Remaking History

1948 Police Action and the Muslims of Hyderabad

Afsar Mohammad

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The story this book follows begins on August 15, 1947. As the new nation-states of India and Pakistan prepared to negotiate land and power, the citizens of the princely state of Hyderabad experienced the unravelling of an intense political conflict between the union government of India and the local ruler, the Nizam of Hyderabad. The author explores how the state of Hyderabad was struggling to produce its own tools of cultural renaissance and modernity in the background of the union government's deployment of the central army, the Nizam's idea of "Azad Hyderabad," and the Telangana armed struggle fostered by leftist parties. With evidence from the oral histories of various sections—both Muslims and non-Muslims—and a wide variety of written sources and historical documents, this book captures such an intense moment of new politics and cultural discourses.

Afsar Mohammad is an internationally acclaimed and award-winning South Asian scholar working on Hindu–Muslim interactions in India. He also focuses on Muslim writing and Telugu studies. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. His previously published work *The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India* (2013) has received high praise for its contributions to the studies on vernacular Islam.

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1948 POLICE ACTION AND THE MUSLIMS OF HYDERABAD

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot No. 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009339636

First published 2023

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-009-33963-6 Hardback

For my Ammi Munavar Begum (d. 2019)
and
Abbajaan Shamsuddin "Kaumudi" (d. 1997)

for all their life lessons;

more than that, for their commitment to a political ideal

with which they were associated since their teenage years.

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PREFACE

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.

—Agha Shahid Ali, *The Country without a Post Office*

When I read this line from a poem by Agha Shahid Ali in 1998, it immediately resonated through the restless chambers of my mind. In Hyderabad on September 17 of that same year, I had witnessed a public rally of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and listened to India's then home minister Lal Krishna Advani give a provocative speech. Invoking anti-Muslim sentiment in Hyderabad and Telangana states, Advani declared that September 17 should be celebrated as "Telangana Liberation Day." That charged declaration stoked a hundred questions in me about the history of Hyderabad, a history which is already replete with intense memories of Muslim lives and their discourses between the 1930s and 1950s. On that September day, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the integration of the Hyderabad princely state into the Indian government, the BJP was jubilant about the military action of the Indian government code-named "Operation Polo" or "Police Action." But could we really call it a "celebration" given the violent history that led to the killing of thousands of Muslims and Hindus, and to the global displacement and migration of thousands of Hyderabadis?

Since the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992, Advani had already been part of the heightened consciousness of the local Muslims. During this period, wherever I went I heard resounding critiques of Advani's statements. However,

September 17, 1998, was different. Like many young Muslims of the 1990s, I too had grown up with anti-Muslim slogans buzzing around me—among them *Musalmaan ke do hi sthan, qabristan ya Pakistan* (A Muslim has only two choices of abode: the graveyard or Pakistan)[1]—and had been called names such as *Babar ke aulad* (the children of Babar, the Mughal emperor), Aurangzeb *vārasulu* (the heirs of Aurangzeb, another Mughal emperor often remembered for his policies on anti-Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism), and "Jihadists."[2] Graffiti and jeers constantly reminded me that my *mulk* (home country) is somewhere in Pakistan. As Advani and his followers explicitly stated several times, I am not a patriot according to their "nationalist" framework.[3] Those intense moments prompted me to write a poem entitled "No Birthplace" remembering the violent experiences of the Partition of 1947 and the rise of Muslim minoritization.

Some limbs and organs
under a vacuum head.
Where did I come from?

None of you told me,
So, at 1947 why I blew up
and remained
—broken since then.[4]

Many writings and oral accounts from Hyderabad and Telangana emphasize that the 1948 Police Action was nothing but an extension of the Partition. Such sentiments once again started playing a central role in the making of a new Muslim identity around 1992—the beginnings of Hindu nationalism. In that kind of political environment, how does one comprehend the consciousness of the new-generation Muslim? Can we gauge it merely through the lens of their faith (*'īmān*) or by identifying their sense of being and belonging with some "foreign" country? I took up these two questions in my previous work, *The Festival of Pīrs*, in which I questioned our normative understanding of the nature of Muslim public rituals in South Asia.[5]

Between 2006 and 2012, during my field research for *The Festival of Pīrs*, I met several Muslim and non-Muslim witnesses of the violence of the 1948 Police Action. It was through them that I started realizing that the response to these two questions should not be limited to faith. We must ask larger questions to investigate this new Muslim consciousness and its multi-layered history. In

talking to various groups of Muslims and Hindus in different parts of Hyderabad and Telangana, I heard multiple responses to these questions. Many of my interlocutors recognized that this variety of responses had barely anything to do with faith—at least faith as many contemporary political factors had defined it. Within the modern history of Hyderabad, these political and religious associations are connected to many regional factors and actors, yet the being and belongingness of a Muslim remains central.

This book is a direct result of asking such larger questions. Although it is a close study of the narrativization of the 1948 Police Action in Hyderabad, many of its observations go beyond that specific event. This book recalls a long journey replete with all kinds of hurdles, as we can imagine from the documentation of any violent event, whether it be the Partition or the Holocaust. Several scholars who have focused on those events tell how different forces commingle to silence or marginalize the voices of such events. In addition to these hurdles, what happened between September 13 and 17 regarding the integration of Hyderabad into the Indian government has been endlessly misinterpreted and falsely recounted, largely because of the dominance of ideologies of nationalism, majoritarianism, and religious fundamentalism in the local historiography.[6] In the case of Muslims and Telangana, there has been a constant hegemony of the privileged localism, such as Telugu nationalism, that led to the formation of the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh in 1956.

The oral accounts in this book document the deeply expressed concerns of many Hyderabadis, concerns that their story even now remains silenced by the overemphasis on the Telangana rebellion, Telugu nationalism of the same period, and the politics of the nation-state. When I began my archival work, I very soon realized that their pain was no exaggeration. However, it was not easy to get them to speak out about the violence and its aftermath. It also took me longer than I had expected to find any sources—both oral accounts and written materials related to the Police Action. For even the Sunderlal Committee's report was de-classified only in 2012, and I learned from various sources that documents and images related to the Police Action were also deliberately removed and disappeared from most public archives. In such a time of censoring and silencing, I started thinking about Muslim history as a whole around the Police Action and its immediate consequences. The very first challenge I encountered was the absolute silence of the witnesses, who include not only ordinary people but also the socio-political activists who had been extremely active in the late 1940s. I noticed that most of my witnesses

were still experiencing trauma from the Police Action, even six decades later. In fact, contemporary Hindutva politics play a particularly prominent role in silencing them; many of these witnesses (as they themselves told me later) "do not want to get into any trouble." Many also noted that "talking about that event is like inviting the trouble on our own." Because of the political pressure put on witnesses, and their consequent reluctance to talk, I had to wait for more than two years for some testimonies. This situation recalls what the anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel termed "the drone of silence."[7]

Nonetheless, I persisted. After all, I have been fascinated by Hyderabad since childhood. When I started reading about Hyderabad during my college days, I also developed an interest in learning more about the long decades from the 1930s to 1950s, particularly about Muslim politics, the Partition, and the Police Action of 1948. Despite several publications on Hyderabad and Telangana, none of the available materials helped me understand the Muslim question. However, I was always surrounded by books and people celebrating the historical Telangana armed rebellion led by the Communist Party (1946–1951),[8] and my own family had been quite engaged in this movement. Both my parents' families were part of its activism, and my father was on several Communist Party committees and a member of its two prominent literary and cultural wings such as the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA). When I talked to my grandmother, Fatima Begum, about the changes she witnessed during the 1940s, she said:

> Everything happened so quickly, we could not even understand what was going on. Since my family—including all my sons and daughters—were active members of the Communist party, most of the information was from the Party. When I look back now and try to remember anything about the Police Action, nothing comes to my memory. I just remember many party workers were killed and unfortunately the party had to wind up its activities thereafter.[9]

It took me a while to comprehend that her memory was extremely selective because she was recalling the event through the lens of the Communist Party. Like her testimony here, every conversation about the Police Action with my family ended with a comment along the lines of, "Well, whatever happened, happened! We've come a long way after that bloodshed. We barely remember anything about it now!" Several publications likewise conclude that the Police

Action was the end of all the history related to the Hyderabad princely state and Muslims.[10]

Since 1948, the language employed at a national level too talks about how the Police Action has tended to be deceptive, politically influenced, and utterly devoid of the sentiments articulated by locals. Rather than being grounded in the past, most of it is defined entirely by contemporary politics that are closely entwined with the ideologies of various political parties. As mentioned earlier, the right-wing BJP was extremely jubilant about imposing their narrative as the singular version of the Police Action. Over the intervening decades, the five days of battle between the Indian government and Hyderabad state have been recounted in many ways and retold from many different perspectives. Though several writings and media posts have also tried to reimagine history by mentioning the "tyranny" of the nationalism that led to the destruction of the Hyderabad state, these are still almost always limited either to praising or blaming the Nizam of Hyderabad. In fact, it has been a very black-and-white conversation since 1948, and more so since 1998.

Precisely seventy-three years later, on September 17, 2021, as I was still working on a chapter for this book, there was an outpouring of social media messages, emails, and online posts related to the "integration" (*vilīnaṁ* in Telugu) of Hyderabad state into the newly formed Indian government in 1948. Those comments clearly perceived the "integration" and the end of the Nizam's rule as a "celebration of the liberation of Hyderabad and Telangana." I read that the home minister, Amit Shah, attended the "Telangana Liberation Day celebration" in the town of Nirmal, and I noted his declarations that the BJP would make sure that Telangana could in future celebrate this historic day without fear.[11] He also recounted the "historic efforts" made by the then home minister Sardar Patel. Yet the idea of "celebration" was actually nothing new as this afterlife of the Police Action goes back to the 1998 politics of the right-wing declarations of the "Telangana Liberation Day."[12] Such contemporary politics have made the entire historical memory of the Police Action even more of an ideological battlefield than before, and the pain of the Hyderabadi community continues to be obscured. At this point, I made it my goal to retrieve this pain and its impact on the community, and to do so from the perspective of an ordinary Muslim of Hyderabad. This categorization of an ordinary Muslim definitely includes the larger Hindu community of the state.[13]

As I finished writing this book, I had a strong feeling that this was just another beginning. There are many dimensions of the violence of 1948 that still need to be explored and debated. In light of all the restlessness I experienced

while writing and thinking about this book, I end this preface with one of my poems on Hyderabad:

people still have that age-old smile
from the last century
that gracefully flows
and spreads through all the spaces.

You're flooded by the words
that barely sound
either Urdu or Telugu,
it's an idiom you and I forgot to inherit.[14]

NOTES

1. This process of stigmatizing and othering Muslims has a long process in the history of India. Christophe Jaffrelot provides a detailed analysis of this movement in *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); for a recent perspective, see Qudsiya Ahmed, "How I Got Over That Dark Geographic Shadow Called Pakistan," *The Wire*, April 6, 2018, https://thewire.in/culture/how-i-got-over-that-dark-geographic-shadow-called-pakistan (accessed July 11, 2022). This essay too suggests searching multiple associations that go beyond the faith.
2. See Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).
3. Yamini Krishna and Swathi Shivanand, "BJP Made Gains in Hyderabad Using History as a Weapon: But How Accurate Is Its Version of the Past?" *Scroll*, January 21, 2021, https://scroll.in/article/983875/bjp-made-gains-in-hyderabad-usinghistory-as-a-weapon-but-how-accurate-is-its-version-of-the-past (accessed July 21, 2022).
4. Afsar Mohammad, *Evenings with a Sufi* [Collection of poems from Telugu] (New Delhi: Red River Press, 2022).
5. Afsar Mohammad, *The Festival of Pīrs: Shared Devotion and Popular Islam in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
6. See the Introduction of this book for a detailed discussion: Swami Ramananda Tirtha, *Memoirs of the Hyderabad Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1967).

7. E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 150.
8. For a recent debate about the Telangana armed struggle and the Communist Party's local history, see Sunil Purushotham, *From Raj to Republic: Sovereignty, Violence, and Democracy in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 6–9, 182–224.
9. Conversation with Fathima Begum from my personal journal.
10. See Chapter 4 of this book for an idea of such materials.
11. Sreebaala Vadlapatla, "Will Observe September 17 as Hyderabad Liberation Day with a Chest Full of Pride: Amit Shah," *Times of India*, September 18, 2021, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/will-observe-september-17-as-hyderabad-liberation-day-with-a-chest-full-of-pride-amit-shah/articleshow/94261032.cms (accessed September 18, 2022).
12. For more on this debate, see N. Venugopal, *Lechi Nilichina Telangana* [The resurgence of Telangana] (Hyderabad: Swechchaa Saahiti, 2000) in which he invokes the poet and activist Bertolt Brecht's famous words about "Hitler's lies." For an entire debate in the Telugu public sphere, see Vivek Tadakamalla and Sangisetty Srinivas, *17 Sepṭembar 1948: Bhinna Dṛkkōṇālu* [Different perspectives on 17 September 1948] (Hyderabad: Telangana History Society, 2010).
13. Ashokamitran's novel published in Tamil and then also translated into Telugu and English provides evidence of this non-Muslim perception. See Ashokamitran, *Janta Nagarālu* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1985); Ashokamitran, *The Eighteenth Parallel*, trans. Gomathi Narayanan (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 1993).
14. Mohammad, *Evenings with a Sufi*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most of the people who deserve my gratitude here have slipped into some unknown past. Now, I remember all those who opened their houses and hearts to share their memories of the Police Action and various historical moments between the 1930s and 1950s. When I started talking to them around 2006, they were active, healthy, and cheerful, bursting with an enthusiasm for life. When I started writing these chapters around 2019, and crept through each page, I started losing them either to COVID-19 or to various other sicknesses. Consequently, I found it hard to listen to their wonderful voices on my audio recorder. That pain of loss delayed the process of transcribing them first into Telugu and then into English. During this gloomy journey, I had many questions and therefore often tried calling one or other of my interviewees, seeking answers or simply more details of an event. Their families typically returned my call by saying, "*Anna*, the elderly one (*peddāyana*) is no more! He was asking about you and your book! Many times, he asked us to 'call Afsar *bēṭā* and ask him to finish the book soon!'"

For many of these families, I have become their *bēṭā* (son) or *anna* (brother) over the past fifteen years. I took so much from them to create this book and felt I was giving them next to nothing in return. The last time I met Quddus Sahab before his death around 2017, he said: "Afsar *bēṭā*, *kitab jaldi likho … bas … voh bahut jarooree tarikh hai*!" (My son, finish writing the book soon. It is good enough, and it is very important history!). He had always been fascinated by Muslim *tarikh* (histories)—starting with the battle of Karbala and through to the Telangana separatist movement of the 2000s. The only thing I could give him for his many conversations was a stack of history books about Telangana. The

memories and voices of many people like Quddus Sahab in the city of Hyderabad or the various distant villages of Telangana have filled my notebooks and voice recorder. So, my *salaam*s should go to all these people, whom I met early on in my field research.

For more than a decade, I traveled far and wide to the remotest corners of Telangana and the crucial sites of the Deccan, always in search of people who could speak about the intense moments of the history of the Hyderabad princely state. On those travels, I made friends with several generations of folk performers, activists, local historians and—most importantly—very ordinary people, who barely scratched together a living but had an enormous treasure trove of precious memories. I walked with them to their village fields, I sat with them at the local shrines. I ate their food and had their delicious buttermilk or chai. I still recall all their faces. Like some wall of a war memorial, to do them all justice I would need to list at least 150 names, many of them individuals who shared with me stories of ordinary Muslims and Hindus who suffered and survived all manner of hardships during the Police Action and the Telangana rebellion. Even though relatively few of their words appear in this book, many of their stories will stay with me forever.

During the second phase of field research around 2013, I visited many libraries and research centers in my search for archives and printed materials about the Police Action. Yet the most important materials were ones I found in the private libraries of the freedom fighters, social activists, and some readers who had actually started their reading journey in the late 1940s during those violent times. Heeralal Moriya, Kavi Raja Murthy, Saravadevabhatla Viswanatham in my hometown of Khammam, Jeelani Bano, Burgula Narsing Rao, "Maa Bhoomi" Narsinga Rao, Dasarathi Rangacharya, Samala Sadasiva, Abid Ali Khan, Huma Kidwai, Mutyam, Alladi Uma, and M. Sridhar and their families in Hyderabad—all opened their entire libraries to me. There I found old newspapers, literary bulletins, and printed versions of various party documents which had enjoyed wide circulation in the 1940s.

But for me the true archives and living texts were the conversations that I had with these families. And to my surprise, despite their passion for poetry and fictional writings, these families had saved many historical documents. Until her death in 2019, I shared the details of each conversation with my mother (Ammi), Munavar Begum. Due to our family's leftist activism, Ammi knew some of its history or about some of these personalities, and she helped me by adding a few more details to whatever they had recalled. Since Ammi was also a voracious reader of Urdu and Telugu fiction, her reading experiences also enriched my

historical understanding of these particular decades of the Deccan. Many members of my extended family have helped me enormously to make connections and flesh out missing information in those personal and public histories.

Despite all their enthusiasm about my topic, my research and writing turned out to be an extremely slow journey. The sheer amount of violence and trauma, and the many sad memories of my interlocutors, were emotionally hard to take on board, and they haunted me like nightmares. Over the years, many friends and scholars encouraged me to continue with my work, hard as it was. Finally, when I was teaching at the University of Texas at Austin in 2012, Syed Akbar Hyder asked me to give a talk about Kavi Raja Murthy's 1949 Urdu novel *Mai Ghariib Hu* for the university's series on Sadat Hasan Manto's literary influences to celebrate his birth centenary. This talk titled "Manto Beyond Urdu" was well received and followed by an intense discussion by one of my favorite Urdu scholars, Shamim Hanafi sahib, along with Donald Davis, Carla Petievich, Kathryn Hansen, Snehal Shinghavi, Kamran Asdar Ali, and the entire team of the Hindi–Urdu flagship program at that school. Even before he died in 2021, Shamim Hanafi sahab called me and asked about my manuscript. He repeatedly said: "We need more of such work beyond Urdu and its vernacular histories."

On the heels of this 2012 talk in Texas, I was invited to speak at several universities and conferences. It was because of those invitations that I started playing with an idea: to study this literary history by connecting it to the larger history of the Hyderabad princely state and the politics between the Indian government and the Nizam with an emphasis on ordinary Muslims and Hindus of the 1940s.

Rejuvenated by this new set of questions, I returned to the field in 2013 to meet political activists and literary personalities in Telangana. At first, I met the Hyderabad-based Urdu writers and their families. Then, I began visiting not only the locations that had been affected by the Police Action but also the centers of the Telangana armed rebellion. Based on some of these materials, in 2016 and 2017 at Emory University and Columbia University respectively, I spoke about Telugu and Urdu language politics and Jeelani Bano's Urdu novel *Aiwan-e-Ghazal* as an example of a gendered Muslim history. During the discussions at Emory, Velcheru Narayana Rao, Joyce Flueckiger, Harshita Mruthinti Kamat, Gautam Reddy, and Jamal Jones shared their critical feedback. At Columbia, Carla Bellamy's question about the political dimension of Jeelani Bano's novel helped me focus my enquiry. The current version of Chapter 3 was actually a result of my discussions with Carla and her colleagues Frances Pritchet, Jack Hawley, and their graduate students.

At a 2017 conference at the University of Pennsylvania on vernacular politics and identities, my wonderful colleagues including Lisa Mitchell, Ramya Srinivasan, and Megan Eaton Robb shared their appreciation and valuable feedback on my presentation that eventually became Chapter 2 in this book. That same year, Raisur Rahman invited me to participate in a conference on Muslim being and belonging at Wake Forest University; there, I presented some materials that are now included in Chapter 1 of this book. That prompted exciting conversations about various dimensions of Muslim identity, urbanity, and modernity, in which Raisur Rahman helpfully pushed me to rethink many aspects of the Muslim question. Bruce Lawrence, Ali Mian, and Razak Khan were in touch with me with helpful comments and encouragement while I was working on this particular chapter. Another segment of this chapter was presented in 2021 at the British Library (my thanks to Priyanka Basu). Benjamin Cohen, Taylor Sherman, and many other scholars participated in the discussion, and of them I particularly thank Benjamin Cohen. Their thoughtful questions helped me think through and write the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this book. In 2019, at the University of Pennsylvania's Annual Telugu studies conference, where I gave a talk about one dimension of the Telugu–Urdu debate, Jangam Chinnaiah, Rama Mantena, and Mallampalli Chandra Sekhar's discussions with me were particularly helpful.

I drew on some of the book's materials in my courses on Indian literature and South Asian Islam at the Universities of Texas and Pennsylvania. I am grateful to my students who read those draft materials and participated in those intense discussions. In fact, their comparative vision made me connect my materials to different phases of minority activism in the USA, including connecting Black Lives Matter to the Citizenship Amendment Act in India. Lisa Mitchell, my wonderful colleague and longtime friend, read and gave me feedback on some parts of this work. Indivar Jonnalagadda has always been there for me ever since we started talking about this project around 2017. He patiently read multiple drafts of the manuscript, and we met several times over coffee or Telugu food to discuss my ideas and the underlying theoretical issues.

In between, I traveled to Hyderabad several times to collect the materials and conduct the interviews. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted interviews with Burgula Narsing Rao, Jaini Mallayya Gupta, Jeelani Bano, B. Narsinga Rao, and several activists who had been part of the various historical movements during the 1940s and 1950s. In Hyderabad, Sajaya Kakarla, Vommy Ramesh Babu, M. A. Moid, Suneetha Achyuta, Jeevan, Burgula Vijay, the families of Jaini Mallaya Gupta, Jeelani Bano, Sarvadevabhatla, Vivek Tadakamalla,

Alladi Uma, M. Sridhar, Jayadeva Rentala, Safiullah Sahab, Sibghat, and Anant Maringanti were particularly helpful. K. Srinivas, N. Venugopal, and Sangisetti Srinivas were always there to respond to my questions about various historical events and materials related to this project. Venugopal was extremely generous when sharing some books and ideas. Ever since we met virtually in 2013, Mohammed Ayub Ali Khan has been a constant inspiration as I researched and wrote this manuscript. During my many trips to India, Gurram Seetaramulu was always fully present to me for both friendly and scholarly conversations. Pathipaka Mohan and Mehak Hyderabadi shared some images for this book. At the University of Pennsylvania, during several conversations, Davesh Soneji shared his critical feedback and encouraged me to finish this book. Daud Ali, Deven Patel, Suvir Kaul, Ania Loomba, Jamal Elias, and Greg Goulding have always been kind to me and have shown great interest in this work ever since we met in 2016. At Cambridge University Press and Assessment, Qudsiya Ahmed, Sohini Ghosh, Anwesha Rana, Priya Das, and Aniruddha De have shown great interest in this book and inspired me to finish it on time. I am particularly grateful to three anonymous reviewers who read each chapter carefully and shared critical feedback.

Beyond the University of Pennsylvania, Charley Hallisey, Chris Chekuri, Sunil Purushotham, Razak Khan, Yamini Krishna, Kena Chavva, Eric Beverley, Himadeep Muppidi, Torsten Tschacher, Deepra Dandekar, Danielle Wildmann Abraham, Kerry San Chirico, Bala Venkat Mani, Sarah Waheed, Raj Karamchedu, Kathinka Frøystad, and Ravi Verelly have been my support group for this book work. For more than a decade, Ulrike Guthrie has been an efficient and skilful editor, and I appreciate her help throughout my writing journey. Last but not least, my wife Kalpana Rentala and my son Anindu deserve my heartfelt thanks for all their inspiration, personally and professionally. Finishing this manuscript happily means spending more time with the family!

INTRODUCTION

1948 POLICE ACTION

A SILENCED HISTORY OF HYDERABAD

> The Police Action was an end of many good beginnings in our lives. We lost not only many friends, our personal careers, and houses, but also and most importantly, the tehzeeb of our shared culture. If someone says it is just about few Muslims, no, not at all. It's a pain about the entire community of the then Hyderabad and Telangana.
>
> —Abdul Quddus Saheb, September 20, 2006.

In September 2006, during the field research for my previous book *The Festival of Pīrs*, I took an early morning bus to Karim Nagar, an urban town famous for the public rituals of Muharram. Almost 200 miles away from the city of Hyderabad, this urban town has a significant Muslim population and was also greatly influenced by the Shi'i Islamic practices of Hyderabad. In Karim Nagar, I met 78-year-old Abdul Quddus Saheb, who began our conversation by talking about the songs of his youth during Muharram, the commemorative event of the martyrdom of the Prophet's family. After a while, he surprisingly took a detour just to talk about the Police Action of 1948. Being a young man of around twenty at the time of this violent event, Quddus Saheb was one of the witnesses of that traumatic era and the consequent divisive politics that partitioned Muslims and Hindus. Many of his memories, as I document here, narrate the story of the new generation of Muslims whose everyday lives and future dreams were brutally shattered by the Police Action of 1948.

According to Quddus Saheb, "It was a nightmare for us, as every Muslim in the Hyderabad state had suddenly become an enemy of the people. We were experiencing the height of every form of hatred and could not even step out of our homes." Growing up in such a hateful environment, Quddus' own story offers a lens through which to glimpse both the external and interior struggles of many Muslims during this period. Before this tragedy, Quddus Saheb was known for his mesmerizing performance of the songs of Muharram, both in Telugu and Urdu. When the Police Action was executed between September 13 and September 17, 1948, along with many other traditions, this narrative performance, according to Quddus Saheb, "started fading out" too.[1] He recalled many memories from this period. During my interview, Quddus said:

> Abdul Quddus Saheb (AQS): In those days I would sing the songs of Muharram both in Urdu and Telugu. I was not even twenty and so enthusiastic about this performance as I strongly believed in its ability to connect Hindus and Muslims. There was no separation between Hindus and Muslims either in daily life, or during these religious events. The people of my town or any village around this place never made any distinctions when it comes to Muharram. I thought that was an ideal setting, and I had also trained several groups of the performers of the songs. It's unfortunate now that I also witnessed a wall of separation and people start using the terms such as "Hindu Muharram," and "Muslim event."
>
> Afsar Mohammad (AM): Do you remember when exactly this separation happened?
>
> AQS: In my understanding, it was all either before or after the Police Action, 1948! The violence followed by those five days of invasion shattered our lives—took away the *tehzeeb* of our everyday lives. It was nothing short of any war—the *jung*, *yuddhaṁ*. I am not talking just about the Muslims, but the entire community of Muslims and Hindus.

Whereas Quddus Saheb's usage of the terms *jung* and *yuddhaṁ*—meaning "battle"—for the Police Action is key for my argument in this book, I was also reflecting on how he was emphasizing the term *tehzeeb*, and towards the end of the conversation, we returned to the same idea:

AM: I want to learn more about the idea of *tehzeeb* in this context. How do you make a connection here?

AQS: The *tehzeeb* of our town's life comes from Muharram and many other devotional practices that we shared. That's where we learn about co-existence and sharing—*milan sār*, "way of life" [*milan sār* in Urdu and *kalupugolu* in Telugu].

Then he suddenly switched to Telugu to say: "idantā ā yākṣan taravāta cediripōvaḍaṁ ṣurū ayindi. jaṁg anṭē yuddhaṁ vacciṁdi" (All this had begun to shatter after the Action. The battle had started!). Somewhat prompted by his words, I took on the task of researching the archives of written and oral sources about the Police Action of 1948. These expressions from the oral accounts also compelled me to start meeting different kinds of people from various parts of the city and Telangana. First, I had intended to talk to the primary witnesses of the Police Action—popularly known as "action" in public memory and Pōlīsu Carya in the political writings on the state of Hyderabad. Many interlocutors consider this as another Partition and narrate the stories of violence and trauma that left many Muslims homeless and displaced. Nevertheless, they were also conscious of the politics of remembering and forgetting.[2] Initially I asked myself and these witnesses two apparently simple but actually quite complicated questions: Why and how was such a traumatic event ignored by mainstream historiography? How does the politics of mentioning, forgetting, and remembering play into this negligence, denial, or misinterpretation of this violent event?

Whereas a few studies offer more evidence about the political tensions between the nation-state and the Hyderabad state, this book focuses on how such processes resulted in the making of a new Muslim discourse in the wake of the Police Action.[3] It proposes that this historical event was a commingling of multiple aspects that had begun with the tensions between the making of the new nation and the question of Muslim representation in 1948 and then extended further into the recent debates about the strategic minoritization and isolation of Muslims, particularly those in Hyderabad state. Several studies discuss this formation of the political minority of Muslims as related to the Partition of India and Pakistan.[4]

This book begins by questioning various ways of the mainstream historiography that privileged the master narratives of nationalism, the

Telangana armed rebellion between 1946 and 1951, and the Telugu linguistic state formation of 1956.[5] Those narratives totally ignored the violent event of the Police Action and the Muslim question. Despite many disenchantments and heavy losses, I argue, the Hyderabad and Telangana situation offers a model for how Hindus and Muslims responded and emerged out of a crisis by offering new strategies such as urbanization, Islamic reformism, and Muslim belonging to resolve the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. This model is much needed today in India—a country ridden with increasingly divisive politics and the rhetoric of Islamophobia. Informed by recent studies on diverse Muslim identities, Islamophobia, nationalism, religious conflicts, majoritarianism, and the post-secularist turn along with the related debates in contemporary literary and cultural engagements, I will discuss multiple dimensions of Muslim identity and religious politics as articulated in various literary narratives and oral histories throughout this book.[6] Unlike the dominant historiography, these sources offer evidence for the mutuality of the shifting Muslim discourses and the rise of the Muslim public sphere, including specifically local Telugu and Urdu hybrid aesthetics in post-1940s Hyderabad.[7] In conversation with global Islamic movements and activism, these locally produced aspects define a new framework to understand the complexities of the Hyderabad and Telangana-based Muslim identity.

By focusing on how this specific period also was successful in producing a new set of modern prose writings in Hyderabad city and Telangana, this book argues that the Muslim question has acquired many nuanced features as it journeyed through different phases of the public sphere. This crucial turn was reflected in both oral and written cultures that emerged in rural and urban locations—thus representing a constant flow between the city of Hyderabad to even remote regions of Telangana. Many of these themes from the Police Action are now being revisited and retold against the backdrop of the post-2000 Telangana state movement. In many ways, these connections take on deeper interpretations as the process of retrieval and reconstruction of the historiography of the Hyderabad state and Telangana engenders multi-layered discourses.

By documenting the stories of diverse groups of actors and agents in this historical event, I analyze varied understandings of Muslim contextualization between 1940 and 1950. However, it is quite intriguing to define a "Muslim" context within the literary sphere of Telangana and Hyderabad. Many "Hindu" writers, including Nelluri Kesava Swamy (1920–1984), Bhaskarabhatla Krishna Rao (1918–1966), Kavi Raja Murthy (1926–1985),

Dasarathi Krishnama charya (1925–1987), and Samala Sadasiva (1928–2012) whom we meet in this book, always deliberately located themselves in a liminal space which was neither Hindu nor Muslim. In addition, they were all writing in Telugu and Urdu at once while participating in various literary, cultural, and political organizations that promoted a shared Hindu–Muslim *tehzeeb*. When we read their texts and life stories closely, as I do in this book, we understand that their voices have always been much closer to the idea of Muslimness, thus owning every aspect of Hyderabadi and Telangana Muslim practices. How one non-Muslim individual or writer or social activist could locate himself or herself within this Muslim public sphere remains a key question. In the process, the definition of Muslim belonging within this local cultural and religious milieu complicates any understanding of *the* singular definition of Muslimness by challenging nationalist, secularist, and even leftist readings. Such readings, in fact, have origins in the immediate reports published after the Police Action, as I briefly discuss in the following pages.

FIVE DAYS OF POLITICS AND CONFLICTS: "HAPPY WAR" OR "MILITARY INVASION"?

On August 15, 1947, as the new nations of India and Pakistan prepared to negotiate land and power, their borders were bloodied by the violence of the Partition. But India's territorial disputes were not limited to its western and eastern boundaries: instead, the citizens of the princely south-central state of Hyderabad were experiencing an intense political and religious conflict between the union government of India and the princely state of Hyderabad. A year later in 1948, to control the regional power of the Nizam of Hyderabad and his private army known as the Razakars, the union government of India deployed the central army for a violent intervention under the code named "Operation Polo," popularly known as the "Police Action."[8]

The five-day military invasion of Hyderabad state (Figure I.1) resulted in tragic consequences, although the media projected it as a "happy war." *Time* magazine of London specifically assigned a correspondent to cover this event and published extensive reports. The very first news story on September 20, 1948 began:

> *Time* correspondent Robert Lubar, together with a *Life* reporter and photographer, set out in a hired 1935 Ford to have a look at the war

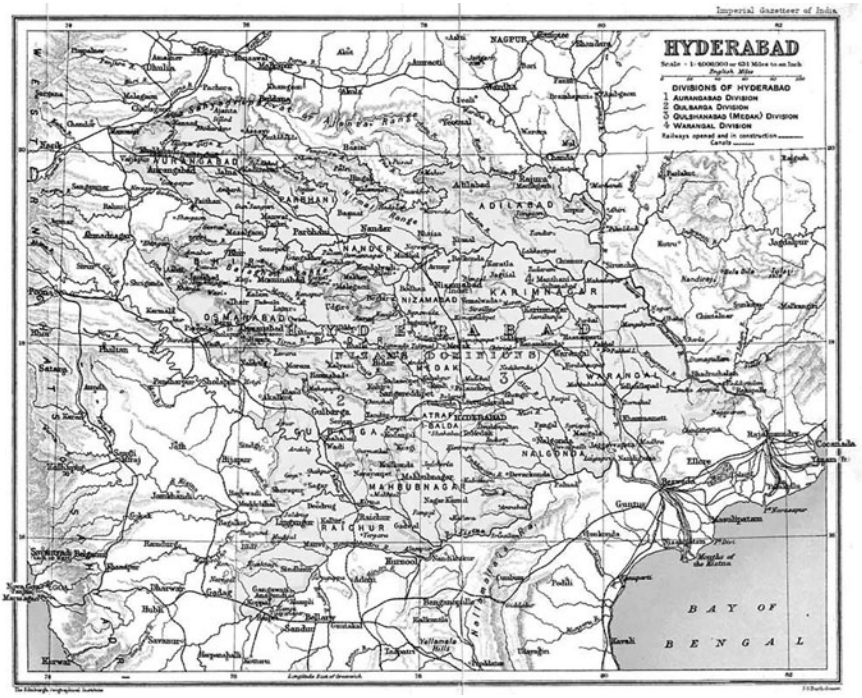

Figure I.1 Hyderabad state from the *Imperial Gazetteer of India,* 1909

Source: Wikimedia commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hyderabad_state_from_the_Imperial_Gazetteer_of_India,_1909.jpg (accessed May 2, 2023).

between India and Hyderabad. The Indian army had undertaken a "police action" (which it also called a "mission of mercy") against Hyderabad where predominantly Hindu population was ruled by a stubborn Moslem Nizam. The would-be war correspondent sped 180 miles towards the front, found that the war was over by the time they got there. All in all, it is one of the shortest, happiest wars ever seen. Cabled Lubar:

"Everyone is satisfied. The aggressive section of Indian public opinion has been appeased. Hyderabad, which was never really out of India, is now indisputably part of India. There have been no terrible outbreaks of communal violence."[9]

Efforts to retrieve the ordinary voices of Muslims against this background were hindered by the media politics of the late 1940s. In one of the stories,

as I discuss in Chapter 1, Nelluri Kesava Swamy describes how two radio stations—a national station of the Indian government and a local station in Hyderabad—were busy broadcasting their competing versions of the news materials rather than the actual facts. The ambiguity and utter confusion created by the media exacerbated the havoc of this event. The historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who witnessed these developments in the city of Hyderabad, described the situation:

> On September 13, 1948, the Indian army, moving on five fronts, invaded Hyderabad; and in less than a week the conquest was complete. The Nizam's army, apparently more of an exhibition than a fighting force, offered negligible opposition. There were relatively few battle casualties except amongst Razakars and other Ittehad civilian volunteers, who threw themselves in as a rather pathetic but devoted resistance. Off the battlefield, however, the Muslim community fell before a massive and brutal blow, the devastation of which left those who did survive reeling in bewildered fear. Thousands upon thousands were slaughtered; many hundreds of thousands uprooted.[10]

According to the Sunderlal Committee, which was appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, and led by Pundit Sunderlal and Qazi Abdul Ghaffar, "only three of sixteen districts in Hyderabad state were free of communal trouble." Whereas the districts of Osmanabad, Gulburga, Bider, and Nander were the worst affected, Aurangabad, Nalgonda, and Medak had lost 5,000 in each district. The committee reported:

> We can say at a very conservative estimate that in the whole state at least 27 thousand to 40 thousand people lost their lives during and after the police action. We were informed by the authorities that these eight were the worst effected districts and needed most the good offices of our delegation. We, therefore, concentrated on these and succeeded, we might say, to some extent at least, in dispelling the atmosphere of mutual hostility and distrust.[11]

About the extent of the violence and deaths, Taylor Sherman noted:

> It is difficult to elaborate the scale and nature of the violence that occurred. The information available to the historian is incomplete,

> both because of the difficulty in capturing such events in historical documents. And because not all of the reports that were drawn up have been opened to public view.[12]

Indeed, for the most part such stories about the violence, migrations, and survivors remain unexamined in the history of Hyderabad. The suppression of the Sunderlal report, as the historian Omar Khalidi noted, was "due no doubt to its adverse comment on the conduct of the Indian army."[13] Despite its first-ever disclosure of such violence during and after the Police Action, the Sunderlal Commission's report remained "classified" until recently as the Indian government considered it to be harmful to "national interest."[14] In his book *Hyderabad: After the Fall*, Khalidi documented several reports and early writings about the Police Action, which he called "[t]he Hyderabad Holocaust."[15]

Sardar Patel, the then home minister, who masterminded and supervised the entire Police Action, even went so far as to insist that there was no such thing as a "Good Will commission" appointed by the government.[16] According to the political scientist Noorani, the government of India also used its media and suppressed the hard facts of the entire action, convincing the authorities that "at times one has to close his (*sic*) eyes in the national interest."[17] Patel's distrust of Muslims and his view of them as "aliens" further complicated the entire issue.[18] There were also reports about how Patel ignored even the warnings of Prime Minister Nehru, who clearly said: "One of the persistent charges made against us is that we intend to kill what is called Muslim culture. Hyderabad is known all over the Middle East as a city of Muslim culture."[19] Nevertheless, the grand narrative of nationalism and Sardar Patel's anti-Muslim ideology buttressed by political authority ended up marginalizing and suppressing the Muslim side of the story. Recent studies by Taylor Sherman and Sunil Purushotham have presented more evidence for various aspects of violence during the Police Action. Purushotham's 2015 essay "Internal Violence: The 'Police Action' in Hyderabad" and the 2021 book *From Raj to Republic* together document and analyze how internal violence became an "important engine of state formation" in post-Independence India.[20] This side of the story of endless violence towards Muslims and the migrations and survival of Muslims is still marginalized in the dominant historiography of Hyderabad. Local newspapers like *Inquilab*, *Zamindar*, and *Ehsan*, as documented by Sunil Purushotham, had extensive coverage of this "Muslim butchering en bloc."