Introduction

For a crowd is one man, and the Dancing Fakir had hit upon an old secret of leading rabbles. Captain John Eyton, *The Dancing Fakir* (1922)

Of *faqīrs*, sepoys and madmen

A visitor to the British cantonment of Aurangabad in the early years of the twentieth century may have been surprised at the sight of the naked Indian seen roaming most days round the orderly streets of the compound, occasionally calling out to passing soldiers or pausing to reload his pipe with cannabis. Had our visitor stopped to ask who this audacious fellow was, he may have received any one of a number of answers. Some person may have replied that he was a former soldier, invalided from the Army on account of insanity but whose presence in the cantonment was tolerated on account of his years of service. Another may have replied that the naked man was a holy fool, a gymnosophist celebrated across the land for his miracles; his errant behaviour was proof in itself of his communion with God. Some further respondent may have told our visitor that the dirty fellow was a mere beggar, an idle native who preferred the pleasures of the pipe to a proper day's work. Others still may have given the reflex response to visitors' curiosity about the many such figures seen in the streets of colonial India: he was a 'fakir'.

With his links to a customary Islam of miracle-working holy men and to the patronal networks of Sufi affiliation which surrounded them, it is this figure of the *faqīr* who stands at the centre stage of our investigation into the religious world of the Indian Muslim soldier or 'sepoy' of the high colonial era. For during this period, the meaning of the label 'fakir' was caught between British conceptions of a traditional, passive and superstitious East and pre-colonial Indian notions of the strange powers of poverty and madness. With its literal meaning of 'poor man' derived from the Arabic *faqīr*, the different valence that the term *faqīr* acquired in its transition to English from its older usage in Arabic, Persian and the

regional languages of India was symptomatic of wider transformations in the meaning of madness and poverty, of 'true religion' and rationality, that characterised many an encounter between Indians and Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The description of the 'fakirs' penned by the Methodist missionary Revd William Butler (1818–99) is a good example of both the denigration of this old-style religion and of its links to the Indian soldier:

> These horrible looking men, with their dishevelled hair, naked bodies, and painted breasts and foreheads, are constantly roving over the country, visiting shrines, making pilgrimages, and performing religious services to their disciples. The Sepoys greatly honoured and liberally patronized these spiritual guides […] But no one who has seen and known them can doubt that the great majority of the Fakirs are imposters and hypocrites.[1]

Summed up in Butler's disdainful prose are three of the key themes of this book: the nature of the 'service industry' that the *faqīrs* controlled; the character of their relationship with the Indian soldier; and the results of colonial Christian denigration of their form of Islam. Rather than focus on the abstract notion of 'Sufism' that European scholars developed to describe an Islamic counterpart to 'true religion' comprising high moral teachings, exquisite poetry, refined metaphysics and, in a word, 'mysticism', this book instead focuses on the neglected physicality that, in the vile bodies of the *faqīrs*, was obscured by this refined and intellectualising agenda.[2] The *faqīr* was Islam in the flesh, with all of the problems and prospects which that implied.

As historians of colonial India have widely recognised, the Army was one of the most influential institutions to broker exchange between Indians and Britons. While merchants, bureaucrats and Orientalists make up a familiar side of the story of the colonial encounter, a strong case has been made for the centrality of the Army in negotiating the formative relationship between Indians and Britons.[3] After the 'Mutiny' of 1857, the Indian Army played an increasingly prominent role in the practical no less than imaginary lives of the British in India, from its role as the provider of employment and housing for thousands of British soldiers and their families to its provision of a culture of martial storytelling that lent a narrative template for encounters with living Indians.[4] As Douglas Peers has noted, as the largest single employer in India, the Army 'stands out as the institution in which the closest and most sustained contacts were made between the colonial state and its subject peoples'.[5] But to render the Army as a simple tool of empire is to miss the complexity of the colonial encounter: the Indian Army was no less a source of employment, pride and identity for the millions of Indians and their dependents

whose lives were shaped by its offer of prestige and a regular salary. The effects of the colonial military on Indian society were at once minute and vast in their reach. Over the past two decades, the emergence of a 'new' military history of India has sought to examine the different armies of India's past against a range of culturalist concerns, from the transformation of the Indian peasantry to the reading habits of the Victorian schoolboy.[6] This book seeks to understand the interface between the Army and religion as it found expression among the Indian soldiers of the Hyderabad Contingent between around 1850 and 1930. As such, the book provides a particular case study of the wider cultural negotiations demanded by the presence of vast numbers of Muslim soldiers in the multifarious regiments of the subcontinent.

It is a contention of this book that the sheer scale of Muslim employment allowed the Army, through its institutions as well as attitudes, to disseminate certain forms of religiosity among its soldiers at the same time that it restrained others. Beneath this proposition, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* provides a detailed reconstruction of the interaction of sepoy religion with the colonial Army as found in the military fellowships of four *faqīrs*. Like any exercise in micro-history, the extent to which the findings can be generalised is a separate matter, and it will be clear to readers that the evidence provided shows primarily what it shows: a particular story of a particular time and place. But if they are to be of any use to other historians, such small-scale investigations need to suggest forms of connection to conversations about processes on the larger scale. While recognising the dangers of over-stepping the evidence, the book therefore offers parallels in passing where they are apparent to circumstances in other parts of India before, in the conclusion, extrapolating a set of processes that are offered for wider application. The extent to which these processes may be regarded as more general is up to other researchers to decide. By drawing on a series of cheap print Urdu biographies of the holy men associated with sepoys in the princely state of Hyderabad (also known as the Nizam's State), what the following chapters do provide is the first detailed reconstruction of the religious life of the Muslim soldiers, and, as such, a study of Indian military life that is unique for being built on a foundation of 'native' sources. The perspective that these sources provide allows us to assess the degree to which, in Hyderabad at least, the British Empire promoted or alternatively reformed the religious life of 'Jack Sepoy' and so to paint a picture of an Islam that was subject to the forces of history as expressed in the meeting of the Indian soldier and the British officer.[7] Shaped by the quotidian concerns of the soldier's life between barrack hall and battlefield, this was

an Islam that at once served and was served by the interests of empire: it was what we may term a 'barracks Islam'.

According to a popular Persian idiom, the anonymous masses of history are referred to as *siyāhī-e-lashkar*, the 'blackness of the Army'. Nameless and forgotten, but for a few exceptions, we have till now little sense of the individual character and concerns of the Indian soldiers by whose efforts Britain's empire in India was created and sustained. The memoirs of British former officers in India survive in their hundreds, just as there also exists a smaller (and late) English-language memorial literature penned by Indian members of the native officer class. But in comparison to the wealth of studies of the British officer and (to a lesser extent) foot soldier, the intellectual, emotional and spiritual world of the sepoy is lost in the anonymity of the lower ranks.[8] A similar preponderance of studies of 'big men' characterises the history of Islam in colonial India more generally, in which the lion's share of attention has been given to the rebels and reformists whose movements seemingly caught the current of history with their sense for the needs of a changing society.[9] *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* deliberately avoids this main beam of historical attention to look at a series of figures whose histories have till now been lost in the proverbial 'blackness of the Army' but are recoverable through their appearance in a number of early twentieth-century Urdu texts that detail the careers of the Muslim holy men attached to the sepoys of the Hyderabad Contingent, the British-officered army stationed in the cantonments of the Nizam's State. For though our visitor to the Aurangabad cantonment was a rhetorical invention, the naked Indian he saw alternatively loafing or parading there was no figure of fiction. But as the range of answers offered to our visitor suggests, precisely who this figure was – sepoy, *faqīr*, idler – was unclear, and no less contested. Had our visitor returned to Aurangabad a few decades later – say around 1925 – he may have been even more surprised to find that a pilgrimage centre had developed around the grave of the beggar whose shouts had caught his attention years earlier. Or perhaps, with the intervening years imbibing the 'wisdom' of empire, he had learned that in India there was nothing out of the ordinary in common people worshipping the bones of 'charlatans' or 'fools'. Between these possible attitudes of wonder and disregard lies an uncharted history of the personal and institutional transformations that made possible such traffic between holiness and poverty, soldiering and madness, a history that also reveals the impact of colonial attitudes towards the Indian subalterns on the framing of later attitudes towards 'popular religion'. As much as this is a book on the Army, it is also a study of the fortunes of 'popular' religion

as evinced in the conflicts surrounding the customary Islam of the Hyderabad sepoys.

Unlike our fictional visitor, the drugged and naked wanderer in the Aurangabad cantonment had a name: Muhammad Aʿzam Khān. Over the following chapters, we show that Muhammad Aʿzam Khān and his fellow *faqīrs* and sepoys have a history that can still be traced amid the 'blackness of the Army'. Making sense of this history is far from straightforward, since our sources on the lives of the sepoys and their *faqīr* guardians are written from a standpoint that differs radically from the soberly empirical tone of the official and memorial literature that constitutes the primary sources on the British side. As represented through the Urdu materials, the world of the sepoy was one that reckoned with different forms of agency, miraculous and supernatural, to those recognised in the writings of their British commanders. Indeed, such modes of agency formed the key currency of the holy men with whom Indian soldiers had aligned themselves from long before Britain's entry to India's military labour market and with whom they continued to associate themselves into the twentieth century.

In relying on cheap print Urdu tales of the sepoys and *faqīrs*, our history is an insider's history and, as such, paints a picture of the British Empire – more specifically the far military reach of empire in India's grandest princely state – from the standpoint of its lowest-ranking servants. As in other essays in 'subaltern' historiography, there is certainly room in the story for resistance to colonial power, not least in our account of Muhammad Aʿzam Khān himself. But in protecting the sepoys serving on imperial duty, the Muslim holy men who surrounded these soldiers were also aides to the expansion of empire. As William Pinch has shown in his recent study of *yōgī* and *sādhū* warriors in India, at different times such armed ascetic regiments alternatively employed their violence in service or repudiation of the Raj.[10] Such studies demonstrate that it is historically futile to regard either Hinduism or Islam as a fixed entity, static in opposition to the interests of the colonial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like any other large-scale religious or ideological label, for the historian 'Islam' is only meaningful when conceived in terms of persons, institutions or discourses at work in the social world.[11] It is in this way that sense can be made of the different ways in which religion operates in history: when 'religion' is seen in terms of contingent human beings rather than in terms of fixed theological ideals – when made present in living Muslims rather than when made abstract in a reified universal Islam. If religion is subject to the forces of history, then what actually constitutes history – what may be admitted into historical narrative in terms of valid agents and causes – is in turn the product of the assumptions that underlie different cultural (alternatively, philosophical,

scientific or religious) worldviews. To write subaltern history in both the literal sense of a history of the Indian soldier and the theoretical sense of a 'history from below' thus requires a willingness to contemplate alternative constructions of history to those brought to India by the empirically-minded heirs to Hobbes and Hume. For the source materials that this book uses to recreate the sepoys' world were written in an episteme that was accepting of alternative forms of agency to those of the physicalist Newtonian universe. If the Subaltern Studies series attempted to eschew the 'grand narratives' of national liberation and class struggle that rob the past of its own terms of reference, in largely ignoring religion for all their fine work, many of the contributors to the series sidestepped the more crucial problem of writing history through the terms with which the participants of that history understood their world to operate.[12] If not necessarily 'religious' in the sense of the unified ideological appeals of the modernising or reformed religions of the nineteenth century, this world was nonetheless one of multiple, often invisible, capricious and unpredictable powers. These powers comprise forms of agency which since Hume's critique 'serious' history has been unable to take at face value, most particularly the anti-scientific agency of the miracle (Urdu *karāmat, kirishma, muʿjiza*).

More recent scholarship has attempted to seize such bulls by the horns, asking such difficult questions as whether India can be said to have possessed a history before the colonial reconstruction of India's past based on 'rational' models of historical agency; or, alternatively, whether it is possible to read Indian source materials 'along the grain' so as to better recreate the texture of past experience, even if at times necessarily letting go of the desire for objective knowledge of 'what actually happened'.[13] In this way, writing any form of 'history from below' has the seditious potential to undermine dominant constructions of history *en somme*. The underlying struggle that defines this book is therefore less one between Islam and the British Empire than one between the different ways of recounting the world on which the participants in that history relied. From examining the points at which these ways convened, interacted or disputed one another in recounting how the world operates, what emerges is less a clash of civilisations than a clash of interpretations.

Islam and the army in colonial India

Until the mechanisation of warfare robbed combat of all but the traces of valour, in his various guises the warrior served as a heroic model in numerous societies around the globe. This was not only true of so-called 'militaristic' societies – those of Spartans, Umayyad Arabs or imperial Britons – but also of societies as different as those of medieval agrarian

India and the pastoral Massai Mara.[14] In all its religious and social groupings, India has been no exception to this rule of thumb. Despite popular images of an essentially peaceful and non-violent Hindu civilisation that were reinforced by the pragmatic politics of Mohandas Gandhi, scholarship has recently demonstrated that far from relinquishing violence, in their provision of professional bands of mercenary soldiers, the Hindu *sādhū* or 'renouncer' orders of pre-colonial India were among the most reliable suppliers of aggression to the Indian war market.[15] While the roving *sādhū* armies that the British encountered, and tamed, in their conquest of Bengal were successfully suppressed, by the middle of the nineteenth century the militant traditions of the Sikh *akālīs* were found to be more adaptable to British designs. Like other socio-religious groups in pre-colonial India, the Sikhs had developed a form of martial organisation that since Guru Har Gobind's assumption of the authority of spirit and world – of *pīrī* and *mīrī* – was inseparable from the precepts of their 'religion'.[16] In the decades after the British conquest of the remnants of the Sikh empire in the Punjab of the 1840s, the development of an ideology of 'martial races' lent the newly organised Indian Army a means of classifying the different peoples of India according to their innate capacity for war, a 'scientific' logic that drew on indigenous notions of warrior peoples current among Indians themselves.[17] With the forces of society and politics eventually read as those of biological race, like other Punjabis the Sikhs found themselves classified among the chief martial races of the subcontinent. The legacy of these racial classifications is still with us today in common stereotypes of the peaceful Indian and the violent Arab, themselves transmuted into 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' through the ideological displacement of race by religion.

Given the prevalence and prestige of military service in India, it should come as no surprise that stories of heroic warfare long formed a staple subject for the literatures of India. Such medieval Sanskrit works as the *Rājadharmakānda* of Lakshmīdhara and the *Narapati-jayacaryā-svarodaya* of Naraharī instructed Ksatriya Hindu rulers in the arts of divination, oneiromancy and amulet-making to ensure success in battle.[18] From the Sanskrit epics of the *Rāmayana* and *Mahābhārata* to the oral epics in regional languages collected by colonial ethnographers, tales of martial heroes served to entertain no less than edify.[19] The same has also long been true in the visual arts, to the extent that weaponry and armour were adorned with no less care than paintings proper of soldiers in equestrian or rampant pose.[20] The stories of Indian foot soldiers and cavalrymen, of sepoys and sowars, recorded in the saintly biographies that form the main sources of this book belong in part to this same tradition of licit entertainment. At a time when in

England such soldierly memoirs as Earl Roberts of Kandahar's *Forty-One Years in India* went through dozens of editions, heroic tales of Indian soldiers were similarly important in popular Indian publishing. From the effects of the theory of 'martial races' on the social structure of Punjab to the contribution of the 1857 rebellion to the music halls of Britain, the military cultures of India and Britain were mutually constitutive. This was, after all, part of the spectacle no less than process of empire.[21]

With his fine uniform and with money in his pocket, the soldier was a familiar and very local hero in the villages of India no less than Lancashire or the English Midlands. As such, the histories of the wayward cavalrymen, mad sepoys and miracle-working *faqīrs* who form the unlikely heroes of this book cover a neglected part of both Indian and British imperial history, at once abetting and subverting the expansion of the Raj. We must be wary of projecting an anachronous and overtly nationalist consciousness onto the thousands of Indian soldiers who served under British command in the colonial era. Military historians have debated the extent to which the sepoy revolts of the nineteenth century – including the rebellion of 1857 – were prompted by transgressions of the sepoy's rights and privileges rather than his allegiance to some greater national or ethnic collectivity. What is clear is that the sepoy world that this book explores should be regarded as neither a parochial nor a traditional culture but rather as a culture – and in particular a religious culture – in transition. Despite its pre-colonial antecedents, the sepoy world that we investigate was the product of a regimentally confined social environment comprising both Indians and Britons. With its own norms of camaraderie and command, a regiment forms a social unit of its own, the structures of which are capable of either underpinning or undermining alternative affiliations, whether of caste, class or religion. What the following chapters explore is therefore a distinctly sepoy religious production, a barracks Islam that for all its connections with wider historical forces was concomitant with, and to put the matter at its most crass, functionally subservient to the institutional structures and professional demands of sepoy life.[22] This is not to say that either the sepoys or their holy men always obeyed the chain of colonial command, as the rebellion examined in Chapter 2 makes clear. It is rather to contend that the services offered to the sepoys by their holy men were shaped by the demands of their soldier patrons.

Indian military history has long been haunted by the spectre of rebel-rousing Muslim preachers urging the troops toward mutiny. The perspective given in *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* complicates this picture by showing that Islam was not so much an external factor that leaked into the parade ground but was a religious culture – a barracks Islam – that

developed out of the soldiers' own lifestyle. As we see in Chapter 2, the reliance of certain holy men on a salaried sepoy clientele meant that the Indian soldier was no mere pawn in the religious games of his preceptors but was active in shaping the actual rules of the game.

Army and empire in Hyderabad state

The setting for this case study of barracks Islam is the princely state of Hyderabad between around 1850 and 1930. Like other successor states that emerged during the eighteenth century, the Nizam's State of Hyderabad owed its existence to the struggles to divide up the territories of the Mughal Empire in the decades after the death of Awrangzeb in 1118/1707. It was during the reign of the third Nizam of Hyderabad, Nizām ʿAlī Khān (r. 1175/1761–1218/1803), that British power began to expand across the Deccan from the East India Company's southern outpost in the Madras Presidency. As part of the rivalry between the various European and Indian powers, in 1798, Nizām ʿAlī Khān signed the Treaty of Subsidiary Alliance with the East India Company, by which Hyderabad was gradually brought into the ambit of British influence and laid the foundations of the 'Hyderabad Contingent' as the British-controlled regiments in Hyderabad became collectively known.[23] If an over-concentration on the political or 'colonial' archive has at times exaggerated the scale of British influence on Hyderabadi life, there was one institution through which British influence was spread throughout the Nizam's State, which contained only a relatively small and geographically confined European population. That institution was the army and, by extension, its logistical corollaries of cantonment towns, roads and railways. By this the people of Hyderabad felt the presence of empire through encounters with the British officers, priests or memsahibs who dwelt in the cantonments that followed the Contingent's deployment all around the Nizam's State.

Although commanded by a British officer class, the Hyderabad Contingent was manned by Indian soldiers and funded at the Nizam's expense.[24] The Contingent was nominally part of the Madras Army, and regiments of the latter were often stationed near the Contingent's men in Hyderabad, heightening their exposure to colonial modes of service. Like colonial armies in other parts of the world, as a social organisation the Contingent was an intrinsically hybrid formation whose barracks and messes formed the laboratories of new cultural and religious forms.[25] Partly in response to political change, and partly in response to the reorganisation of India's military traditions under the British, the character of the original 'subsidiary force' raised after 1798 changed

throughout the nineteenth century. Around 1816, several of the irregular brigades of infantry and cavalry that had earlier been raised to meet specific threats were reorganised as part of a wider pattern of reigning in the 'dangerously' unregulated system of mixed European and Indian bands (most famously Skinner's Horse) which presented a threat to an increasingly racialised no less than centralised model of military order.[26] After this first round of reform, several new brigades of both horse and foot were founded. By 1826, the five Hyderabad cavalry regiments become known as the Nizam's Cavalry, which was also supported by a number of infantry regiments. After 1829, these forces took orders only from the British Resident in Hyderabad, and, with their British officers and the growing influence of the Resident, although nominally in the service of the Nizam, the soldiers in fact served the interests of the Company and then the Raj. The Contingent's cavalry regiments were principally made up of Muslims of old gentlemanly families. As one of the British officers serving in Hyderabad in the middle years of the nineteenth century explained, 'these troops are principally Mahomedans […] The force consists of picked men: many of the privates are even of the best Mahomedan families.'[27]

Such was the cost to the Nizam's treasury of maintaining this army that by the middle of the nineteenth century the state was effectively bankrupt. In 1853, the government of the fourth Nizam, Nāsir al-Dawla (r. 1244/1829–1273/1857), was forced to surrender to the British the agriculturally rich northern province of Berar, along with the districts of Osmanabad and Raichur, in lieu of arrears. As a result of the Berar fiasco, the Hyderabadi armies were once again reorganised in such a way as to maximise British influence, and it was during this period of reorganisation that the cavalry and infantry regiments became collectively known as the Hyderabad Contingent. From this period, the Contingent came to exert ever-greater social and political influence in the Nizam's State as its manpower and administrative appendages expanded to create a network of cantonments replete with churches, schools, hospitals and asylums. It is this period of the colonial army's greatest influence in Hyderabad that is dealt with in this book. Although in 1902 the Contingent was technically disbanded as a separate force and its regiments absorbed into the Indian Army, the cantonments in which the Contingent had been posted continued to be occupied by the soldiers of the Indian Army, and most people in the Nizam's State continued to refer to them by the word 'Contingent' (*kontinjant*), which had long been absorbed into the Urdu of the Deccan. It is in this more general sense of regiments in Hyderabad under British command that the term 'Contingent' is used for the remainder of this book.