

MEDIAEVAL DECCAN HISTORY

COMMEMORATION VOLUME
IN HONOUR OF P.M. JOSHI

EDITORS

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A New Account of the Diamond Mines of the Deccan

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IF INDIA was the jewel of the crown of England, we know that the actual world-famous jewel of that crown came from a diamond mine of the Deccan. The *Kohinoor* has been the subject-matter of several historical controversies, many of them with political imperial flavour.¹ This article does not seek to add to such controversies but it is aimed at bringing to light a new, unpublished source of information about the diamond mines of the Deccan in the early seventeenth century. It needs to be acknowledged that diamonds have played an important role in the history of the Deccan and of India, as well as in the fortunes of many who ruled over this country or traded with it from near and far. A testimony to this importance and interest in diamonds are many accounts that have been left behind in the course of centuries. The very early accounts, like the one of the Venetian Polo, are more fascinating than reliable. Perhaps the earliest and most reliable account of the diamond mines of the Deccan, is found in the *Colloquios dos Simples e Drogas* published in Goa by the Portuguese Garcia da Orta in 1563.² It is to be noted that while he is better known for his contribution to the knowledge of Indian flora, his observations and information about diamonds and other precious stones in India and elsewhere have come through Linschoten's *Itinerario*.³ Linschoten borrowed his information on this subject and on several other matters extensively and almost textually, from Orta's *Colloquios*.

Besides the account that has come through Linschoten, the Hakluyt Society has also made available the relation of William Methwold who was based at Masulipatnam in 1818-22, that is, till he was accused of misusing Company's funds for private trading (particularly in diamonds) and was temporarily recalled and relieved from his bond of service.⁴ Compared with Methwold's description of one single mine of Kollur in Golkanda, Tavernier's account of diamond mines in the Deccan has been so far the most comprehensive and most depended upon for the history of diamond mining and diamond trade in India in the seventeenth century. He had travelled

extensively throughout the Deccan in search of gemstones during the years 1641-1661, and he provides details about the routes and distances between different mines, as well as about mining administration, methods and results.⁵

India seemed to dominate the diamond trade of the world since early times, and it has been reported to have been the largest manufacturer-exporter of gem diamonds as recently as 1981-82.⁶ Already the account of Garcia da Orta refers to the diamond fair at Elichpur (once capital of Berar), where the Gujarati traders purchased the diamonds brought from the Deccan and re-exported them to Goa and other parts of India.⁷ And as Tavernier reports, the diamond-merchants in the mine-areas of the Deccan preferred payment in bills of exchange on Surat, because of the greater convenience of the merchants engaged in foreign trade there.⁸ The importance of diamonds as trade-item is confirmed by A. Bocarro, who has left a very detailed account of the Goa-based Portuguese seaborne trade c. 1635. Referring to Goa-Portuguese trade-route, Bocarro tells us that the export of diamonds was appreciable, and that once there was one party's consignment of 64 lbs. of diamonds. Diamond cargo seems to have been more in demand in the Goa-Manilla trade. However, at the time Bocarro wrote his account the demand for diamonds seems to have slackened on both the routes of the Goa-based seaborne trade.⁹ But as we know from the accounts left by many foreign travellers, including Jacques de Coutre, whom we wish to introduce here, the diamonds were forever in demand as the best means of transporting one's capital relatively safely back to Europe after a term or more in Goa; they were like traveller's cheques. Bullion was conspicuous and heavy. It could be easily stolen in one's absence, and it was hard to conceal from customs officials or others who might want to know under what circumstances it had been obtained. Jewels could be sewn into one's clothing, and then sold for a profit in Europe. Viceroy Dom Fillipe Mascarenhas for instance, who resented much the trading activities of the Jesuits, is reported to have possessed a quantity of diamonds, all of them of great weight. As Prof. C.R. Boxer suggests they were probably obtained from the Nawab Mir Jumla with whom Goa's Viceroy was on friendly terms for many years.¹⁰

To match the detail of Tavernier's account of diamonds and diamond mines in the seventeenth century, there has been so far just one other account in the form of a report that was submitted by the Earl Marshall of England, Henry Howard, in 1677 to the Royal Society of London.¹¹ While this report does not seem to have drawn much attention since it was just published in the *Philosophical Transactions*, xii, 136, June 25, 1677, pp. 607-917, we have been able to trace another account which could rank with those of Tavernier and Earl Marshall of England for the prolixity of details, but gains over them in time. It dates back to the early years of the seventeenth century, and may be thus considered as the earliest detailed account of the diamond mines of the Deccan. The account is contained in *La Vida de Jacques de Coutre*, manuscript no. 2780 of the National Library of Madrid. It is in parchment folio of 268 leaves with versos, or about 110,000 words, including an appendix of some pertinent documents after the *Vida* narrative ends on fol. 247. The language of the

narrative is Castilian. Though written in autobiographical form, it was organized by the son of Jacques de Coutre in 1640 from the notes of his father. The manuscript is as yet unpublished. It contains invaluable first-hand information about the East Indies, particularly South-East Asia and the Deccan, which Jacques de Coutre visited often on his trips as soldier and private merchant for nearly thirty years in Portuguese India since 1592. He was of Dutch origin and changed his surname to *Couto* in Goa. However that did not prevent the Portuguese authorities from suspecting his secret contacts with the Dutch rivals in Asia. He was hauled up by the Goa Inquisition in 1623, and after his property was confiscated, he was dispatched under arrest to the Inquisition of Lisbon. He got his case referred to Madrid, and was eventually acquitted in 1632.

The manuscript of Jacques de Coutre is divided into three books. Texts containing references to his visits to diamond mines of the Deccan are found in Book Two: Chapters XV and XVI (fols. 152-165), and in Book Three: Chapters III and IV (fols. 177-188). They cover the period 1611-1618. I am translating the relevant texts into English, but the place names have been kept as far as possible as they appear spelled in the manuscript, except where they are obviously identifiable with the places definitely known in our historical geography.¹² The text has been edited to make it readable in English, but we prefer to leave it without any editorial comments at the present.

Book Two—Chapter XV

“The natives in general were robbers and would easily molest the Christian travellers. During my travels I used my cunning and covered completely the palanquin in which I was travelling with a white cloth, so that no one could see inside it and the impression given was that some woman was in it. People in these parts have a great respect for women and do not ask who is in them when the palanquins are covered in this fashion. I did not enter any places except at night to rest, and that too in palanquins of the size of a small bed.

“I travelled the whole day and ate only what the natives who carried me had to offer. That was usually rice and milk. I travelled in this manner for ten days till we reached the country of Nayak Nandial, a chieftain with seventy villages under his sway. Hardly had we reached, the bearers of my palanquin left me without prior warning. Though the place was safe I was annoyed because I did not know the local language and could not ask for food. I found a shop selling rice and other cereals and by making signs purchased food for one pagoda of gold. I had food for two days. After that I came across two Gujarati merchants dealing in diamonds. They spoke their Deccani language which I followed reasonably well and I told them I was Jacques de Coutre. They had heard that name and its fame and found it hard to believe I was the one, because they found me so weak and bedraggled. Him they knew to be a rich man. When I told that I did not have much on me and after repeating

my story many times over, they offered me food and a palanquin to go to the mines of Ramanakotha where I intended to go. They informed me about a Portuguese named Fernao Jorge who was there awaiting my arrival with much money to purchase diamonds for me and for my companion, Francisco da Silveria, his brother, who had stayed behind in the city of Chandragiri. I thanked these merchants and reached the mines two days later on the first of April, 1611. I met Fernao Jorge and told him of his brother. He was sad and sent a man in his pursuit. He arrived while we were buying diamonds, and said he had been robbed and beaten while crossing the country of Raya.

“He was disgusted in the country and was unwilling to go into the mines. He was determined to return to Goa along with one of the *lascarins* (as soldiers in India are called) and left by a different route leaving behind the diamonds he had with him and much money besides. I had a troublesome stay there. One evening I went on horseback with a gun and seeing a turtle up a tree shot it from the saddle. It disturbed the horse no end and he galloped all over the rocks and finally threw me off with such force that I broke my arm. The treatment was expensive and being bored with the mess I was in, I returned to Goa with a servant.

“While in the mines earlier, I noticed the trouble the Indians had in finding diamonds since the lands belonged to Hindus. They are worse administered than those of the Muslims. The kind of soil in which diamonds are found are part rocky and part soft which breaks under a little pressure, and are of the same colour as *mengui* with white and black shades. The natives, fifty thousand in all, are very poor, having little to eat, particularly those in the mines. The shacks they live in are covered with straw and measure three yards in width and length accommodating their women, children, and tools. Their poverty is indescribable, since almost all are naked but for a small loin cloth and dirty and muddy from the mines. It is hard not to notice it. They sleep on mats. Being too poor to fend for themselves, they band together into groups and offer themselves to merchants who pay them their food, provided they hand over the diamonds they find that month to them. The merchants buy them very cheap after discounting the expenses borne in their regard. The workers continue in debts for months, since the diamonds they find are too few to cover their expenses.

“A good many die in debt and the sacrifices they make to the devil keep them much the same, if not poorer. They pay Gopal Raya, nephew of the emperor and the master of the mines, half a pagoda per person per month to work there. Diamonds above seven carats belong to the master and those below to the finder. The workers are always watched for any big diamond.

“Before they begin to dig any part in the mine, they prepare a ground enclosed by a ditch half a foot deep. Near it they erect a pagoda four spans high and inside it they place a pyramid-shaped stone of marble for their saffron anointings and devotions and goat sacrifices. After this, they begin to dig with iron implements and the earth is placed in a sieve made of cane and lined with hide, which they place on the pavement, till it becomes a heap the size of a man to be spread around for

washing. In order to hasten this process they move the earth with their feet the way a farmer does in a field. After this seven to eight men sit on the pavement and beat the heap into powder with square granite stones a span long.

“When they reach the edge of the pavement, the mud is carried away by the wind and the stones are left behind. Thus the earlier heap of a man’s height is now half a yard in height and consists of little stones. The seven then begin to look out for diamonds, big and small, but usually find the latter according to the luck of each. They do not speak when sorting and at times work two or three months without any success. They watch each other while they sort, lest one or the other steals the bigger diamonds. There are the guards and merchants at the edge of the pavement besides. Yet they manage to steal and sell it to foreigners for less than half its value. Violations are punished with loss of life and property, which applies likewise to those who buy. The miners are not allowed to sell to the foreigners, but only to the merchants who provide for them. This prevents evasion of duties due to the master which are 2% from the buyer and 2% from the seller too. There are many tax farmers and guards, and the foreigners can buy only from the merchants.

“Work in the mines is very hazardous. While there, I once saw a mine give way and trap fifty persons in it. It had rained much that day. There was so much wailing the following day with more than three hundred women of the miners burnt (as *satis*?). If mines such as these were found in Spain, each diamond of a carat each would cost more than five hundred *escudos* because of the work and cost involved. Here, foodstuffs and other requirements being cheap, a worker needs no more than eight *maravedis* a day to live reasonably well. In Spain, he would need six *riales*.

“Sorcerers abound here and once I came across four of them in the house of a miner I was in. They were adults and dressed as women and aged about fifty. They would play and sing and dance without ceasing day and night, making triangular circles on the ground with coloured chalk and placing betel and areca in the centre as a ritual. At the end of this ceaseless activity, the men and women there would be possessed and do various things, dancing, singing and crying and moving about naked pitching their heads against each other and the wall.

“I will narrate another incident in the same place, which I would not have believed if I was not there, or if I had been told about it. I desired greatly to eat goat-meat and there are plenty of goats around since the natives do not eat them and consider it sinful to have them killed. I travelled a distance with a companion to buy a goat and found a shepherd with more than two thousand of them. After much pestering he sold me one so small that it even had not been severed from its umbilical cord. I say this to prove that the natives were sorcerers. I paid a silver larin for it, equivalent to a *rial* and half of our currency. I was very happy and took the goat home in my arms. The natives laughed at us as we passed through their lanes and I did not know why. I ordered the goat killed and it appeared ten times bigger than original and looked fifty years old when roasted and brought to the table. It looked unfit for the table and was stinking of urine when we tried to taste it. I threw it out and was

surprised to be blinded into buying an old goat for a young one. After this incident, I returned to Goa.

Chapter XVI

“I made a trip from Goa to the mines of Poli, Gotoal and Marmur in 1612, I could not stay quiet in one place, and was keen to see different things around the country and the barbarities of the Muslims and the Gentiles, even at personal risk and trouble. I studied the trade of the East and West, particularly in stones and precious pearls, while in the South. I took interest in the commerce of rubies, emeralds, pearls and precious stones which I sold to the kings in the East. I was thus fortunate to deal with those kings and engage in stones which they much appreciated. They valued such dealers, particularly if they were Christian foreigners. The profits I made gave me enough money for my travel and other expenses. After my trip to the mines of Ramanakota, I went to those of Poli, Gotoal and Marmur in the year 1612. I passed through Bijapur and sold to Abraham Adil Khan some pearls and jewels. I also sold jewels to some merchants and then continued my journey to the mines. I passed through many beautiful and walled cities that were centres of commerce. One of them, Goji, manufactured fine *beatilha* sarees. The mosque of the Muslims there is made entirely of black marble and in it lies buried Ali Adil Khan, the uncle of Abraham Adil Khan.

“I passed through Zagar where the famous *Zagaris* are made. I admired the city of Rachol. It is well protected with two to three walls and moats, barriers and castles like the forts in Holland. They are comparable to the ones I have seen in the East. I reached the city of Palwar after crossing many villages. It is on the border between the lands of Adil Khan and Gopal Raya, nephew of the emperor of Vijayanagar. That very day I crossed the river Tungabhadra, a big river indeed, and made for the fortress of Kawali. Gopal Raya was there and he sent for me no sooner I had reached. I sold him some jewels and presented him a little dog which he greatly appreciated. He paid me promptly and gifted me cloths of gold and silk and gave me betel to eat. He saw me off with great signs of friendship.

“The following day I went to the mines of Langapur and of Ramanakotha, but not finding any good diamonds there I had to go through difficult roads to reach the city and mines of Poli. By the side of the city lay the mine, the oldest in Vijayanagar. It belonged to the overlord Krishna Raya. There are most often small stones found therein in loose earth as well as in the rock. I got the mine-diggers to get me some stones with diamonds in them promising to pay them well, and the hundred and sixty I finally got I sent to my brother to show to our friends in Europe. I was the first one to have such a curiosity for even the Portuguese do not know how they came about. I once entered one of the caves under the hills where the miners were at work in white shorts, guided by one who was naked and had a light in his hands. We walked a distance along a very narrow and bare road sufficient for one at a time till

we reached a big hollow, enough to hold thousand persons. There were many working with lights and implements. The diamonds are found in the veins of the rocks. It was very hot inside, more so as the ground was humid. The diamonds here were of the colour of iron and mixed with white and dark-like *mengui*. I left the place all wet and stained with mud like the miners. I bought a diamond here from a miner. It weighed thirty carats, and I paid seven hundred pagodas for it. The Raya heard of this and sent for me. He told me that but for the fact that I was a European he would have taken all my property away and have my house burnt. I tried to excuse myself as best as I could. The said miner was brought before me and I could not deny it. I promised to get it back by sending a messenger to Goa to ask my brother to have it returned. So I did. The Raya was pleased to see it again, and returned me my seven hundred pagodas. The miner received many lashes which almost killed him.

“Disgusted with this incident, I left for Gotoal belonging to Nayak Nandial. On reaching there, I saw the entire country in revolt because of the war between the Nayak and his brother, Mahappa, over one of the mines, the richest in the East, and where one found big and good diamonds. There were none for sale and I left for Marmur not without risk for it belonged to another overlord Tima Nayak. I bought some diamonds here and saw the mine, known as the mine of the Portuguese. Some big diamonds were found here. It was known as such because a certain Portuguese, Alvaro de Mendes had gone to India in search of diamonds on the orders of King Sebastian. The mine now lay guarded and silent. This caused me to return to Poli where I bought many diamonds and then returned to Goa.

Book Three—Chapter III

“My foot [hurt while making his escape from the jail in Goa] somewhat better, I went in a palanquin to Bijapur (1616) where I stayed with Antonio Monterio Corte Real, Portuguese ambassador in the court of Adil Khan. He esteemed my company since I knew the native language and helped him in matters connected with his office. While I was there I sold much of what I carried and with the proceeds went to the diamond mines. On my arrival, I bought what I needed and from Bijapur sent it all to my brother, Joseph de Courte. My trips from Bijapur to the mines were at least nine in all, over a year and a half. I spent some time in each of them. Each mine had its own master, and I covered eight of them, namely, the mines of Langapur, Ramanakota, Poli, Dwanikuthi, Marmur, Gotoal, Kotakonda and a new one in the territory of Qutb Shah, all yielding diamonds. Another mine in Qutb Shah’s domain is known as Kodapoli, and yields soft stones like garnets, sapphires, amethyst, marine water, hyacinth and others of different colours.

“After a year and a half, I returned to Ramanakota and from there to the city of Kanaguli, where Gopal Raya, the master of the mine lived. He bought some pearls and jewels from me and showed me some big diamonds for sale, of ten, twelve, eighteen, twenty and thirty carats each. But the price he quoted made them

unbuyable. Their value in Europe would have been half. It is difficult to buy stones or jewels from these princes unless they sell them out of necessity. From there I went to the court of Qutb Shah. On the way I met a Jew from Constantinople who spoke good Spanish. We went together and since he carried five thousand pagodas of gold he was much frightened and our journey was through thick forest infested with thieves.

“I had with me twenty-five natives whom I had hired to carry my goods, including much gold, pearls and emeralds. There are many such men in this country whose profession it is to carry goods from one place to another (goods meaning precious stones, gold and pearls). I have never known them or met them before and even without witness one can safely entrust to them much wealth. They are very poor and do not have enough clothes to wear, but they are very faithful and an example of honesty to the whole world. When they come across thieves on the way, they sense them already from afar and bury what they carry in a place distant from the road. The thieves find them poorly dressed and do not pay much attention to them. If caught they would rather prefer to be killed than hand over what they carry. On my journey I suspected that there were robbers in some forests we had to cross. I sent the twenty-five men ahead with instructions to await my arrival in a certain village with the goods. I reached there and not finding them there was quite worried. Although I trusted them, I feared they might have been killed. I continued my journey and found them in the city of Melkapur where they handed me everything intact. They were waiting for me since they had taken a circuitous route to avoid the robbers.

“Whenever I travel I take them along and they serve me well. I reached the city of Warangal where one finds the *beatilhas* of Warangal. The place is inhabited by Telingas, Moors, Turks and Persian merchants who deal in this commodity. Our Jew was happy to be in this safe place and to deal with such merchants.

“We continued our journey and reached Bagnagar, a league and half from Golkonda. The Jew went to live with the Moors and I took up residence near the house of our ambassador, Fr. Bartholomew, much respected by Qutb Shah and all the nobles of the kingdom. We did not discuss pearls, for I did not intend to sell them to the king, nor about my escape from Goa. While there I bought a great quantity of cat-eyes which are stones not known to many, and rubies too. At the end of the two months, I received a letter from my brother, Joseph de Courte, and some others asking me to return to the mines. I returned after having been in the court for four months, and the Jew decided to come along.

Chapter IV

“A few days after I reached Bicholim, I was forced to return to the diamond mines in 1618. I passed through Hiza on my way to the mine of Poli. I had trouble with the customs but they let me off without any payment, and I reached the village Manappar, with a river around it but now dry. I saw more than two hundred horsemen,

and an equal number of footmen moving in the same direction in the river. They were robbers and I had heard of them from the people. I returned and got into a mosque and went up its terrace from where I could survey the whole area. My twenty men were there with their guns, bows and arrows. I had quite an amount of money with me. These robbers of Advani, as they are known, tried to sack the village, but could do nothing since it was small and I was defending it well. After three hours of battle and some fatal losses on their side, they fled with three thousand heads of cattle which were outside the village. I did not leave the guns and kept watch the whole night, since I did not trust anyone. While leaving the place the next morning, the chief inhabitants of the place came to thank me for defending the village. I took a different direction to reach the city of Poli and its mine, and to avoid the thieves. I conducted my business there and returned to Goa.

"I passed through the city of Rachol, very well fortified and old too, which once belonged to the emperor of Vijayanagar, but now to Adil Khan. It had a fortress in the centre and no one could enter except the governor and his garrison. The governor was in at the time, having been recently appointed. He was the son of an Abyssinian and had twelve thousand cavalry with him. On reaching there, they opened my boxes and examined them. I found it strange since it had never been done before, nor was it customary. They found three thousand gold pagodas in yellow pouches, the money Adil Khan had paid me for some pearls I had sold to him. I was much annoyed with this lack of courtesy shown to me. At sunset, the governor passed by the door of my residence accompanied by many, and having called me out, took me away without any explanation. We walked through the city. After entering the fortress, he sat down on the judgment seat as they like to do at nights, and whispered into the ear of a servant to take me inside the fortress. I tried to get away but could not, since six men with sticks prevented me. I realised that I was a prisoner. They took me up a high rock in the middle of the fortress on which was a castle with a palace in it, an old one, but well defended. It belonged to the emperor of Vijayanagar. I was kept there till midnight. I realised they had arrested me, for I had offered forty thousand ducats to a person who had a diamond extremely good and weighing one hundred and fifty-three carats. Many merchants come to know of this deal and suspected I had bought it, which was not true. The governor felt the same and tried to kill me in order to take it from me. I had good many diamonds in the pockets of my shorts.

"After midnight, the governor came along with eight men and having sent the two who were with me away, went to a garden at the foot of the rock while I stayed alone and very sad, but strong-willed. He finally sent for me. At the foot of the rock was a dilapidated residence with no doors and windows. I climbed some twenty steps. There was no light inside, and one side of the room was without any wall, and the ground led to a deep well without any rim, so deep that one could not see the water within. It would be difficult to escape if one was pushed inside by someone.

"The night was clear and the governor was in the corner of the room with a dagger in his hand. His eight attendants were armed likewise. They pushed me towards the border of the well and stood on the other side watching me in the face. The governor kept asking me questions while I was tormented by the thought of being killed in such a miserable manner. I carried on with great courage which could come from God alone. I told them that I came from the mines in reply to his query, and that I was a merchant of his king Adil Khan. I asked him how, being the son of Malika, he did not know me, a friend of his father and a frequent visitor to his house. He asked me where the goods of the king were. I informed him that on reaching, I immediately sent them with some Gujarati merchants in my company. I offered to give him the three thousand pagodas in yellow pouches, just as the king had given them in payment for the pearls sold by me to him, pearls the king bought for his daughter when she married Nizam Shah (Izan Maluco). I told him repeatedly that I could enter the palace of the king freely and was surprised he did not know me. Having said this, there was nothing else I could do but wait to be thrown into the well by those awaiting the instructions of him who had done this to many lately. He turned to his side and whispered to let me go. He left the palace and the eight men and I did likewise. After reaching the end of the steps, he turned and told me to return in good time and ordered the doors of the fort to be opened for me.

"As I was leaving, I found two of my men about to be thrown into the well as they tried to do to me earlier. He had them released and told me he liked Christians and invited me to dine with him. He ordered the dinner. Perhaps, he had been advised to make up for what he had done and wanted to honour me. He took me to a garden in the new palace which had a water-tank near it. We entered it through a corridor leading to the tank. There were on the ground mats laid out and since he could not sleep he wanted very much to talk to me. He asked me to bring along on my return a pair of good horses which I said I would do if business was good. We sat at the table and the food brought was badly cooked. He insisted with much affection that I should eat, but I was much worried as one waiting to be hanged and could neither eat nor swallow, but tried to eat just to please him. It did not go on well and he then gave me betel and saw me off. It was three in the morning. They opened more than six of the fortress doors and I left with infinite thanks to God. I realised it was dawn.

"I continued my journey and reached Bijapur from where I sent a foot-messenger with letters for my brother asking him to send me a safety pass to enter Goa from where I had escaped from jail. I promised that I would never again visit the lands of the Muslims because of what had happened to me and for other reasons. My brother got me the safety pass immediately from the Viceroy, Conde de Redondo. As soon as I heard of this, I came to Goa and I was free of the sentence for my arrest issued by Viceroy Don Jeronimo de Azavedo. The day I reached it was the feast of Our Lady of Conception in the year 1619, and I vowed never to return to the lands of the Muslims.

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