

## .....• The Beginning of the End •.....

The question of Hyderabad was one of the major unresolved issues at the beginning of 1947: would Hyderabad accede to India by the time the latter gained independence, or would it stay out of the Indian Union altogether, as a sovereign state, or attempt to join Pakistan? For a time, the question loomed very large and it still remains on the agenda of the UN Security Council, more a historical relic than unfinished business. But in the beginning of 1947, the issue was no less worrying than Kashmir.

To look for the origins of this situation is to risk an infinite regress along the chain of cause and effect. Certainly, there were major causes, whose proper assessment would require a balanced historical analysis. Here, I propose to enumerate some of the more immediate causes. Even at the level of a fairly superficial overview, it becomes clear that the Hyderabad question had a certain degree of complexity, and given the contending historical, political and social forces, a peaceful and harmonious outcome was not assured.

As a factor contributing to the downward spiral, Hyderabad's relative isolation from the larger affairs of India figured somewhere at the top of the list. This could perhaps be traced to the exchanges between the viceroy of India, Lord Reading and the Nizam as far back as 1926, on the subject of Britain's paramountcy over Hyderabad. This famous clash subsequently dissuaded the ruler from taking a closer interest in Indian affairs. The Nizam's aloofness in the 1930s and 1940s adversely affected opinion in Delhi and in Hyderabad, at a time when

trust and mutual confidence should have been cultivated by both sides. It also showed up the differences of outlook on the constitutional position of Hyderabad, which were to come to the fore in 1947. The British continued to assert paramountcy and the right to intervene in the internal affairs of all princely states; Hyderabad continued to regard itself as the greatest of the princely states, therefore expecting to be treated as a special case. And it began to anticipate the time when the British would depart.

In June 1947, when the new viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, announced his plan for the transfer of power, the idea that paramountcy would lapse was reconfirmed by Britain. In Hyderabad's case, it opened the way for the argument that the Nizam would revert to his original status of a sovereign prince, and could choose to assert his independence or accede either to India or Pakistan. Although the argument was legally sound, it was, in fact, quite unrealistic to expect that independent India would concede to Hyderabad what Britain had never allowed. Whoever ruled India would hold the view that Delhi would succeed London as the Paramount Power, and that Hyderabad could not possibly exist as an independent entity in the heart of the new Indian Union. But the Delhi perspective was not appreciated in Hyderabad.

At the level of popular politics there was one overwhelming fact to be taken into account: Hyderabad was predominantly Hindu, with Muslims representing some 20 per cent of the population. From one perspective, its political arrangements were self-evidently undemocratic, with an autocratic Muslim ruler at the head of the system, and a small, apparently reactionary Muslim ruling class dominating its administration and political life. From inside the system, the perception was entirely different. Hyderabad was viewed as a state blessed with a remarkably secular outlook, enjoying communal harmony, with a benign ruler concerned with the advancement of the poor and the protection of the oppressed; an excellent administration where recruitment was based on competition and advancement on merit; and an eclectic ruling elite, which included, besides Muslims, Hindus, Parsees, and others who had proudly assimilated into the distinctive culture of Hyderabad.

Which perception reflected the reality more accurately? It was all in the eye of the beholder. But those who subscribed to the second point of view were concerned that unless the inevitable transition to responsible government was handled with care, something of inestimable value might be lost.

Given these differences of perspective, the process by which the Muslims (or the ruling elites) were going to let go of their special position remained unclear. The main political beneficiary of any process of democratization, the Hyderabad State Congress, though espousing the same aims as the Indian National Congress, had a past in which it had proved ineffectual and a future that was likely to be equally unpromising, as long as it continued to be so poorly led. The state Congress leadership was, to say the least, unimpressive (with some honourable exceptions, such as Dr G.S. Melkote and Barrister Akbar Ali Khan). It had in the past made the wrong moves, such as initiating a civil disobedience movement in alliance with the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, parties less secular in outlook than the Congress. In the 1930s, Dr Lateef Sayeed had complained about the quality of Congress leadership in the state to Gandhi, with little effect. The ban against the Hyderabad State Congress was lifted in 1946, but it boycotted the legislative elections all the same, and at its meeting in Hyderabad city in June 1947, challenged the government to accede to its demands or face a mass civil disobedience movement. Then, having largely failed to get such a movement going, the state Congress leadership tried to enlist the sympathies of the neighbouring provinces. Returning from his tour of neighbouring provinces, the state Congress president, Swami Ramanand Tirth, courted arrest on 7 August 1947 by organizing a 'Join Indian Union Day'. However, the public response to this show of solidarity was so poor that the Swami had no audience for his speech. But he delivered himself up to the police all the same, for having breached the peace by hoisting the Indian flag. In short, the State Congress did not represent a very impressive movement and was reduced to an absurd spectacle, unable to mount an effective opposition to an efficient, authoritarian regime, despite its undeniable popularity among the Hindu majority of Hyderabad. Its utter reduction had, as we shall see, damaging results.

Meanwhile, the activities of communist elements in the Madras presidency were having repercussions inside Hyderabad, where the authorities had to take measures to suppress local Marxist activity and raids across the border. The communists had gone underground in 1943 after being banned, but their menace had only increased. By 1947, it was proving immensely difficult to contain the civil disobedience movement of the state Congress, while combating the communist incursions. Hyderabad had long borders and the state's modest law and order forces found themselves overstretched. It was under these circumstances that the Muslim party *Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen*, also known as the *Majlis*, offered to set up a volunteer force, the *Razakars*, to help the authorities combat the threat on the borders of Hyderabad. This turned out to be a mixed blessing. Even at its best, the *Razakar* was a ramshackle outfit, largely ineffective as a help to the government's law and order forces, but a propaganda gift to the Congress party and other critics of the Hyderabad regime. Led by Syed Qasim Razvi, the *Razakars* gradually came to be seen as the private army of the *Majlis*, and the mouthpiece of the militant Islamic elements of the state.

By 1947, the *Majlis* had come a long way. Founded in 1927 as a cultural organization, it had long since assumed political overtones. In any case, it was never the same again after the untimely death of its brilliant and charismatic leader, Bahadur Yar Jung, in 1944, and increasingly became the vehicle for Muslim views, no longer tempered, it seemed, by responsible leadership.

Over and above all this was the government's handling of popular Muslim opinion. Muslim passions could be easily aroused and throughout this period, a factor weighing heavily on the government was the volatility of Muslim sentiment. There were many examples illustrating this fact. The editor of the local daily *Waqt*, Abdul Rahman Rais, launched a campaign against moderate elements in the government. Some time later, during the negotiations leading up to the Standstill Agreement, the press was so vicious in its attack on the constitutional adviser, Sir Walter Monckton, that he actually tendered his resignation (later withdrawn). The press did not even spare the prime minister. The public was willing to believe the worst. A state with a reputation for

communal harmony seemed to be losing its equable political temper as Muslim opinion acquired an unprecedented stridency.

In Hyderabad, it was the Dichpally affair that most clearly illustrated the volatility of public opinion and the seeming lack of response from the government. It was alleged that the Dichpally Mission authorities had pulled down a mosque, a temporary structure with a thatched roof, located in the Leper's Asylum at Dichpally in Nizamabad district. This sent a wave of indignation sweeping through the Muslim population of Nizamabad. The local Majlis roused communal feelings and the Chattari government appeared slow to react. The council that was meeting at the time at Shah Manzil, the prime minister's residence, went about its business at a leisurely pace. The procrastination drew the Muslim crowds already gathering in the city to Shah Manzil, which they attempted to set on fire. The crowd then marched to the house of the minister of revenue and police, Sir Wilfrid Grigson, and set fire to it too, acting on the rumour that the mosque had been removed at his instructions. Prompt action could have prevented this senseless conflagration and possibly many future tragedies. The government's weakness or procrastination in dealing with the troublemakers only ensured many more such demonstrations and had a demoralizing effect on the civil service. Thus, an unremarkable event acquired certain significance, as an ominous precursor to Qasim Razvi's dramatic show of strength, regarded in some circles as a virtual coup d'etat.

The situation inside Hyderabad was exacerbated by external factors, most notably, the repercussions of Partition. In June 1947, the British announced their departure. Three months later, they were gone, having failed to anticipate the consequences of their precipitate withdrawal, which led to a massive exchange of populations between India and Pakistan, accompanied by a tremendous bloodbath, in which hundreds of thousands lost their lives. A thousand miles to the south, Hyderabad began receiving a flood of refugees, as frightened Muslims poured in thousands from neighbouring provinces, though southern India was generally calm during the period. Having experienced the trauma of partition, India developed an overriding concern with the possibility of fragmentation and chaos. Its determination to prevent a repetition

of those horrors, and to pre-empt all further challenges to the integrity of India, without doubt influenced its negotiations with Hyderabad. The apparent fragility of the newborn Indian Union was certainly a factor in Hyderabad's calculations.

In June 1947, reacting to the Mountbatten plan for the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan, the Nizam announced that he intended to accede to neither India nor Pakistan, but would preserve the independence of his state. Nevertheless, the Hyderabad government continued to negotiate with Delhi (and not with Pakistan), and it was hoped that a Standstill Agreement would provide enough time to work out the details of whatever status Hyderabad eventually achieved. The negotiations were carried out in secret and continued in the months beyond India's independence on 15 August 1947. At one point, Qasim Razvi (returning from a visit to Delhi) unveiled a 'plot' to lead Hyderabad into accession. This caused quite a stir in Hyderabad, and the main negotiators, the Nawab of Chattari, Sir Walter Monckton, and Nawab Ali Nawaz Jung, came in for much criticism and were widely reviled. This episode, however, was just a curtain raiser to what was to follow.

Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of British India, stayed on as the first governor general of independent India, but it was understood that this would be a very short assignment. It was his fervent desire to settle the Hyderabad issue before leaving India. Spurred on by him, negotiations continued. By October 1947, the two sides appeared close to agreement. Shorn of all rhetoric, it amounted to this: India would consider a Standstill Agreement, on the understanding that Hyderabad would concede to the idea of accession. Provided Hyderabad agreed to join India, the latter was prepared to consider the modalities, the when and how of the matter. The draft agreement, reached after protracted negotiations, was brought back to Hyderabad in late October. The council approved the draft and recommended the agreement to the Nizam. In the early hours of the day that the Hyderabad delegation was to fly to Delhi, Qasim Razvi organized a massive demonstration. A large crowd surrounded the houses of the delegates, that is, the prime minister (the Nawab of Chattari), Sir Walter Monckton and Nawab Ali Nawaz Jung.

The delegation did not leave for Delhi and the draft agreement remained unsigned. This was a triumph for Qasim Razvi over the ruler, the government and the people of Hyderabad. The Ittehad leader had organized the show of strength with great care. In marked contrast to the unruly crowds that had in the past set fire to Shah Manzil, this huge gathering was disciplined and peaceful. Nothing untoward took place as the crowd gathered, or during the prolonged demonstration, or as it dispersed.

Of course, an event of such significance caused much reaction in contemporary government circles in Hyderabad. How was this demonstration accomplished? Why was no action taken when the Razakar volunteers had been moving about the whole night? When was the police commissioner informed? Why did the authorities not disperse the crowds? Did the government not desire swift action? Certainly, there were comments along these lines but little criticism. The consensus seemed to be that it would have been unwise to order the police or the army to take any sort of action against a peaceful demonstration. If the government had ordered such an action, it is not certain whether the army or the police would have carried it out, or fully executed it. This would have resulted in a worse outcome for the government. And however much the militant attitude of the Majlis, or the weakness of the government came in for blame, it was not felt that the civil service had a hand in the affair. Many such insinuations gained currency later, but this was not a point of criticism at the time. Among those early critics were Mulla Abdul Basith, Fareed Mirza, Baquer Ali Mirza and a few others, whose stand on the issue won widespread admiration. It took great courage to criticize the government in power and the Ittehad, whose star was clearly in the ascendant. Notably, Delhi kept aloof throughout the crisis. What would have happened if India had condemned the event as a coup and insisted on a constitutional process? But the moment passed. The crisis subsided as quickly as it had arisen, taking with it any possibility of an early intervention.

It was clear even then that this event marked a turning point. For some, it was the beginning of the end. Still others, more optimistic, argued that given India's preoccupations and assuming Pakistan's support and Britain's sympathy, Hyderabad could yet be swept into

a tumultuous independence. It had a strong case in law and the best constitutional lawyer in the British Empire to back it up: Hyderabad had only to seize the day. This is how things appeared at the time. There was, in other words, an element of rational calculation in drawing back from accession, not just a blind response to extremist passion.

If there was calculation in the reluctance to sign the Standstill Agreement, the basis on which it was made soon began to erode. The position of Hyderabad did not improve; that of India did. While appearing to back off in the face of the great demonstration against the Standstill Agreement, the Hyderabad government nevertheless signed it one month later, on 29 November 1947. There were no changes in the terms on offer, the Indian government and Mountbatten refusing to countenance any. In the meantime, the prime minister, the Nawab of Chattari, had resigned a second and final time, following the October demonstration. A new delegation had gone to Delhi but, in the end, it signed a virtually unchanged Standstill Agreement.

A great deal has been made of the October 'coup', which is popularly regarded as the turning point, but the November reversal is equally significant: the two events together define Hyderabad's position. The November reversal shows that Hyderabad was not necessarily in the clutches of local militants. It is an oversimplification to assign all action on the Hyderabad side to the dictates of Muslim reactionary forces. The facts more readily fit the picture of a government negotiating under pressure. In the talks leading up to the October draft, the idea of accession before negotiation had not been thrashed out; in November, while it was still not thrashed out, it had become clear that such a wholesale accession posed a serious difficulty. The agreement bought time, but little hope. Hyderabad was now locked in a negotiating position from which it appeared unable to extricate itself. Pressure from India only worsened the situation.

How did things come to such a pass? To put it simply, the situation did not contain the seeds of its own resolution. First, negotiations between Hyderabad and India did not appear to even result in a meeting of minds. India saw itself as having succeeded Britain as the Paramount Power vis-à-vis Hyderabad (and all other princely states). In its view, if Hyderabad would agree to accede to India on



only three subjects (external affairs, defence and communications), then everything else was negotiable. Hyderabad's position, however, was different. Upon Britain's departure, paramountcy had lapsed; Hyderabad was legally an independent state. If India was prepared to accept this, Hyderabad was ready to negotiate on everything else. To some extent, therefore, the near-agreement of October 1948 was perhaps the result of a papering-over of fundamental differences; Qasim Razvi had shown in the 'plot' incident cited earlier that popular Muslim opinion in Hyderabad was not ready for accession, thus the ease with which the façade of agreement was torn off.

Second, there seemed to be no possibility of working towards the convergence of opposing sides, which could have promoted mutual accommodation. The gap was unbridgeable between the Nizam and Delhi; between the Muslim-led ruling elite and the Hindu majority. Mountbatten felt this estrangement keenly and thought that personal contact might resolve differences. He invited the Nizam to Delhi, but the latter did not go, feeling perhaps that nothing but awkwardness would result. Those who tried to bridge the gap between the two sides were termed traitors ('ghaddars'), as if the very idea of mediation betrayed an inexcusable spirit of compromise over fundamental values and principles. Given the distance separating the two sides, perhaps the October agreement had come on too fast, before Muslim opinion could be prepared for it.

Third, there seemed to be a desperate willingness to slide down the slippery slope to chaos, as a means of initiating a process of dangerous negotiation. Did the Hyderabad ruling class manoeuvre itself into a position in which it relinquished the initiative to the Muslim militants? Otherwise, how can it be explained that the forceful Nizam, an experienced and calculating ruler, seemed to be caught as helplessly as he appeared to be in this tangled web? Was it the purpose of his tactics to get rid of an embarrassing initiative? How did Delhi both sign the Standstill Agreement and allow the state Congress to escalate its active opposition beyond civil disobedience? And was the Hyderabad administration indecisive because it was weak or weak because it was indecisive? What was the driving force behind this series of steps that added up to a large miscalculation? It is easy to lay the blame on

Muslim extremism, shaped and directed by a handful of senior civil servants. But this sounds too much like a conspiracy theory: impossible to disprove, therefore gaining a spurious plausibility.