Book Review

Emma J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xix + 318 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-48193-9. Price: £75.00 (cloth).

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Emma J. Flatt's *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates* is a convincing and expertly written study of courtly culture in the Bahmani sultanate (1347–1528) and its five successor sultanates, Bijapur (ca. 1490–1686), Ahmadnagar (ca. 1490–1636), Berar (ca. 1490–1574), Bidar (ca. 1492–1619), and Golkonda (ca. 1501–1687). The members of the courtly societies of these Indo-Islamic states had roots in (most prominently) north India, Iran, and Central Asia, and they had adopted Persian as the language of the court and administration. Scholarship in the field shows a long-standing interest in studying these elite migrants to the Deccan.[1] Prompted by the observation that courtiers moved as easily between the Deccan's courts as they did to them, Flatt now aims to elucidate what practices and ideas allowed their easy integration and their high degree of mobility. As such, the book also fits within a growing body of scholarly literature that pays attention to the topic of mobility—not only of people,

1. E.g., Jean Aubin, "De Kûhbanân à Bidar: La famille Niʿmatullahī," *Studia Iranica* 20, no. 2 (1991): 233–261; Simonetta Casci, "Cultural Mobility in the Deccan: The Afaqis' Long Journey," *Deccan Studies* 7, no. 2 (2014): 5–23; Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 59–77; Muḥsin Maʿṣūmī, "ʿAnāṣir-i qawmī-yi tashkīl dihanda-yi jāmiʿa-yi Dakan dar dawra-yi Bahmanīyān va chigūnagī-yi taʿāmul-i ānhā bā yakdīgar," *Majalla-yi ʿilmī-pizhūhishī-yi dānishkada-yi adabiyāt va ʿulūm-i insānī-yi dānishgāh-i Iṣfahān* 2, no. 53 (1387 Sh./2008): 81–91; Muhammad Suleman Siddiqi, "Ethnic Change in the Bahmanid Society at Bidar: A.D. 1422–1538," *Islamic Culture* 60, no. 3 (1986): 61–80; idem, "The Pro-Afaqi Policy of Ahmad Shah Wali Bahmani: Its Impact and Consequences," *Deccan Studies* 11, no. 2 (2013): 25–48; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no. 2 (1992): 340–363.

but also of objects and ideas—in the wider Islamic world.[2]

Flatt argues that vital to understanding this historical phenomenon is to grasp what constituted courtliness. She contends that the Deccan's elite shared with their counterparts in Persian-speaking lands a particular courtly disposition: a certain awareness of and engagement with authoritative literature and related knowledge, behaviors, and skills. It was acquired through a "cosmopolitan" education based on a "canon" of Persian (and Arabic) texts that betray a concern with instruction and moralization. The aim of this education was to impart to the student a specific mindset that would make him value the ongoing effort to gain proficiency in a variety of fields and to perfect a range of courtly qualities. This mindset consequently helped courtiers from diverse backgrounds to carve out a space for themselves in the Persian-oriented sultanates of the Deccan.

Flatt builds this argument on the idea of the Persian Cosmopolis, a concept that is gaining currency among historians of Islamic South Asia. The term is a shorthand for a tradition stretching over a vast time and space marked by a reliance on deep-rooted and transregionally appealing ideas, images, and practices associated with the Persian language and its literary heritage. These were often reinterpreted and adapted to local contexts, mainly in the political realm. The author provides a clear explanation of this concept, engaging with Sheldon Pollock's work on the Sanskrit Cosmopolis, as well as with Richard Eaton's and Philip Wagoner's use of the term Persian Cosmopolis (pp. 17–24). Absent from this discussion is the Arabic Cosmopolis, which was introduced almost a decade ago by Ronit Ricci.[3] The role of Arabic itself, however, is not forgotten in the book; Flatt mentions that Arabic works were also part of the courtier's canon and in chapter 5 points to the use of an "Arabicized" Persian in Bahmani *inshāʾ* (epistolography, meaning both the art and its products) as a political tool. It might have been interesting to consider the implications of these glimmers of an Arabic presence at South Asian courts for the idea of the Persian Cosmopolis—and of an Arabic one. In Flatt's defense, though, the concept of the Arabic Cosmopolis is only now making headway in a couple of recent studies, which appeared after the publication of Flatt's work.[4] This young field shows the utility of thinking about cosmopolises as a way to grasp issues of mobility, transmission, and connectedness over larger areas, as Flatt does, but it

2. On the Deccan, specifically, the most recent example (which appeared after Flatt's book) is Keelan Overton's edited volume *Iran and the Deccan: Persianate Art, Culture, and Talent in Circulation, 1400–1700* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020). For the Islamic world more generally, see, for example, Stefan Rohdewald, Stephan Conermann, and Albrecht Fuess, eds., *Transottomanica – Osteuropäisch-osmanisch-persische Mobilitätsdynamiken: Perspektiven und Forschungsstand* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2019), which also includes a part on India (Christoph U. Werner, "Persisch-Indisch-Osmanische Interaktionen").

3. Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

4. E.g., Christopher D. Bahl, "Transoceanic Arabic Historiography: Sharing the Past of the Sixteenth-Century Western Indian Ocean," *Journal of Global History* 15, no. 2 (2020): 203–223; Mahmood Kooria, "Languages of Law: Islamic Legal Cosmopolis and its Arabic and Malay Microcosmoi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 29, no. 4 (2019): 705–722.

also highlights the fact that the concept is still in full development and that the complexities of the South Asian context call for both refinement and extension.

In a laudably innovative approach, Flatt herself extends the concept of the Persian Cosmopolis to comprise not only language practices but bodily ones as well (see p. 20). This allows her to highlight the importance of the physical manifestations in which the influence of the Persian Cosmopolis in the Deccan courts is visible, such as rituals, the training of the body for particular skills, and material objects. In the first chapter of the book ("Courtly Disposition," pp. 31–73), the author elaborates on this line of thinking. She explains that the way a courtier in the Persian Cosmopolis thought about what constitutes courtliness and how to achieve it was influenced by the idea, prevalent in Islamic advice literature as well as in Sufi thought and medico-philosophical theories, that both the body and the character were malleable and could be perfected (or corrupted) via internal and external forces. The self, the body, the world, and the cosmos constituted a continuum: changes in one sphere were believed to influence the others. By extension, this idea implied that the cultivation of courtliness was crucial not only to attain worldly success, but also to live ethically and to refine one's soul. This interplay between the political and the personal, practices and knowledge, the worldly and the ethical, and the mundane and the spiritual in the courtly culture of the Deccan sultanates is a common thread throughout the book.

Chapter 2 ("Networks, Patrons and Friends," pp. 74–119) and chapter 3 ("Courts, Merchants and Commodities," pp. 120–164) consider the social and economic networks that tied the Deccan sultanates to the Persian Cosmopolis. Most of the subtopics discussed in these chapters are well known in the field through previous scholarship; they include the connotation of knowledge acquisition that "travel" had in Islamic accounts, the Bahmani sultans' pro-immigration policies, the interdependence of trade and state in the premodern Indian subcontinent, and the Bahmani chief minister Maḥmūd Gāvān's (d. 1481) mercantile networks. The part on the Bahmani secretary ʿAbd al-Karīm Nīmdihī's (d. ca. 1501) social network (pp. 83–88), in particular, might have benefited from a fresh examination of the material in the main source, Nīmdihī's *inshāʾ* collection *Kanz al-maʿānī*, instead of relying on Jean Aubin's publications.[5] Still, these chapters are valuable for bringing together the complex and varied aspects of the Deccan's transregional relations in a comprehensible overview. Further, the addition of highly engaging sections related to Flatt's interest in bodily practices brings back the focus from the wider context of economic and social connections to the court. For example, as part of demonstrating the role of friendship relations and sociability in courtiers' careers, Flatt discusses the practice of sitting together in the assembly (*majlis*) and how concerns about the body and its susceptibility to external influences shaped this social encounter (pp. 109–119).

5. An edition of the collection has been available in print for five years but has received very little scholarly attention: ʿAbd al-Karīm Nīmdihī, *Kanz al-maʿānī (Munshaʾāt-ī Nīmdihī)*, ed. Muḥammad-Riżā Naṣīrī and Muḥammad-Bāqir Wuṯūqī (Tehran: Academy of Persian Language and Literature [Farhangistān-i zabān va adab-i fārsī], 1394 Sh./2015).

The remaining chapters of the book each deal with a set of skills that were important in the courtly life of the Deccan sultanates: letter writing (chapter 4, "Scribal Skills," pp. 167–209); knowledge of esoteric sciences (chapter 5, "Esoteric Skills," pp. 210–267); and mastery of martial arts (chapter 6, "Martial Skills," pp. 268–302). These chapters illustrate some of the concrete aspects of courtly life, but their aim is also to show how these three seemingly very different occupations were all underpinned by the same idea: that they (and the literary or scientific works that treated them) had transformative powers on both a communal and an individual level. To the individual courtier, each of these skills held obvious practical value; one should be able to write letters for the sultan and to colleagues and friends, be aware of the power of esoteric sciences to better serve the sultan and to safeguard one's own well-being, and be ready to fight in battles. At the same time, given the continuum between physical activities and the soul explained by Flatt in the beginning of the book, these skills were linked to courtly ideals of perfected selves: the true *munshī* (composer of *inshāʾ*), the spiritual master, and the *javānmard* (a person embodying characteristics of "young-manliness").

At the communal level, Flatt argues, we can observe attempts to mobilize each of these three courtly skills to deal with the ethnic, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity of Deccani society. The Bahmani chief minister Maḥmūd Gāvān thus advocated in his chancery manual an "Arabicized" Persian, purged of vernacular influences, as the basis of *inshāʾ* to balance out rivalries between ethnic-political factions at the court, which are well known for the disrupting role they played in Bahmani history. As for the esoteric sciences, one of the sultans of Bijapur, ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh I (r. 1558–1580), found them an ideal arena in which "to create conceptual commensurabilities between Indic and Islamicate cosmologies with the aim of promoting a shared culture in a multi-ethnic and religiously plural society" (p. 305). He did so by writing an astrological encyclopaedia that drew on both Islamic and Indic beliefs, images, and practices. Finally, the Deccan sultans are shown to have encouraged or prohibited certain martial arts depending on whether they perceived them as a unifying or disrupting force.

In addition to a range of more conventional primary sources on the early modern Deccan, such as Firishtah's *Tārīkh*, ʿIṣāmī's *Futūḥ al-salāṭīn*, Shīrāzī's *Tadhkirat al-mulūk*, and Ṭabāṭabā's *Burhān-i maʾāṯir*, the book's main arguments build on two particularly noteworthy sources: Maḥmūd Gāvān's chancery manual *Manāẓir al-inshāʾ* (chapter 4) and ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh's astrological encyclopaedia *Nujūm al-ʿulūm* (chapter 5). Flatt's use of them makes a key contribution to the field, because both works to date have been looked at only from specific angles. *Nujūm al-ʿulūm* has mainly received art-historical attention owing to its splendid miniatures.[6] In *Manāẓir al-inshāʾ*, the sections on the rules of letter composition have been singled

6. An exception is Flatt's own previous study "The Authorship and Significance of the *Nujūm al-ʿUlūm*: A Sixteenth-Century Astrological Encyclopedia from Bijapur," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131, no. 2 (2011): 223–244.

out for use in analyzing official letters from other premodern Islamic dynasties.[7] Flatt's argument that these works served political, societal, and personal ends for the first time sheds light on the purposes for which they were potentially written. Much work remains to be done to better understand these Deccani texts (for example, no attempt has so far been made to examine *Manāẓir al-inshāʾ*'s place within the larger Islamic tradition of *inshāʾ*), but Flatt's intervention is an important step forward.

Only two minor reflections about the effectiveness of the book's arguments as a whole impose themselves. First, the arguments presented slightly lose sight of the book's opening question: "How had the ideas of 'the court' and 'courtliness' become so immediately recognisable across a wide geographic area, and so readily applicable—by Persians—to Indic culture?" (p. 2). This question is raised after observing that certain images of the court modeled on ancient Persian examples are used by the Bijapuri historian Rafīʿ al-Dīn Shīrāzī to describe the cave temples at Ellora. It also relates to an aim articulated in the abstract: that the book "challenges the idea of perpetual hostility between Islam and Hinduism in Indian history." Although the introduction recognizes that one should not disregard the local context when focusing on the Persian Cosmopolis (pp. 22–24), the issue of the interaction between "Persian" and "Indic" elements in the Deccan's courtly culture only really receives attention in chapter 5. The author herself suggests, in her concluding remarks, that this question deserves to be taken up more elaborately in future research (p. 306–307).

Second, a risk of the thematic instead of chronological approach of the book is that the reasoning of one of the central arguments becomes somewhat circular: strong connections, often through human travel, with the Persian-speaking world allowed the Deccan sultanates to develop a courtly culture compatible with those of other regions within the Persian Cosmopolis, which in turn facilitated the transregional movement of courtiers. Admittedly, it would be pointless to try to establish cause and effect in this complex, two-way process. Nevertheless, an attempt might have been made to discern certain evolutions in migrants' movements over the almost three centuries under discussion and to explain how they related to Deccani courts' participation in the Persian Cosmopolis. That this remains a very difficult thing to do further illustrates the relevance of Flatt's research and the pressing need for contributions like *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates*.

The book features some useful and clear maps of the early modern Deccan (pp. 5 and 8), the Persian Cosmopolis (p. 76), and the Bahmani capital of Bidar (p. 278), as well as wonderful illustrations taken from Persian manuscripts, mostly from the *Nujūm al-ʿulūm* (MS CBL In. 02). As to the transliteration of titles and phrases from Persian and Arabic, unfortunately a rather large number of mistakes remain in the publication, mostly due to an inconsistent rendering of the letters *ʿayn* (ʿ) and

7. E.g., Malika Dekkiche, "The Letter and Its Response: The Exchanges between the Qara Qoyunlu and the Mamluk Sultan: MS Arabe 4440 (BnF, Paris)," *Arabica* 63 (2016): 579–626; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "The Delicate Art of Aggression: Uzun Hasan's *Fathnama* to Qaytbay of 1469," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 193–214.

hamza (ʾ) throughout. For example, we find *ʿAjāʿib* (p. 39) instead of the correct *ʿAjāʾib*, *mujtamiʾ* (p. 157) instead of *mujtamiʿ*, *al-māʿida* (p. 199) instead of *al-māʾida*, and *Rasāʿil* (p. 233) instead of *Rasāʾil*. There is also *Iqʿra* (p. 179, n. 42) instead of correctly *Iqraʾ*, al-Mutanabbīʿ (p. 198, n. 112) instead of al-Mutanabbī, *faṣāhat* (p. 201) instead of *faṣāḥat*, *Makhzān* (p. 202, n. 129) instead of *Makhzan*, and *Manāẓīr* (throughout chapter 4) instead of *Manāẓir*. This does not change the fact, however, that *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates* is a highly erudite work, carefully structured and original in its approach and arguments, which should certainly become part of the "canon"—to use some vocabulary that matches the themes of the book—of historians, area specialists, political scientists, and scholars of language and literature alike.