

## Secularism in India Through the Lens of the Early Modern Hyderabad State

The Hyderabad region has been one of the most religiously diverse regions of India for the past three centuries. Located on the Deccan Plateau of central South India, the region's two largest religious groups have been Muslims and Hindus. Since the establishment of the Nizam, a monarch state that ruled the area for centuries, Hyderabad managed to grow as a separate entity independent of other empires and influences in the Indian subcontinent. This ended with the 1948 annexation of the state into India. The two realistic options for the state at the time were to become part of either Pakistan or India. The majority Hindu population of Hyderabad is ultimately what gave it to India. This shows the strong sense of religious nationalism that is clearly seen in the founding of Pakistan, but more hidden in the beginnings of independent India making secularism an act unachieved by India.

The creation of Hyderabad within the Deccan sprouted from the Mughal Empire in the subcontinent. The Mughal empire was a Muslim empire that had first come to the area in the 16th century from Central Asia and started ruling in North India. Aurangzeb, one of the last Mughal rulers, spread the empire further south into the Deccan. Asaf Jah I, one of Aurangzeb's noblemen, was put in charge of this area. However, as the Mughal empire began its decline after Aurangzeb's death, Asaf Jah I sought to ensure that he would stay in power of the Deccan. After a battle with the Mughals, Asaf Jah I assumed the title of Nizam-Ul-Mulk, the first Nizam. Hyderabad under the Nizam's rule after 1724 became separate from Mughal rule, establishing another significant Muslim state in the Indian subcontinent. Close cultural ties were kept between the Nizam and Mughal, and past Mughal rulers were highly respected within

Hyderabad. The two groups became completely distinguishable only after the fall of the Mughal empire and the continuation of the Nizam during British rule (Moosvi 365-370). The area referred to as “Hyderabad” under the rule of the Nizam did not have the same boundaries as present-day Hyderabad. During the Nizam’s rule, Hyderabad included modern day Telangana as well as parts of Maharashtra and Karnataka. All of this makes up much of the Deccan Plateau, about 82,000 sq miles in total. The Deccan is in a centralized geographical position within the subcontinent, making it an attractive area for various empires (Smith 27-28). Early government under the Nizam looked similar to Mughal government. They were monarchy with noblemen chosen by the Nizam to help in decision making. The majority of nobles with whom the Nizam surrounded himself were also Muslim. The Nizam also chose Samasthans, Hindu rulers who paid taxes to the Nizam for control over a certain area. These were often rulers who had been in the area prior to Mughal influence in the whole subcontinent. Samasthans had very little political influence in the Nizam’s courts and government, limiting their power to their given land. The majority of inhabitants of the Deccan Plateau were and are Hindu (Leonard 571-574).

Hyderabad never became part of the British rule in India, which started in the 1800’s. British occupation in the area did however have large effects. Hyderabad became a “princely state.” Although “princely states” may have a connotation of independence, these were vassal states. Much like the Samasthans to the Nizam, there was little room to expand. The city did manage to modernize with a large railroad industry and universities, though this may have been hard to avoid given its central location in the subcontinent. The Indian subcontinent gained independence from Britain, forming independent Pakistan on August 14th and independent India on August 15th of 1947. The All-India Muslim League pushed for the creation of Pakistan as a

majority Muslim state. There was a fear that religious demographics within the subcontinent would benefit the Hindu population as it was greater. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan and leader of the Pakistan movement, stated the following in a speech delivered in 1945 after the Simla conference held to discuss possibilities of independence. “ ... It is high time that the British Government applied their mind definitely to the division of India and the establishment of Pakistan and Hindustan, which means freedom for both, whereas an united India means slavery for Mussulmans and complete domination of the imperialistic caste Hinduraj throughout this subcontinent, and this is what the Hindu Congress seeks to attain by constant threats to all and sundry, and this is what we are determined to resist with all that lies in our power”(Jinnah). Jinnah wanted freedom from the British as well as division of religions. Still he hoped for a secular state as said in his speech to the U.S. in February of 1948, “In any case Pakistan is not going to be a theocratic State to be ruled by priests with a divine mission.” The countries in the months following independence were desecrated by Partition. The borders drawn at West Pakistan and East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh) saw extreme communal violence as Hindus and Muslims rushed or were forced to either side away from their homes. An estimated one to two million people died due to Partitions. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, was conflicted on the matter of the creation of Pakistan. After the Simla Conference, he stated that “The Muslim League can have Pakistan” (Tinker 354). He believed the League made plans “designed to place the responsibility for dividing India conspicuously on the Indians themselves” (Tinker 354). He wanted India to be an entirely secular state, resulting in this hesitation and aggression towards Pakistan.

The Nizam of Hyderabad was against the partition of India and wanted Hyderabad to remain separate from both India and Pakistan to retain his wealth. He made a deal with India because it was the country to which Hyderabad was geographically attached. The Standstill Agreement of November 1947 with the Government of India stated that India would be in charge of Hyderabad's foreign affairs so long as Indian troops did not occupy the area. The deal was meant to last a year. It allowed Hyderabad to exist as it did during British rule. This agreement fell apart rather quickly. India was accused of trying to gain more control of Hyderabad's trade, and Hyderabad was accused of trying to become completely independent of its neighbor. Two specific accusations against Hyderabad were of illegal arms trade with Pakistan and moving away from Indian security by building the Nizam's military, the Razakars, led by Qasim Razvi (Sherman 87-90). In 1937 the Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, appeared on a *Time's* cover as the richest man in the world. The Nizam during this transition era after Indian and Pakistani independence, was concerned with his wealth. The people with whom he surrounded himself were more concerned with maintaining their power. The Razakars wanted Hyderabad to join Pakistan. This influence made the Nizam warmer to the idea of joining Pakistan if independence could not be an option. Their ideals were similar to Jinnah's in that they were separatists who wanted a Muslim state. The Razakars' tactics were brutally and fatally violent. They targeted working class people who stood against them. This included the Telangana Communist Party, who were driven by the state's poor. Since the majority of the poor were Hindu, the majority targeted by the Razakars were Hindu. However, the Razakars showed no mercy to Muslims who wanted to join India or be part of the communist party. (Smith 33-35). Only around 13% of Hyderabad's population was Muslim in this time period (Smith 27). Becoming separate from

India would not have been a simple task. Bringing Hyderabad to Pakistan would bring with it a large Hindu population.

Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first Deputy Prime Minister, played a vital role in annexing many of the princely states to India, including Hyderabad. In reaction to the Razakars' atrocities and the possibility of Hyderabad becoming part of Pakistan, Patel called for military intervention. Over the course of four days, the Indian military invaded Hyderabad, fighting the Razakars and terrorizing working class Muslims, much like the Razakars had done to the Hindus. The term "Razakar" came to define any Muslim making any Muslim a target (Sherman 90-91). "Operation Polo" was violent and unsettling. A report was ordered by the Indian government in the aftermath to describe the damages. The Pandit Sundarlal Committee Report says. "In many places we were shown wells full of corpses rotting" (Sundarlal 3). The Indian military specifically targeted the Muslim community as they shared the faith of the Razakars. The report, however, also recounts instances of ordinary Hindus and Muslims working together. "The Hindu weaver invariably defended Muslim weavers against Hindus and protected them often at very high costs" (Sundarlal 5).

It is evident that these everyday people of both religions in Hyderabad were hurt by both the Razakars and the Indian military. The violence of the Indian military is what won at the end, making Hyderabad part of India, the majority Hindu state, instead of Pakistan, the majority Muslim state. Despite the Muslim power in the area, the fact that over 80% of the population being Hindu made Pakistan an almost impossible option (Smith 27). Muslim ideology is a vital part of what Pakistan means. The Pakistan option for Hyderabad would have required getting rid of an extremely large number of people, another bloodshed like partition. This is clearly shown

in the history and leadership of the Pakistan movement. The unnecessarily brutal violence employed by India can not be backed up by a religious stance as the state claimed to be secular. Independent India was not founded in religion the same way Pakistan was, but events like this can show a sense of religious nationalism because a group with political and military control used their power to attack members of a specific religion. Biases towards Muslims by Hindus with political and military control did arise and have direct and devastating effects on Hyderabad's population. Secularism can not fully fit if there is a population with significant religious diversity.

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This speech was given by Muhammad Ali Jinnah as a reaction to the Simla Committee which began conversation about Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan.

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The claim of this article is that early independent India was not stable. It uses Hyderabad as an example of this instability. The journal explores different political and religious identities of the area and how they worked against or for harmony in the area.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. "Hyderabad: Muslim Tragedy." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1950, pp. 27–51. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4322137](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4322137).

This article was written in 1950 which was very soon after the annexation and the title claims Muslim existence in Hyderabad to be a tragedy. The article gives descriptions of Muslims in Hyderabad in that time period and social structure during the Nizam's rule.

Sundarlal, Pandit. *Sundarlal Committee Report*. The Government of India. Sep. 1948. Pp.1-40

This is a report ordered by the Indian Government after Hyderabad was annexed into India. The report specifically looks at how the military behaved in the massacre and the people critically involved. There were three people put in charge of this, two Muslims, and one Hindu to head it. The report can show what India's focus was on Hyderabad based off what the country did after and how it lines up with this document.

Tinker, Hugh. "Jawaharlal Nehru at Simla, May 1947. A Moment of Truth?" *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1970, pp. 349–358. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/311529](http://www.jstor.org/stable/311529).

This article gives accounts of different leaders at the Simla Committee which began conversation about Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan.