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Unruly Hinterlands and Settlement Histories of the Deccan Plateau

The settlement histories of the early Deccan Plateau in south-central India serve as an example of environmental unruliness, providing a spatial and temporal framework for investigation. My understanding of “unruly” here follows Peter J. Taylor,¹ whose argument revolves around “unruly complexity”:

I am interested in situations that *do not* have clearly defined boundaries, coherent internal dynamics, or simply mediated relations with their external context. *Such unruly complexity . . . arises whenever there is ongoing change in the structure of situations that have built up over time from heterogeneous components and are embedded or situated within wider dynamics.* [emphasis added]

Taylor’s insights highlight heterogeneous elements and historical variability in geographic and social composition. A focus on specific regions or localities of the Deccan is imperative, for it showcases the diversity, variability, and interdependence of complex processes within a well-defined system over time. Unruliness develops within these systems when previously entrenched forces begin to collapse. The resulting heterogeneity and process of continual adjustment that shapes historical settlement produces unruliness.

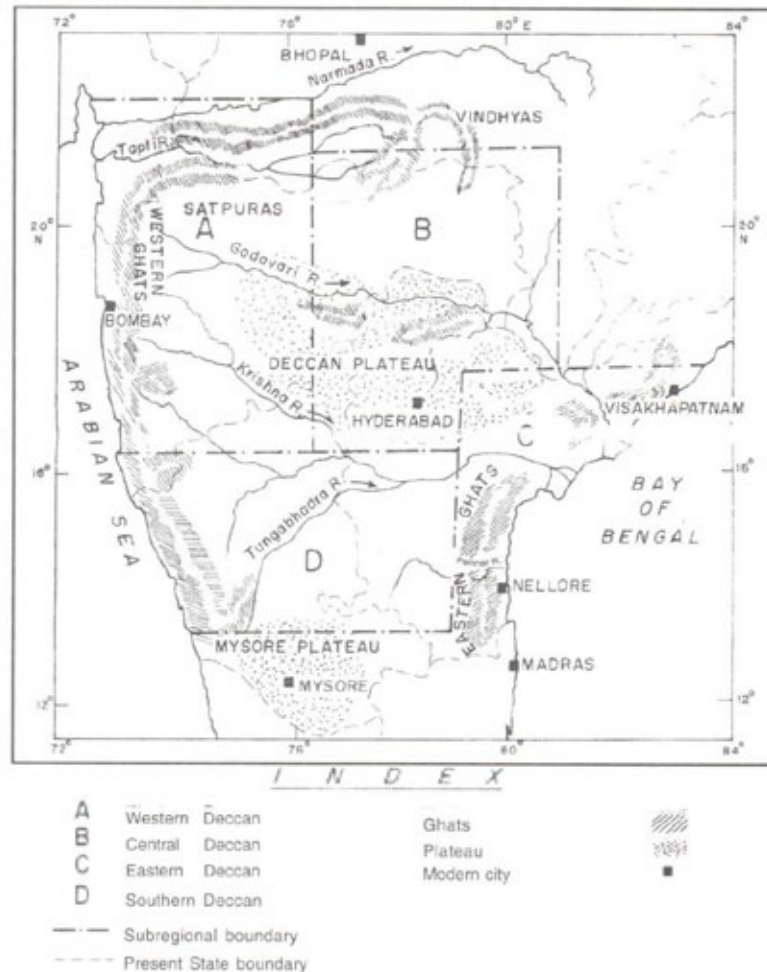
The Deccan

Today, we understand the Deccan Plateau in terms of the Deccan Traps, comprising distinct geological subregions loosely aligning with present-day Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. The physical Deccan is broadly understood as the land south of the Vindhyas, up to the Krishna-Tungabhadra Basin (see map).² As one of the oldest landmasses in the world, it is physically complex. Major rivers cut across the Deccan Plateau, but it is the rocky landscape that marks its physiographic and ecological heterogeneity. The upland plateau is marked by red soils that retain little moisture;

1 Peter J. Taylor, *Ecology, Interpretation Engagement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

2 Reprinted from Aloka Parasher-Sen, “Origins of Settlements, Culture and Civilization in the Deccan,” in *Deccan Heritage*, ed. Harsh K. Gupta, Aloka Parasher-Sen, and Dorairajan Balasubramanian (Hyderabad: Universities Press, 2000), 235.

Map of the Physical Deccan. Image from Aloka Parasher Sen, "Origins of Settlements, Culture and Civilization in the Deccan" (Hyderabad: Universities Press, 2000), 235.



this is particularly apparent in the Telangana territory, which has long relied upon water tanks and artificial irrigation. This single subregion of the Deccan Plateau (marked “B” on the map) is characterized by extraordinary ecological diversity that has attracted widespread settlement over centuries. Despite the difficult terrain, most settlements were situated near pockets of water, enabling agriculture to develop. Over time, the plateau became the agricultural hinterland of both the east and west coasts of peninsular India. Nevertheless, plagued by rocky, shrub-choked soils and limited by the seasonal

availability of monsoon-fed waters, these lands produced only the nominal agricultural output typical of dry farming areas.

The most significant unruly feature here is complexity and multiplicity, and the tenacity with which settlements have repeatedly survived and reemerged. To understand these patterns we need to look beyond simple definitions of unruliness, which is not an absolute state of disorder—of chaos, complication, and inhospitable conditions—as many of us would conveniently believe. The historical environment in the Deccan is one of continuous *negotiation* between order and disorder. Studies have shown how it became a site of settlement and political upheaval, but typically depict it merely as an enabling *bridge* carrying the evolved norms of civilized life from the north Indian plains to the far south. While this region was surely shaped by the trans-peninsular travel and communication it facilitated, Deccan society also developed its own character through the communities that came to inhabit it. The people of the hilly and forested areas of the Southern Peninsula have tended to isolate themselves in refugee zones, which Subbarao has labeled “areas of isolation.” The Deccan, however, has also been characterized as an “area of *relative* isolation,” unruly through the *diversity* of its physical and cultural landscape. Such unruliness has led Deccan people to adopt and adapt to external influences, establishing a “curious pattern of survival of the older with the new.”³

Historical Settlements of Telengana

Telengana has been frequently overlooked as its patterns of development do not fit dominant historical narratives of the Deccan. But a closer look at Telengana adds resolution to our definition of unruliness. In Telengana few written records are available for the pre-medieval period, and so the archeological record has been indispensable for constructing its history. Using Taylor’s concept of “unruly complexity” we can question a linear narrative of social change, especially one explaining sociopolitical and economic development in terms of “urban” growth or “city” formation—terms that become difficult to apply to settlements that arose between 300 BCE and 400 CE. This so-called early historic urbanization is difficult to envisage across the physically varied environments of the Deccan, which gave rise to diverse settlements: some may fit into the definition of an

3 B. Subbarao, *Regions and Regionalism in India* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2011), 7–8, identifies these as “areas of isolation” in contrast to “perennial nuclear regions” identifiable as the chief river basins of the country.

early historic urban center similar to those in other regions of India, while others were particular to the Deccan.

To analyze the historical trajectory of the Telengana, details of early settlements, including Dhulikatta, Kotalingala, and Peddabankur around the mid-Godavari valley, and others located farther away, such as Kondapur and Phanigiri, were taken as examples. Each had its own character, structural remains including fortifications, religious structures, and edifices associated with artisanal activity. And they all flourished on the Deccan Plateau. The dynamics of internal changes that characterized these localities evolved alongside economies that depended on the small-scale production of iron artifacts. Peddabankur and its surroundings were entrenched in the manufacture of iron goods, including sickles, forks, knives, nails, and spearheads. Most places show evidence of the production of terracotta and beads as well. At Kondapur, which evolved into a significant trade center, hoards of beads were found, and along with other sites in this region it was an important center for terracotta production. Many of the terracotta remains were in the form of molds, some used to make coins, and almost all of the sites show evidence of punch-marked, die-struck, and inscribed coins in their material remains, which is rare for the same historical period in other parts of the country. This is evident from the inscribed coins of local rulers found at sites like Kotalingala, indicating a local mobilization of resources, which in turn meant that the political elite had the ability to issue their own coins.⁴ Their control of the iron-generating areas probably made this possible, since considerable numbers of iron objects were present at sites including Peddabankur, Dhulikatta, and Kondapur.

Previously, I have compared the specificity of archeological artifacts found at these Telengana settlements, each telling their own local story, to those found in more prosperous regions along the coast or in the fertile river valleys in the Andhra Pradesh areas of the Deccan. Earlier explanations were that settlements emerged in the Telengana as more prosperous regions sought sources of economic development there; the Buddhist monks who traveled across the Deccan Plateau became agents of this change and interacted with and lived off local inhabitants, opening up the region to traders. The key question of what sustained local artists, craftsmen, and technologists, and how they coped with these changes, were themes that scientifically trained archeologists found

4 Aloka Parasher-Sen, "Localities, Coins and the Transition to the Early State in the Deccan," *Studies in History* 23, no. 2 (2007): 231–69.

barely relevant. Yet data show artefactual assemblages that reflected the lives of simple communities that engaged in mixed farming and small-scale production of artifacts produced from local resources. It is these types of sustenance, depending on different modes of production and variegated socioreligious and political organization, that came to characterize the diversity of the Deccan Plateau over lengthy periods.

In characterizing the earliest urban centers on the Deccan Plateau, then, we need to emphasize their heterogeneity and highlight the importance of the existence, or coexistence, of particular subregions as independent or semi-independent entities contributing to the historical development of the entire region. Particular standardized features of literature, monumental brick construction, or coin hoards, known in other parts of the subcontinent, did not appear evenly across the Deccan Plateau, nor everywhere in peninsular India. A unilinear stage of development from pastoralism to agriculture and to urbanization for the whole region cannot be claimed; instead, details of the political and social—as well as economic—systems that controlled and maneuvered these diverged noticeably in each of the Deccan's regions and subregions. Several grades of manufacturing, the market, political and religious centers flourished, drawing long-distance traders from across the subcontinent and as far away as the Mediterranean, who flocked here in large numbers. The Deccan was thus not unruly so as to be inhabitable but, following Subbarao, was an “area of relative isolation” where communication made the origin and survival of communities complex. This complexity was dependent on a diversity that had to be protected. Historical forces have converged on this unique landscape, highlighting economic trajectories of material change alongside sociopolitical interactions of confluence while bringing together complex characteristics and traits that became difficult to homogenize.

Conclusion

Historical studies of the Deccan region have tended to define its political evolution, eulogizing the greatness of its forgotten empires and monuments. This has framed history with a primordial essence meant to assert dogmatism, characterizing the region's uniqueness. This kind of position should be avoided, as each of the subregions of the Deccan Plateau developed a tenuous identity over time that changed with economic and political challenges.⁵ In other words, not all periods exhibited similar boundaries

5 Parasher-Sen, “Origins of Settlements, Culture and Civilization in the Deccan.”

in each subregion, and at some points in time local identity was more prominent than overall identity.⁶ By creating several parameters through multiple sources, including tools, coins, writing samples, buildings, burials, and religious edifices, and demarcating several types using written material found in local contexts, it became possible to show in greater depth the intricate nature of how early historic settlements emerged. In straddling time, space, and data we have highlighted different processes in a constant state of negotiation. Such a historical interpretative approach rejects those that wish to find permanence and certainty in characterizing the Deccan's settlement. It also rejects those that consciously ignore the layering of small but significant fragments of information that reveal the variety and complexity—the unruliness—that shaped the region's historical development.

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6 Parasher-Sen, "Localities, Coins and the Transition to the Early State in the Deccan."