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BOOK EXCERPT

‘Life here flows on like the Tungabhadra’: The multi-faith and multi-ethnic identity of Hampi

An excerpt from ‘Where the Madness Lies: Citizen Accounts of Identity and Nationalism’, by Kishalay Bhattacharjee.

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Hampi is officially described as the “last capital of the last Hindu kingdom of Vijaynagar”. What one can see today is the incredible intensity of destruction witnessed by the region, and yet what remains is an able testament to its magnificence. Located in a craggy, rocky landscape with open plains, the sophisticated urban planning and architecture of the city is sufficient proof of a highly developed society. The ruins and excavations indicate a large number of religious, yet secular structures, and a diverse population that included Hindus, Muslims, and Jains.

I drove into Hampi from Hyderabad on a monsoon afternoon. The urban Indian city is missing here and every turn of the road brings us to a ruin, a temple, a few pillars –

standing like milestones to an empire that once reigned supreme. The only modern monument in the town square is a badly sculpted figure of BR Ambedkar. Massive rocks almost seem to tip over, having stood here for centuries.

Hampi assumed importance in the present Hindu-India position because of the way it was founded, and subsequently, how it was destroyed. Its foundation resulted from invasions into southern India by Delhi sultans at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Despite having overrun the Hindu kingdoms here, Delhi failed to exert control and hold onto its conquests. This led to the rise of autonomous satraps like Kampila and Sangamas in the Tungabhadra region. It was the two Sangama brothers, Harihara and Bukka, who gained control over major parts of south India at the same time as the Bahmani kingdom of the Deccan began its expansion.

Existing literature states that “Vijayanagara architecture is also known for its adoption of elements of Indo Islamic Architecture in secular buildings like the Queen’s Bath and the Elephant Stables, representing a highly evolved multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.” Two hundred years of glory and power are palpable in Vijayanagara, which was easily the largest for any city in India.

It is as if the city was designed to showcase artistic evolution, wealth as well as religious and political thought. The city achieved metropolitan proportions in the accounts of foreign travellers, who described it as one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Vijayanagara dazzled anyone who visited the city. The Kohinoor came from this very land.

However, historical narratives can be a slippery slope. As the novelist VS Naipaul enters the ruined city, he recasts the story as a tale of defeat and destruction. His India is a “wounded civilisation”, mortally hurt by “invasions” and still impacted by its effect. The rise and fall of Vijayanagara, as understood by British historians like Robert Sewell, is problematic. Sewell, in *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar*, describes the kingdom as “a Hindu bulwark against Muhammadan conquests”. For many, Indian nationalism meant and still means Hindu nationalism. Sewell’s characterisation was timely and found a sizeable audience. Other historians, like Richard Eaton, have not only debunked Sewell, but have contradicted his evidence:

Peninsular India in 15th and 16th centuries was not so much a sacred realm, far less a zone of two mutually exclusive sacred realms, as it was a crossroads. As in contemporary north India, peoples in the 15th- to the 17th-century Deccan circulated through overlapping religious, political, and commercial networks. Long-distance merchants such as Mahmud Gawan brought horses, precious metals and other goods from the coasts inland and textiles and spices from the interior to the coasts. Jain, Hindu, Muslim pilgrims moved in all directions. Sufis, ascetics and lay seekers circulated from place to place, or from person to person, pursuing salvation, wisdom or more mundane goals.

Eaton cites that Deva Raya II recruited 10,000 Turkish archers for Vijayanagara. He provides several examples of how peninsular India was an interconnected zone, rather than a Hindu domain. The Qutub Shahi prince Ibrahim, for example, fled Golconda to escape to Rama Raya's court, and Raya himself was patron to Qutub Quli Shah. Vijayanagara currency was in circulation across the Deccan, and the Bahmani kingdom traded in Vijayanagara currency as well as their own, which indicates that for the citizens of these kingdoms, the entire region was a single economic zone.

What VS Naipaul's history ignored was that Vijayanagara had "nearly two centuries of intense and creative interaction with the Islamic world", to the extent that the costume of the royalty changed from the Dravidian sartorial tradition of bare-chested kings to Islamic court attire. It adopted several attributes of warfare, commerce and technology from the Islamic world.

Deva Raya II is said to have employed 10,000 Muslim horsemen. The kingdom was part of the alliance of Muslim armies that defeated the Sultanate of Ahmadnagar, but later fell prey to the shifting Deccan politics – this was the reason for its downfall, rather than a "Muslim" invasion of a "Hindu" kingdom. Revisiting Vijayanagara's history would confront us with a sensual hybridity and syncretism that challenges the notion of an immutable Hindu identity. Archaeology, inscriptions, and history only reinforce the fact that the line between Hindu and Muslim faith was blurred here.

Today, Hampi stands deserted, and the contours of legend and lore seem to have consumed a kingdom that was once rich and powerful beyond measure. The rocks still threaten to tip over. Lush green banana plantations are everywhere. The city is today a collection of villages, and the villagers, although aware of their rich history, are not enthused about being citizens of a fairytale past.

Mohamed Roshan Jameer lives in Ramsagar [a village in Bellary district, Karnataka].

Mohamed Roshan: We are farmers. We grow bananas and rice. We sell these in Hosapete. For the past 40 years, we have been growing bananas. Before that, we were growing wheat. My father and grandfather were also farmers.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee: So where are you from?

MR: I am from India!

KB: But most of us have never seen the entire country. What do you mean when you utter the word "India"?

MR: It is impossible to know the meaning. I cannot think about it. We come to know about the number of languages, number of people from the media, from books...but cannot say what is the meaning of India. But when something happens in the country

and the media reports it, I do think about why it is happening or what is happening. Because I am an Indian, I have to think why such a thing is happening in my country.

KB: Has your family always been in Hampi?

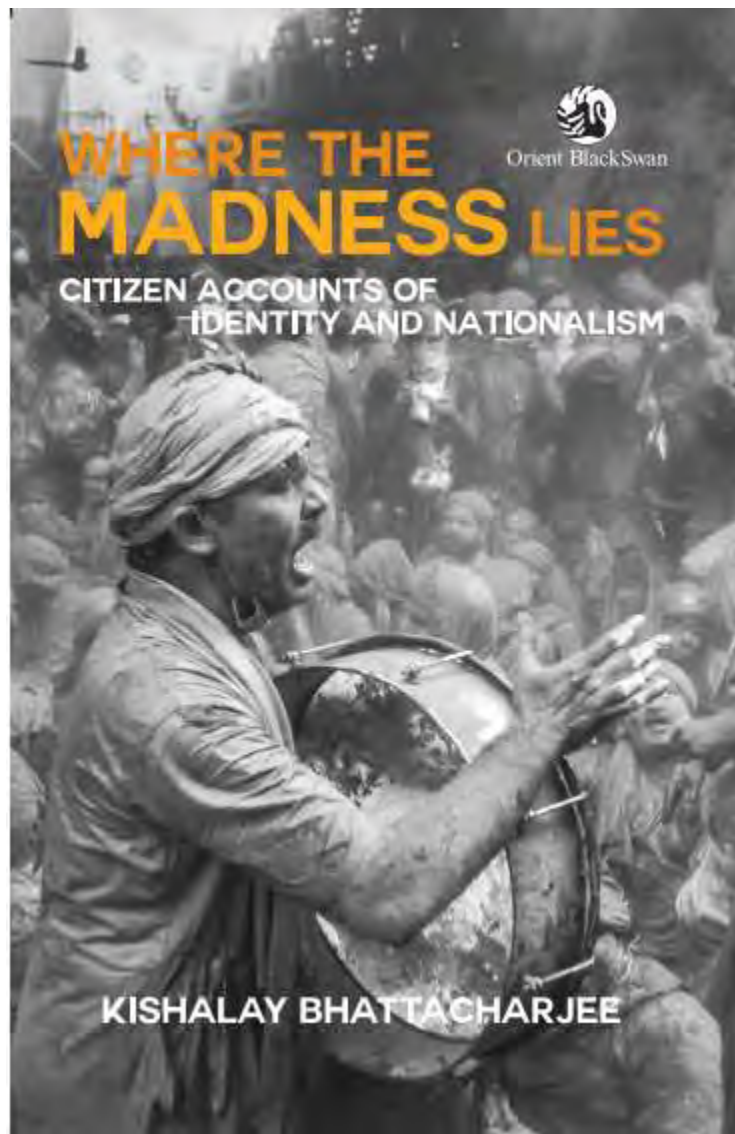
MR: Yes, since the time this place was a kingdom, they have been here. We have always been told about the glorious past of our city. No one till date has been able to find Krishnadevaraya's mahal. People around the place say once the mahal is found, India can be free of all its debt.

KB: Krishnadevaraya was a Hindu king and the invaders who destroyed the temples or stole gold were Muslims. Has that caused any differences between the Hindu and the Muslims in this place?

MR: There is no such difference. Everyone treats each other well. In the raja's court also, both Hindus and Muslims were there. At that time, the population of Muslims in this area was less. So temples are more in number here. There is hardly any Muslim population here. But we get everything...water, ration, etc...

KB: After this place became a world heritage site, did it make things easy for the residents?

MR: See, we have agricultural lands. For us, farming means eating. Now these people come here, they want to dig up and check in places. They pay some money to take up that land and we suffer because of that. So, I can't say that the heritage tag has made our lives any better. Hampi is still untouched by the noise and the rhetoric across the country. In an India that would rather emphasise Hampi's long tale of defeat and destruction than its history of Hindu-Muslim hybridity, the people living there, who claim lineage to the once-eminent city, are neither proud of it nor despondent. Life in Hampi flows on like the Tungabhadra. Dusty red earth and banana plantations are situated where the ruins of another world stand firm – a multi-faith and multi-ethnic world that India may well prefer to ignore, because it challenges the idea of a monolithic identity.



Excerpted with permission from Where the Madness Lies: Citizen Accounts of Identity and Nationalism, Kishalay Bhattacharjee, Orient Black Swan.