



A stone relief in the wall of Bijapur city of the year 1658/9, when a large campaign was mounted against Shivaji. The elephant symbolises darkness and the enemy, the lion the royal house of Bijapur and the monkey perhaps political cunning or stratagem, as it does in several stories of the time.

Photo taken by author, December 2003

# Saying one thing, doing another?

## *Political consciousness and conscious politics in 17th-century India*

By investigating the place where mentality, or *doxa* (or whatever one likes to call the universe of unconscious or semi-conscious practice) meets the universe of consciousness and reflexive action, my paper aimed to address one of the challenges Sheldon Pollock posed for the masterclass: to integrate social and intellectual history.

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As Anthony Pagden (1996) notes, a view established itself in (intellectual) history from the 1960s onwards that the things past agents held in their heads were 'generally unexamined, unreflected-upon, and frequently imposed'. Though in the field of western history this trend may be in decline, in Indian history, as practiced in western academia, it still rules supreme, with the pre-colonial period represented as a state of semi-consciousness and the colonial period as a 'rude awakening' – an idea that has trickled down to works of fiction like the recent film *Mangal Pandey* and Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace*.

Take the contentious case of Shivaji, the warrior turned great king of the third quarter of the 17th century. As a thought experiment, we can try and disentangle his ideology from his practice to see if they match. This can be no more than a thought experiment as, it must be noted here, there is no way to disentangle his ideologies and practices given that we have access to his actions only through

textual representations. But let's for a moment go with all those historians who, implicitly or explicitly, contrast practice with ideology.

Shivaji co-opted a centuries-old discourse of Deccani patriotism and gave a new lease of life to both its unifying and divisive strands. This discourse had originated among Muslims of the Deccan, who could not or would not lay claim to a foreign origin and instead exalted the Deccan, roughly central India, as their homeland. (There was some discussion after the paper over whether the term patriotism is appropriate to the 17th century, but the author agrees with Bayly (1998) who argues that it is.)

Evidence, too long to cite here but discussed at length in Kruijtzter (forthcoming), shows that Shivaji appealed to this idea of the Deccan as a patria and excluded from it the Afghans who were partly in control of the state of Bijapur, but included Marathas, Deccani Muslims, Muslims of African origin and the Sultan of Golkonda. What matters here is that Shivaji deemed an appeal to Deccani patriotism a useful instrument of

policy, which can only have been premised on the idea that people might be willing to act on that appeal. The case of Nasir Muhammad, an African Muslim who handed a fortress to Shivaji so that it would not fall to the Afghans, brings this point home vividly.

The question remains whether Shivaji's Deccani patriotism was heartfelt or a ruse. On this question of deception, also highly relevant to the investigation of consciousness, the various compendia of letters of Shivaji's arch-enemy, the Emperor Aurangzeb, may shed some light. In the 1670s Aurangzeb is supposed to have written 'one cannot rule without practicing deception', with two quotations from the Quran to support that view. But at times he also expressed dismay over deceit and is supposed to have written towards the end of his life, 'God willing up to the day of my removal to the eternal home, there will be no difference between my words and acts'.

Finally, my paper turned to the issue of collective self-deception through the case of gift-giving. Contemporary Europeans are supposed by some modern

scholars (eg, Cohn 1992:169) to have misconstrued the acts of gift-giving that were so prominent in court life as mere exchanges of goods for favours. But perhaps those Europeans not so much saw things differently as wrote things differently. As Bourdieu remarks, 'in order for the system to work, the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges...while at the same time they must refuse to know and above all to recognise it' (1977:5-6). Beside all the connotations of honour there was a plain-for-all-to-see economic aspect to gift-giving at the Mughal court. At the time of Aurangzeb all gifts were valued as they were brought into the court and a receipt was given the donor, and a century earlier one finds a miniature to the authorised history of the rule of Emperor Akbar in which a scribe is carefully recording the gifts brought upon the birth of an imperial heir. (I thank S.R. Sarma for drawing attention to this miniature at the session.)

In conclusion it may be said that 17th century Indian statesmen consciously employed and responded to ideologies, consciously deceived each other

or refrained from deception, and were conscious of the exchange mechanism of gift giving. In short, consciousness was the salt in the pie of politics. <

### References

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