimagining of the self and a means of self-representation. According to Geevers and Marini, one other important aspect in the process of dynastic formation relates to the royal family's choices of whom to accept into their clan and whom to dismiss, or what standards of behavior to expect from all members of the family. A further important point to note is that such decisions did not just involve the male heads of the family; many women—mothers, siblings, spouses, children and other relatives—were also involved. In addition, not only were living members part of the dynasty, but, crucially, it also included both deceased forebears and as-yet unborn descendants.¹⁴ According to Duindam, the construction of a dynasty would also involve "a series of conventions" regarding the offspring who could be regarded as part of the dynasty and who were eligible for the throne; such encompassed effective succession planning and marriage strategies.¹⁵ Borrowing analytical tools from the aforementioned dynastic historians, my chapter will explore Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan's exercise of dynastic power (including if he really did exercise it) through an exploration of three main topics: 1) his reimagining of his genealogy (how the Nawab glorified his pedigree and intensified links with his followers); 2) his plans regarding the succession system; and 3) the affiliations of the dynasty (or strategic marriages).

The rise of a new dynasty not only meant changes in the status and composition of the ruling family; it could also result in the replacement of courtiers, administrators, and the whole of the establishment elite. The Walajah Nawabs' accession to the throne naturally caused significant alterations in the Karnatak court and elite society. In Chapters Four and Five, I will discuss who were the individuals or groups that the Nawab recruited to help him

¹³ Geevers and Marini, "Introduction," 2-3, 11-12, 16.

¹⁴ Geevers and Marini, "Introduction," 7, 11.

¹⁵ Duindam, *Dynasties*, 88, and chapter two, 87-155.

run the state. The Walajahs' history of migration within the subcontinent meant that they possessed family networks and connections in three areas: the North Indian region of Awadh, the imperial court in Delhi, and the Deccan. How did the new rulers' associations impact the composition of the Karnatak court? As has been seen in Part I, eighteenth-century Karnatak was a region of extraordinary demographic diversity. How did the Nawab interact with each ethnic or interest group that existed within the local society of Karnatak at the time? How far were they part of the Nawab's network(s)? How did the Nawab's policies in dealing with the different interest groups develop or change over time? How did the groups of courtiers who held royal favor and patronage reflect the specific conditions or problems that the Nawab had been facing? These are the questions that I will try to answer in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four—Nawabi sword—mainly discusses the “the people of the sword,” those who led lines or groups of warriors and mercenary soldiers in the Nawab's service. According to Ibn Khaldun, their principal function is to assist the ruler in expanding, defending, and governing the border regions. Additionally, in this study, “the people of the sword” will include those officials who assisted the Nawab on the battlefield as well as the regional governors who were appointed to administer the provinces, although, in reality, the latter group might not carry out military tasks alone but could also perform many of the “civilian” duties required to administer a province as the Nawab's representative. The “people of the pen,” who I will mainly discuss in Chapter Five, were much more diverse in function than those of the sword. In essence, they were individuals or groups of literate men who fulfilled a variety of non-military tasks for the state government. According to Ibn Khaldun, this group of people has many subdivisions, including the pen of letters and of correspondence, of diplomas and of fiefs, and of book-keeping. He wrote that, when the ruler wished to obtain the fruits of royal authority “such as collecting taxes, holding (property), excelling other dynasties and enforcing the law, ‘the pen’ is helpful for (all) that.”¹⁶ One modern historian, Maaïke van Berkel, has pointed out that the people of the pen usually had two main skills, scribal and accounting.¹⁷ From my research into Nawabi Karnatak, these two skills often overlapped in individual civil officers at court, so it is impractical to divide them into the two separate sectors of administration and finance as is often done for modern states.

Chapter Six tries to reconstruct the Nawab's religious networks. Who were the religious individuals, schools, and institutions with whom the Nawab and his court

¹⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 1958, II: 4, 47.

¹⁷ Maaïke van Berkel, “The People of the Pen: Self-Perceptions of Status and Role in the Administration of Empires and Polities,” in *Prince, Pen and Sword: Eurasian Perspectives*, ed. Maaïke van Berkel and Jeroen Duindam (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 428.

associated? These religious literati could either be directly recruited to court positions—such as teachers, court scholars, court judges, and religious advisers—or be associated with the court through various other forms of patron-client relations. In my view, these religious individuals were, in reality, very close to, or even overlapped with, the category of “pen,” as they could use their “pen” to serve the Nawab in various ways. It is not only Ibn Khaldun who has stressed that religion is a crucial tool for building group cohesion and a dynasty; many modern scholars, such as Susan Bayly and Juan Cole, also view religious men and institutions as a key power resource, and the ability to patronize them was a crucial factor in the success of any pre-modern South Asian ruler. Similarly, Liesbeth Gevers and Mirella Marini have also highlighted that ruling families made careful choices as to which churches they chose to sponsor, something which was a crucial part of their efforts to build up their dynasty’s and state’s identity.¹⁸ There are many well-known examples of early modern rulers using religion as the primary vehicle for building political legitimacy and unifying diverse groups of the population. For example, the Safavid shahs’ political legitimacy was predicated on their religious claims to be the legitimate Sufi of the Safaviyya order and the leader of universal Shia Islam.¹⁹ On the other hand, the wrong religious policy could lead to disaster for a state. One such example is Emperor Aurangzeb, whose orthodox attitudes are often blamed by scholars for causing major conflicts during his reign, conflicts which contributed to the end of Mughal rule.²⁰

As the following discussion will involve many individual officers who were part of the Nawab’s court, it seems appropriate here to provide some general background information related to governmental institutions and posts in Karnatak. This polity, like many other Mughal successor states, was mainly based on the Mughal administrative system and the imperial court, with some alterations made to suit specific local circumstances. Usually, each Mughal province had its own set of administrators. The supreme governor, the subadar (with titles such as Nizam or Nawab), carried out military-*cum*-administrative duties and was entrusted with the overall tasks of maintaining overall peace in their region and putting down local rebellions. Additionally, there were the diwan (the chief revenue collector), the *bakhshi* (the chief army paymaster, inspector, and military adviser), and the *diwan-i buyutat* (the supervisor of roads and buildings, imperial stores, and other state workshops). During

¹⁸ Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 48, and see also 151-186; Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi’ism*, 1, 66; Gevers and Marini, “Introduction,” 7.

¹⁹ See also: Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 52-53, 67-70, 92-93.

²⁰ Dale, *The Muslim Empires*, 101, 259-260.

Mughal rule, the provincial diwan, bakhshi, and diwan-i buyutat were the direct representatives of, respectively, the imperial diwan, the chief bakhshi (*mir bakhshi*), and the *khan-i saman* in Delhi. The officials who held these three provincial positions worked independently and did not consider the local governor to be their master. Hence, they were deployed as tools in the provinces by the imperial government, and part of their role was to check and balance the power of the regional governors.²¹ In the late eighteenth-century Karnatak state some of these positions were retained, but they were transformed into minister-ships of the Nawab. Under the Nawab, the diwan functioned as the wazir or the state's prime minister, an office that was abolished in the regional court. One of the Nawab's diwans, Saiyid Asim Khan, performed an array of duties relating to administration, revenue collection, and diplomatic missions. It seems that the position of diwan-i bayutat ceased to exist under Muhammad Ali Khan's reign, but the office of khan-i saman was retained, indicating that the offices of the imperial Mughal court were recreated in this post-Mughal state. Another civil office at the Karnatak court, known as *diwan-i khas*, was held by a very prominent courtier who, alongside the diwan, carried out various administrative tasks. The bakhshis or military paymaster was maintained, and, as in Delhi, the highest bakhshi at the Nawab's court was called mir bakhshi.

Many other sub-provincial Mughal offices were also replicated in the Karnatak provincial and district administration, including those of *talukdar*, *faujdar*, *killadar*, and *amildar*. A talukdar was the head or governor of a *taluk* (a province or district that was smaller than the suba); killadars and fawjdars were fort commanders, in charge of the military and defense; while amildars were the chief revenue collectors, representatives of the provincial diwan whose role was to check and balance the work of the governor. Despite the dual structure of the Mughal administrative system continuing well into the eighteenth century, as the Mughal Empire underwent the process of zamindarization these offices were often combined into one person, who essentially became the supreme governor of the district (the ruler's *na'ib*). In the early-eighteenth-century Karnatak, the dual system of governor and diwan was still evident, when the Mughal court appointed the Afghan Da'ud Khan Panni as the Karnatak Nawab and Sa'adat Allah Khan, from the Indo-Arab Nawayat tribe, as its diwan in order to limit the Nawab's power. However, this dual structure seems to have disappeared under the Nawayat and Walajah dynasties, where the fawjdar played a far more active administrative role than merely being a fort commander, while, instead of simply overseeing

²¹ Sharma, *Mughal Government and Administration*, 238-242.

the collection of revenue, the amildar carried out all the functions of a governor. However, the eighteenth-century Nawabs could still keep an eye on local governors or army commanders by appointing *sarishtadar* (head clerk) and *peshkar*, whose main role was to report on those governors. Many other offices from the Mughal period were also preserved in Karnatak: the *qanungo* (chief accountant and revenue record-keeper), *kotwal* (chief police officer), and *qadi* (court judge) were other offices at district level, while *daroghas* (superintendents) and *mutasaddis* (superintendents or managers) also continued to exist.²² The preservation of most of the Mughal offices seems to confirm that there were no significant institutional changes during Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan's reign. However, due to his unusually close relationship with the British and his frequent contacts with other Europeans on the coast, the Nawab established a "European Office" at his court to manage correspondence and communication with these groups.²³ It was filled with local scribes who were proficient in many languages, as well as many European secretaries hired by the Nawab. The people involved in this department will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

As the discussion in Part II (and in Part III) will be heavily focused on the Nawab's court, it will be useful to discuss briefly what the term "court" means. This word has been defined and applied in different ways by various scholars who have used it as an analytical tool to explore aspects of royal life. Here, I will discuss three definitions of the term that will prove useful for this study. First, "court" can refer to the ruler's residence in purely physical terms; it is the place where a ruler lives and carries out his royal duties. The second definition combines the aforementioned spatial framework with specific people; here, the court comes to denote courtiers, those people who are usually found in the ruler's residence or in close proximity to him. Such can include members of the ruler's family who live with him, his domestic servants, bodyguards, confidants, and friends. This definition of a court is close to the meaning conveyed by the term "royal household." However, the term "courtier" is sometimes used to refer to all elite officials who served the ruler but were not necessarily resident in his palace, in part by virtue of having duties in both the center and the provinces.²⁴ Another set of scholars, among whom one of the most prominent is Antony Spawforth, have

²² Sharma, *Mughal Government and Administration*, 43-45, 238-239; Rajayyan, *Administration and Society in the Carnatic*, 22-24; Richards, *Mughal Administration in Golconda*, 94-95, 162, 265, 272, 274; Stein, "State Formation and Economy Reconsidered," 402; Bernard S. Cohn, "The Initial British Impact on India: A Case Study of the Banaras Region," in *The Eighteenth Century in India*, ed. Seema Alavi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227-228; Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*, 339-395.

²³ IOR, Mss Eur E/379/1, DGP, Mar. 1771, 192.

²⁴ Antony Spawforth, "Introduction," in *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3-4; Maria Brosius, "Court and Court Ceremonies in Achaemenid Persia," in *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, ed. Antony Spawforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18; Felix Konrad, "Global and Local Patterns of Communication at the Court of the Egyptian Khedives (1840-1880)," in *Court Cultures in the Muslim World: Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung (London-New York: Routledge, 2011), 236.

tried to conceptualize the term “court” in a more abstract sense by combining its physicality, personnel, and social functions. The term court in this third conception is thus “a social configuration” characterized by “some distinctive modes of communication.” It is the chief spatial and social setting in which ruler and elites come together to manage their mutual interactions. It is also the site of exchanges between the ruler and all kinds of people who are not necessarily members of the court, such as ordinary people or envoys from foreign powers. The modes of communication that are often thought of as characteristic of courts include diverse ritual and ceremony, protocol, and the carefully meticulous manners of its partakers, involving veneration and flattery.²⁵

These three facets of the term “court” will be touched upon in various sections of this study. The “court” as a physical space—with its architectural style, artistic design, size, and splendor—may mirror some aspects of the ruler’s self-representation and worldview. This aspect of the Nawab’s court will be examined in detail in Chapter Eight. In Part II, various groups of people around the ruler—his family, officers, and other people whom the second definition of the “court” encompasses—will be explored and discussed. However, when the Nawab’s court is mentioned in this dissertation in other contexts, it is most often used in relation to the third definition, i.e. as the chief social setting in which the Nawab interacted with various groups of people who either approached him or were approached by him. The details of what happened during these exchanges, in terms of formal and informal audiences, rituals, ceremonies, and so on, can be used to explore the Nawab’s feelings, perspectives, and standpoints on various matters and the people involved in them.

²⁵ Spawforth, “Introduction,” 3-4.