

At Home in the Regional Court

Critiquing Empire

The meaning of the term *ghar* changed a great deal from the first to the second half of the seventeenth century. Learned elites articulated the political stakes of this term in the Muslim courts of the Deccan, the south-central plateau of peninsular India. A shared religion, Islam, and a transregional language, Persian, had rarely produced harmony across northern and southern Indian Muslim courts, a pattern that continued in the seventeenth century as military conflicts and diplomatic confrontations intensified.¹ The Mughals loomed large in the imagination of people far removed from the capital city of Delhi who had never set foot in the imperial realm. This chapter shows how two poets from regional courts resentfully admired the empire's strength while, on other occasions, contemplating the possibility of the Great Mughals unraveling all together. Persianate Muslim courtly literati, nonimperial subjects who resided in the Deccan, participated in a shared ecumene that stretched from Iran to India and was ruled by many different monarchs. Despite living outside imperial domains, these observers formulated the most evocative criticisms of the Mughals at a time when they showed no sign of retreating. Making sense of imperial power encompassed expressing emotions such as envy, resentment, suspicion, scorn, and anger toward it.

In this chapter, I interpret two largely unexamined martial works by Persianate Muslim literati from the regional court of Bijapur—narrative poems written in the *masnavi* form.² These works represented *ghar* as a political category, using it to formulate an ethical critique of the problems of patrimonial power, understood as a perpetual balancing act or a game of chess between household and state. One meaning of *ghar* was loyalty toward two lineages of service, first the king and then the household. According to these poets, both regional and imperial kings violated the moral and ethical criteria for righteous and just rule, as



FIGURE 4. Hakim Atishi, *Ādilnāma* (The book of ‘Ādil, ca. 1630s), fol. 2, Ms. P. 4300. YSR Reddy State Museum, Hyderabad, India.

had the aspiring elite household chiefs who now sought to be kings. Provincial Persianate literati expressed their political views through well-established literary templates discussing how kingly power stood on shaky grounds in the seventeenth century—it faced challenges from regional elite families, regardless of whether or not they were Iranians, Marathas, Habshis, or Afghans. Poetic critiques went beyond the Mughal dynasty to encompass a whole host of political players—namely, patriarchal heads or household chiefs whose increasing autonomy threatened kingly sovereignties.

The first work, written in Persian by Hakim Atishi, *Ādilnāma* (The book of ‘Ādil), was composed and compiled between the years 1628 and 1637, and the second, written in Dakkani by Nusrati, *Ālināma* (The book of ‘Ali), was completed in the 1660s.³ Serving in the courts of consecutive Bijapuri sultans, Muhammad ‘Adil Shah (r. 1627–56) and his son ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah II (r. 1656–72), Hakim Atishi and

Nusrati's poetic milieu intersected in the 1650s at a time when Persian and Dak-kani poets vied for patrons beyond sultans. Together, the *'Ādilnāma* and *'Alināma* act as bookends for tracing Mughal suzerainty's narrative arc from the perspective of literati in regional courts. Composed at different times and in different languages in the Bijapur sultanate, both texts comment on the shifting terrain of defining ghar in peninsular India under Mughal occupation.

Hakim Atishi, or Muhammad Amin, was a Shi'i Muslim, the son of a certain Hakim Shamsuddin 'Abdullah. His family hailed from Basra (present-day Iraq) but moved to Shiraz and then later to Lar (in Fars province, southern Iran). Traveling from Hormuz in the Persian Gulf to the port of Dabhol on the Konkan coast in southwestern India, Atishi arrived in the Deccan in the 1620s, making the city of Bidar (in present-day Karnataka state) his home for the next thirty years.⁴ He wrote several masnavī; the martial poem, *'Ādilnāma*, accounts for the early years of sultan Muhammad 'Adil Shah's reign (1627–56).⁵ Like many skilled émigré Persian courtiers before him who made their home in southern and northern India, Atishi's itineraries also followed well-established networks of circulation and patronage across the Indian Ocean.⁶ These migrants brought with them not just literary skills and an experiential knowledge of kindred Islamic courts but also a rubric for observing power relations in the interconnected worlds around them. Atishi thus dramatized Bijapur's complicated relationship with the Mughals that resulted in a short-lived alliance against the Nizam shahs of Ahmadnagar (ca. 1490–1636), followed by a fallout and a series of battles and negotiations between the 'Adil Shahs and the Mughals. From the first half of the seventeenth century, then, the *'Ādilnāma* presents the years just before and after the negotiations with the Mughals that culminated in the historic deed of submission of 1636, when the Deccan sultanates ostensibly gave up their sovereign status and ceded to nominal imperial rule.⁷

The second work, *'Alināma*, begins with Maratha warrior chief Shivaji Bhonsle's famed encounter with Bijapuri general Afzal Khan (d. 1659) and goes on to cover relations with the Mughals, with the poet reflecting on the different household lineages' role in reshaping imperial and regional monarchical sovereignties. It was composed in the late 1660s, when multiple semi-autonomous provincial elite lineages openly contested regional sultans and posed formidable challenges to Mughal Delhi. This martial poem's author, Nusrati (d. 1674?) arguably one of the most celebrated Dak-kani poets from Bijapur (both during his lifetime and later), received recognition during the reign of Sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shah II (r. 1656–72).⁸ Although only a few biographical insights can be gleaned from Nusrati's work, we know that he came from a family of soldiers who had served in Bijapur's army for generations and who were followers of the Deccan's most famous Chishti saint, Khwaja Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz (d. 1422).⁹ A Sunni Muslim theologian with a deep knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith, Nusrati was also perhaps one of the earliest practitioners of the so-called *sabk-i hindī* or "Indian style" poetics in Urdu.

Examining this poet's reflections on the diglossia between Dakkani and Persian offers another way of deepening literary scholars' critique of the pejorative and ahistorical term, *sabk-i hindī*, which referred to premodern Persianate works produced in the Indian subcontinent as below canonized works in classical Persian.¹⁰

What is at stake in comparing texts in two languages and the ways in which two authors perceived shifting senses of belonging in the Mughal Empire's distant provinces? In the last twenty years or so, regional specialists of South Asia have emphasized the need to examine multilingual literary texts for their political, social, and aesthetic contexts and functions.¹¹ Instead of fixating on Persian texts for extracting the political history of Muslim-ruled dynasties, scholarly work on Mughal north India has illuminated the interactions between transregional cosmopolitan languages such as Persian and Sanskrit, and between Persian and other regional vernaculars, showing in particular how non-Muslim literati engaged, observed, and made sense of Mughal power.¹² Such comparisons have collapsed the easy correlation of premodern languages with fixed religious, linguistic, and regional identities.¹³ Several regional histories of the period from 1500 to 1800 that examine martial works have shown how adaptation across linguistic zones drew multiple communities into new courts and networks.¹⁴ In contrast to the study of multilingualism in Mughal north India, the Muslim courts of peninsular India, despite their greater linguistic and social heterogeneity, have largely been studied through Persian texts.

My aim in this chapter is to contribute to the larger scholarly conversation on multilingualism by making two arguments. First, by examining provincial Muslim critiques of imperial power in transregional Persian and panregional Dakkani, I emphasize the dynamic history of intrasectarian political critiques within South Asian Islam, wherein Muslim literati held Muslim-ruled dynasties accountable to the standards of proper political conduct. Second, I show that the cross-pollination of political critiques in these two languages was grounded in their long histories of circulation across the north and south. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the linguistic spheres of individual elite patrons were rarely exclusive and unmixed. Cultural production in both Persian and Dakkani sought to make sense of the fusing of north and south, along with the movement of elite household chiefs across these fragile political borders. This portrait contradicts the prevalent idea of associating regional vernaculars exclusively with a local or regional identity. Examining a shared poetic form in both Persian and Dakkani undergirds the circulatory regimes inherent in the making of premodern literary cultures. It rejects straightjacketing language into identity, as Francesca Orsini has shown, a frame that had developed in the earliest colonial and nationalist literary histories that downplayed northern Indian Urdu's early relationships with Dakkani, Gujri, and other regional idioms.¹⁵

Recent investigations of Persianate narrative poetry and prose¹⁶ view these textual traditions as part and parcel of a constellation of inherited literary tropes and

metaphors modified to the realities of different contexts; they therefore urge more empathetic readings.¹⁷ As has been argued in many different literary contexts, we cannot impose neat modern-day genre distinctions on the capacious heterogeneity within the *masnavī* form.¹⁸ And, at the same time, literary and aesthetic borrowings in Persianate poetry cannot be decoupled from its inherently political concerns, whether about poetic practice or contemporary rulership. Together, a literary-historical analysis reveals how early modern *literati* apprehended power, witnessed change, and sought to explain these historical changes by mobilizing the tools, vocabularies, and conventions of an established literary form. To this end, Atishi's and Nusrati's poetic representations capture the transition and tensions between monarchical authority and the crystallization of regional households in the seventeenth century.

Unlike the Persian chronicle, constrained by the obligation to report on events (or at least to pretend to report on them), poetic dramatizations of contemporary events both make possible and preclude certain ways of reading. These textual genres do not always attest to the chronicle's truth claims; nor can such representations be read to index the dates, battles, and names found in prose histories. Rather than reading martial works merely for narrative history, it is worth reading them for how poets recast well-known narratives about events unfolding in their present to declare a political viewpoint.¹⁹ Thus, the two poetic texts at the heart of this chapter ask this question: what did an early modern empire mean for those who lived beyond its borders?

The chapter examines articulations of *ghar* in the politics of literary patronage and as a category of belonging that transformed in the wake of imperial rule. In the first part, I examine each poet's reflections on poetic craftsmanship and the defenses of their aesthetic and linguistic choices as they sought to secure patronage under new household chiefs. In literary circuits across premodern South Asia, poets and *literati* dealt with a crisis of validation and self-worth, a theme shared in Persianate literature from the Deccan.²⁰ While Atishi reflected on competition with other Persian-speaking *literati*, Nusrati discussed the linguistic tension between Persian and Dakkani. He declared his goal of recounting contemporary events in a lesser tongue—a topic I have addressed elsewhere and briefly revisit here as another form of political meaning-making.²¹ The problem of literary competition inexorably tied to the politics of securing patronage permeated the content of these poetic works.

In the second part of the chapter, I examine representations of *ghar* as a political category that encompassed different kinds of patrimonial power. Both poets addressed the growing challenge that regional rulers faced from different household lineages—from émigré Central Asian Muslim aristocrats to Maratha warrior chiefs who fought for political autonomy in the shadow of imperial suzerainty. In the third part of the chapter, I trace how the two poets emplotted the Mughals on a tenuous political spectrum replete with other familiar constituents, including

Iranians, Habshis or Indo-Africans, Marathas, and Portuguese. I examine representations of selected household chiefs by interrogating the affective vocabularies and the contrasting language of social difference that poets used for laying out criteria for belonging to ghar, laying out how poets transitioned from advice to invective toward the Mughals over the course of the seventeenth century.

The fact that the Mughals were fellow Muslims meant very little to either Atishi or Nusrati. Sectarian, linguistic, and cultural commonalities between empire and its margins held little importance for Atishi, who assessed both the Mughals and the Deccan sultans through the rubric of kingly righteousness and just rule. As an émigré poet, Atishi thought in more transregional terms about empire's pitfalls. Writing in the late 1620s, he observed a rivalry between ruling kings and a series of "minister-favorites," who held high-ranking positions in court and on whom regional sultans depended for governing newly conquered territories.²² By contrast, in the second half of the century, regional courts swelled with many more possibilities of power beyond these lesser grandees and court ministers. Our second poet, Nusrati, writing in the 1660s, articulated an unapologetic disaffection for the Mughals, decrying threats to kingly power from many independent, regional household lineages, including the Marathas and the Indo-Africans. To make sense of challenges from former vassals, soldiers of fortune, and friends who had become rivals, Nusrati did not mince his words and turned eulogy into invective.

PAYING HOMAGE TO MASTERS: POETIC GENEALOGIES AND THE ART OF COMPLAINING

Martial works are not mere histories about a finished past from which the modern historian can extract a narrative. To read them as such would belie the narrative poem's overarching ethos and multiple layers, including its central concern with form and literary technique. Paying homage to previous poets was one common practice across Persianate works.²³ Both Atishi and Nusrati deployed this standard practice, of acknowledging literary giants before them, in order to reveal political allegiances with their friends, call out their rivals, and affirm an intellectual community in the present. In this section, I examine how poets placed themselves within a line of literary figures in a longer classical tradition while attempting to indicate the novelty of their compositions; I also examine what their declarations tell us about how the politics of patronage created senses of belonging to a ghar.

In their authorial confessions, Atishi and Nusrati engaged in the common practice of citing the great masters of classical Persian poetry—Nizami, Hafiz, Firdawsi, and Sa'di. But both poets infused into the stock image of paying homage to a received literary tradition details about who their true friends and patrons in court were while calling out imposters and enemies. To examine the politics of paying tribute to the masters, we may begin by turning to Hakim Atishi's authorial

confession first. More than a third of his *‘Ādilnāma* covers a range of subjects, from advice to kings (*hidāyat* or *pand*) and exempla (*hikāyāt*), to illustrate various moral lessons on giving up material things, worldly impermanence, not being greedy, living righteously, and so forth, all of which then shape the poet’s critique of the Mughals and their kingly power that appear in the narrative poem’s later chapters.²⁴

Atishi begins his composition by expressing his professional frustrations and personal anxieties around the poetic memories of the great Persian masters. His foremost lament is on the problem of plagiarism in his industry about which he expresses grief at the outset and on many pages thereafter. We may empathize with premodern literati’s anxieties, which are not unlike present-day academic ones. In a world of intellectual exchange and dialogue, rivalries inevitably revolved around perceived and actual instances of unacknowledged borrowing or rehashing of someone else’s words—a concern that plagued Persianate literati working within strict constraints of form and language.²⁵ Without naming a rival poet but needing to distinguish himself from other Central Asian émigrés to secure patronage, Atishi locates the root of this problem not only in an individual’s moral degeneracy but in the bigger trend of riff raff, third-rate, thief poets (*sukhan duzd*) coming to Hindustan from Iran. He sets himself apart from his unnamed rivals because he wishes to uphold the qualities of righteousness and wisdom and disregard gossip. To illustrate the plagiarism problem, Atishi utilizes the image of the world of poetry as a marketplace to recount a story (*qissa*) about a thief poet who came to India hoping to set up shop and sell his wares. He informs his readers sarcastically that this thief poet came from the world of stupidity to give pearls in Hindustan (*sukhan duzdī az ‘ālam-i ablahī / be hind āmad az bahr-e gohar dahī*). Atishi was not the only one with a complaint against this particular plagiarist who had a reputation for stealing others’ verse.²⁶

In between such moments of anxiety about poetic craftsmanship, he imparts ethical advice to his peers and colleagues on how to be a good poet. For example, seeking the master poets was one way for the struggling poet to cure himself of the plagiarism problem, since reading the classics would lead the wayward in the right direction. Thus, in both the prologue and epilogue, while paying homage to the great masters, Atishi counsels the aspiring poet to turn to Nizami, Sa’di, and Firdawsi to learn poetry’s secrets. However, what first appears to be stock verses eulogizing these figures quickly transforms into veiled insults targeting the current Bijapur sultan and a place where the poet asserts his affinities for new patrons, in particular, his benefactor Mustafa Khan Lari, the Iranian prime minister, whom we already met in chapter 3.

This shift of allegiance from king to household chief comes alive when Atishi discusses the greatest innovator of martial poetry, Firdawsi (d. 1019), and the poetic memory of his relationship with Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030).²⁷

He begins by praising Firdawsi, who wrote thousands of timeless verses making legends about the dead eternal.²⁸ As was well known, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna had failed to recognize Firdawsi's talent and give him credit (and pay him) for his monumental work, a narrative that became part of poetic memory across the Persianate world.²⁹ Atishi took this well-worn trope a few steps further, using it to complain about the reigning Bijapur sultan, Muhammad 'Adil Shah (r. 1627–56). By calling Mahmud of Ghazna a breaker of covenants (*paimān gusil*), he casts doubt on his own reigning king's birth:

be nā pāk zādeh nadārid umīd / ze zangī be shustan na gardad safīd
na būd shah-i ghaznīn ze pusht-i pedar / ke firdawsi az vey be shud shikwe-gar

do not have hope from a bastard / for washing a *zangī*³⁰ cannot turn him white
 the sultan of Ghazna was not from his father / that's why Firdawsi complained about him

By directly referencing Mahmud of Ghazna's bastard status, Atishi's implicitly points to the disputed lineage of the current Bijapur king whose birth was at the center of courtly intrigue and a disputed accession in the 1620s around the time of death of the previous ruler, Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II's, a moment already examined in chapter 4. Atishi expresses his dissatisfaction with Sultan Muhammad, who, like Mahmud of Ghazna, failed to recognize the talents of great poets. By evoking the example of Mahmud of Ghazna's vizier, Ahmad Maymandi (d. 1032), who was the first to recognize Firdawsi's genius, Atishi declares his allegiance to the current prime minister, Mustafa Khan Lari.³¹ Drawing a temporal parallelism, Atishi mentions a past sultan and poet to draw an analogy between himself and the current sultan of Bijapur. Noting how he labored for six months to compose the 'Ādilnāma, Atishi beseeches Mustafa Khan, a true customer of poetry, openly stating his disaffection with Sultan Muhammad 'Adil Shah and declaring a newfound allegiance to the minister and his extended household:³²

*be nām-i tū dar pardah-yi madh-e shah / namūdam jahān ra pur az mehr-o-māh*³³

In the guise of praising the king, in your name / I showed the world a path with sun
 and moon

Atishi therefore draws on the well-known history of the sultan's failure to recognize Firdawsi's talents to claim his own current allegiances in court. However, making such declarations also came with dangers and so, by doing this, Atishi distinguishes himself from Firdawsi and his iconic work, the *Shāhnāma* (*The Book of Kings*), which recounts rivalries between fictionalized kings and heroes. Despite praising Firdawsi for immortalizing the dead, Atishi laments that writing about the dead is better (and perhaps safer) than writing about the living, because the former would remain unaware of your poetry (*bovad mordeh behtar az ān zindeh tan / ke ghāfil bovad az adā-yi sukhan*).³⁴ Later innovators of martial poetry thus saw themselves as surpassing Firdawsi, the creator of the *Shāhnāma*

and its imagined stories. By writing about the living, like Amir Khusrau and other poets who had declared how they had departed from Firdawsi, Atishi too saw himself as taking greater risks by going beyond storytelling toward recording actual events, contemporary historical actors, and the politics of his own times.³⁵

Nusrati's work in the second half of the seventeenth century likewise addresses the theme of professional competition but his poetic competitors were composing in the imminent panregional literary idiom, Dakkanī. Persianate literati debated what it meant to memorialize contemporary events and emulate Persian classics such as Firdawsi's *Shāhnāma* in Dakkanī, in a derivative linguistic register. Unlike Atishi's anxieties, which centered on compatriot Persian émigré poets, Nusrati's authorial confession reveals tensions between these two tongues while reiterating a similar, measured appraisal of Firdawsi.

In the *Alināma*'s preface, Nusrati first turns to the task of thanking his intellectual interlocutors who encouraged him to take on the challenge of recording the present in lowly (*haqīr*) Dakkanī.³⁶ While Nusrati pays homage to his patron, Sultan 'Alī 'Adil Shah II, who was also a prolific Dakkanī poet, he goes beyond merely praising the sultan to express his gratitude toward literati friends. Such gestures of gratitude for interlocutors and friends were not unlike the acknowledgement sections of scholarly monographs in modern times. Through the simple task of saying "thank you," Nusrati self-consciously reveals his intellectual community and political affinities. Among his contemporaries and those whom Nusrati held in the highest regard was Nurullah Qazi, an Iranian poet-historian who had just completed a chronicle titled *Tārīkh-i 'Alī 'Adil Shāhī*, covering the early years of the reign of 'Alī II, who urged him to write a new kind of history.³⁷ Recognition from learned friends lent Nusrati credibility in his position as official chronicler, a position that had never before been assigned exclusively to a Dakkanī poet.

In comparison to Persian, Dakkanī had less prestige in Bijapur and Golconda's literary circuits, and poets writing in this literary idiom often emphasized the fact that their respect was hard-won. To valorize the skill of bilingualism, Nusrati points to himself, declaring that the truly gifted poet must have skills in both Persian and Dakkanī. Moreover, he had nothing but an attitude of condescension for those who could not appreciate verse about contemporary politics, calling those who had dismissed it in the past jealous and ignorant (*hasīdān jāhilān*).³⁸ Modifying the mirror motif to refer to the mutually enriching relationship between these two tongues, Nusrati makes the case for polyphonic verse:

agar koi ho m 'anigar wa ārasī / padhe razmiya hindī wa fārsī
agar hai u kāmīl samajh ka dhanī / to is yek te hue do hunar son ghānī
*ke donon kī khubī mujh ankhiyān men ān / khulāsa nikāliya hun khush maye chān*³⁹

if someone is intelligent and a mirror
 let him read poems of war in *hindī* and *fārsī*
 he shall be enriched with two sets of skills
 my eyes have the vision of both [languages]
 for I sieve goodness from both

A true connoisseur would appreciate any literary idiom in any recognizable poetic form. A poet-historian who could think in multiple tongues drew on received templates, eventually hoping to surpass his predecessors in both theme and content.

Like other Persianate literati before him, after discussing linguistic choice, Nusrati also returns to the sensitive question of originality by paying homage to the great masters. Anointing the *ʿAlināma* as the *Shāhnāma-i dakkān* (The book of kings of the Deccan), Nusrati evokes the distressing memory of Firdawsi's disappointment with Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, declaring that the great master's soul would forget its grief and delight (*ʿajab kiyā hai firdawsī pāk zad / apas gham besar ap kare ruh shād*) from reading the *ʿAlināma*, a skillful emulation of his classical work.⁴⁰ Like Atishi, who paid homage to the canon, before him, Nusrati also contrasts the *Shāhnāma*'s imagined stories and plots with the actual events and battles fought by Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 998–1030) and his kinsmen, events and battles that Firdawsi left unrecorded.⁴¹ Nusrati's *ʿAlināma* stands out because it focuses on the tumultuous present and takes the risk of representing current historical actors. At a time when so many new players claimed to be kings, deploying the genre of the martial poem to create heroes was a particularly fraught endeavor. For the poet-historian, casting nonkingly contenders as heroes from much humbler social backgrounds was a tricky exercise. Poets were declaring the high stakes of representing contemporary rulership, acutely aware that decentering kings and replacing them with nonkingly aspirants could pose problems for their own livelihoods. Memorializing the living rather than the dead was, therefore, a dangerous undertaking.

To be sure, demonstrating that one knew the canon and locating oneself within a poetic tradition was essential for building a reputation and finding an affiliation with a ghar. But such received images were then modified to observe, judge, and take a position on contemporary politics—the other ambition of narrative poetry. Both poets' authorial confessions reveal how the poetic terrain of the Persianate was contested with debate about which themes and tongues were worth recasting into well-established templates. In self-reflective moments, Atishi and Nusrati unveiled their intellectual and professional communities and their complaints about unappreciative audiences and shady colleagues. At first glance, these two seventeenth-century works appear to merely eulogize kings and dynasties. I have argued that much more lies within, including avowing linguistic choices, calling out competitors and friends, signaling the risk of talking about politics, and announcing why their compositions should stand out. Now, I turn to unpacking

how the two poets constructed the politics of ghar in their uncertain present by casting their critical gaze on the mighty Mughals, as well as more intimate friends turned rivals, over the course of the seventeenth century.

THE POET-COMMENTATOR:
HOUSEHOLD POLITICS AS A GAME OF CHESS

At first glance, page after page of kingly praises in both the *Ādilnāma* and *Alināma* may lead us to regard the texts as unexceptional, no different than myriad other Persianate martial poems in *masnavī* form. But underneath the layer of customary verses about a monarch's valor, wisdom, fairness, and justice, both Atishi and Nusrati pause to look upon the unruly world around them and reflect on the fact that, in such times, kingly virtues no longer count for much.⁴² As we saw before, Atishi admitted that singing the sultan's praises was, in fact, a cover for eulogizing his true patron, the prime minister Mustafa Khan. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the cast of nonkingly lineages carving out independent power circuits exploded. Nusrati was preoccupied, even alarmed, by the emboldened autonomy of Marathas, Indo-Africans, and Afghans, all of whom had long operated within peninsular India's courts. He compared the current volatile political landscape to a game of chess where the rules were constantly changing. He coined new words and analogies to define the various meanings of political loyalty, which, at the time, seemed to have no enduring criteria.

Both the *Ādilnāma* and *Alināma* captivate the reader not because they present us with a minefield of new facts about well-known historical events, but for their many telling silences and everything that the two accounts leave unsaid. In the *Ādilnāma*, for instance, Atishi does not mention Bijapur's infamous civil war that took place in the late 1620s to early 1630s between three courtiers of distinct lineages—the *habshī* or Abyssinian Khawas Khan, the Maratha Brahmin Murari Pandit, and the Iranian Mustafa Khan Lari—and that resulted in the deaths of the first two and the latter's ascendance in court, an event much discussed in political histories.⁴³ Likewise, chronicles from this period typically mention the deed of submission that was negotiated with the Mughals in 1636, but Atishi does not. Omissions of major political negotiations in the heroic verse genre meant to valorize regional sultans alerts us to multivalent functions of such representations. Poetic representations offset the reality that the Deccan sultans were ceding sovereignty to imperial overlords. Given the roughly eight-year period during which the *Ādilnāma* was composed (1628) and compiled (1637), prior to the civil war but after the acceptance of Mughal suzerainty, the poem's hero in each chapter depends entirely on who was winning at that particular historical moment.⁴⁴ Considering the relationship of verse with contemporary historical contexts, we need to accept that although such representations may be exaggerations, they nonetheless were meaningful to those who produced them and they therefore offer

insight about the context within which they were produced. Despite the historicity of the events and figures depicted in premodern works, the inversions of political reality in these representations may unsettle the positivist historian. And yet, these inflected portraits of power allow us to ask the question—to what extent was Mughal rule accepted and admired across distant regions of seventeenth-century South Asia? The observations of Deccan's poets answer: to a very limited extent. According to them, imperial overlords could neither be trusted nor excessively admired. By composing anti-imperial works at a time when the Mughals dominated every corner of the subcontinent, contemporary actors rejected the inevitability of imperial authority.

Falling within the long continuum of ethical literature in Persian, what Mana Kia has called the “*adab/akhlāq* complex,” the *‘Ādilnāma* weighs in on moral dilemmas understood through the shifting grounds of patron-client relationships.⁴⁵ Imparting ethical advice throughout the narrative, Atishi first counsels his new patron and well-wisher Mustafa Khan on good governance, prudence toward one's friends, generosity toward subjects and, last but not least, the patron's duty to appreciate (or adequately compensate) the poet for his labor.⁴⁶ At different points in the narrative, Atishi praises Khawas Khan and Mustafa Khan with the well-worn image of the wise, insightful minister (*dastūr-i roshan nazar*) who imparts good governance (*tadbīr*) by counseling the king, a role he prays will last forever.⁴⁷

Signaling the growing tension between kings and households, Atishi eventually wields the wise minister image to diminish the Bijapur sultan's authority. He addresses his patron Mustafa Khan, endowing him with a stature above the regional sultan and anoints him with the title of the Deccan kingdom's protector (*nigehdār-i mulk-i dakkan*).⁴⁸ Mustafa Khan led negotiations with the Mughals who likewise regarded the prime minister as indispensable and as the one who adorned the king's throne (*be sar hammashīn sāz tāj-i mahī / muzaiyan kon takht-i shahenshāhi*).⁴⁹ The poet goes so far as to say that out of great respect the imperial army and its commanders bowed before the prime minister, thus momentarily dissolving the hierarchy between a Mughal commander and the Bijapuri prime minister (*nishastand bā yek digar ān chunān / ke zāhir nabūd farqī ān dar miyān* [they sat beside each other, as if there was no difference between them]).⁵⁰ By altogether removing the regional sultan from Mughal-Deccan diplomatic negotiations, Atishi paints the regional household chief as equal in status to the Mughals. He imparts old conventions of representing kingly virtues on new nonkingly patrons, casting household chiefs as direct negotiators with imperial power, operating without the intervention of regional sultans. It would still be a few more decades before the Deccan's political terrain shifted from sultans to nonkingly households that, in turn, would curtail Mughal presence in peninsular India.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, we witness a far more resolute break from charismatic kingly authority, a process that unfolded in tandem with

Mughal entrenchment in the south. Thirty years after Atishi, Nusrati commented on an altogether different political landscape, choosing to make sense of it in the lesser literary idiom of Dakkani. In his times, a greater number of players—from Afghan military households to former Indo-African slaves who commanded their own militaries to Maratha warrior chiefs—now made claims to sovereignty. But, alternating careful praise and critique was not enough to capture this brave new world where anyone could be king. A far more irreverent mode of expression was employed to express how one’s most familiar friends and kin had become strangers and even bitter rivals.

Unlike the celebratory seventeenth-century Marathi literary works and triumphant Mughal chronicles in Persian, Nusrati’s work offers an uncensored evaluation of late seventeenth-century Mughal-Deccan politics written, if you will, from the perspective of the losing side (that of the Deccan sultanates).⁵¹ Nusrati writes about his understanding of historical change and his verdict on politics in contemporary times. Indicating to his audience that he “is about to explain the end of kingship in the Deccan” (*katā hun atā bāt ik kām kī / dakhan kī shahī kī saranjām kī*), he first draws a portrait of an unpredictable, riotous chess game where conventional rules and strategies are suspended. ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah II’s ascension to the throne in 1656 came with the bleak realization summed up in these lines:

*nanhe aur bade the so sab bad nihād / achāle u chāron taraf se fasād
mukhālīf te aksar munāfiq hue / muwāfiq bhi kayī na muwāfiq hue*

Small and big were all wicked / creating discord from all four sides
Opponents became enemies / those who agreed became disagreeable⁵²

In this new game of chess (*navī shatranj kī bāzī*), the king faced most difficult choices, since everyone around him played the same moves but with unexpected twists that violated the rules of the game. Nusrati begins by describing changes in politics as a game of chess, noting:

*jine liya sake khel yūn apne hāt / sake kar ū lelāj par piyād ko māt*⁵³

he who is able to seize this game in his hand / like al-Lajlaj, he could checkmate as a pawn

Evoking the tenth-century Arab chess theorist and chess master, Abu’l-Faraj Muhammad ibn ‘Ubayd Allah al-Lajlaj (or “the stutterer/stammerer”) (d. 970), Nusrati decries the fact that the game’s age-old strategies, which so few had managed to master, were now being turned upside down.⁵⁴ As the verse above notes, these were times in which the most insulting form of defeat, where the pawn delivers a checkmate to the king, was not just an unsurprising outcome, but a likely one. In this new game *dushman* (enemy) and *dost* (friend) were two sides of the same coin with an equal opportunity to turn on the king. One had to tread with great caution in such times. This dialectical relationship between friendship and enmity, trust and betrayal, and familiarity and estrangement shape Nusrati’s subsequent narratives in the *‘Alināma* about contemporary political encounters. His

observations of the Maratha warrior chief Shivaji Bhonsle, the Indo-African military commander Siddi Jauhar (d. 1665?), as well as high-ranking Mughal generals such as the Kachawaha Rajput Jai Singh (d. 1667), inverted contrasting affective terminologies to capture a fractious political landscape where an ever-increasing number of pawns now claimed to be kings.

FROM ADVICE TO INVECTIVE:
ON EMPIRE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

When do wisdom, advice, and words of praise turn into invective and insult? When those closest to you become enemies. Poets observed the actions of aristocratic and military households that had long been tied to monarchical power but were now seeking to carve out independent domains. Atishi and Nusrati's works embody this core transformation that took place over the course of the seventeenth century. Both poets put the martial poem's form and content to the task of representing the uncertainties faced by monarchical power by composing a new set of heroes and villains. Above, I showed the transition in the century's first half from the minister-favorite figure to a much larger playing field of semi-autonomous household lineages that threatened regional sultans at the same time they were negotiating with imperial power. The Mughals came to represent different things to different actors over the course of this century.

Persianate narrative poems capture the long transformation in the meaning of the term *ghar* and what it came to signify as the Mughals marched south, which was at times negative. At the beginning, poets would describe the empire as an object of begrudging consternation, then patronize it as a sort of wayward kin in need of a scolding, and finally by defining it as a diabolical entity that deserved only opprobrium and derision. The term *Mughal* was understood best in contrast to its antonymic signifier *Deccani*, the meanings of which simultaneously widened in the second half of the century. Regional poets writing in the 1630s or 1660s refused to accept Mughal ascendancy and instead sought to explain the fragility of the empire's universal ambitions and the uncertainties it had brought on multiple societies.

Let us turn again to Hakim Atishi and the question of what belonging to a *ghar* under the Mughals in the early years of imperial suzerainty from the 1620s to the 1640s meant. A reluctant admiration and a sense of obligation toward the Mughals crumbled as alliances with the Deccan sultanates broke, treaties were violated, and disputes over territory intensified. Still, rather than admonishing them outright, Atishi imparted measured moral advice to all rulers, Mughal and Deccani alike, framed through the idiom of *nasihat* or *pand* (advice).⁵⁵ At the level of their poetic compositions, Persianate literati in the Deccan sought to invert imperial suzerainty's punitive terms that had been put upon the region, which included measures such as paying tribute, reading the *khutba* (sermon) in the Mughal emperor's name, and regulating the ranks and titles of the regional nobility.

Thus, Atishi's text begins with a degree of deference and filial devotion that the Deccan sultans professed toward Mughal rulers, starting with a period of unity when Bijapur and Delhi delivered a final blow to the nearly extinguished neighboring sultanate of Ahmadnagar (ca. 1490–1636). With a clear recognition of and awe before imperial power, the poet admires the Mughal army's magnificence by composing many verses eulogizing the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58).⁵⁶ Atishi both unsettles hierarchies between regional and imperial sovereigns and at the same time holds imperial power accountable to an obligation to protect its subordinates. He begins by inverting the hierarchy between the king of Lahore (*shahinshāh-yi lahor*), who was lower than the Deccan sultan (*bādashāh-i dakkān*). Then, expressing a filial devotion to empire through an idiom of kinship, he recasts this relationship as one between a father and a son (*chū ū bābā bāshad man ū rā pesar*). Together, the two would last with certainty as long as the son, the Bijapur sultan, fulfilled his obligation to pay taxes to the father, the Mughal emperor (*pedar gar ze farzand khwāhad kharāj / musallam shavad har do rā takht-o-tāj*).⁵⁷ This idealized image of filial devotion marked multiple dramatizations of letters exchanged between the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and the Bijapur sultan Muhammad 'Adil Shah, according to which both rulers agreed to a mutually beneficial bond.⁵⁸ In an initial arrangement in the late 1620s, the two sides agreed to divide the lands above and below the River Krishna.⁵⁹ Thus, the Bijapur sultan instructed his army to follow a righteous path and give half of the conquered lands to the Mughals with respect and without any war or conflict, for this was the way of Muslim rulers.⁶⁰

Shortly thereafter, however, the imperial masters fell in Atishi's eyes, as the Bijapur-Mughal alliance that had extinguished the Nizam shahs of Ahmadnagar collapsed in the 1630s. For the remaining narrative, Atishi's assessment of the Mughals turns dour; many battles, embassies, and negotiations ensued and many promises made were quickly broken.⁶¹ In scenes of renewed armed conflict with the Mughals, he comments on their *kaj ravī* (crooked ways), *makkārī* (cunning), and *māk-r-o-fareb* (deceit), as well as on Shah Jahan's tendency to give ambiguous, two-faced answers.⁶² The Mughal emperor, now belittled and addressed by his given name of Khurram, held grudges (*kīneh*), which was unbecoming of a king who sought universal legitimacy.⁶³ According to Atishi, Shah Jahan had showed gratitude outwardly for Bijapur's help defeating the Nizam Shahs, but in private the king remained ungenerous and wished to take over both kingdoms.⁶⁴

Referring to Shah Jahan as the great man who broke the treaty (*chunam gasht peymān shikan ān janāb*) and consistently failed to keep promises, Atishi warns the Mughal sovereign that even honey turns to poison for those who are weak in keeping their word (*kasī kū buvad dar jahān sust 'ahd / khurad zahr peyvaste barbād-i shahd*).⁶⁵ The poet concludes by imploring the Mughal king, "why does the wise man go on the path / going on which he is overcome by regret" (*chera mard-i dānā be rāhī ravad / ke az raftan-i khud pashimān shavad*).⁶⁶

Then, after many verses imparting moral maxims to the Mughal ruler on how to be righteous and just, Atishi pauses to admonish himself for giving advice:

*khāmosh ātishī in che pand ast pand / kas in guftagū rā na dārad pasand
kanūn bar sar-i dāstān bāz kard / ke āmad sar-i nām zīn gham be dard*⁶⁷

be silent, Atishi! What's with all this advice?
no one is fond of this talk of yours
go back to the story now
for the story itself is tired of your advice!

Here, Atishi breaks away from the main narrative as a kind of aside, where he is both self-evocative and self-referential, admitting to his audience that interrupting the story of Mughal-Deccan politics flouts narrative norms. But this digression is absolutely necessary in times when kings themselves are breaking the norms for ethical rule and the poet has to step in, as a political observer, to share what righteous and just rule means. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Atishi concludes all his narrations of battles and diplomatic negotiation with pronouncements on the Mughal Empire's moral degeneracy, followed by advice on how to correct such behavior in the advice mode of *pand* or *nāsīhat*. Such multivocal narrations therefore serve to unify the text's prescriptive/didactic purposes with its other goal of recording political events.

Across the Persianate world, scholars have long recognized how the *adab/akhlāq* complex offers fertile ground for reading the political, not merely as symptomatic of context but as unfolding within the text's responses to its own conditions of production.⁶⁸ Atishi was not writing an ethical treatise nor composing his verse within the mirror for princes genre. Early modern literati and their audiences rarely drew such neat distinctions that are so clearly delineated in modern scholarship.⁶⁹ The heroic-historic masnavī could simultaneously encompass *hikāyāt* (exempla), *madh* (eulogies) for regional household chiefs, and advice for or criticism of reigning monarchs. The *Ādīlnāma*'s stakes and content transformed over the roughly eight years during which it was compiled and composed with themes fusing it together to record new events and encounters unfolding at different points in time.

The poet's turn to nonkingly patrons occurred at the same moment that regional contenders were vying for their own power when Mughal power had itself weakened regional kings. Provincial Persianate literati tried to make sense of what it would mean to pledge symbolic allegiance to Delhi, have Mughal soldiers permanently encamped across the River Krishna, and pay tribute to imperial overlords. The signifier *Mughal*, a term the Mughals themselves never used, took on new meanings over time for observers like Atishi and Nusrati, who located themselves within conflicting imperial identities. As subjects of a shared Perso-Islamic ecumene, Atishi's verse was, of course, no different than his Persian-speaking courtly compatriots in Mughal north India. What, then, made his observations

on empire any different? For one, as we just saw, that to Atishi the Mughals were hardly beacons of harmony. To this outsider on empire's margins, promises broken with those who were weaker violated the very criteria for universal sovereignty. The Mughals could not be trusted or relied on but nonetheless had to be tolerated for the sake of political survival. It would be another few decades before a more negative assessment of the Mughals and a far more dystopic vision of empire emerged from the pens of Dakkani literati.

Along with growing political and military conflicts, the choice of language itself allowed for a more scathing evaluation of the empire. In the century's latter half, then, appraisals of imperial power were no longer measured or careful. In fact, words to apprehend the Mughals were not selected with caution; they were meant to hurt, reprove, and castigate. Entanglements with imperial power in any part of the early modern world cannot be understood without their predictable corollary—the explosion of corporate groups within imperial territories or, as in our case, provincial household lineages residing beyond imperial domains that challenged kingly authority.⁷⁰ Nusrati mapped the Mughals onto a contentious political landscape now littered with many familiar contenders. He compared the Mughal-Rajput general Mirza Raja Jai Singh and the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (d. 1707) with homegrown, intimate foes such as Shivaji and Siddi Jauhar. From famous battles in recent memory to the destruction of the great port city of Surat and innumerable fort sieges across the Hyderabad-Karnatak, Nusrati drew up a map of places and people impossible to pin down as friend or foe, loyal or disloyal, confidant or traitor.

A critique of empire and its fragility came alive in Nusrati's verse many decades before the disintegration of imperial order in the eighteenth century.⁷¹ Familiarity served as the basic criterion through which he gauged each actor's character and pronounced the requisite moral judgements. Those who had once been the closest advisors, trusted vassals, or sworn themselves as kin protected by the sultan deserved the most extreme invective. For instance, Shivaji and the Siddi Jauhar, hailing from lineages that had long been attached to the 'Adil shahs of Bijapur, were the most familiar and, consequently, deserved the maximum scorn. On the other hand, Mughal generals such as the Mirza Raja Jai Singh and Shaista Khan (d. 1694), strangers from the outset, deserved a different kind of criticism, as did players much further afield, such as the Portuguese and the Dutch. As a learned political observer, Nusrati imparted wise counsel, but he also chose to berate, launching his invective against and censure of those who had dared to revolt against kingly power.

Let us briefly revisit the chronology of events in the 1660s before turning to how they were narrated in Nusrati's verse. When Mughal emperor Aurangzeb returned to Delhi from the Deccan, the War of Succession among princes temporarily paused attempts to conquer the southern Indian sultanates in 1657–1658. At the same time, provincial household chiefs who previously served regional sultans

now appealed to the Mughal emperor, making promises to protect newly conquered imperial territories in the northern Deccan and on the Konkan coast.⁷² In 1659, Shivaji killed Afzal Khan (d. 1659), a general who was sent by the Bijapur sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shah II to capture or kill him—an iconic event embedded in both popular and scholarly retellings. After the Mughals subsumed all territories north of the River Krishna and Shivaji's domains near the region around Pune, armed skirmishes between the Mughals, Marathas, and Deccan sultans were suspended for a few years. In 1663, Shivaji attacked Aurangzeb's maternal uncle and new Mughal viceroy to the Deccan, Shaista Khan and his encampment, sacking the Mughal port city of Surat in early 1664, an event that caught imperial authorities and European mercantile observers off guard.⁷³ With Mirza Raja Jai Singh's arrival in the Deccan in 1665, a new set of negotiations unfolded between Bijapur, Golkonda, Shivaji, and the Mughals, with each side forging cross-cutting alliances to undercut the other.⁷⁴ All these events lie at the 'Alināma's center, but instead of following a neat chronology, Nusrati moves in and out of recent memories to events unfolding in the poet's present, collapsing distinctions between different temporalities and plotting historical actors onto his larger cognitive map—that is, by setting the stage for a chess game about the politics of ghar.

We may begin by following how the poet depicted Siddi Jauhar, also known as Salabat Khan, who first swore allegiance to but later revolted against 'Ali 'Adil Shah II.⁷⁵ Narrative histories and modern representations have recounted a sequence of events from the time 'Ali II chose Siddi Jauhar to capture Shivaji at Panhala fort, to the moment when he turned coat and rebelled around the year 1661. But beyond what really happened, how did contemporary observers understand this encounter between an Indo-African elite slave-general, a Maratha warrior chief, and the Bijapur sultan? Nusrati gives meaning to this conflict by fitting each character into a vocabulary of difference and affinity with respect to the larger problem of kingly authority's uncertainty. In a world of tenuous solidarities, it should come as no surprise that physical, cultural, and sectarian differences were fair game for recasting enemies, who had once been loyal vassals.

The narration of Siddi Jauhar's revolt also illustrates how a household head from a prominent social group, Indo-Africans, who had long been integrated into southern India's political and social fabric,⁷⁶ could be simultaneously understood as both deeply familiar and a political Other, depending on the observer's ideological agenda. In such premodern encounters, honor was rarely a static, normative category because its valence changed according to what was at stake among opposing social groups.⁷⁷ In other words, honor came from without, emergent from what a particular historical actor did in relation to others, rather than being inherent in any individual or group. For instance, in the case of Siddi Jauhar, we witness him going from honorable to dishonorable in the course of just a few months. On March 9, 1660, Siddi Jauhar interceded on behalf of the Bijapur sultan to enlist support from Gondaji Pasalkar, a *desai* from the Muse valley near Pune, for his

military campaigns against Shivaji. When he mediated Bijapur's relationship with several other such Maratha hereditary subordinate territorial chiefs, a series of honorific titles ('*umdatu* 'l-wuzrā-yi 'uzzām zubdatu 'l-umarā-yi kirām / the most trusted of ministers and finest among the greatest nobles) precede mentions of Siddi Jauhar in Persian administrative documents.⁷⁸ Even our poet, Nusrati, casts this trusted former slave as a "devoted friend of the people and of soldiers" (*ra 'āyā kā Mukhlis / sipāhī kā yār*)⁷⁹ when sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shah II first anointed Siddi Jauhar with an honorable title, Salabat Khan, and praised him for offering to lay siege to Panhala fort, where Shivaji was hiding.

However, shortly thereafter these honorific titles transform into biting insults. Recalling that Siddi Jauhar had taken over the *jāgīr* of Karnul after revolting against his master, the Bijapuri commander 'Abdul Wahab, Nusrati condemned Sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shah II's hasty decision to pardon him.⁸⁰ He disagreed with the king's tendency to forgive so easily and ignore this troublemaker's faults (*apas sāf dil sāt shah be khilāf / use phir nawāze khatā kar mu 'āf*).⁸¹ When he rebelled against the Bijapur sultan, Nusrati used a contrast of phenotypes, a premodern colorism of sorts, to capture the shift in Siddi Jauhar's political loyalties. As soon as the Indo-African rebelled, the poet used his physical attribute of dark skin to heighten his otherness. Word reached the king that Siddi Jauhar had turned into a *bāghī* or bandit. At this point, the poet declared:

siyah rū te ich thā ū ghadār / jiyā thā honth zāgh-i murdār khwār
kavā nā thī us son anast kise / sadā thag pane kī ich thī gat usse

black face! It was he who was the traitor,
his lips red like a raven gorging on dead corpses
no one liked him one bit
for he only knew how to inveigle

Decrying Siddi Jauhar's decision to negotiate with Shivaji, Nusrati admonished the Indo-African general for smearing his own name and sinking his household (*dubāyā āpas nām-o-nāmūs-o-ghar*).⁸² This euphemism of the home or ghar that appears consistently throughout the '*Alināma*, connotes two meanings: on the one hand, it refers to each regional chief's own lineage and extended household; on the other, it alludes to being brought up in the king's court but revolting against the very home that has nurtured you. Later in the '*Alināma*, Nusrati laments in a qasida about Siddi Jauhar's rebellion the following: those who had been reared in the king's court (*shāh ke ghar*) had turned into rebels, with sedition the only skill known to such lost souls (*nawāziyā shah ke ghar ho athā shah son phir bhāgī / na thā bin fitna angīzī fan us gumrah utangal kā*).⁸³ This dismay at betrayal from one's closest and very own is what drives Nusrati's suspicion of nonroyal regional elites who defy kingly authority. The poet turns praise into invective as political circumstances shift by heightening phenotypical difference to express the loss of honor and a sense of betrayal from a former slave and trusted vassal.

For Nusrati, no figure exemplifies this attitude of ingratitude and disloyalty more than the Maratha warrior chief Shivaji Bhonsle, whose family had once served under the 'Adil shahs of Bijapur. According to Nusrati, Shivaji sowed the seeds of sedition (*tukhm-i fasād*) in the Deccan and was the reason fighting began between the Deccan sultans and the Mughals (*bade bādshāhān mai pādhyā ladāyī / dakkān aur mughalān ke dar miyān*). Mapping Shivaji onto a wider canvas of contentious politics, from the Franks to the Mughals, the poet exhorts:

*bhariyān thā sab us zāt makrūr yū / dise ādmī rūp ban naṣl deo
dikhā de tū tuk apnī talbis kon / lage vird la haul iblis kon
firangi te thā kufr mai at ashad / kare dīn son dushmanī sakht bad
na is qatl-i hajj te 'ibādat nahnī / haram main bī sonpadhe tu thā kushtanī
sādā sahibān son namak bar harām / kiyā nit namak khārīyān kār kām⁸⁴*

An essence filled with cunning
He appeared to be a man but was actually a devil
Show your disguise now!
In the way we say *la haul*, and the devil escapes
He is a worse disbeliever than the Portuguese
The greatest enemy of faith
And yet, the reason for him tending towards murder is not worship
For you were caught killing even in the house of god
You had always been a *namak harām*
Killing even those who were loyalists

Here, Nusrati judges Shivaji according to a broad universal criterion: not being a believer in any faith. Among those who lacked this trait were the Portuguese, the greatest unbelievers according to Muslims, and against whom all other rivals were measured, referring here to their attempts at disrupting the pilgrimage to Mecca. The problem with Shivaji was that he managed to surpass even the Europeans, not because of any special allegiance to one faith but because of his merciless behavior toward everyone. As Nusrati saw it, the fact that Shivaji was a non-Muslim was not what underlay his proclivity to kill. At the end of this verse and many other narrations throughout the poem, the poet returns to the very old concept of eating one's salt—*namak harāmī*—of someone who has violated an allegiance and is guilty of breaching the trust of a former friend. The measure of loyalty was relative, rather than absolute, and at its center lay the problem of deep familiarity and intimacy. Those who were the most familiar and dared to turn coat deserved maximum disdain and were caricatured in terms of ethnic, sectarian, or physical difference. Just like the known quantity and formerly loyal Indo-African Siddi Jauhar, whom Nusrati had no qualms denigrating in terms of his physical features, the very familiar Shivaji failed the measure of being true to any one faith. His complete disregard for religion, rather than his affinity for one, is what Nusrati chose to highlight in this instance. Standard measures of recognizing social difference, whether through

skin color or faith, were often underscored in moments of political conflict with the most familiar rivals.

And yet, the seventeenth-century narrator was hardly oblivious to pointing out sectarian difference and using it to frame a political rivalry polemically, which begets the question of *when* such narrative choices were made.⁸⁵ We may extend here the argument that Cynthia Talbot has made for intersectorial encounters in southern India in preceding historical periods. She argued that constant competition among warrior elites shaped their shaky claims to legitimacy and necessitated marking boundaries or the production of ethnicity against an outsider or other.⁸⁶ By the seventeenth century, we are no longer dealing with a clearly defined encounter of first-time rivals, such as those elucidated by Talbot in medieval Andhra (southeastern India) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Under Mughal suzerainty in the seventeenth century, peninsular India's variegated ethnolinguistic elites had accumulated a long, layered memory of past encounters and were well known to each other. After 1650, we witness a reappropriation of old tropes and binaries to articulate politics in a context of deep familiarity and relatedness. Household chiefs from different ethnic and linguistic lineages who had long known each other now cut across southern India's sultanates and imperial north India, necessitating validation or rejection of each group's ascriptive identity. By the time Nusrati was writing in the mid-1660s, very familiar contenders—Iranians, Indo-African, Marathas, and Afghans—were part of one seamless, coconstituted continuum of politics in a shared ghar.

Another narration in the *'Alināma* that illuminates sectarian difference is the famed encounter between Mirza Raja Jai Singh and Shivaji.⁸⁷ In Nusrati's framing of this incident, sectarian affinity subsumes or contradicts one's political loyalty. To open this episode, the poet draws out scenes, such as that involving Mughal emperor Aurangzeb appointing Mirza Raja Jai Singh to the Deccan, and then recounts the historic siege of Purandar and the treaty negotiated after it in 1665, which reduced Shivaji's domains.⁸⁸ Nusrati dramatizes Shivaji's political calculations first in a monologue and then as a conversation with Jai Singh. With an imperial victory over Purandar fort inevitable, the Maratha commander sees his house burn down from all sides (*dikhiyā do taraf te lagī ghar ko āg*), reckoning with the fact that the Mughals would not spare him (*mughal son to main sakht kitā hūn khod / ke le gad muje chup nā devenge chod*).⁸⁹ To save himself, Shivaji implores Jai Singh that very little would be achieved by arresting him. Instead, the Maratha commander makes a proposal to the Mughal-Rajput:

kadhein fauj-i dihli kī is shān son / chalī thī nā yūn sāz-o-sāmān son
rakhein bait merī to kyā kar ke fan / yadī le ke detā hūn mulk-i dakhān . . .
*dikhāyā hathelī mein aisā behisht / lagī bāt tajvīz mein khūb resht*⁹⁰

Delhi's army have come here with great pomp and glory
 What will you get out of capturing my house?

But, what if I give you the kingdom of the Deccan?

Approving this talk, [Shivaji] thus showed [Jai Singh] paradise in the palm of his hand

The premodern poet's compelling words here may at first lead the modern reader to pick a side regarding what really happened in these contentions. It should come as no surprise that generations of scholars have sought to determine the truth value of such representations—that is, whether Shivaji wished to defend the Deccan against the Mughals or whether he welcomed the imperial overlords with open arms.⁹¹ But premodern narrative constructions, even if more or less accurate, are unlikely to provide straight answers. For they only provide suggestive evidence for the political and ideological positions of who it was who was telling the story of these conflicts in the seventeenth century. Rather than reflecting each historical actor's true intent, Nusrati's construction of Shivaji's and Jai Singh's meeting unveils the shifting terrain of *ghar* at a time when provincial familial lineages threatened charismatic kingship. Whether the literate observer was a partisan of a regional household chief or not, they could not deny the latter's growing ability to undercut ties between dynastic powers.

Nusrati thus declares how Shivaji's ability to manipulate Jai Singh led the latter to break the Mughal alliance with the 'Adil shahs of Bijapur. Shivaji's ability to manipulate Jai Singh stained the Mughal name (*sivāya ne mughal son katak kar jo kām / diyā dāgh thā leke nāmūs-o-nām*) while compromising the Kachawaha Rajput's primary obligation to the Mughal imperial household.⁹² In this instance, Nusrati chooses to emphasize sectarian difference, naturalizing a solidarity between two vastly different kinds of non-Muslims—Shivaji, a Maratha Bhonsle peasant-warrior and Jai Singh, a Mughal-Kachawaha Rajput.⁹³ We saw earlier that when compared to the Franks or Europeans, the Maratha warrior chief was cast as the greatest of unbelievers, unequivocally disloyal to all faiths, willing to murder even in the house of God. But moments later, when citing Shivaji as the primary reason for friction among great kings, Nusrati heightens his sectarian otherness. The Maratha commander's newfound solidarity with a Rajput general thus undercuts the latter's primary political loyalty to the Mughal crown. Nusrati closes this episode with moral lessons on the dangers of greed (*tama*) and how greed can destroy one's own. Ethnic and denominational differences thus carry more value when political hierarchies appear to be under threat.

And yet, when we take the case of the Bhonsle household more broadly, there are no natural solidarities. Nor is there a well-defined stance for or against the Bijapur crown. For instance, Nusrati was far more generous toward Shivaji's half-brother, Ekoji, who remained a vassal of 'Ali 'Adil Shah II and would soon establish the Maratha court at Tanjavur after displacing its *nayaka* rulers in 1675.⁹⁴ As the son of Shahaji Bhonsle (d. 1664), who had served the 'Adil shahs of Bijapur and was one of the wisest ministers at court (*ekoji jo shahji kā farzand thā / vazīrān mein nāmī khirdmand thā*), Nusrati lauded Ekoji's bravery (*mahābalī*) and prudence

(*samajhdāri*), which made him far superior to his insolent half-brother.⁹⁵ Premodern literati certainly mobilized an idiom of difference (physical, sectarian, ethnic) to delegitimize some actors and elevate others.

The intimate diagnosis of major regional households, whether Marathas or Indo-Africans, was the prism through which Nusrati made sense of the changing meanings of *ghar*. Mughal suzerainty opened up space for more and more regional contenders to participate in territorial expansion while strengthening their own domains. The dramatizations of confrontations, such as those between regional kings and provincial household chiefs examined above, bring us to the poet's assessment of the Great Satan among them all—the Mughals—and to the question, what did Nusrati think of the mighty imperial masters who indirectly caused the rise of contending household states? The filial bond articulated in Atishi's work thirty years earlier vanished in the decades of continuous war in the late seventeenth century. At the outset, Nusrati, too, conceded to and was in awe of the Mughal army's scale and size. He began by observing their weapons and armor, listing Mughal soldiers' ethnicities, places of origin, castes, and lineages. But shortly after sizing them up, he devoted page after page for sizing them down, expressing an incisive critique of all things Mughal. Empire actually meant a set of panimperial behaviors and vices, shared across its highest and lowest ranks, building an overall morally degenerate and fickle entity called "Mughal."

At first, like Atishi looking north earlier in the seventeenth century, Nusrati expressed wonder at the enormous Mughal army marching toward the Deccan. He beheld the sight of the mosaic of people who made the rank and file of Mughal soldiers. All these different levels of personnel, from the common soldier to the high-ranking noble, together constituted the idea of Mughal-ness. But empire's moral degeneracy would compromise the enormous breadth of human and material resources at its disposal. An imperial army with universal ambitions, drawn from across the world, failed to compensate for the empire's unethical moral conduct:

katā hun itā fauj dehli kī bāt / chālī thī dil pe kis dhāt sāt
ke kis fauj kon dekhne mai samaj / dise na kise inteha hor apaj
mughlān kate mulk wa kayī shahar ke / kate hind wa koyi māvarānnahr ke
chaghtai qizilbāsh uzbek bali / qandahārī kate balkh hor kabuli

...

fareb un ke fan men badhā burd hai / janam jag jā iblis shāgird hai
nichī jin mai aslā murawwat kī bū / karen us pe bad jis te nek un pe hue
thikāna īch duniyā ko māder kahen / chupa laudh zāhir kon khwāhar kahein
badī bāp saun apnī mirās jān / birādar ka khūn shir mader pehchān
dekhen kuch hai jān fāidah āp ko / nā chode sageh bhāi aur bāp kon

...

rohille katak zāt ke the ūvatt / zabardast panjābīyān dil ke ghatt
bahūt rāo rāne athe raj ke put / ghurūrī son shaitān jhagde pe bahūt⁹⁶

now I say a bit about the Delhi's army,
 and how it set out with a mission in its heart

upon seeing this army, one understands,
it appears it has no beginning nor end

say, Mughals came from many cities and kingdoms
say, some from Hind, others from Transoxiana

the bravest Chagtai, Qizilbash, Uzbek
Qandahari, Balkhi, and Kabulis
...
in any challenge, deceit is their art,
for ages, the devil has been their student

they do not have even a little stench of compassion,
they do bad to those who do good to them

to show the world, they'll call someone their mother
hiding their lust, they'll call a girl their sister

to mistreat their father is hereditary,
to them, the brother's blood is like mother's milk

when they see their own benefit
they won't even spare their brother nor father
...
Rohillas, with an essence of deceit,
formidable Panjabis, cowards at heart

many Raos, Rane and Rajputs
devils full of pride, ready to fight

Nusrati observed the different kinds of people, places, ethnicities, and lineages that constituted the abstract idea of “Mughal.”⁹⁷ From Central Asia to Hindustan, distant regions and ethnic units defined the panoply of people that fell under the term *Mughal*. But Nusrati very quickly stripped the Mughals of their universal, cosmopolitan grandeur by uniting the empire's diverse subjects through pan-Mughal vices of deceit, lying, cheating, ruthlessness, and killing relatives. Despite ethnic, regional, and linguistic variety, certain inherent traits of disloyalty, untrustworthiness, and treachery were shared across the highest and lowest imperial levels.

For instance, Nusrati seized every opportunity to take a jab at the War of Succession, which had transpired among Mughal princes in 1657 and 1658, an event that was then part of popular memory. He belittled an empire whose sons for the sake of their own gain did not spare their own fathers and brothers (*dekhien kuch hai jān fāidah āp ko / na chode sageh bhāi aur bāp kon*). The imperial trait of betraying family manifested itself in different ways at the empire's more humble echelons. Hailing from different parts of Hindustan and Transoxiana, the whole empire was united by the quality of *fareb* or the quality of lying and inveigling others. The Mughal army was strong in numbers and weapons, but treachery was the primary strategy through which it won fleeting loyalties during diplomacy and war. Mughal greatness

thus had its limits, and even while acknowledging empire's ability to encompass so many different kinds of people, observers on the margins mistrusted it.

Going to the very top of the imperial chain of command, Nusrati cast Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) as a spineless, gullible character. In one portrait of the moment when Shivaji plundered the imperial port city of Surat in 1665, we find the beleaguered Mughal emperor consulting his incompetent officers who had failed to protect the empire's most important gateway to the Indian Ocean. Surat, with the whole world's wealth and goods, was the city where merchants from across land and sea resided (*rahein bahr-o-khushkī kī tujjār jān / mile bast-i 'ālam mein jo nayīn so dhān*). Shivaji cast his gaze on the port that had blessed the lands of Hind (*levein hind nit faiz us te nol*), making plans to capture it.⁹⁸ After describing Surat's riches, Nusrati then dramatizes its plunder and destruction, the news of which was delivered to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. On hearing the bad news, the emperor clenches his teeth with his fingers and bites his lips hard in anger (*pakad apne dānton main hairat son bont / kahīyā chābnā sakht gusse se hont*) and realizes that the only way to cleanse the lands of that rascal (*zamīn us harāmī se karnā hai pāk*) is to turn to the 'Adil Shahi sultan for help.⁹⁹ Nusrati deliberately changes the dominant image of the Mughal emperor as universally all powerful and formidable into a hapless sovereign who, lost in neurotic monologues, appeals to much smaller neighboring sultans to deal with a formidable political rebel.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Nusrati's appraisal of the Mughals also entails a complete disregard of their claim to be fair Muslim rulers. Just as we found no consistency in the poet's criticisms of regional non-Muslim contenders like Shivaji, who were sometimes judged based on sectarian difference and at other times cast as antithetical to all faiths, the Mughals also receive no special treatment simply because they were fellow Muslims. In one such appraisal, Nusrati begins with the usual insults when comparing Mughal and Deccani armies:

*mughal āke avval jo lāt khāte hain / dakhān kī ladāyī te kachū āte hain
yek yek maut ke waqt farzand kon / kahīn yād rakh pūt is pand kon
dakhān pur moham huī tū sutt rozgār / ke zanhār nayīn phir ū āne ke thār*¹⁰⁰

The Mughals come here to get their asses kicked
But they evade a fight with the Deccan
At each and every moment of death
Remind our sons of the following advice
Set yourself upon the important task of defending the Deccan
Such that they [the Mughals] never have the nerve to return here

"Mughal" here is synonymous with unmanly (*nāmard*) and a trickster (*hīleh-gar*). In one dramatization of an alliance between the 'Adil shahs of Bijapur and the Qutb Shahs of Golkonda against the Mughals, Nusrati compares the Mughal army's invasion of the Deccan with the failed attempt of Abraha, the sixth-century Abyssinian Christian king, who attempted to destroy the Ka'ba, alluding to the Qur'an's well-known chapter:¹⁰¹

*madad un jise āp be shak karein / bashar kyā hai jo is ko komal kare
kīyā mār gard āp thā jis vakīl / abā bīl ke hit son ashāb-i fīl*¹⁰²

those who God helps without a doubt,
what is man, for he can never weaken [God's] help

the enemies, of those whose advocate is God, turn to straw
in the same way the flight of birds pelted stones at the companions of elephants

Abraha and his army, the companions of elephants (*ashāb-i fīl*) were miraculously pelted by a flight of birds (*abā bīl*) as they invaded the Hijaz. Similarly, the Mughals were bound to lose against the Deccan's armies because God was not on their side. Like Abraha, the Mughals had a much larger army, but the Deccan was exalted and revered in a manner similar to Mecca and would remain protected through divine intervention.

Nusrati appropriated literary topoi repeatedly deployed in conquest narratives across the Islamic world to dramatize encounters with non-Muslims.¹⁰³ He took the Abraha image a step further to strip much more formidable, fellow Muslim sovereigns of their claim to be just rulers, as the imperial masters had already lost credibility in the eyes of contemporary observers by invading the Deccan sultanates.¹⁰⁴ It would not be an exaggeration to say that Nusrati saw nothing redeeming in the Mughals when he declared:

*kabal waqt par yū ich kām āyenge,
mughalān son zāt apnī dikhlāyenge.
nā 'āqīl hai hargez himāqat kon chod,
jo gurgī kon sehrabandī sar ko chod*

at the hour of need, only we can help them
then, the Mughals will show their true colors
for they're unintelligent and will never let go of stupidity
instead of on their head, they wear the groom's veil as their pajamas!

Writing within a shared discursive heritage with a universal criterion for just kingship, Nusrati disagreed with contemporary Indo-Persian authors who valorized the Mughals as ethical, righteous rulers. From the perspective of this provincial observer, the empire was impaired by remaining oblivious to its own weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

These words, meant to implore the Mughals, reveal how masnavī shifted from praise and eulogy to critical advice and invective as the terrain of belonging to a ghar changed within the course of a century. When imperial suzerainty first begins in the 1620s, we hear Atishi's measured words for reforming the Mughals. In the latter half of the century, when imperial occupation indirectly facilitated the rising autonomy of regional household chiefs, Nusrati's invective reflects anxieties

about the rapid reversal of political hierarchies and unsettling of the status quo caused by the presence of the empire in a distant region. Both poets, in recounting contemporary events, assert the fragility of all things Mughal by questioning war's moral and ethical implications in their uncertain times, and their role in unsettling senses of *ghar*. What starts first as ambivalence then becomes deep mistrust and even disdain for mighty imperial overlords—this is how those on the margins, who were still very much within the extended Mughal imperium, made sense of what they observed was wrong with empire.

Counternarratives about imperial and regional power were not merely untrue and exaggerated representations in which poets played with tropes and words. Among the many layers in this textual tradition, I have here followed the *ʿĀdilnāma* and *ʿAlināma* for political meaning-making and tracing the evolution of the politics of place. In some ways, a literary archive's formal constraints and limits prevent us from tracking the sequence of events that led to the Mughals annexing peninsular India in 1687 or telling the story of a single ethnolinguistic group, narratives that can be easily constructed from Persian chronicles and European travelogues. Instead, I mapped out what changed about the politics of *ghar* in the seventeenth century and in which words this change was represented. What the martial poem offers is a profile of the many emotive responses to imperial power and what iconic events meant to contemporary observers. Our two Bijapuri poets honed their art in the long and continuous tradition of martial poetry by producing portraits of different kinds of political problems—first, the crisis of dealing with poetic competition and second, the tension between kings and households.

Reading a literary archive for compositional techniques and tropes is indispensable for interpreting texts as rich and capacious as the *ʿĀdilnāma* and *ʿAlināma*.¹⁰⁵ While being less focused on the literariness of these materials, in the first part of this chapter I investigated how poets used standard tropes and images for declaring their political affinities, professional anxieties, and courtly allegiances, all of which were tied to senses of belonging to a *ghar*. Next I showed how the martial poem served as an ideal medium for creating a new set of heroes and villains in a raucous political landscape. Persianate literati memorialized political encounters, deploying appreciable poetic forms in Persian and Dakkani, partly to distinguish the political category of the Deccan from the Mughals, but mostly to make sense of what was changing about the nature of power in their times. Regional poets emphasized their difference as nonimperial subjects and either embraced new nonroyal patrons (as Atishi did) or grew alarmed by household lineages that were growing distant from monarchical authority (as in the case of Nusrati). Innovations within this form, in proximate linguistic registers, were perhaps another means to oppose and outdo, literally and militarily speaking, deeply familiar, similar, and intimate rivals.

From provincial Persianate Muslim literati's vantage point, claims to Mughal greatness were not entirely untrue, but they were, at least at times, vastly overblown

and exaggerated. Despite being in awe of empire's military strength, regional critics hardly looked up to the Mughals as legitimate rulers, as righteous Muslims, or as beacons of *adab*. They gave new meaning to existing affective terminologies for loyalty and betrayal, familiarity and estrangement, as well as sectarian difference to plot imperial power onto a wider canvas of contentious politics, as nonkingly figures made claims to political power in the seventeenth century. These intrareligious fault lines and debates within Islamic South Asia enable us to move away from the task of constantly restoring the Mughals to a preconceived idea of "India" or telling the story of a quaint, syncretic precolonial society, which the empire partly helped sustain. In a period of imperial suzerainty, the meanings of empire-building and territorial domination were contested, not just militarily, but through words, metaphors, and narrations that revealed the contingent meanings of loyalty and the uncertain grounds on which regional and imperial sovereignties stood in the early modern period.

It is worth reiterating here a point emphasized in the book's introduction. The tensions between a purportedly all-powerful kingly authority and non-royal household lineages is a pattern as old as South Asia itself. No matter which region of the subcontinent or which era we consider, the household, or what Sumit Guha calls the "locus of sociopolitical organization,"¹⁰⁶ as the fundamental basis of property inheritance and social reproduction, persisted regardless of which dynasty held power. So, what changed about this relationship in the age of imperial consolidation and how did historical actors diagnose or perceive this problem across different units of time and space in South Asia? Persianate Muslim elites in the Deccan courts represented the political vicissitudes of their own times by casting moral judgments and declaring what was right and wrong in one's quest for power, a very old theme in ethical literature across the Islamic world.¹⁰⁷ In doing so, the words and images in these poetic compositions revealed the fragility of political identities and the contingent articulations of loyalty to a *ghar* at a time when kings and households contended over sovereignty.

Although old and new political histories have tracked the chronological sequence of battles, treaties, negotiations, and alliances that led to an inevitable Mughal conquest, often by meticulously following the Persian chronicle's certitudes, our task here was to investigate a literary archive that illuminates what these political events meant to contemporary observers.¹⁰⁸ Entering the story of Mughal-Deccan relations from a different textual register—poetic counternarratives that represent the tension between kingly and household power—refracts the narrative of imperial inevitability and regional decline that pervades the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁹ Poetic works reveal how a different set of actors—regional elite poets and household chiefs—eclipsed sovereigns, interlocking northern and southern India's political structures by articulating the stakes for political identities (Mughal versus Deccani and so forth) and the loyalties they were supposed to represent.

The late seventeenth century, far from being a moment of origin, was a moment of accumulated layers of familiarity and the culmination of old patterns, a time to settle scores with the deepest, most intimate acquaintances. Rather than being an inaugural moment when the self-professed Maratha Hindu Shivaji collided with the perennially Other Muslim sultans of Hindustan and the Deccan, this was a time when well-acquainted historical actors, who belonged to the same political ghar, contended over what it meant to be a Mughal, Deccani, Maratha, Habshi, and Afghan. To diagnose all these players in the cantankerous present, instead of their more common practice of giving advice and counseling, Muslim poets turned praise into invective to declare their political allegiances and ideological agendas.¹¹⁰ Pathologizing intimate rivals required the use of sectarian, phenotypical, and gendered language to heighten a sense of difference with those who were familiar and too similar to oneself. Rather than shy away from the controversial vocabularies of sectarian and ethnic difference, poets wielded such emotive language as a form of political meaning-making. My analysis pays attention to when and why an idiom of difference was used to construct crucial representations of friends and enemies. I show how premodern literati mapped a range of groups onto a political spectrum by turning to the language of difference and affective binaries to make sense of their most familiar rivals.

One of the primary aims of this book is to bridge the distance between studying the court and the state by transcending different textual genres that have been used to reconstruct separate kinds of South Asian pasts. In order to do so, we have to raise the question about the reception, the possible audiences, and the social setting within which poetic works such as those of Atishi and Nusrati circulated. Across Persianate societies, the martial poem became a powerful medium that complemented chronicles about contemporary events while also engaging with the burden of tradition from Firdawsi onward. The first and most immediate audiences were, of course, other courtly literati, to whom both Atishi and Nusrati made references as either interlocutors or rivals. The martial poem and its central topoi—of all things related to the battlefield—may also suggest Dakkani's role as a language that circulated in sites of military engagement, going beyond Persian's learned courtly circuits, limited to capital cities of empires and regional sultanates. Chroniclers often reported that martial poems or *fathnāma* were commissioned and written at encampments after military victories, suggesting that the social setting of Dakkani was analogous to similar oral genres in Bundeli and Marathi.¹¹¹ Using the regional idiom thus enabled a palpably different and much more biting criticism of imperial rule that reached a wider audience than Persian's elite register.

During the seventeenth century, just as the Mughal frontier reached the Coromandel Coast in southeastern India, the sociological profile of regional elite lineages challenging kingly authority also changed—from Iranians to Marathas, Indo-Africans, and Afghans—all of whom occupied center stage in martial works. In a fraught political landscape, provincial literati redefined the meaning of

disloyalty and betrayal, fitting distinct groups into shifting definitions of what it meant to be a Mughal and a Deccani or both. In the next chapter, we will enter the closing decades of the seventeenth century, where social elites from the Deccan encountered merchants, weavers, and companies entangled in the economy of the southern Coromandel coast and the wider world of the Indian Ocean.