

Hyderabad

A biography

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To present history is not easy. A purely factual account, involving a monotonous medley of names and battles, provides but a tedious chronicle of hapless brownian motion with no purpose in sight. Needless to say, such accounts invariably leave you not only dissatisfied, but bored and disgusted, no names stick, no events are remembered. Taken together such a reading experience may nevertheless drive home the point that history, and hence life, is ultimately pointless, and then we die, that will be it, nothing will remain in the face of a totally indifferent posterity.

I find Luthers book a bit strange. It certainly does not adhere to the usual conventions of a sophisticated Western historical text. Its emphasis is on narrative, some of which is rather engaging, not on analysis. This gives to the project an aura of naivety, to which the slightly peculiar English adds. It is an Oxford India Paperback, as such printed on slightly lower quality paper, with just a hint of smudged print. All in all such remarks touch on condenscension.

The narrative starts out as a fairy-tale. This is charming and engaging. It just does not only give names, but characters with a rounded sense of individuality. You almost feel that you have been transported to the lost world of the Arabian Nights. There is of course a price to be paid for this, namely historical accuracy. Without extensive documentation any suggestion of inner thoughts or actual conversations remain pure speculation. However, a work that is not meant to be primarily scholarly, gains a lot by such liberties. The first step in learning about history is to care about it, to be curious, and such approaches definitely may induce curiosity. However, the author is not able to maintain the initial sense of a fairy-tale but soon a factual enumeration takes precedence giving to the mind little intellectual purchase, intermittently interspersed with somje dramatic incidents, as that of the siege and eventual conquest of Golconda, the fortress at whose feet the city Bhagnagar, later renamed Hyderabad, was founded. This fall of Golconda meant the subservience of the local dynasti to the Moghul empire, as represented by the great Moghul Aurangzeb, who was instrumental in the Moghul expansion to the south.

During the latter part of the 18th century and the first part of the 19th century the English became predominant. In the book this central process goes almost unnoticed, as it may very well have done to those contemporary with it. Indian history being marked by internal strife and foreign invasions, the growing influence of the English was effectively hidden by a series of tactical moves among conspiring and warring states. Gradually the English, victorious over the French, assumed the position formerly held by the Moghul empire, an empire which was never crushed but eaten from within, until just an empty shell remained. It was not until the famed Sepoy Mutiny in 1857-58 when a belated awakening was affected. The English may have been expelled, had the revolutionaries

been more determined, better organised and united, and of course also better equipped militarily; as it was the mutiny was to be remembered for its atrocities, and it confirmed the English presence as that of a superior civilization and race, allowing it a stronghold on the subcontinent for almost another century. The Mutiny did touch Hyderabad, but only marginally. The regional dynasty remained, those of the Nizams, employing as prime ministers (Diwans) a series of men whose names always involved 'Jung', the greatest of them all - Salar Jung, a favourite of the British because of his support during the Mutiny, was among other things an avid collector, the museum named after him still being one of the cities main tourist attraction¹

Gradually Hyderabad was ushered into the Modern Age. Persian was replaced by Urdu and local languages gained a foothold in publishing and education. The ruling dynasty had to contend with representatives and suggested premiers, yet nominally the Nizam was in charge as the supreme ruler, or at least as the ultimate owner. The tradition of so called 'nazar' was in practice well into the 20th century, meaning the obligation of giving the Nizam gifts in any dealings with him, gifts which could be quite demanding. Even more onerous to the subjects was that the Nizam could claim as property anything that he fancied, i.e. whenever he expressed appreciation of something it was your duty to surrender it. Many things you could hide, but not buildings of course, and many proud owner of a newly constructed palace, had to relinquish it.

Hyderabad along with Kashmir contested its submersion into the new State of India. In Kashmir a Hindu ruler over a predominantly Muslim population swore allegiance, while his subjects became restless. As is well known, this conflict has never been fully resolved more then fifty years later, with Hyderabad the situation was in a sense reversed, a Muslim dynasty holding sway over a Hindu majority (although the Muslim minority was large and influential, swelled by conversion, predominantly among the lower castes). The natural destiny would be becoming part of Pakistan, but problems of logistics of a landlocked entity were too formidable. A strong Muslim fighting organization was formed - the razakars, under the leadership of Kasim Razvi, but during the stand-off with the Indian army the Hyderabad forces crumbled within days. Hyderabad, later to become the capital of an enlarged state - Andra Pradesh, became united with India, the Nizam not deposed but shorn of all but nominal power.

The main events after the reunion were Communist resurgencies in Telangana, with redistributions of land, those were crushed by police actions, but traces of gerilla activities remained well into the 70's. Otherwise Hyderabad started to grow rapidly in the mid-fifties due to a large influx of rural populations, eventually merging it with the twin city of Secunderabad. A succession of more or less able Chief ministers has marked the last forty years, many of them with names such as Rao or Reddy. One flamboyant character stands out, the former well-known actor - N.T.Rama Rao, who introduced a new way of campaigning, namely driving around self-contained in a van, visiting villages, playing popular song, and eventually carrying the day with his new populist party - Telugo Desam Party, in the polls. As many populist politicians he found that winning an election is one

¹ I visited it in January 2004, finding it a rather ghastly place, intermittently fascinating, but basically unintentionally driving home the point that earthly possessions are ephemeral and become indeed ghastly when surviving their owners.

thing, actually governing is another. At the latter he proved himself not only inept but indifferent, nevertheless he was able to gain the coveted post as Chief minister three times during a 13 year period. Eventually he had a fall out with one of his sons-in-law, the latter gaining access to power for a nine year period ².

Confusing as the account may be, anyway it does give a sense of the realities of Indian politics. The large masses which has to be wooed, the interactions with the World Bank and other international agencies and the development of infrastructures, lavish representations, corruptions, betrayals, and spectacular come-backs. Of Hyderabad as a city, very little is conveyed. The Charminar (meaning the four minaret, 'char' being the word for four in Hindu) decorating every initial page of each chapter, provides a visual theme, but this is about all³. There is a reference to the river that winds through the city ⁴ and which in former times were quite of a torrent, but which now is but a trickle. And finally the city was once a green city of gardens, while now with the exploding population it has become overlaid by concrete. Old Hyderabad families do no longer feel at home, nostalgically looking back to the times before independance, a naturally vanishing minority. Cars proliferate in the streets, there is much noise and exhaust⁵. But such woes are common to most big Indian cities. Also the educated classes tended to send their progeny abroad with the opredictable result that those settled comofrtably leaving their parents isolated and stranded at home. A similar exodus also affected the manual workers, in Hyderabad particularly those of Muslim affiliation, who could bring their rudimentary skills to the Gulf States, sending intremittenat remittances home. This increased contacts with the Arabs may also have contributed to a Muslim religious revival, needless to say joined by an increased Hindu awareness, and ironically today in Hyderabad you may see many more burqas and skullcaps than formerly⁶.

So what is next? As the British historian and philosopher Collingwood points out, history end at the present and has no truck with the future. Yet life is continous, and the necessary ending of a historical account with the present gives the impression of conclusion. There were problems of the past, but now they have been resolved and life has arrived. Thus it is hard to realise that the present soon will become part of the past, and the events which may now loom so large will soon fade into insignificance.

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² My brief visit to Hyderabad in January 2004 actually coincided with his fall

³ I myself was struck by the Arabic Night quality of the open place in front of it, framed by bazaars, and it came as a shck to learn that this, not the Carminar, was of rather recent vintage.

⁴ by whose banks I saw much washing of clothes as well as reedy untiocuhed areas with some avian wild-life

⁵ which I can certainly testify to, the situation being definitely much more chaotic than not only in downtown Bombay but also Chennai

⁶ The presence of many black burqas was one of the major features of streetlife I recall from my brief visit