

FORUM:  
*TEXTURES OF TIME*

3.

THE QUESTION OF HISTORY IN PRECOLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers an important and enduring problem in the writing of Indian history: how do we historians approach precolonial narratives of the past? A rich and suggestive new study of South Indian modes of historiography, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800*, by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, has positioned itself at the center of this debate. For a variety of reasons, precolonial narratives have been demoted to the status of mere information, and genres of South Indian writing have been dismissed as showing that South Indians lacked the ability to write history and indeed lacked historical consciousness. *Textures of Time* responds to this picture by proposing a novel historical method for locating historical sensibility in precolonial narratives of the past. The authors ask us not to judge all textual traditions in India, especially narratives of the past, on the basis of the verifiability of facts contained in them. Rather they suggest a radical openness of the text, and they argue that a historical narrative is constituted in the act of reading itself. They do this by examining the role of genre and what they call *texture* in precolonial South Indian writing.

This essay examines the strengths and limitations of their proposal. It does so by examining the formation of colonial archives starting in the late-eighteenth century in order to understand the predicament of history in South Asia. Colonial archives brought about a crisis in historiographical practices in India; they not only transformed texts into raw information for the historian to then reconstruct a historical narrative, they also delegitimized precolonial modes of historiography. A better understanding of these archives puts one in a better position to assess the insights of *Textures of Time*, but it also helps to highlight the problems in its solution. In particular, it reveals how the book continues to use modern criteria to assess premodern works, and in this way perhaps to judge them inappropriately.

Given the considerable violence inflicted on Indian texts over the last two hundred years or more, this ecology (“a cultural ecology of available historiographical modes”) now needs to be reconstructed. It will not be easy, for the damage is severe. What is required is a new way of reading.<sup>1</sup>

I. INTRODUCTION

I use this provocative quotation from *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* as a point of departure because it encapsulates an enduring and important problem in the writing of Indian history: how should historians

1. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (New York: Other Press 2003), 5.

approach precolonial narratives of the past? It also points to the new direction that Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the authors of this rich and suggestive recent study of South Indian modes of historiography, want historians to take in considering the question of history in India. *Textures of Time*, first published in 2001 in India and in 2003 in the US, is the second book-project from the productive collaboration among Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam. All three are scholars of South India from different disciplinary locations. The surprisingly spare number of collaborative works in the field of South Asian history makes the breadth and scope of their project even more laudatory. In their first book, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu*, they were able to bring their expertise in religious, literary, and historical study of South India to fruition.<sup>2</sup> One of many significant contributions of *Symbols of Substance* was in demonstrating the emergence of new literary genres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that accommodated the entrance of folk elements into the courtly culture of the Nayaka rulers of southern India. Their novel proposal was that Nayaka disregard of brahmanical ideology resulted in the emergence of a new ethos characterized by new ideas of self, the individual, and the concomitant birth of a new historical consciousness. Their second collaborative work and the subject of this forum, *Textures of Time* takes the question of history one step further and proposes what the authors call the “texture” of historical narrative as a defining characteristic of historiographical practices in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century southern India. Texture, they argue, is a unique feature of history-writing in southern India, one distinct from genre, as texture concerns the internal structuring of a given narrative. By reading for texture, they propose, we can begin to access the historiographical modes of the precolonial past.

However, before we examine the question of texture, it might be helpful to ask where the idea that precolonial India lacked history and historical consciousness first arose. In order to understand the emergence of this so-called problem, we must turn to the British colonial period. In the early part of the nineteenth century, James Mill published a scathing attack on Indian literary and historical traditions, putting forward the charge that Indian literary and historical traditions did not measure up to their European counterparts despite all the efforts of Orientalists such as Sir William Jones (founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784), Charles Wilkins (first translator of the *Bhagavad Gita* into English), and Alexander Hamilton (the first Sanskrit professor in Europe) to make Sanskrit literature available to European readers.<sup>3</sup> South Asian prose was seen to have been

2. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

3. James Mill, *History of British India* (London, 1817). Sir William Jones established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 in Calcutta for the promotion of Orientalist research. Since the discovery of the Indo-European concept in 1786 by Jones, philological study in colonial India proposed the historical linking of the languages of the Indian subcontinent to European languages. This “discovery” caused a revolution in intellectual circles back in Europe. Raymond Schwab aptly called this the Oriental Renaissance, the consumption of texts brought out by philologists studying the languages of the “Orient.” See Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

“underdeveloped,” not reaching levels of sophistication needed for a sober historical writing style to emerge. Moreover, those who were unsympathetic to Indian achievements in poetry denigrated the “Hindu” mind as having a proclivity for myth and fantasy—in other words, falsities. It was almost as if poetry and “truth” were incompatible. Rev. William Taylor in 1857 wrote: “From the prevalence of poetry in Hindu composition, the simplicity of truth is almost always disguised. The painful result is that the Hindu mind has become familiarized with lying. Truth is insipid. Evidence loses its force.”<sup>4</sup> H. H. Wilson, reflecting on Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* (twelfth-century chronicle of Kashmir), wrote:

His work as a historical composition is clear and consistent, and contains fewer extravagancies than most of the works to which the name of History has been assigned, by the unphilosophical and credulous natives of the East. Like the mass of the Hindu compositions on all subjects, it is written in verse, and as a poem, it contains many passages of merit, both in sentiment and style.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Taylor, Wilson did not find fault with the use of verse for historical compositions; what was inexcusable in his eyes was the mixing of “fabulous” stories with historical details. Wilson reprimanded “natives of the East” for their slippery use of the category of history. This echoed the judgment of the colonial historian Mark Wilks, who wrote that history in India was “so deformed by fable & anachronism, that it may be considered as an absolute blank in Indian Literature.”<sup>6</sup> Colonial scholars could scarcely find a genre devoted to historical writing in Indian traditions.

Given the dominance of a particular mode of history-writing in the colonial and postcolonial periods, how do we begin to think about historical consciousness and history writing in the precolonial past? In order to do this we must first come to understand how the dominant mode approaches these earlier narratives of the past. The new historical method that ascended to dominance in the colonial period both criticized and delegitimized older narratives of the past—at the same time that these narratives became “archived” in order to become the raw material with which the new historians could construct more “accurate” histories. To explore why the problem of history continues to haunt the study of South Asia, in particular its precolonial pasts, I want to bring attention to the formation of colonial archives at the cusp of the transition to colonial rule. It was at this juncture when precolonial narratives of the past came into contact with the emerging historical method.

## II. COLONIAL ARCHIVES

With the belief that there was no reliable, developed historical genre in India the British began archival projects to collect, collate, and “uncover” textual and material sources throughout the period starting from the late-eighteenth century

4. William Taylor, *The Catalogue Raisonné of the Oriental Manuscripts in the Library of the (Late) College, Fort Saint George* (Madras, 1857), iv.

5. H. H. Wilson, “An Essay on the Hindu History of Cashmir,” *Asiatick Researches* XV (1825), 7.

6. Mark Wilks to George Buchan, 4 March 1807, British Library (BL), Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC), MSS Eur F 228/39.

in order to reconstruct Indian history from its very beginnings. The quotation I began with directly points to this archival project of “constructing sources,” and Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam rightly point out that very real damage may have been done in this process. British colonialism’s entanglement with history began early in India, when both history and archive emerged as technologies by means of which the state went about bringing the colony under its purview. Consequently, the British colonial foray into the Indian past shaped subsequent discourses about the nature of historical narrative, historical consciousness, and more broadly the place of history in Indian literary traditions.

Colonial archives ranged from the records of the state—those records devoted to the transactions of the state, primarily its bureaucracy—to the collections of texts and manuscripts held or preserved by the state in the interests of preserving the pasts of the Indian subcontinent. Preserving Indian pasts came with a price—the price of an emerging positivist history that judged according to its rather narrow principles that Indian records of the past were merely accidentally historical and not self-consciously so. This view of history as a rational science was itself new in Britain.<sup>7</sup> What is curious about the development of the science of history was how vigorously it was promoted in colonial India by British administrators, where it was seen as especially necessary in the face of what the British saw there as an absence of historical consciousness. Early observers of Indian culture and society were puzzled by what they saw as the peculiar Indian inattention to chronology, sequence, and dating in historical narratives.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the presence of myth, legend, and the fabulous in those very same narratives brought forth harsh assessments of the historical record in India. Even while criticisms were launched against Indian traditions of history and declarations were made that India as a civilization did not develop a historical consciousness, antiquarian-collectors in the late-eighteenth century were eagerly gathering textual material to uncover local and regional histories.

One such collector was Colonel Colin Mackenzie. Mackenzie was an important figure for southern India, especially with regard to his collecting project and the creation of an “archive.” Many of the “texts” and “sources” that *Textures of Time* examine were directly touched by the Mackenzie project. By examining his collecting project we can come closer to understanding the colonial conditions of the production of “sources” and the forging of the new historical method. During the East India Company’s campaigns (throughout the 1790s) in southern India against Tipu Sultan and subsequently after his defeat, Mackenzie was sent to sur-

7. It is important to note the profound changes that were taking place in Europe on the question of history and historical method. A unique form of positivist history and method emerged to dominance in the nineteenth century in Europe, as many philosophers of history have documented (from Ernst Cassirer, Hayden White, J. G. A. Pocock, to Reinhart Koselleck). In light of this rise of a particular kind of history along with the professionalization of the discipline, Pierre Nora has argued that the discipline and practice of history in the past century accorded itself a scientific arsenal and enforced the view that historical method was produced to establish true memory. In effect, it sought to gain control over our access to our diverse pasts by discrediting other genres (oral and written) through which the past was often filtered into the present. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), volume I.

8. Charles Phillip Brown, *Carnatic Chronology: The Hindu and Mahomedan Methods of Reckoning Time Explained: With Essays on the Systems; Symbols Used for Numerals, a New Titular Method of Memory, Historical Records; and Other Subjects* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1863).

vey the new territories. His primary duties were to map the territories and report on the conditions of the lands. His surveying duties required him to inquire into the revenue systems and the actual state of the lands. However, over and above these duties, Mackenzie began to collect, record, and reconstruct South Indian history. His collection included manuscripts, transcriptions of inscriptions, translations, and sketches of archeological curiosities. Mackenzie's collection figures in hundreds of journals and manuscripts spread across India and Britain.

The process of cataloging Mackenzie's collection in the nineteenth century shows the vulnerabilities to which it was subjected. The collection was misunderstood and misread by many. However, we learn much about colonial (and post-colonial) attitudes toward Indian historiographical practices by looking at the history of this collection. The task of assessing Mackenzie's archive began soon after his death in 1821. Almost immediately, H. H. Wilson was given the assignment of cataloging Mackenzie's collection to make it accessible to historians and others who would be interested in researching India's past. Wilson was quite a monumental figure revered both by the East India Company (EIC) government and by his fellow philologists in Calcutta, Madras, London, and Europe. Wilson was well placed in the Asiatic Society in Calcutta at the time and was an obvious choice for the EIC to work on Mackenzie's collection. However, Wilson was not an expert in South Indian languages, and his understanding of Mackenzie's collection was filtered through his training as a Sanskritist. He was unsure of the historical value of much of Mackenzie's material. His catalogue of the collection was published in 1828, and a few years later in 1832 Wilson left for England to assume a position at Oxford, the Boden Chair of Sanskrit.<sup>9</sup>

After Mackenzie's death in 1821, his assistant Kavali Venkata Lakshmayya stayed on in Calcutta until 1827 while he worked with Wilson on his *Descriptive Catalogue of the Mackenzie Manuscripts*.<sup>10</sup> Even though Lakshmayya left for Madras in 1827 to immerse himself in intellectual life there (where he founded the Madras Hindoo Literary Society), he applied later in 1833 to continue to work on Mackenzie's research, and indeed managed to move the manuscripts to the Library of the Madras Literary Society in 1828.<sup>11</sup> However, because native Indians were thought to be incapable of the enormous task of sorting through historical sources, Lakshmayya was denied the opportunity to assess Mackenzie's collection. Rather, Rev. William Taylor was handed the job of cataloging the collection. However, Taylor dismissed much of what he saw in it. While Wilson was able

9. The first chair in Sanskrit at Oxford University.

10. Lakshmayya was one of Mackenzie's principal assistants on this project, along with his brother Kavali Venkata Borayya. H. H. Wilson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Mackenzie Manuscripts* (Calcutta, 1828).

11. Letter from Alexander Johnston to Charles Grant, President of the Board of Control, March 10, 1835, Madras Public Consultations (MPC), 640A, 1835. Alexander Johnston was instrumental in encouraging the EIC to purchase the collection and to advocate to them for the importance of Mackenzie's collection. Johnston also provided much encouragement to Lakshmayya to continue his Mackenzie research by forming literary societies in Madras as a way to encourage literary pursuits. His letter to Charles Grant is extraordinary for its revered description of ancient traditions of education and literary creativity in South India. Johnston used that history to argue for the continuation of historical research with the encouragement of the government and to foster intellectual exchange and appreciation between India and England.

to appreciate some of the originality in its nonhistorical genres, Taylor was convinced that this literature provided definitive proof that Indians were incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood.

By the early part of the twentieth century, the colonial glass ceiling that kept Lakshmayya from taking over Mackenzie's research in the early part of the nineteenth century seemed to have been lifted. Indians were now seen to be capable of bringing order to Mackenzie's collection. In the 1930s K. A. Nilakanta Sastri began the task of producing summaries of the manuscripts with the idea that the source material contained in the manuscript collection would be valuable for historians.<sup>12</sup> This earlier generation of Indian historians in the first few decades of the twentieth century was keenly interested in unearthing new historical sources. Mackenzie's collection among others figured in their assessments of the state of the Indian historical record.<sup>13</sup> However, Nilakanta Sastri died before he was able to finish the project and bring the catalogue to publication. The work was then continued into the 1970s when T. V. Mahalingam brought out two volumes, the first devoted to Tamil and Malayalam, and the second to Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi.

In the first half of the twentieth century, historians of South India made use of Mackenzie's collection without a sustained critical look at how its manuscripts were formed. While Nilakanta Sastri, M. Somasekhara Sarma, and N. Venkatamanayya, historians of early and medieval South India, made enormous strides in using the documents found in Mackenzie's collection, there was very little study of the collection itself and the colonial conditions of its production.<sup>14</sup> More recently there has been a return to the Mackenzie collection by scholars of South India, particularly to issues surrounding native authority and the authority of the pasts preserved in the archive. Peter Schmitthenner brought renewed attention to the collection through his study of the nineteenth-century philologist, Charles Philip Brown, who had devoted considerable energy to preserving the Telugu manuscripts of the Mackenzie collection.<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Talbot carefully

12. Nilakanta Sastri gathered a number of scholars fluent in the various languages to translate and write synopses of the manuscripts, interestingly mimicking what Wilson had done a century earlier. These assistants included: K. Sivaramakrishna Sastri, M. Ramakrishna Kavi, K. Srinivasachari, G. Harihara Sastri, M. Venkateswarlu, C. Munikrishna Rao, and N. Venkata Rao. The summaries number 244 in Mahalingam's volume; Telugu comprises around forty percent of the total number of manuscripts. These are the original *kaifiyats* collected by Mackenzie's assistants. Much of the collection is still kept in the Government Oriental Manuscript Library in Madras. See T. V. Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts: Summaries of the Historical Manuscripts in the Mackenzie Collection* (Madras: University of Madras, 1972).

13. C. S. Srinivasachariar, "Robert Orme and Colin Mackenzie: Two Early Collectors of Manuscripts and Records." *Indian Historical Records Commission. Proceedings of Meetings*. Vol VI. Sixth Meeting Held at Madras. January 1924.

14. M. Somasekhara Sarma, N. Venkataramanayya, and P. V. Parabrahma Sastry come to mind. Sarojini Regani's *Nizam-British Relations 1724-1857* (Hyderabad, 1963) makes liberal use of the *kaifiyats*. She used printed *kaifiyats*: Samalkot *kaifiyat*, Pusapativari *kaifiyat*, Korukonda *kaifiyat*, Kimmoori *kaifiyat*, Mogaliturru *kaifiyat*, Peddapura Samsthana Charitramu, and Sri Ravu Vamsiya Charitra. The manuscripts from the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (GOML), Madras, were the Kalingapatam Hakikat, Ganjam Hakikat, Sarvapavaram *kaifiyat*, Samalkot *kaifiyat*.

15. Peter L. Schmitthenner, *Telugu Resurgence: C. P. Brown and Cultural Consolidation in Nineteenth-century South India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).



examined the Telugu *kaifiyats* from the collection.<sup>16</sup> Phillip Wagoner directly addressed the question of native authority in the formation of the collection and advocated a collaborationist model of intellectual inquiry as the basis for the collection's emergence.<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Dirks has been the most vociferous in calling for historians to rethink the colonial archive.<sup>18</sup> Almost two centuries of engagement with the Mackenzie collection have passed and what we see is a project that began with Mackenzie and Kavali Venkata Borayya in the last decade of the eighteenth century had become overlain with successive generations of scholars bringing their own historical concerns to the collection. The main concerns of historians of the twentieth century have been to locate the authority of the pasts preserved in the archive: how do we trust the narratives in it? Where do we locate authority within these narratives?

Colonial archives brought about a profound change in historiographical practices in India. They not only converted or transformed texts into raw information for the historian to then reconstruct a historical narrative, they also delegitimized precolonial modes of historiography. The narratives themselves got demoted to information, and genres specific to South Indian modes of expression were not taken seriously. This is where *Textures of Time* makes a significant contribution to the field. It brings the question of genre to the forefront of the debate and takes issue with colonial assumptions regarding the lack of a stable historical genre in Indian traditions. Most importantly, *Textures of Time* wants to accomplish two things: 1) to recover genre (the prose chronicle or the *kaifiyat*—technically not a genre but a historiographical mode), and 2) to propose a new way of reading (texture). With respect to the first, if we were to look for a historical genre resembling those one finds in European history, we might be misled into thinking that Indians were ahistorical or were indifferent to history. Yet *Textures of Time*, by examining a number of different kinds of narratives—from *kavya* (high literary style) to

16. Cynthia Talbot, *Precolonial India in Practice: Society, Region, and Identity in Medieval Andhra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

17. Phillip B. Wagoner contests the domination model of the formation of colonial knowledge, and instead draws on Thomas Trautmann's model of conversation and Eugene Irschik's model of collaboration as a framework for understanding interaction between Indians and British Orientalists in the early colonial period. While I am sympathetic to any proposal that intellectual history of early colonial India was one of much interaction between British officers and Indians (a conversation, as Trautmann has argued), the question of power in the formation of colonial knowledge is not resolved in these formulations. Indians were active, sentient beings encountering new experiences with eagerness and excitement in the early colonial period. However, even with the active participation of Indians, one cannot ignore asymmetrical relations between the British and Indians under colonial rule. I would therefore resist using "collaboration" as a model of intellectual inquiry because of its ideological implication that the British and Indians were on an equal footing in colonial India. When we flatten the differences between the British and Indians we lose any sense of what colonialism as a *political* form might have been. See Wagoner's "Precolonial Intellectuals and Production of Colonial Knowledge," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45:4 (2004), 783-814. Also see Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans in British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

18. See Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and "Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter Van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

*kaifiyat* (simple prose devoted to often mundane particulars)—finds genres that have strong leanings toward a conception of history familiar to us (especially, the authors argue, the *kaifiyat*'s tendency toward realist narrative). However, they also want to point out that the exercise of finding genres of history is by itself inadequate for understanding historical sensibility in early modern southern India. Thus, they propose an additional, second approach, one that looks at the internal structuring of a given text in order to evaluate whether it is a "history." This, they claim, is a different exercise than the search for information within the texts, and offers additional insight besides that gained from recovering a genre devoted to history.

### III. KARAṆAM HISTORIOGRAPHY

One of the enduring consequences of the archival projects of the colonial state (such as Mackenzie's) was the emphasis on the recovery of history through the search for raw information or "facts." *Textures of Time* urges us repeatedly to resist "filtering" facts from different historical narratives because this process—a process perfected from the beginning of colonial rule in late eighteenth-century India—does violence to the integrity of the narrative, to the different genres within which history takes shape. Using positivist methods, colonial historians throughout the nineteenth century (from the Orientalists onward) to the twentieth century (such as an early generation of scholars like Nilakanta Sastri) decried the presence of the so-called "mythic" in the historical as polluting genuine history, and they therefore attempted to separate the two within one given narrative in order to preserve what was worthwhile and to discard what wasn't. In converting textual genres into mere information, however, these historians neglected to pay attention to the integrity of the narratives themselves—to engage them on their own terms. *Textures of Time* takes up the challenge and attempts to recover historical narratives from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century South India.

*Textures of Time* makes a bold argument that there was a *karaṇam* (village accountant) historiography—or practices of history shaped by a *karaṇam* sensibility. *Karaṇam* historiography did not result in a genre of historical writing, but rather it gave rise to a specific historiographical mode. The *karaṇam*, having been trained as a scribe/clerk more than as a scholar, brought new sensibilities to his writing.<sup>19</sup> The *kaifiyat* accounts then represent an alternative to a high literary tradition. Velcheru Narayana Rao has argued rather persuasively that *karaṇam* prose, neither stylized nor represented in meter, developed in the offices of the village accountant.<sup>20</sup> Many of the *kaifiyats*<sup>21</sup> of the villages and towns of Andhra

19. Because *niyogi* brahmins were appointed to the office of *karaṇam*, they were scribes rather than pandits (trained not in schools but by their predecessors). H. H. Wilson mentions this in his Introduction to Mackenzie manuscripts. See Wilson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Mackenzie Manuscripts*.

20. Velcheru Narayana Rao, "Print and Prose: Pandits, *Karaṇams*, and the East India Company in the Making of Modern Telugu," in *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stuart H. Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia (Bangalore: Orient Longman, 2004).

21. Mackenzie's vast collection contained a large number of *kaifiyats* or "local tracts." H. H. Wilson described these local tracts as "short accounts in the languages of the Dekkin of particular



Pradesh collected by Mackenzie and his assistants were written down in the late-eighteenth and for the most part the early part of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The accounts contained details of the villages: their agricultural products, history of temple donations, transcriptions of epigraphical records, and genealogies of local families. In this sense *Textures of Time* rightly argues that *kaifiyats* should not be seen as a genre of writing, but rather they should more appropriately be described as libraries. “Archive” might be an appropriate term to describe them in that they were prepared by *karaṇams* (village accountants) to preserve on record the particulars of social life around them. One definition of *kaifiyat* is just that: particulars of a place—whether the particulars were family histories or were registers of land-grants. *Kaifiyats* are collections of disparate documents that a village accountant kept as a historical record and transmitted from one generation to another. They come to occupy a prominent place in the late eighteenth century in South India when Mackenzie and his Indian assistants brought attention to them. The Mackenzie project spent a considerable amount of time collecting historical accounts through these *karaṇams*.

In the Telugu-speaking regions, the origin of the practice of recording village particulars (from genealogies, to the variety of crops grown, to who owns the land) predates Mackenzie and his collecting endeavors. The *dandakavile* or village chronicles had been associated with *karaṇams* before the advent of the *kaifiyat*. The *kaifiyat* seems to have taken on the mantle of this earlier tradition of recording at the village level.<sup>23</sup> By the time Mackenzie was collecting material in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the *kaifiyat* was firmly in place in the tradition of preserving village accounts. Whether a *dandakavile* or *kaifiyat*, it was the office of the *karaṇam* that had the responsibility to preserve, account for, and transmit information about property rights and family histories in a particular village. The office of the *karaṇam* can be traced back to the Kakatiya rulers of Warangal (1158–1323). By the time of Kakatiya rule, officers called *ayagaras* looked after the administering of the village.<sup>24</sup> One of the officers mentioned in the inscriptions of the Kakatiyas was the *karaṇam*, whose duty was to maintain village accounts.

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places, remarkable buildings, local traditions, and peculiar usages, prepared in general expressly for Col. Mackenzie by his native agents, or obtained by them in their excursions.” See Wilson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Mackenzie Manuscripts*, xii.

22. There has not been much study of the manuscripts themselves. Since they were collected in the early part of the nineteenth century, selections have been hand copied and published over the past two centuries. In the last few decades, there has been a renewed interest in the *kaifiyats*, and both the Andhra Pradesh State Archives and the Tamil Nadu Governmental Oriental Manuscript Library have made attempts to publish a select few of the *kaifiyats* for researchers to make better use of them. The actual manuscripts are in need of greater preservation. The dating of the manuscripts has not to my knowledge been done up to this point. Scholars have relied on reports in the Mackenzie collection that give us insight into how they were collected.

23. This tradition of village chronicles began with the Gajapati rulers of Orissa from the middle of the fifteenth century. See Introduction by P. V. Parabrahma Sastry to *Gramakaifiyatulu: Guturu Taluka* (Hyderabad, 1984).

24. N. Venkataramanayya and M. Somasekhara Sarma, “The Kakatiyas of Warangal,” in *The Early History of the Deccan*, ed. G. Yazdani (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), and P. V. Parabrahma Sastry, *The Kakatiyas of Warangal* (Hyderabad: The Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1978), 193.

The *kaifiyats* contained a number of different “records” from genealogies, accounts of prominent castes in the region, lists of *inam* (rent-free) lands, and descriptions of crops native to the region. At times there is even a signature of the *karanam* who noted down an account. The accounts or records in the *kaifiyats* vary a great deal from one another, but they all have a matter-of-fact style to them. From the Nellore *kaifiyats*, the following account gives a sense of the texture of these records (unlike the storytelling mode of the more proper prose-chronicles):

In this year a *poligar* named Khojnaavappa came and having built a fort there he brought under his control the revenue of the villages of the *jagir*. Then in the year of *viroodhi*, Nawab Abbula Habatukhan Bahadur Janparu Jangguu was given the *jagir* by Hajarat Nawab Saheb after the *jagir* was seized.

Then the *jagir* came into the possession of Nuuruddi Mahannad Khan. Then in the year of Raudri the East India Company having seized the *jagir* are [sic] currently ruling it.<sup>25</sup>

This account (*Panurapuram Kalakateru*) ends with the company seizing the *jagir* (land to which people were granted revenue rights) of the ruling families. However, there is no lamenting of this fact. It is just plainly stated. After this bit the writer goes on to document what is grown there and what kinds of animals roam in the forests, and so on.

Because the prose contained in the *kaifiyats* fell outside the expected literary genres in Telugu, *kaifiyats* were easier to transform into historical documents by colonial collectors such as Mackenzie. Moreover, because the collectors were specifically looking for historical sources and sought out texts they believed contained clues to the chronology of South Indian history, and because of the matter-of-fact style of the *kaifiyats*, the *kaifiyats* grabbed their attention and were seen to be the primary sites from which to extract factual data. In the collection of Guntur *kaifiyats*, one document begins with a personal note from the writer, Mallayya, in 1811; he writes, “Having heard that this village has much *kaifiyat*, we stayed for two days. The *karanams*, having gotten approval from the government, did not find any *dandakavile*, so we wrote down the existing inscriptions in the area.”<sup>26</sup>

The *kaifiyats* were thus privileged, first by colonial historians and later on by the earlier generation of Indian historians, over literary sources precisely for their attention to details of genealogy and village economy. However, they were also blamed for being inconsistent in details. Starting in the nineteenth century to the present, readers of the *kaifiyats*, using positivist methods, pointed out both the consistencies and inconsistencies in the narratives. Within the narrative parts of the stories, great value was attributed to the supernatural, especially as it provided a moral framework for the actions of the protagonist. The ease of movement between the mythic and the historical has a long history in the Indian historical record, in particular in the tradition of genealogies. The most common mispercep-

25. “Panurapuram Kalakateru” from *Nellore Jilla Kaiphyyattulu*, ed. S. K. Pachauri (Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh State Archives, 1993), 222. My translation.

26. *Guntur kaifiyats*, v. 1, from “Poturu Grama Kaiphyyattu,” *Gram Kaiphyyattulu: Gunturu Taluka*, ed. Sri B. R. K. Sastri (Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh State Archives, 1984), 40. My translation.

tion of this movement was that Indians were cognitively incapable of distinguishing between myth (the non-verifiable) and history (the verifiable). *Textures of Time* rightly points out that what is at stake here between history and myth is not what is true and false (a distinction that Paul Veyne makes in his discussion of gods and myth in Ancient Greece), but what is factual and fictive.<sup>27</sup> The authors argue that the ability to separate fact from fiction is critical in understanding these early modern genres. However, *Textures of Time* goes on to propose that this cognitive ability resides in the reader of the text.

#### IV. THE QUESTION OF GENRE AND TEXTURE

In addressing the problem of history in terms of genre, however, Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam propose that in the precolonial Indian past there was no one genre that solidified as history. Rather, they argue that history was written in the dominant genre of a given time.<sup>28</sup> One of the difficult tasks *Textures of Time* takes on is to ask the question of what defines a historical narrative as historical. In their earlier work, Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam traced one genre in the early modern period in Telugu-language writing. They argued that the prose chronicle in Telugu—such as *Prataparudra caritram* (The Story of Prataparudra), *Tanjavuri andhra rajula caritra* (The Story of Tanjore's Andhra Kings), and *Rayavacakamu* (Tidings of the King)—presents a fundamentally historical tradition.<sup>29</sup> These chronicles belong to a prose genre that has roots in the oral *katha* (storytelling) tradition. Telugu poets did not favor prose until the end of the sixteenth century after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in South India. Although prose was used in inscriptions, it was in a rather fragmentary manner. These prose chronicles, however, use the medium to articulate new experiences. An important contribution to the study of early modern literary production, *Symbols of Substance* argued that new genres developed as folk elements trickled into the courts of the Nayaka rulers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that this gave rise to a new historical consciousness. The prose chronicle, because it focused on the king as a thinking and acting individual making deci-

27. In the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss's response to myth was to attempt to reconstruct mythic consciousness in contradistinction to the historical consciousness of the West (something that Giambattista Vico attempted in the seventeenth century; Ernst Cassirer, inspired in part by Vico, also tried to provide a logic to myth). See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, ed. Thomas Goddard and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, transl. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946).

In contrast, Paul Veyne argues for a reconsideration of myth in light of positivist history. Veyne asks us to view myth as not about another kind of consciousness in opposition to the one constituted by reason. Rather he proposes that myth was not about the "real" as truth. Myth conveyed what was noble as truth. That is, myths recounted what was noble, not what was "real"; therefore, the measure of truth in myths was based on something other than the real or the verifiable. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* transl. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

28. Even in the Western tradition, the question of genre was always in flux. Only after the professionalization of the discipline of history in the nineteenth century did a genre monopolize claims on historical truth.

29. Phillip B. Wagoner, *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Rayavacakamu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993).

sions, set it apart from the flatter representation of the individual that one gets in the genealogy. The chronicles of the Nayaka period embodied both these attributes, as well as represented an innovative literary genre that was the product of the sociocultural transformations of the period.

Let us reconsider the text *Rayavacakamu* that *Textures of Time* sees as embodying an emerging historical consciousness firmly situated in *karanam* historiographical practices. It is a historical prose work from the late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century written in the court of the Madurai Nayaka. Wagoner writes that *Rayavacakamu* should be seen as an “organically coherent literary whole.”<sup>30</sup> He writes that this single text stands on its own, unlike oral epic histories that generally have many different versions and do not have a set chronology of which event should be narrated before another. Yet the style differs from that of classical genres because it uses spoken forms of Telugu, especially in the dialogues among characters (or historical actors). Another new development in this genre is what Wagoner describes as the use of internal monologue. *Rayavacakamu* appears to defy traditional definitions of historiography. With its focus on the figure of Krishnadevaraya, his ascension to the throne, and his subsequent education into the role of king, in this work history appears more like a historical novel. The novelistic aspects of the work contribute to a finer depiction of the individual, Krishnadevaraya. He is full of curiosity; he questions, doubts, asserts authority, and realizes his powerlessness. The novelistic and dramatic elements of *Rayavacakamu* set it apart from modern histories. These elements indicate the place of narrative within this genre. Because the novelistic and dramatic aspects were not seen as diminishing the value of the history, we can infer that in the immediate precolonial period, storytelling was profoundly related to the representation of reality (that which happened) and the representation of an imagined world (fiction). Is the storytelling mode adequate in representing reality or does its close affinity with fiction discredit these histories? *Textures of Time* asks us to consider this very important question. Its answer is a definitive no; the presence of the fictive, it argues, does not discredit the text as historical.

Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam ask us not to judge all textual traditions in India, especially historical narratives (the genealogy, or *vamsavali*, and the chronicle, a prose genre that can include elements of biography and accounts of historical battles, and so on), on the basis of the verifiability of facts contained in them. Rather they attempt to account for the presence of the non-verifiable—the mythic or, in their own words, the fictive. Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam argue that the readers of these texts knew what was real (or verifiable) and what was not because of internal textual clues. This is what they refer to as *texture*. Because history takes different generic forms from one era to the next, what counts as history is something greater than just genre. If we push their conception of texture further, what in actuality *Textures of Time* proposes is that the ideal readers of these texts take on the role of historians in that they are called on to do the work of distinguishing the factual from the fictive. As readers, they are called on to act as judges. The radicalness of this proposal is the “openness” attributed

30. See *ibid.*, 10.

to the text. By proposing that a historical narrative is constituted in the act of reading it, Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam give us a fresh perspective on the question of historical form/genre.

However, how do we know what makes up the cognitive world of the reader? What historical and sociological factors led to this cognitive formation (for the reader to be able to understand the difference between myth and history—as a difference between the verifiable and the non-verifiable)? Surely, by employing the same criteria/categories (such as verifiability—a central tenet in modern historiographical practices) to identify that which is history, we attribute to readers the cognitive make-up of modern historians. It is not clear why verifiability (through legitimate sources and evidence) should be a central component of history-writing in the early modern period. Are we not once again measuring precolonial narratives of the past against protocols of present historiographical practices? For all the rich exploration of early modern genres and narratives in southern India that *Textures of Time* undertakes, it would be disappointing simply to answer the charge of an absence of a historical genre in Indian traditions with realist narratives as proof of historical sensibility in precolonial India. However, by introducing the concept of texture, they render far more complex and subtle the basis on which we judge historical narratives in precolonial south India.

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