

Conclusion

This research has discussed and compared court politics in Vijayanagara and its heirs in six chapters, dealing with foundations and foundation myths, dynastic successions, the power of courtiers, court protocol and insult, influences from sultanate courts, and mutual relations. Combining all findings, this concluding section addresses this study's central questions, posed in the Introduction: How did court politics in Vijayanagara's heirs compare to each other and to those in the empire itself? Can the successor states really be regarded as a specific group of kingdoms? To what extent were court politics shaped by imperial legacies, local factors, and wider developments? How can court politics and the position of kings in these states generally be characterised? And how do the conclusions of this research relate to earlier studies?

While the previous chapters compare Vijayanagara and its heirs on particular topics, this section takes a different approach. First, based on the conclusions in all chapters, it considers the states one by one. Next, it discusses the differences and similarities between the kingdoms on a more general level and tries to explain them. Finally, it compares this study's conclusions with the existing historiography.

Starting with Vijayanagara, the foundation myths of the four imperial houses contain various motifs to legitimise their rule: descent from warriors and the Lunar race, martial feats, links with earlier dynasties, divine recognition, natural miracles, acquisition of wealth, migration, clearing of land, and dynastic continuity. With respect to successions, these dynasties were neither very stable nor particularly unstable compared to the successor states. On average, reigns lasted about a decade and accessions to the throne were regularly contested, sometimes violently. But emperors were mostly followed by sons or brothers and seldom by infants, women, or illegitimate relatives. With regard to Vijayanagara's courtiers, the more prominent ones were mainly Brahmins or members of the rulers' castes. They could grow very powerful but also rapidly fall from grace. They benefitted from familial and other connections, and often combined military, administrative, and mercantile functions, simultaneously or consecutively.

As for protocol, it appears that Vijayanagara's court largely adhered to ceremonial advocated in Indian political treatises. Important aspects included audiences,

welcoming and departure ceremonies, gift-giving, and other moments of contact, in person or through correspondence. The required ritual was either followed—to express satisfaction and convey respect—or breached, to show resentment. Thus, protocol often reflected rather than shaped relationships, although diplomatic humiliations could have far-reaching consequences. Finally, throughout its existence influences from sultanate courts manifested themselves in Vijayanagara, as illustrated by two aspects considered here: dynastic titles and royal dress.

Moving to Ikkeri, these Nayakas' origin stories mostly contain the same elements as those of Vijayanagara. But texts here also include two other motifs—the acquisition of royal symbols and the loyalty of servants—while they do not refer to migration and chiefly mention descent from warriors only. Judging from its successions, this Nayaka house was not much more stable or unstable than the imperial dynasties, on the one hand enjoying a longer average reign, but on the other hand seeing more undesirable rulers (minors and women) and witnessing fierce competition between two family branches for a long period. Whereas there was little difference between Ikkeri and the empire when it comes to the power of courtiers, diplomatic insult seemed a more regular phenomenon in this kingdom. That was at least the impression of the Dutch, but then they mostly experienced court protocol in times of friction. Anyhow, Ikkeri's ceremonial, whether followed or violated, was mainly similar to that of Vijayanagara. As for Persianate influence, there is hardly any evidence for this in the Nayakas' titles, while references to royal clothing are somewhat ambiguous but largely point to a continuation of the Persianate imperial dress code.

For Nayaka-ruled Tanjavur there is less information than for the other heirs, but sources suggest there were several differences with them. It appears the foundation myths of this dynasty lack some motifs observed elsewhere: land clearance and the acquisition of wealth and royal symbols, perhaps related to Tanjavur's long past as a highly fertile realm. Moreover, successions under these Nayakas indicate relatively much dynastic stability. Reigns generally lasted twice as long as in the other kingdoms, the throne always passed to sons or brothers, and competition between pretenders was dealt with quickly and effectively. Tanjavur under the Nayakas appears not to have stood out with regard to the role of courtiers and protocol. This also applies to sultanate influences, at least for the one aspect that could be considered here: dynastic titles are entirely devoid of Persianate elements.

Under Tanjavur's subsequent Bhonsle rulers, court politics were also exceptional in various respects. As with its predecessors, this dynasty's origin stories contain fewer elements than those of most other heirs. There seem to be no references to natural miracles, land clearance, and wealth, while descent is claimed from celestial bodies and kings alongside warriors, unlike in Nayaka myths. Further, although not to the extent of Tanjavur's Nayakas, the Bhonsles witnessed

few succession struggles, mostly passed the throne to sons or brothers, and enjoyed comparatively long reigns—apart from a brief, atypical period of violence involving some unqualified pretenders. The same relative stability is found for courtiers, whose careers generally lasted longer and who faced less aggressive competition than in other kingdoms. Also, this court included influential Muslim officials during much of its existence. Protocol appears to have been somewhat different, too, considering the few royal audiences deemed necessary to conduct business with the VOC, the regular physical contact between the kings and Dutchmen, and the relative lack of diplomatic insult. Besides, influences from Muslim-ruled courts were rather prominent, suggested both by occasional Islamic titles and names and by what seem to have been Persianate dress and ceremonial.

The foundation stories of the Nayakas of Madurai are largely similar to those of Vijayanagara and Ikkeri. Only the motif of natural miracles is not very prominent. With regard to the length of reigns, succession struggles, and the number of illegitimate rulers, Madurai had much in common with Ikkeri as well. The kingdom was different from other states, however, in that it had two important political centres—the central capital and the southernmost governor's seat—accounting for many violent clashes between powerful courtiers' families. Madurai's protocol, and the relatively limited degree to which it was breached, resembled that of most other courts. Finally, whereas sultanate influences on royal titles are not found, the continuous use of such dress is obvious here.

As for Ramnad's Setupatis, all mentioned motifs figure in their origin myths, but this house claimed descent from warriors, kings, and, uniquely, the Sun. Successions caused more instability here than anywhere else, given the frequency of short reigns, brutal struggles for the throne, and illegitimate or infant rulers. Ramnad's courtiers seem to have come from a greater variety of backgrounds than in other states, including Brahmins, Muslims, and members of the rulers' caste. With respect to protocol, too, Ramnad stood out for the regular insults meted out to the Dutch, mostly related to the conflicting commercial interests of this court and the VOC. The Setupatis were also exceptional for their partial switch from Persianate clothing to garments with traditional, Indic connotations on public occasions.

Comparing all these similarities and differences, certain broad patterns among Vijayanagara's heirs can be observed. Ikkeri and Madurai appear to have resembled both Vijayanagara and each other to a large extent. Their foundation stories, successions, role of courtiers, protocol, and Persianate influences were all rather alike. One distinction between Ikkeri and Madurai was the coexistence of two political nodes within the latter, perhaps somewhat akin to Vijayanagara with its powerful provincial governors. While Nayaka-ruled Tanjavur was similar to the other Nayaka courts with regard to the position of courtiers, protocol, and sultanate

influences, its origin myths were partly different and successions caused less instability. Ramnad was still more distinct. Its foundation stories shared much with the other myths, but its dynasty was the most unstable, its courtiers most diverse, its protocol most often breached, and its Persianate elements most variable. Bhonsle-ruled Tanjavur clearly stood out the most: in none of the discussed aspects did it resemble Vijayanagara and, by extension, Ikkeri and Madurai.

These observations underscore that the empire's direct heirs indeed formed a separate group, differing in various ways and degrees from indirect heirs. Yet, there were also variations among the direct successors, with Tanjavur in particular occupying a slightly exceptional position—as did Mysore, indicated by the few, brief discussions of this court. Several factors may have caused these differences among Vijayanagara's direct and indirect heirs, perhaps most prominently geographic and demographic aspects, dynastic origins, and broader developments in south India.

Geography and demography probably influenced each element of court politics considered here. Physical features like coasts, rivers, forests, arid zones, and mountains at least partially determined levels of population, sedentarisation, and social stratification. Consequently, they affected political mobility and access to courts, and thus helped shape the size and composition of pools of courtiers and pretenders to thrones, ultimately influencing succession patterns, factionalism, and other aspects of court politics. Fertile, densely populated, and highly stratified Tanjavur was in this respect the opposite of marginal, partly nomadic, and politically fluid Ramnad. Also, Ramnad's long seashore, strategic location, and natural focus on maritime trade contributed to its many clashes with the Dutch and showed in wealthy Muslim merchants exerting power at court and furthering Persianisation. The foundation myths of each kingdom reflect geographic circumstances as well. They either speak of territories that must be cleared of jungle, or actually leave out this motif, indicating that cultivated land was already available.

The role of the different backgrounds of royal families appears harder to determine and not to have been all-pervasive anyway. Obviously, dynastic origins shaped certain motifs in foundation stories. Men establishing dynasties in regions they did not originate from, as in Tanjavur and Madurai, are generally said to have travelled vast distances to perform heroic deeds and gain recognition from kings and deities. Texts about dynastic founders of local origin do not mention such migrations or at most refer to a round trip to be acknowledged by higher powers.

In addition, a local background may have meant that royal families had stronger connections with the society they ruled, allowing for easier access to the court, more competition, and less stability, as seems to have been the case in Ikkeri and especially Ramnad. Besides, the shared Telugu milieu of the Nayakas of Tanjavur and Madurai could have facilitated both defections of courtiers and exchanges of princesses between their kingdoms, influencing internal politics at each court as

well as their mutual relationship. The Maratha origins of Tanjavur's Bhonsles and their past under the Deccan sultanates also manifested themselves in various ways, ranging from motifs in origin myths—such as dynastic links, divine recognition, migration, and royal symbols—to the role of Muslim courtiers, a pragmatic attitude towards protocol, and Persianate customs.

However, the background of royal houses appears to have fundamentally affected just some aspects of court politics, or did so only for certain dynasties. The fact that the Nayakas of Tanjavur and Madurai had foreign roots whereas Ikkeri's Nayakas and Ramnad's Setupatis were of local origin, was seemingly not an important factor in the influence of courtiers, the practices of court protocol, the receptivity to Persianisation, and the nature of relations with neighbouring kingdoms. That dynastic backgrounds were insignificant for so many facets is perhaps another indication that in the Vijayanagara successor states, kings were not automatically politically dominant figures, as discussed in more detail below.

Finally, broader developments in south India greatly impacted court politics in Vijayanagara's heirs. While even origin stories may have been adjusted over time because of such changes, external influences on other political aspects are certainly evident. The interests of states outside the group of Vijayanagara's successors could be decisive, as shown by Bijapur's involvement in several successions in Ikkeri, and Arcot's increasing role in struggles for the throne in Tanjavur and Ramnad.

Further, south India's growing overseas trade and commercialisation provided both established and aspiring courtiers—ministers, military men, and merchants alike—with new opportunities to diversify their activities, extend their networks, and increase their power. Wider political processes also brought about the adoption of sultanate practices, first by Vijayanagara and later, to some extent, by its heirs, who came to look to the Mughals. In the same vein, political developments later caused Ramnad to abandon or modify Persianate customs.

All in all, several factors, each in their own way, influenced court politics, creating variety among Vijayanagara's successors. Still, there were many resemblances between the heirs, and between them and the empire. Perhaps, those shared characteristics can be regarded as the strongest legacies of Vijayanagara, being adopted by all direct and indirect heirs, regardless of geographic and demographic conditions, dynastic origins, and wider regional processes. For the aspects of court politics considered in this study, the following similarities can be observed.

All foundation myths comprised the motifs of descent from warriors, martial prowess, ties to earlier royal houses, divine acknowledgement, and dynastic continuity. Under all dynasties, successions regularly led to competition and violence between contenders for the throne. At every court, courtiers combined different ranks and portfolios, employed family relations and other networks, and acquired

great or even dominating power but could also entirely lose it again. They always included Brahmins and members of the rulers' castes. The forms of protocol, the occasions that required it, and the purposes it served—following or breaching it—were all largely the same at each court. Lastly, sultanate influences seem to have been visible everywhere in royal dress, at least for some time, as well as the *khil'at* ritual.

Those similarities were of course not unique to Vijayanagara and its successors. The Introduction explains that some of these characteristics already existed in the regional kingdoms preceding the empire. The importance attached to martial feats, religious recognition, links to older royal houses, and dynastic continuation predated Vijayanagara. The same applies to the adoption of certain Persianate customs.¹ There is relatively little information, however, about the frequency and nature of succession struggles or about the backgrounds, careers, and power of courtiers before the period of regular European reports. With regard to court protocol, medieval and earlier political treatises suggest a continuity into the early modern period as far as norms are concerned. But again, not much is known about the extent to which such standards were obeyed or evaded—and for what reasons and with what effects—until European sources become available.

Therefore, returning to V.S. Naipaul's statement quoted at the beginning of the Introduction, what Vijayanagara itself contributed to the legacies passed to its heirs, was not "little" but rather must be typified as varied. For some aspects of court politics, the empire served as a catalyst, disseminating older south Indian notions and practices over the many regions it controlled. In other instances, it played a more innovative role, generating new strategies, adjusting and combining erstwhile traditions, and responding to wider Indian and international developments. These included the ongoing influence from the Indo-Islamic world and, as a new factor, the presence of European powers, both of which caused political, economic, military, and cultural changes. Thus, lasting through the vicissitudes between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Vijayanagara absorbed elements from very diverse backgrounds and dispersed these over its vast realm. In this way, the empire had a great impact on the states, courts, and dynasties that succeeded it, albeit in various manners and to different degrees.²

Moving to these successors, some scholars have argued that Nayaka-ruled Tanjavur exemplified the Nayaka states—at least those in the Tamil zone—in that its ideas on rulership were typical for these kingdoms. As explained in the

¹ For such customs under the Kakatiyas (reigning until the fourteenth century), see: Talbot, *Precolonial India in Practice*, 173; Eaton and Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture*, 14-17; Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan*, 11-12, 18. See also: Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, chs 1-2; Flood, *Objects of Translation*.

² For the conclusions drawn on the last few pages, see also Stein, *Vijayanagara*, 131-46.

Introduction, the ideology of Nayaka kingship is said to have comprised the following elements: personal qualities and loyalties took precedence over ascribed, high-caste affiliations and exalted ancestry; the role of Brahmins as ministers, advisors, or recipients of gifts had diminished; portable wealth (to be spent on physical pleasures) was more important than martial skills; and royalty and divinity—palace and temple—had merged. Further, those notions would have differed substantially from earlier ideas on rulership.³

These conclusions are no doubt valid for general concepts of kingship found in literary works composed at the Nayaka courts, the type of source mostly used for these arguments. The present research shows there is more to say about the position of kings in the Nayaka states and other heirs of Vijayanagara if one considers more practical aspects of court politics and, in addition to Indian texts, uses European sources extensively.

With regard to this study's themes, it appears Ikkeri and Madurai most closely resembled each other. Indeed, Nayaka-ruled Tanjavur was somewhat atypical among the successor states for its dynastic stability, the relative lack of violence at court, and the absence of some motifs in its foundation stories. Besides, it seems these Nayaka kingdoms actually had much in common with Vijayanagara, contradicting the abovementioned arguments. For instance, origin myths of all houses emphasise martial prowess, mentioning the founders' descent from warriors and their own physical skills. Further, while the direct heirs did not generally claim illustrious pedigrees, they did seek close ties with earlier dynasties, both imperial and local, which apparently helped legitimise their rule.⁴

Also, Brahmins still played an important part as ministers and advisers at these courts. South Indian works describe their prominent role in the foundations of some kingdoms. In each successor state, Brahmins formed a sizeable percentage of the courtiers, serving in many functions—civil, military, diplomatic, and mercantile—and often growing very powerful, as Dutch sources indicate. It therefore seems that the break between the Nayaka kingdoms and preceding polities was not that fundamental, at least not in every respect. Ramnad, too, although it differed from Vijayanagara and its direct heirs in various ways, still shared several characteristics with them, not surprisingly given its origin as an offshoot of Madurai.

As for Bhonsle-ruled Tanjavur, some scholars have stated that much remained the same here when the throne passed from the Telugu Nayakas to the Maratha Bhonsles. Studies point to the continuation of certain political institutions, royal imagery, and

³ Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, passim, for instance xii, 54-6, 169-219; Narayana Rao and Subrahmanyam, "Ideologies of State Building," 215, 225-31.

⁴ For the importance of genealogies for the Nayakas, see also: Branfoot, "Dynastic Genealogies," 368, 375-6; Ota, "Bēḍa Nāyakas and Their Historical Narratives," 186-7.

religious patronage, and to the ongoing flowering of art and literature through this dynastic transition. Others have purported that the Bhonsles forsook elements of Nayaka kingship and returned to the earlier political ideology of Vijayanagara.⁵

However, the present research suggests that the Bhonsle court also differed in many ways—origin stories, successions, courtiers, protocol, Persianate practices, and relations with other courts—from both its Nayaka predecessor and the empire, as well as from other successor states. For this study, Tanjavur under the Bhonsles has thus served as a useful counterpoint, showing that Nayaka-ruled Tanjavur, Ikkeri, and Madurai—and to a lesser extent Ramnad—resembled one another and Vijayanagara rather closely, at least with regard to the aspects of court politics examined here.

More generally, this research makes clear that the day-to-day practices of court politics in the heirs of Vijayanagara were highly dynamic. As the findings in all chapters imply, power relations were constantly evolving, shaped as they were by varied competing groups and individuals. At each court, these relations could change fast and radically and were only partially determined by formal hierarchies. Although monarchs served as the kingdoms' sovereigns and symbolic centres, in several ways they were just one of the many elements in the contest for power. Like everyone else at court, rulers were vulnerable, their actual influence depending on other parties, most conspicuously courtiers. But the latter, although collectively very mighty, were also typified by diversity and rivalry. Thus, kings and courtiers all participated in the court's political dynamics and consequently shared in and contributed to the realm's power.⁶

These observations, based on both Indian and European sources, run counter to various conclusions of other scholars on the relations rulers maintained with their courts and states. As explained in the Introduction, in several studies of individual Vijayanagara successor states, historians describe courts as largely static entities, where power relations were mostly fixed and kings acted as absolute rulers or at least dominant figures, their position generally unquestioned and uncontested. That proposition appears to be untenable, given the many instances in the present study showing that monarchs were frequently challenged, outshone, or even deposed by other, often non-royal actors at these courts.⁷

⁵ Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 314-18; Subrahmanyam, *Penumbral Visions*, 149, 162, 175, 231-2; Vriddhagirisani, *The Nayaks of Tanjore*, 7-8; Srinivasan, *Maratha Rule in the Carnatic*, 11; Srinivasan, "Some Interesting Aspects of the Maratha Rule"; Narayana Rao and Subrahmanyam, "Ideologies of State Building," 228-32. See also Guha, "The Frontiers of Memory," 277-8.

⁶ See also Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 113-14, 143-8.

⁷ Historiographic claims of absolute rulership have been questioned in revisionist studies on many pre-modern Eurasian courts. See: Duindam, "Rulers and Elites in Global History," 4; idem, "The Court as a Meeting Point," 35.

These findings also have implications for the historiography on Indian courts before the early modern age. For those earlier phases, external sources—which may complement, contextualise, and add nuance to local sources—are scarce or wholly absent. There is no reason, however, to suppose that court politics fundamentally changed when European powers appeared in India and began creating their extensive archives on the region's political developments. As suggested in several preceding chapters, the dynamics found at the courts studied here likely characterised earlier courts, too.

It is argued above that the period of Vijayanagara and its successors saw considerable change in the region, particularly caused by Persianate influences and European activities. These created wider networks and new political, military, and economic opportunities—all no doubt contributing to the dynamic nature of the courts. But it seems improbable that, for instance, heavily contested successions with undesirable outcomes, dominant and competing courtiers, and deliberate courtly insults were largely new trends in early modern south India. One may assume that these aspects of court politics had been present long before foreign sources started referring to them. Indeed, we have seen that several of these phenomena are occasionally hinted at in a variety of Indian sources, such as chronicles, proclamations, court correspondence, treatises on statecraft, and images.

Finally, the view that power and authority at Indic courts derived from the mutually dependent king and Brahmin, does not seem easily applicable to Vijayanagara's heirs. As explained in the Introduction, this notion basically holds that the king provided the Brahmin with protection and livelihood, in return for which the Brahmin sanctioned the rule of the king. However, in both the south Indian and European sources used for the present research, Brahmins predominantly appear as being heavily involved in more worldly aspects of court politics, acting as ministers, generals, diplomats, and merchants. Only some Brahmins figure in these sources as royal preceptors and family priests, playing a legitimising role.

One may wonder whether this observation can be related to the hypothesis that in the Nayaka kingdoms the king had amalgamated with the deity—or at least the deity had come to depend on the king—as a consequence of which the king no longer needed the Brahmin's sanctioning. Thus, the latter had lost his special status and, like everyone else, became merely a servant of the king,⁸ with all the access to worldly power this position entailed, of course.

But some dynastic sources do actually refer to rulers seeking legitimation from Brahmins because of their special status. One striking example concerns Madurai's temple painting that depicts a Brahmin as intermediary in the presentation of the royal sceptre by the goddess Minakshi to the Nayaka Queen Mangammal

⁸ Narayana Rao and Subrahmanyam, "Ideologies of State Building," 224.

(see illustration 6, left, in Chapter 2). Notably, however, no Brahmin is included in Ramnad's palace mural showing the Setupati Muttu Vijaya Raghunatha—a near contemporary of Mangammal—as he receives a sceptre from the goddess Rajarajeshvari (see illustration 22 in Chapter 6). The mediating role of a Brahmin was apparently not deemed essential here.

Whether this contrast is related to the difference between the dynasties' backgrounds, the rulers' genders, or the images' locations (temple versus palace), it implies that in Vijayanagara's successor states kings could, but not always would depend on sanctioning of Brahmins. That rulers had several options in this regard is also suggested, for instance, by the diverse roles assigned to Brahmins in dynastic foundation stories. They variously appear as world renouncer (for Vijayanagara itself), manifestation of a deity (Ikkeri), and courtier (Nayaka Tanjavur), or are even more or less absent (Madurai, Ramnad, Bhonsle Tanjavur).⁹

At any rate, as said, many Brahmins were involved in the more worldly aspects of court politics. In such cases, their relationship with kings was often characterised by political interdependence, where power was both contested and shared, rather than by ideological interdependence.¹⁰ Furthermore, Brahmins were not exceptional in this respect. People of very different backgrounds—like members of the kings' castes, often from the low Shudra *varṇa* (caste category), and, at some courts, Muslims—maintained similar relations with rulers.

Altogether, this study indicates that in many ways neither kings nor Brahmins necessarily occupied a special place at the courts of Vijayanagara's heirs. Rather, it appears that in the dynamic court politics of these states their positions frequently resembled those of other parties striving for power. Thus, there are several gaps between these conclusions and earlier historiography, such as research considering Nayaka kingship in the Tamil zone fundamentally different from earlier political structures, works depicting the courts of the successor states as static and harmonious, and theories on the king-Brahmin nexus. This disparity may at least partly be caused by the use of different sources and a focus on different aspects of court politics. However, the bridging of these gaps must be left to the future.

⁹ I thank Elaine Fisher, Dirk Kolff, Jos Gommans, Valerie Stoker, and Caleb Simmons for sharing their thoughts on relations between kings and Brahmins in Vijayanagara and its heirs. Obviously, I am solely responsible for the ideas presented here.

¹⁰ See also Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India*, 67.