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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.

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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:

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> 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

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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),

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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

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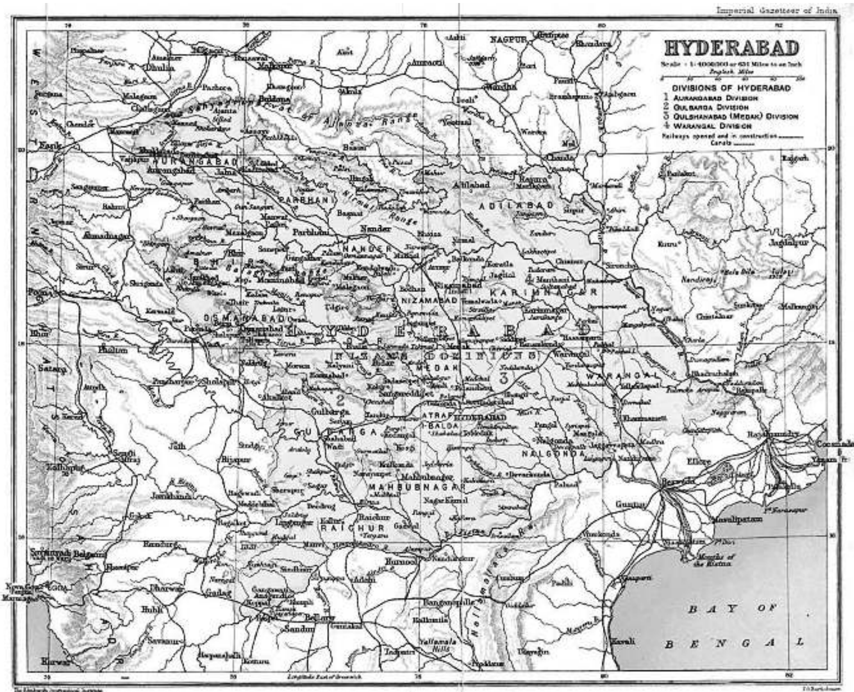

Figure I.1 Hyderabad state from the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 1909

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,

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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,

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> 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."

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In addition, this particular period also witnessed numerous political and religious transformations related to the Hindu–Muslim question (Figure I.2). The Nizam of Hyderabad and the Razakars had started circulating the idea of Azad Hyderabad (Independent Hyderabad) and a "Muslim State"—some writers used the Telugu term *Mahammadīya rājyaṁ* (literally, "Mohammadan State")—to claim their independent political authority.[21] On the other hand, the leftist parties undertook an armed guerilla movement known as the Telangana armed rebellion (*Telangāṇa sāyudha pōrāṭaṁ* in Telugu) between 1946 and 1951 against the locally dominant feudal system.[22] Between these two modes of political violence and the battlefield of diverse viewpoints, Telangana was struggling to produce its own tools of political transformation

Figure I.2 The map of the Hyderabad state from the document of the appeal made to the United Nations (later published in 1951)

Source: Document on the Hyderabad Question before the United Nations, Karachi, 1951.

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and a local version of modernity.[23] Prior to this violent political moment, argues historian Benjamin Cohen, Hyderabad state had envisioned a clear break from the feudal setting to being an era of a "new Hyderabad."[24] From 1908 to 1948, many such developments produced an urban Muslim category, which culminated in the making of a new Muslim identity along with the "new Hyderabad" during the Police Action. Against this complex background, any discussion about Police Action, as I show in this book, was not confined to immediate violence and trauma. Despite its unsettling impact, the political event of the Police Action in many ways resulted in revisiting the Muslim question that includes an urban dimension of Muslimness and the Hindu–Muslim composite culture—otherwise popularly known as the Hyderabadi *tehzeeb*. How do we understand these two dimensions when the very identity of Muslims was in danger during the Police Action?

THE MUSLIM QUESTION, HYDERABAD, AND TELANGANA

Although a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment pervades many of the writings promoted by the nationalists and leftists, the question about Muslim being and belonging remains largely unanswered or buried. The Muslims of Hyderabad did indeed experience intense moments when their belonging was challenged. But the critical moment of the Police Action, which historians such as Omar Khalidi and A. G. Noorani described as the "fall of Hyderabad," created a new dilemma. This led to an unprecedented disenchantment with the nationalist mission of the Indian government along with a fear of majoritarian political authority. Being a Muslim in this political and religious context challenged the individuals' everyday life and survival beginning in 1948. This book emphasizes the urgency of reading this history through the lens of Muslim belonging to understand various political and religious transformations that fashioned the everyday life of Muslims in the long 1930s and 1940s. 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 postcolonial India, 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.[25]

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