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 III: Embracing the Europeans

I will start Part III, "Embracing the Europeans," with a brief supposition regarding the Nawab's self-representation: he probably wanted to draw the Europeans into the micro-cosmos he was creating. The Nawab's official chronicle, *Tuzak-i Walajahi*, contains a large section dedicated to Europeans, their world, and their relationship with the Nawab and his state. The account begins with an impressively accurate overview of world history since the Age of Discovery: Eurasian trade before 1483, scientific advances in Europe in the late fifteenth century, European states' desire to find a sea route to Hindustan, the accidental discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus, and so on. Then, it describes the Portuguese, Denkumar (Danish), Walandez (Dutch), French, and British, the five European nations who had trading posts in South Asia. For each of these, the following details are provided: the location and size of their country, an overview of their capital city, who was the king or aspects of their government, their military strength, and their trading activities and settlements in South Asia.[1] In the Nawab's daily court record, the *Ruznama*, his meetings with individual Europeans—for various purposes and activities—are considered important events and so are recorded. It is noteworthy that, in the *Ruznama*, at the beginning of each day not only is the date (date, month, year) noted in the Islamic calendar (*hijri*) but that in the Western, Christian calendar is, too. The particular attention he paid to Europeans and the efforts he made to integrate them into his dynastic history and court records clearly highlight the fact that the Nawab felt that the Europeans had become a central, and crucial, part of his world. His provision of Western dates alongside Muslim ones in the *Ruznama* is especially significant in light of O'Hanlon's argument regarding the relationship between the command of time and power in South Asia's imperial traditions. According to her, one vital attribute of being an emperor, a great sultan, or a *chakravatin* ("King of the Universe," in Sanskrit) was having command over time. In order to present themselves as commanding time, those who ruled frequently included dates that were recorded using more than one calendar, and even established new eras in their state documents.[2] The Nawab's use of the Western calendar may be interpreted in this light, as evidence that he wished to present himself as commanding the European world. Similarly, it is likely that the information regarding Europe and the five European nations contained in his chronicle was meant to represent the Nawab's profound comprehension of the West and their agents in South Asia; they were always in his sights and under his cognitive control. It is noteworthy that the Nawab's efforts to control the

[1] Nainar, *Tuzak-i Walajahi, Part 1*, 85-109.
[2] O'Hanlon, "Contested Conjunctures," 768.

Europeans, as reflected in his self-representation, are in stark contrast with the image of him often presented by modern historians, who see him as either a British puppet, passive client, or subordinate ally. As discussed in the introduction, modern scholars usually base such images on hindsight, via knowledge of the subsequent EIC domination over the Karnatak state, without providing detailed and comprehensive observations of the process as it unfolded and with little interest in the Nawab's agency. It is the central aim of Part III to re-investigate the relationship between the Nawab and the Europeans by concentrating on the Nawab's own perspective and his agency in shaping developments. On the European side, the British Company and the British nation will be the focus of attention, since they had the largest role in the Karnatak state. Subrahmanyam, one modern scholar who has occasionally touched upon the eighteenth-century Karnatak state, gives a brief overview of the Anglo-Nawab relationship in one of his works as follows: "Muhammad 'Ali's court had close relations with a number of European powers, […]; these [European] individuals and the East India Company effectively managed over the course of several decades to reduce Muhammad 'Ali to a state of political and cultural dependence using both military and financial means."[3] Subrahmanyam's account is a good illustration of the main points on which modern scholars usually concentrate. Next to the word "dependence," three key terms frequently appear: "cultural," "military," and "financial(/economic)." Therefore, these three are good places from which to start this re-examination. For the sake of convenience, I will start, in Chapter Seven, with an investigation into Anglo-Nawabi financial or economic links, then continue in Chapters Eight and Nine with cultural and military engagements, respectively.

Chapter Seven, "Economic Encounters," differs significantly from previous discussions of the Anglo-Nawabi financial or economic relationship. On this issue, specialists on Karnatak's history—Gurney, Phillips, Ramaswami, and others—have traditionally focused on the Nawab's debts to the EIC and British individuals, seeing them either as the basis of British control over the Nawab or as a means by which the Nawab was able to make the British his allies. I shall not go over the debt issue once more, but will instead explore various other economic activities that reveal cooperation and competition between the Nawab and the British and other European nations. As seen in Chapter Five, the rise of prominent groups of financial officers in the Nawab's court, such as the Kayasthas and the Telegu Brahmin dubashes, was remarkably similar to the changing politico-economic circumstances

[3] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "On Early Modern Historiography," in *The Cambridge World History: Volume 6, The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 CE, Part 2, Patterns of Change*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 426.

in the wider context of South India, particularly on the Coromandel Coast; as such, it can be assumed that there were close links between the Nawab's court and the regional mercantile world. Chapter Eight, "Cultural Encounters," aims to extend and deepen the debates of earlier studies regarding the Nawab's openness to Western culture(s). Gurney views this merely as having been the result of the ruler's curiosity and enjoyment of contemporaneous fashions, claiming that the Nawab was "no more a precursor of that extraordinary and attractive amalgam of English and Indian social habits that became more usual in the following century."[4] Ramaswami, on the other hand, rarely touches upon this facet, though it can be inferred that he likely considers it to have been a way in which the Nawab could make a good impression on his British allies. As he comments, the Nawab's commissioning of European-style portraits of himself as gifts was mainly "to placate influential Britons."[5] Phillips declares the Nawab was "a considerable anglophile" and implicitly suggests that the Nawab being open to "Anglo" elements was one main factor that allowed him to be all too readily exploited by the British.[6] Susan Bayly's work is one exception to this trend, as she argues that the adoption of European artistic styles should not be interpreted as a naive effort of the Nawab to impress his British friends. On the contrary, she argues, he used European painters and paintings as tools to represent himself as a "patron of the art" and as an "arbiter of taste and refinement" within his realm.[7] Natasha Eaton believes similarly, and who interprets the Nawab's adoption of European art as a political tool to display his power on the interregional stage.[8] The arguments of the latter two scholars will be discussed further in Chapter Eight. Here, I would like to underline their efforts to understand the Nawab's standpoint and perspective when interpreting his adoption of European culture. While both these scholars base their ideas on the Nawab's production of European-style portraits, I will extend the discussion to various other elements, related to both material culture and people. Chapter Nine, "Military Encounters," is a continuation of Chapter Four, and will it elaborate on the development of the Nawab's military after he successfully persuaded the EIC to establish the Nawab-EIC joint force. In Part II, while one could understand the Nawab's success in using the EIC's military as a stooge to help him subjugate his rebellious subjects, some examples of the Nawab's military difficulties were also highlighted. For example, he seemingly could not move his own Karnatak force unless was permitted by the Madras Presidency. My

[4] Gurney, "The Debts of the Nawab of Arcot," 16-17.
[5] Ramaswami, *Political History of Carnatic*, 339, 346.
[6] Phillips, "The Development of British Authority in Southern India," 36.
[7] Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 170.
[8] Natasha Eaton, "The Art of Colonial Despotism: Portraits, Politics, and Empire in South India, 1750-1795," *Cultural Critique* 70 (2008): 73.

preliminary argument is that, while the Nawab's military cooperation with the EIC was the basis for his success in consolidating his power, it was also the beginning of it succumbing to that of the EIC. In other words, problems in the Nawab's military policy—and his attempts to fix them—should be the focus of discussions regarding British domination over Karnatak, not the "vicious circles of debts" that previous historians have usually sought to describe.

A historical concept that I will engage with in Part III as the main analytical tool with which to discuss the Nawab's embrace of European elements is the idea of "(in)commensurability" in East-West encounters. The notion of "incommensurability" emerged in the early 1960s, when Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend argued that the most fundamental problem in scientific exchanges between two different worldviews or systems is the rare possibility of exact translation. Later, the concept spread to other contexts, and it has been used in historical studies often since the late 1970s regarding cultural exchange, i.e. those times when agents from two or more politically and culturally different entities came into contact. The basic idea of "cultural incommensurability" is that it is hard for people from one cultural world to learn about and fully understand foreign customs and ideas; this may be due to factors including the impossibility of precise translations between different languages, or the pride or idleness of humans. And such cultural incommensurability has been a root cause of numerous conflicts between the agents of two worlds in various contexts—such as diplomatic and artistic exchanges, or warfare—that are evident in the historical record.[9] In studies of early modern South Asia, this concept has mainly been used in the context of East-West encounters. Bernard Cohn, for example, argues that seventeenth-century South Asians and Europeans, who had been raised in different social and political logics—which were themselves expressed in various symbolic and traditional languages—were not able to fully comprehend different systems of meaning beyond their own culture(s). As such, their diplomatic exchanges were doomed to fail.[10] Meanwhile, there are historians who have argued the opposite, believing that cultural commensurability did exist and that it was at the heart of early modern East-West interactions. The most recent champion of this view is Subrahmanyam, who has argued that the critical breakdowns that sometimes occurred during diplomatic exchanges were not due to a breakdown of communication or the inability of different parties to understand each other; instead, it was precisely the opposite: because they understood each other too well and intentionally generated conflict as a specific "form of

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[9] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4-5.
[10] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 18.

communication" through means such as insulting their opponents or attempting to redefine the "rules of the game."[11] More recently, Guido van Meersbergen has also elaborated on the concept of cultural commensurability in his study of diplomatic exchanges between two European Companies (the EIC and the VOC) and petty South Asian courts in the seventeenth century. According to him, not only could European agents understand the precise meanings of local diplomatic signs and rituals but they had the capacity to adjust to the host culture. The examples of mediation and compromise that occurred during their encounters were, almost without exception, provided by the Europeans' willingness to be nominally incorporated into the South Asian culture in order to achieve their goals (mainly receiving trading privileges).[12] Van Meersbergen has made a significant contribution to the study of Euro-Indian encounters. However, in my opinion, his presentation of the Europeans as experts in cultural adaptation has, implicitly, created a counter-image of the South Asian elites as less flexible and less capable of understanding and adjusting to foreign systems than were their European counterparts. It is likely that Van Meersbergen has fallen into what Subrahmanyam refers to as a "trap that still besets many historians of early modern encounters," that of accrediting initiatives in matters of cultural bridge-building mainly to European agents. As Subrahmanyam also stresses, "translations, in reality, are always a two-way process."[13]

Part III seeks to complement and be a counterpoint to Van Meersbergen's debates on Euro-Indian encounters in two main ways. First, while he focuses mainly on the fact that European agents were very good at understanding and highly adaptable to the South Asian world, my study of the Karnatak Nawab will show that their local counterparts were no less able and open to embrace and adapt foreign customs and technologies. Secondly, while Van Meersbergen focuses on why European envoys chose to compromise and adopt aspects of local culture, I will highlight the local perspective by tracing the motives and approach of the Karnatak Nawab in his enthusiastic attempts to enter the European world and embrace various European elements. In fact, with very few exceptions, scholars of Karnatak have but rarely analyzed the Nawab's perspectives on each of the European elements that he embraced, with the exception of some simplistic assumptions about him gaining military and financial support or satisfying his own curiosity.

[11] Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters,* 7, 16, 20, 23.
[12] Guido van Meersbergen, "Ethnography and Encounter: Dutch and English Approaches to Cross-Cultural Contact in Seventeenth-Century South Asia" (Doctoral Dissertation; University College London, The United Kingdom, 2015), 36-38, 141, 145, 172, 197-199, 207.
[13] Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters*, 30.