CHAPTER IV

REGIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY : THE DECCAN

A necessary corollary of American studies on Medieval India has been the evolution of Regional historiography especially of the Deccan and the Punjab. Regional historiography of India has been greatly enriched by scholars from the United States, since they are detached from the social milieu of the region they write about and therefore approach their sources with an open mind. As more and more American scholars became interested in India, attention was focused on areas within the country and on topics no historian had previously worked upon. This led to the development of regional studies, especially on the Deccan and the Punjab as it was felt that regional history "in its proper context, stimulates the understanding of a nation's history as a whole. Every locality has its glories, past and present, and the historian should take pride in studying and writing about what (this) region has contributed to the larger heritage of which he is a part."¹

Also, Americans have a regional background because state historiography has always been very rich in the U.S.A. as each of the fifty states have their respective authentic histories. With respect to the Deccan, it was an area of special interest for Europeans and Americans as their


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earliest contacts with India had been confined to this region. Moreover, the missionaries who followed the traders to India, also found the South more receptive to Christian beliefs and ideas. Their writings dealt with socio-economic and religious matters and this trend has continued to the present day. Research by American historians on South India is on similar themes but their approach is more methodical and scientific. "What has occurred ... is a reformulation of certain aspects of South Indian history in response to perceived inadequacies of interpretation"\(^2\) of earlier research.

For the modern researcher, the term 'South India' denotes that portion of peninsular India beneath the Krishna river and the watershed of its major tributary, the Tungabhadra."\(^3\) Despite its close trade and missionary links with the outside world, till the turn of the present century, most historians of ancient India tended to neglect this region in their works. "A disdainful attitude toward Southern themes has not been confined to the study of India" alone. "The taint of parochialism has long colored scholarly studies of the southern United States, not to mention those

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of southern Germany, Italy, and indeed virtually every country in which northern political, intellectual and other forces have been dominant, or atleast are perceived as dominant."4 One of the best general surveys of ancient south India was written only in 1955 by K.A.N. Sastri, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijaynagara*. But even at that time the term "South" denoted "all the land lying south of the Vindhyas"5 for most writers.

On the whole, research on South India tended to be disappointing, unsatisfactory and of poor quality. This was largely because of geographical and political factors. More historians were attracted towards Northern India which enjoyed greater political unification, larger empires, more land under agriculture due to vast fertile alluvial tracts of land in the Ganga - Jamuna Doab. The South on the other hand with its uneven topography saw much less political uniformity than the north. Even in the economic sphere "the simple picture of the state revenue earned from the vast land in the northern plain became more easily intelligible to the ancient historians of the time than the complicated pattern of economy caused by more than marginal effects of


sea power and the economics of maritime activities.  

In the years since independence there has been a growing awareness amongst historians about the importance of the source material on southern India lying in the various state archives in the Deccan. The entry of American Scholars into the field of socio-economic history of South India after 1960 gave a great impetus to the development of scholarship on this facet of Indian history. New conceptual framework and a fresh look at sources has helped us to gain a wider perspective of life in South India over the centuries.

A majority of these early works, however, were associated with the study of art, architecture and temples. Credit to a large extent for developing the historiography of South Indian culture should go to Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch. Due to their sincere efforts and pioneering work in the early years of the twentieth century, they were able to stimulate considerable interest of Indian art and South Indian temple architecture and inspire a whole generation of American scholars to work on various facets South Indian Art.

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was, as his name suggests, a "cultural hybrid." Born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to

a distinguished Sri Lankan statesman and his English wife, Coomaraswamy was brought up in England. He graduated in Geology and Botany from London University in 1900 but by 1907 his interest in South Asian rock formations gave way to an insatiable desire for knowledge about the history of South Asian Art. In 1910 he became Director of the Art Section of the United Provinces Exhibition at Allahabad, and in 1916 he produced a landmark study, *Rajput Painting: Being an Account of the Hindu Paintings of Rajasthan and the Punjab Himalyas from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century Described in their Relation to Contemporary Thought*. This monumental work was published in two volumes by the Oxford University Press. Simultaneously, he built up an impressive and original collection of Indian bronzes which in 1917 found a permanent home at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The same year Coomaraswamy became Fellow for Research in Indian, Persian and Muhammadan Art at the Boston Museum, a position he continued to hold till the end of his life.

Few scholars have had more to do with shaping the field of Indian art history than has Stella Kramrisch. Along with Ananda Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch has given an important direction and impetus to the study of Indian Art. She was the Curator of Indian Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Professor of Indian Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Her impeccable scholarship shines forth
in her works and testifies to her depth and breadth of involvement in Indian civilization as a whole.

One of Stella Kramrisch’s earliest books was The Hindu Temple (2 volumes, 1946), which even today is considered the standard work on Indian sacred architecture. In this study, the author has attempted to "set up the Hindu temple conceptually" and states that "its structure is rooted in Vedic tradition, and primeval modes of building have contributed their shapes. The principles are given in the treatises on architecture." For Kramrisch the Hindu temple is "an exposition of metaphysical knowledge" which finally took shape and found maturation between the eighth and twelveth centuries.

Other outstanding works by Stella Kramrisch are, Unknown India : Ritual Art in Tribe and Village (1968), and The Presence of Siva (New Jersey, 1981). In 1983 Barbara Stoler Miller edited Exploring India’s Sacred Art : Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch (Philadelphia). This book consists of Kramrisch’s finest writings - sixteen essays divided into five subject categories - where personal details of Kramrisch’s life are interwoven with wider intellectual and social currents to give a complete picture of the scholar and her dedicated work on India that spanned

more than half a century. The essays survey Indian art under the Guptas, Palas and Senas, Buddhist inscriptions at Bharhut and Sanchi, and the Ajanta paintings in the Deccan. They also reflect Kramrisch's ability to relate the archaeological and historical record to traditional texts which is proof of a deep understanding of Indian civilization.

While dealing with the political history of South India, no indepth study was undertaken to examine the complex life of the people from different perspectives. Mainly descriptive or narrative histories of the rulers, dynasties, land grants to the brahmans, the royal palace, etc., continued to be produced till well into the twentieth century.

Since the 1960's however, this "monotonous rendering" and "conservative framework" began to be challenged by American scholars who were attracted by the newly unearthed vast body of sources which could provide a new conceptual structure of South Indian history. These Americans were not all academic historians. In fact fresh insights for the history of South Indian came from sociologists and they started inquiring into topics like - Rites and Rituals; Economic Development and Social Change; When Caste Barriers Fall; Land and Caste; Region and Regionalism; Structure and Changes; Ideology, Caste and Politics, etc." These works reflected a growing "concern

for the smallest unity of society, the recognition of forces other than religious which operated to produce a phenomenon, absence of the air of superiority, presence of perspective...."10

Between 1967 and 1970 Burton Stein, W.G. Spencer, E. Irschick, R.E. Frykenberg and others held deliberations at the Universities of Texas (1968) and Wisconsin (1970) and subsequently came out with a number of publications on different aspects of South Indian history. The most vitriolic critic of the traditional or conservative historiography was Burton Stein who wrote his controversial monograph, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Oxford University Press, 1980). In this voluminous treatise, Stein has given a complete reinterpretation of medieval south Indian Society and polity under the Pallavas, the Cholas, and the Vijayanagar dynasties. The author has drawn his inferences after a fresh examination and analysis of the "distinguished" scholarly literary sources and inscriptiveal records of the south Indian medieval age. In the course of his inquiry, Burton Stein found that "the rich historical literature on South India affords few descriptions of these peasant societies and almost none relating peasantry to other social elements in the

development of Indian society and culture."\textsuperscript{11}

The study of rural Indian and agrarian relations meant merely a narrative of land revenue settlement or an inventory of taxes. Such an approach failed to comprehend certain vital questions "pertaining to the material basis of medieval South Indian life,"\textsuperscript{12} or the richness and vivacity of its culture. By applying a new theoretical technique, this study "attempts to provide the foundation for a broad, new interpretation of medieval South Indian history based upon a central concern with peasant society and culture."\textsuperscript{13}

In this volume the state is considered a "segmentary state", an organic structure which derived its political authority and cohesion from local society and institutions. "The interaction of Brahmans and localized peasant folk constituted the primary cultural nexus of medieval South Indian peasant society."\textsuperscript{14} The basic units of the state were not the administrative divisions, but the peasant microregions or nadus. Within each nadu the dominant peasant Sudra cultivators allied with powerful Brahmin priestly groups in a mutually beneficial arrangement.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{11} Burton Stein, \textit{Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India}, p.2.
\bibitem{12} Ibid., p.3.
\bibitem{13} Ibid.
\bibitem{14} Ibid., p.4.
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Political control in a nadu was exercised by means of the local assemblies called nattar. Consequently, political changes at the centre hardly had any impact in the nadu. Kingly authority and the 'state' were remote entities, which did not really matter in peasant societies as these were physically and culturally distant from central control.

Brahmans exercised the most authoritative control over the microregions and localities as "power, order, legitimacy within the locality world of the South Indian peasantry were mediated"¹⁵ by them. Infact the powerful Pallava-Chola states of the Deccan rose by "massing" together several hundred nuclear areas, and not on the strength of vast royal standing armies which conquered and destroyed local institutions. These monarchs only exerted "compelling coercive power" or "ritual hegemony" rather than direct executive authority. To achieve their end, the Pallava and Chola rulers also patronized Brahmins through the construction and endowment of vast temple complexes. Therefore, according to Burton Stein, medieval South India possessed a vigorous peasant culture and society which coexisted peacefully with an "overarching", but not "intrusive", state. True authority and power was vested in the countryside, not in the cities. The local functionaries

¹⁵. Ibid., p.9.
and chieftains maintained law and order, paid tribute and made donations to royal temples because it was in the larger interest of the nadu to do so.

Stein, therefore, has rejected the previous notion of an impoverished medieval peasantry living under the subjugation of the state or feudal lords. The author goes on to say that a structural change took place in South Indian society under the Vijayanagar empire. With increasing Muslim invasions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Telugu warrior chiefs (nayaks), who were repulsed by the Muslim on slaught, seized control of the nadus from the peasant assemblies and asserted military control over these agriculturally productive microregions. Thus, a new relationship based on mutual interest in the face of the Muslim threat emerged between the state and locality. The study of South Indian society from this aspect offers another stimulating perspective on large-scale human structural and cultural transformation in the medieval period.

There are critics who do not accept Stein's hypothesis of a self-sufficient medieval village in South India or the notion of a segmentary state. Nonetheless, Burton Stein's historical vision and scholarship is impressive. In order to understand early South Indian history, he has concentrated on four aspects: "temples, kingship, agrarian organization, and what can broadly be
called "culture"\textsuperscript{16} in his works. In \textit{All the kings’ Mana: Papers on Medieval South Indian History} (Madras, 1984), Burton Stein examines the relationship and tension among these four interests, viz. temples, kingship, agrarian organization and culture. The essays contained in this volume are devoted to the study of medieval South Indian temples and their economic functions. The approach analysis of Stein to the study of South India is materialistic because according to him "it has always seemed essential for me to deal with the material base of institutions, whether religious, political, or agrarian,"\textsuperscript{17} in order to ascertain the impact of the economy on the nature of state and on the manner in which groups and classes in any society relate to one another.

Earlier, in 1975, Burton Stein edited a volume entitled, \textit{Essays on South India} (Honolulu, Hawaii, 1975) which is a collection of seven essays that were delivered at a conference on South India at Wisconsin in April, 1970. The scope of the essays is wide and are a reflection of the vast range of interests of Americans in South India. American scholarship on South India in the fields of archaeology, Tamil literature, history, geography, anthropology, and

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16. Burton Stein, \textit{All the Kings’ Mana: Papers on Medieval South Indian History}, Madras, 1984, p. v. \\
17. Ibid. 
\end{flushright}
social-linguistics has been surveyed in these essays and those areas identified where the need for future research is felt necessary.

As early as 1970, Burton Stein has stated in his article, "The State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique" that in Chola times the effective unit of organization was the nadu - "a sociological and ecological" microregion where local agricultural groups worked in union for its economic well-being. The Chola king was an overlord who received tribute rather than tax; and the medieval South Indian "State" was "custodial," not a "managerial" entity,\(^{18}\) - a view Stein has held and been able to propagate with conviction.

The importance of peasants and temples has been widely acknowledged by scholars in the historiography of Southern India. In 1985 David Ludden wrote Peasant History in South India (Princeton, 1985), a work which has received the same acclaim as Eric Stokes'. The Peasant and the Raj (Cambridge, 1978). This excellent and wide-ranging monograph has done much to secure a place for peasants in the new social history of the Indian subcontinent. Ludden's research is confined to the Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu where the peasants, he says, were masters of their own

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destiny. British colonialism did not have much impact on the agrarian society in Southern Tamilnadu - and was able to develop only with the active collaboration of local peasant leaders. The peasants evolved their own rural ecology by controlling not only agriculture, but water resources, worshipping their gods and organizing their own distinct social relations through a complex network of kinship and caste ties. They also fully controlled the economy of the areas and even the markets in the towns were the outcome of peasant initiative and the development of agrarian capitalism.

Just because the peasants worked quietly and maintained a low profile, their role in Southern Indian history should not be overlooked. "The people who ... make and break the status quo do not become famous, yet their quiet innovations and conformities aggregate to make society - the human environment - what it is and what it is becoming. Their individual decisions interact to produce rythms of inner motion that render societies dynamic. To hear those rythms in recorded words and deeds from the past is the social historians' task ..."¹⁹ - a task David Ludden has been able to accomplish with aplomb.

Another notable work on this important theme is *Temples, Kings and Peasants: Perceptions of South India's Past* edited by George W. Spencer (Madras, 1987). The essays contained in this volume reflect the current research interest among Americans scholars regarding South India. There is a special concern with temples as they are seen as the "main integrative factor binding the disparate elements of precolonial society into one social fabric. As a focal point for economic redistribution, the South Indian temple was the conduit through which exchange occurred."²⁰ The medieval South Indian monarchs tried to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects by making generous donations to the temples; South Indian temples performed an integrative function due to their wide appeal in society as a result of which people belonging to different communities were incorporated "into one community of worship." Temples provided gainful employment to peasants and artisans besides lending money to local agriculturists in times of need. They were also an important medium for the redistribution of wealth of the rich to other segments of society.²¹ Therefore, it is natural for scholarly interest to focus on South Indian temples and their multifarious functions.


²¹ Ibid.
The articles in George W. Spencer’s *Temples, Kings and Peasants* are all innovative, thought-provoking, perhaps (somewhat) controversial but original and of great significance in widening the scope of South Indian historiography. George L Hart III has analyzed the sacred powers of Tamil women and various notions about them in his paper "Women and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad." This has led to growing scholarly interest in women’s studies based on early Tamil literature.

In "The Pasts of a *Palaiyakarar*: The Ethnohistory of a South Indian Little king," Nicholas Dirks examines the role of "linkages in a system of hierarchical relationships between great and little kings, especially how those connections were manifested through titles, emblems, and land bestowed by superiors – kings or deities – on lesser kings and devotees in return for various kinds of service."23

Eugene Irschick, in his essay, "Peasant Survival Strategies and Rehearsals for Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century India," comes to the conclusion that in the countryside around Madras City, the peasants successfully resisted certain policies of the East India Company. The

British were not successful in manipulating the rural folk around Madras City. On the contrary it was the villagers of Southern India who "actively shaped the emerging colonial system. They played a "game" of obstruction whose rules were culturally defined, and successful resistance forced the British to adapt their own behaviour to the rules of the local game."24

Another facet of South Indian history that is examined in recent historiography pertains to separatist movements, especially amongst the Tamils and in Telengana, and regional developments in the Indian Nationalist Movement. One of the earliest works to be written incorporating this theme is Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929 by Eugene F Irschick (Los Angeles, 1968). It evaluates "the effect of a regionalistic movement during the second and third decades of the twentieth century in order to illustrate one aspect of contemporary Indian social and intellectual history."25

According to Irschick the causes for the rise of nationalism in the Madras Presidency are to be traced to the existence of "linguistic" "cultural" and "social" rivalry

24. Ibid.

amongst the Brahmans and the so-called "backward" non-Brahmans which culminated into a political upheaval between the years 1916 and 1929. The growing polarization between the two groups had been reinforced by the writings of European and Indian scholars which "posited the idea that non-Brahmans were Dravidians and the original civilizers of the region, and that the Brahmans were the "Aryan invaders" from the north." This traditional notion saw the Dravidians as "inferior", who had been conquered and their institutions supplanted by the "superior" Brahmans with their sanskritic "Aryan religion".26

But with the spread of modern education and ideas, and a corresponding growth of the Press in India, the years between 1916 and 1929 witnessed the proliferation of cultural and political separatism. The non-Brahmans "challenged the prevailing elite group; they demanded a position of importance and special treatment by the government; they created a myth of their own origins; and finally they decided on a drive for separatism."27 To achieve their ends, the non-brahmans willingly collaborated with the British at critical junctures during the course of the nationalist struggle and in turn "received valuable assistance from them."

26. Ibid., p. xv.
27. Ibid., p. xvii.
This aspect of Southern Indian historiography has also received the attention of another renowned scholar, Robert Eric Frykenberg. In 1985 he and Pauline Kolenda edited a volume entitled, Studies of South India: An Anthology of Recent Research and Scholarship which consists of essays presented at a conference in Wisconsin during November, 1983. These essays give a comprehensive historiographical review of research in South Indian history since the 1970's "either by an empirical survey of scholarly developments, or by a critical reappraisal of theoretical formulations, as pertaining to our understanding of the cultures and peoples of South India."28 Some of the papers in this volume suggest topics and directions for further study. What emerges is a growing pre-occupation and interest with the problems and aspirations of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the implications for India as waves of refugees find their way to this sub-continent.

Frykenberg has also analyzed the introduction and impact of Western education in the South in an incisive article "Modern Education in South India, 1984 - 1954: Its Roots and its Role as a Vehicle of Integration Under Company Raj," published in the American Historical Review, February 1986. Frykenberg opines that the British

administrators were well aware of the fragility of their empire in India "They knew that, without warning, unforeseen, unpredictable, and unsettling incidents could erupt"29 and dislodge the English from India. In order to strengthen their grip on the country, the loyalty and support of Indian civil and military servants of the East India Company was absolutely essential. But unfortunately due to the "complex and segmented" nature of Indian society each group was only concerned with its own immediate ends. In order to overcome this hurdle a solution was found by providing certain incentives to Indian employees.

A modern western education, it was hoped, would help Indians imbibe ideas like "merit", "training" and "indoctrination", and would also create an esprit de corps amongst the native officials. Therefore, modern education in India, including South India, was introduced due to political and practical considerations. Its origins lay in Northern Europe because "it was there that new techniques evolved for building radically new social institutions and, therewith, for releasing unpredictable social energies. Precedents for "mass", "national", "public", even "popular" education came out of apocalyptic dreams and millenarian

visions .... Emphasis was placed on personal enlightenment, spiritual vitality, and moral transformation by means of a proliferating network of small training groups (collegia philobiblica)," which played a vital role in the establishment and spread of modern education in South India.

R.E. Frykenberg also has numerous historiographical works surveying various primary sources which throw valuable light on the history and culture of South India. His special attention has been drawn towards the study of South Indian inscriptions of which almost 100,000 survive to the present day. He has advocated not only a proper cataloging of these inscriptions but also detailed map drawings, with proper notes and references, to show the distribution of numerous inscriptions found scattered all over the peninsula of South India.

During the course of his search for fresh archival sources which shed light on various aspects of the South Indian past, Frykenberg has come across Tamil documents in the form of family history, private journals and personal letters. Of special significance are the writings and observations of Savariraya Pillai, a Christian teacher and preacher based in Tinnevelly (Tirunelveli) District of Tamil Nadu. Though he never learned English, and his linguistic skills seem to be confined to the local Tamil dialect these records "giving us acute perceptions and probing reflections

30. Ibid., pp.40-41.
upon private life and public affairs in South India over a span of forty years, are almost priceless as sources for historical understanding ... The writings of Savariraya Pillai contain a substantial amount of data for both linguistic and literary analysis. Peculiar local dialects and idioms, archaic expressions and forms of vocabulary, newly coined concepts, ... and changing styles that were becoming current in new forms of literary expression provide avenues for further research by scholars ... Such social history, especially when informed by data that provide a "view from the bottom" or a "documentation of repression" within a highly stratified agrarian system, can offer much to the kinds of historiography now being pursued."31

Increasing interest of American scholars has also been drawn towards peasant rebellions, peasant leaders and the persons who rebelled, especially in Telengana. Attention of researchers is focused on "the egregious conditions that aroused their indignation, the social and economic transformations that gave them the capacity to act, the leaders who came forward to mobilize them ..."32 in a bid


to explain peasant militancy and rebellion. Apart from this, what is now studied comparatively is the fate of colonial regimes in the wake of such rebellions because it is increasingly realized that "the capabilities of political systems are probably more various than either the grievances or the capabilities of the groups challenging them."\textsuperscript{33}

Of special significance to researchers is to find a satisfactory explanation as to how peasants in this backward region were influenced by Communist ideology and were able to "build up a vigorous Maoist type of guerrilla war across an area of 4000 villages."\textsuperscript{34} There seems to be a general consensus that the erstwhile state of Hyderabad (of which Telengana was a part), was more vulnerable to outside influences than other regions of South India due to an ineffective regime, a lack of solid political institutions, and a widening gulf between the peasants and elites which left no scope for "viable linkages among persons in either horizontal or vertical directions."\textsuperscript{35}

Hyderabad seems to hold a special place in the minds and hearts of American scholars. This may have been initially largely due to visions of grandeur, pageantry and

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p.28.
stories of fabulous wealth associated with the Nizam. But this romantic interest soon gave way to serious scholarship of Hyderabad because of the excellent archival sources housed in the Andhra Pradesh State Archives and cognizance of the fact that "by the end of the eighteenth century, Hyderabad represented a new political system, with a whole new set of participants."\(^{36}\)