Kingship and Colonialism in India's Deccan: 1850–1948

Benjamin B. Cohen

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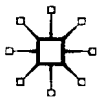

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For my parents, Roberta and Stephen

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Of course, any errors are solely my own.

Salt Lake City,
March 2006.

Notes on Text

In addition to the Common Era (CE) calendar system, documents from the Deccan frequently used two other systems. The first is the Hijri (H) calendar, which begins with the flight of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. The calendar is lunar and begins from 16 July 622 CE. The second calendar system is the Fasli (F) ("harvest") calendar. This was devised by Mughal Emperor Akbar. The Hijri calendar did not correspond to the agricultural year, nor the fiscal administration, so farmers were pressed to pay taxes out of sync with the administrative calendar. The Fasli calendar was designed to correspond with the agricultural seasons—one crop (*rabi*) in the spring, and the second (*kharif*) in the fall. The Fasli calendar is solar, and thus has slowly diverged from the lunar Hijri calendar. Whenever possible I have converted dates to their CE equivalent, or when necessary, provided the equivalent along with the original Hijri or Fasli date.

Scholars of South Asia will be familiar with Indian vocabulary used, thus I have omitted diacritical marks. Terms are given in italics, and can be found in the glossary for clarification. Indian terms that have become part of the English lexicon are not italicized, such as raja or durbar. The exception to this is the term "samasthan" because of its frequent use. I have used common spellings for places, thus Hyderabad and not Haiderabad, and used the English "s" to signify plurals, rather than the Telugu or Urdu equivalents, thus, "*samasthans*" rather than "*samasthanlu*." All maps and translations are by the author.

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Abbreviations

APSA	Andhra Pradesh State Archive, Hyderabad
B.G.	British Government (currency)
CW	Court of Wards, Hyderabad
F	Fasli date
GOI	Government of India
H	Hijri date
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, London.
NAI	National Archive of India, New Delhi
NML	Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi
Rs.	Rupee
TNSA	Tamil Nadu State Archive, Chennai
WFP	Wanaparthi Family Papers, Hyderabad

Introduction

In February 1937, the American weekly magazine *Time* featured a cover picture of Osman Ali Khan. He was the Nizam of Hyderabad and the wealthiest man in the world. It is not surprising that he commanded the attention of the magazine during America's Great Depression. Readers would have found his estimated wealth of 1.4 billion dollars a staggering sum.[1] His vast princely state—larger than France—held a key position in south central India, a region known as the Deccan, and was surrounded on all sides by the territories of the British Raj. They would have seen a Muslim whose descendants traced their ancestry back five centuries. In short, the Nizam and his palace-filled capital of Hyderabad presented to the reader a magnificent example of potentates and "oriental splendor." However, the reader might have been surprised to learn that, while the city of Hyderabad was predominantly Muslim, and Urdu speaking, the rest of the state was Hindu and spoke mostly Telugu. In 1909, with a population of 11.1 million, roughly 85 percent of the state was Hindu, about 10 percent was Muslim, and the remaining a mix of Christians, tribals, and others.[2] If the inquisitive reader had wanted to know more about those people and places beyond the city of Hyderabad, their search would have yielded almost nothing.

Thus, Hyderabad State has largely been presented as having a sole center of power, dominated by the Nizam, his minister, and a handful of British officials. However, this impression is misleading. In fact, the state had multiple centers of power and multiple participants who negotiated their power within the state. Amongst those participants dotting the countryside were the capitals of the samasthan (Hindu kingdoms) kings whose origins predated the arrival of Muslim rule in the Deccan. These kingdoms began as military service providers to the Kakatiya and Vijayanagar empires of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. As the Deccan came under Indo-Muslim rule, they negotiated their power and authority with their new masters. Over time, their survival and resilience led them to become the oldest members of Hyderabad's polity. At the same time, they shared their position within the Nizam's dominions with other

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nobles. Some of these were landholders with vast estates not unlike the samasthans, while others were ethnic communities (Arabs, Africans, Afghans, etc.) who wielded economic and military influence across the state, but were generally not large landholders. As the Deccan and Hyderabad State were home to a variety of ethnic, religious, and political communities, each began to incorporate ideas and practices from the other. Due to their longevity, the samasthan kings came to be composites bearing multiple identities. These complex identities drew upon a continuity with their "ancient" pasts, while over time they were quick to adapt and adopt change.[3] While the Nizam held this multiethnic cadre in his political orbit, he and these participants continuously negotiated their positions in a variety of military, ceremonial, and legal ways over several centuries.

For Hyderabad and the Deccan, there has been a long history of seeing a "synthesis," hybridity, or syncretism of politics, religion, and culture.[4] These suggest a melding of two or more entities, and the creation of something new. However, the samasthans, their rulers, and Hyderabad's political milieu in the nineteenth and early twentieth century might alternatively be viewed as composites. A composite has two or more elements, separate, yet forming a larger body. Rather than forming new identities, they forged composite, multiethnic and multicultural identities, each wielding and having access to power deployed at different times and for different purposes.

This work suggests a new perspective on Hyderabad State and the role of local power holders, specifically the samasthans, in a multiethnic and multitiered political system. These polities provided valuable military, fiscal, and ceremonial support to Hyderabad's Nizams, while at the same time maintaining their identity and autonomy within the state's polity. In their territories, they pursued military, administrative, and social practices that both gestured to their origins and came to incorporate newer Indo-Muslim and European practices that surrounded them. Thus, while previously ignored by Deccan and Hyderabad historians, these kings and their states played a vital part in the local-regional dynamics of India's largest princely state. They provide a case study for the ways in which power was negotiated in a multiethnic state, and over time, how identity (individual and political) became increasingly composite in nature.

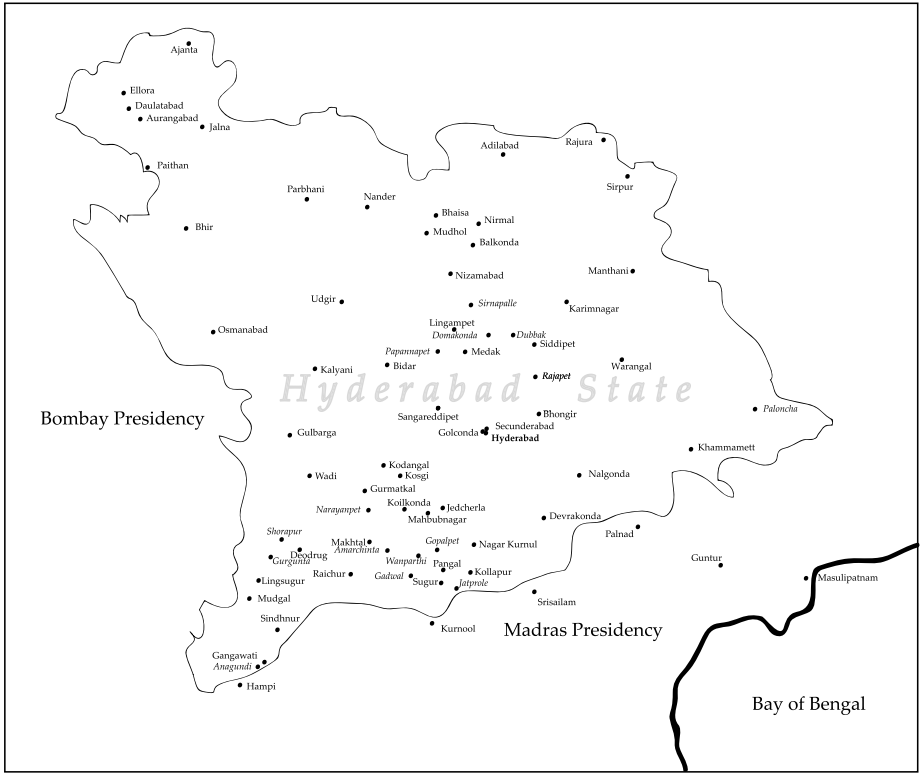
An example of this composite identity comes in physical form from the statue of a samasthan raja. A few miles north of the Krishna river, which marked the boundary between Hyderabad State and the Madras Presidency, is the town of Kollapur, in modern day Mahbubnagar district. At the center of town is a walled palace compound. Just beyond

the imposing gate is the statue of Raja Lakshma Rao. Cast in the early 1930s, the statute pays tribute to one of Hyderabad's multiple power holders. It incorporates in fixed form the composite Hindu, Muslim, and European culture and politics that permeated the state, something neither reflected in the *Time* article nor in much of the scholarship surrounding the state. The king stands as a life-size statue, raised on a plinth and protected by an ornate gazebo. He wears a turban, an Mughali styled long coat with tight pajama pants, English lace-up shoes, and sports a walking stick. On the plinth are his birth, ruling, and death dates carved in the languages that surrounded him: Telugu, Urdu, English, and Persian. The statue not only memorializes one of Hyderabad State's leaders, but also reflects the diversity and composite culture embodied in the state's structure.

Lakshma Rao and his kingdom were one of the samasthans, sometimes also called "little States."[5] These kingdoms were led by rajas and sometimes their wives, *ranis* (queens). Hyderabad State had fourteen samasthans, as seen in map 1, which in order of prestige were: Gadwal, Wanaparthi, Jatprole, Amarchinta, Paloncha, Gopalpet, Anagundi, Gurgunta, Narayanpet, Domakonda, Rajapet, Dubbak, Papanapet, and Sirnapalli.[6] As table 1 indicates, their combined lands formed nearly 10 percent of the state's territory; their populations topped 1.2 million people, or about 10 percent of the state's total population; their annual combined income was over six million rupees; and their *peshkush* (payment, tribute) to the Nizam was nearly one-third million rupees.[7]

As rulers within the Nizam's dominions, and as neighbors to British India, the samasthan families negotiated their power vis-à-vis the Nizam's government, and at times, *through* the Nizam with the British. Both the Nizams and British officials struggled to understand the position of the samasthans within Hyderabad State, and within south India. Two incidents bear out the tripartite negotiation over the samasthans' position and powers.

First, for British officials in the neighboring Madras Presidency, it was a delicate process of recognizing the position of the samasthan families, but in doing so, not subverting the authority of the Nizam whom the samasthans were ultimately subordinate to. One such negotiation occurred in the summer of 1914. At that time, the raja of Wanaparthi purchased a home from Salar Jung, minister of Hyderabad State, in the hill station of Ootacamund. Princes, chiefs, and notables were required to obtain permission to own a house in Ootacamund, and the raja ran afoul of British policy as he purchased it directly from Salar Jung and not through official channels. The question at hand was whether the law,



Map 1 Cities, Samasthans, and Towns of Hyderabad State

Table 1 Area, Villages, Population, Income, and Tribute of Some of the Samasthans

Samasthan	*Area (Miles)*	*Villages*	*Population*	*Annual Income (Rs.)*	Peshkush *(Rs.)*
Gadwal	817	122	968,491	1,704,607	86,540
Wanaparthi	605	150	62,197	1,332,105	83,862
Jatprole	429	86	31,613	1,207,750	71,944
Amarchinta	161	69	34,147	614,155	6,363
Paloncha	3,090	70	38,742	678,382	45,875
Gopalpet		35	16,301	315,213	22,663
Anagundi		78	4,295		
Gurgunta		38	19,937		7,050
Narayanpet			59,967	130,000	

which applied to "chiefs" and "notables," also applied to the raja. Recognizing the importance of the samasthan, and writing to the raja's defense was Major Minchin, first assistant to the Resident at Hyderabad. Citing the entry for Wanaparthi in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, (itself a source of authority) Minchin concluded, "there can be no doubt, in Mr. Fraser's opinion [then Resident at Hyderabad], that the raja must be regarded as a 'Notable' or 'Personage' of the Hyderabad State."[8] The raja took possession of the house without further difficulty.

British authorities decided what position the Wanaparthi raja held. However, an incident a few years later brought to light a moment when the Nizam chose an opposite tact, in short, erasing the samasthans from maps of the state, and thus—in a sense—negating or downplaying their very existence.[9] Maps of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century India generally illustrate large areas of the subcontinent under British control, while the remaining territories were governed by the princely states.[10] Maps of Hyderabad State displayed the towns and villages of the state along with roads, rivers, railways, etc., but fail to reveal Hyderabad's complex political geography. In fact, it seems to have been the policy of the Nizams, at least that of Osman Ali Khan, to actively discourage the mapping of Hyderabad's different political entities, including the samasthans.[11] In June 1923, the British Residency, then under Charles Russell, wrote to the Nizam's secretary, Nawab Fasih Jung, to request on behalf of a Survey of India team to show the boundaries of the Gadwal, Wanaparthi, and Amarchinta samasthans on the Survey of India maps. If shown, the boundary would have been "undemarcated and approximate" and of no value in a court of law.[12] Fasih Jung replied that the Nizam's government, "very much regret their inability to accede to the request." No further explanation is given. This policy—stated or

not—had a twofold effect. In viewing a map of Hyderabad State only a sole center of power—Hyderabad city—is visible. The Nizam cast himself as *the* power in the state, and controlling cartographic representation was a way to exercise this power. Second, this cartographic imbalance has reinforced the historiographical tilt toward Hyderabad city itself. As no other political entities were adequately mapped, historians have largely failed to examine the state's periphery, although it constituted 95 percent of the population.[13]

The samasthans and their towns and villages, demarcated or not, reflect the religious and linguistic composition of the state as a whole. The populations of the samasthans were distributed amongst Hindus, Muslims, tribals, and a few Christians, Sikhs, and Jains.[14] Accordingly, the samasthans had language speakers that included Telugu, Marathi, Kanarese, Urdu, and English. The overall ratio of each religious group mirrors that of Hyderabad State or, about 85 percent Hindu, 5–10 percent Muslim, and the remainder a mix of other faiths. Each samasthan had both temples and mosques scattered throughout its territories. Frequently the grandest temples and largest mosques were located in the samasthan capital towns. Both temples and mosques often received the support of the ruling family, and within Wanaparthi, we can add Christian missionary establishments to the list of religious institutions that received support.[15]

A royal palace generally anchored capital towns in the samasthans. These structures were sometimes originally forts that had been modified over time, while others were built as royal residences. Most were two or three stories in height with grand staircases marking their entrances. The façades had a mix of arches and beams, and the roofline had elaborate finials. The palaces were set in gardens, and those were in turn surrounded by walls and a system of gates. The main gates were often elaborate structures designed more for awe and inspiration than for practical purposes. The palace at Wanaparthi had large lions set at the base of the steps. The palaces had durbar halls (a ruler's court) where the raja would receive guests, conduct business, or be otherwise entertained. Over time, these rooms and the structures themselves were adjusted to accommodate new technology. Electric lights replaced candles and torches, while outside, motorcars replaced horse or elephant-drawn carriages.

Beyond the palace gates, samasthan capital towns fanned out in all directions. In Wanaparthi and Kollapur, rows of shops and noble residences lined the main street leading up to the palace. In his Telugu account of the ruling family of Jatprole, V. Sadasiva Sastrulu provides a list of the offices and amenities available in Kollapur in the first decades

of the twentieth century. These included: "line" houses, a magistrate's office, *taluk* (district, division of an estate) office, post office, school, police office, and jail, while further afield other communities resided that were typical of the time including weavers, potters, merchants, etc.[16] The laying of the foundation stone for these structures was often occasion for a guest—usually a Hyderabad official, both Indian or Briton—to be in attendance. The heads of the samasthans recognized the symbolic authority granted to them, and reciprocally offered by them, to these guests. For instance, in Kollapur on 1 June 1930, Maharaja Kishen Pershad (president of the Nizam's Executive Council) was in attendance at the laying of the Lakshmaraya School's foundation stone. Six years later, Richard M. Crofton (director general of Revenue in Hyderabad, 1935–1945) attended the laying of the foundation stone at the Samasthan Hospital.[17] Cyril Jones (an assistant engineer and later managing director of the Nizam's State Railways) was lavishly entertained by the rani of the Sirnapalli samasthan. Jones and his companion, George J. Campbell (a railway survey engineer), were greeted by servants of the rani when they entered samasthan territory.

> It was about midday and they had cleared a space in the jungle and laid out a meal. I think I never enjoyed a meal more. About three or four Indian dishes on leaf plates were followed by the most delicious sweetmeats. We then mounted ponies which the rani had sent for us and rode to the palace where the rani received us in durbar. She was a charming middle aged woman but unfortunately was a victim of elephantiasis. I bitterly regretted that I had to rely on Campbell to express my appreciation but he was fluent in Urdu and I was not. She and Campbell got on very well and were obviously renewing an old friendship.[18]

Holidays, festivals, and markets marked the calendar year of the samasthans. In his introduction to the statistical report on such events in the Nizam's Dominions, Mazhar Husain, director of Statistics, comments that, "In the scheme of life, man has wisely provided some useful diversions from the dreary and monotonous routine of the daily life. Such diversions are in the nature of periodic Festivities, Melas and Jatras."[19] These occurred on a weekly basis, while others were only annual events. They marked important moments in the agricultural calendar, or were related to saints, heroes, or evil spirits. These events attracted varying numbers of attendees. For instance, in the Paloncha samasthan the Venkatesh Swami gathering drew only an average of 150 people, the Lakshmi Narsimha Swami gathering at Sangotam in the Jatprole samasthan drew 4,000 attendees, and the Kurmurti Swami

gathering at Amapur in the Amarchinta samasthan drew 20,000 attendees.[20] In addition to events associated with temple deities and agricultural life, smaller markets regularly sprung up to serve the needs of villages and townsfolk alike. These markets were frequently located just beyond the palace gates. The markets provided attendees a chance to purchase goods, exchange information, and enjoy a few moments of entertainment that such events inherently offered. Some of the goods sold in these markets were grown in the samasthans including wheat, *jawar* and *bajra* (millet), ragi (grain), maize, and gram. Thus, the samasthans present a picture of towns and villages organized around the capital where the royal family resided, each penetrated by multiple languages, faiths, and occupations, and punctuated by important calendar dates or the occasional visit by a dignitary. All the while, the samasthan families carefully maintained their authority within their own domains, and negotiated their position within Hyderabad's political milieu.

Negotiations beyond Hyderabad

While this work provides a case study for the way in which power was negotiated within the Nizam's multiethnic dominions, this same process had similar antecedents in the Deccan and elsewhere. Over time the process was further complicated by the addition of European participants. In the Deccan, larger regional powers have long made use of smaller subordinate powers, keeping them in their orbit through a mix of military service demands and ceremonial rewards. Thus, it is not surprising to see the names of the samasthan rulers mentioned in both Kakatiya and Vijayanagar empire accounts, as well as in Mughal records. Military need, fiscal acumen, and ceremonial processes undergirded these relationships. For instance, the Kakatiya rulers employed local rulers or chieftains who maintained bodies of armed forces for them, deferring some of the cost of maintaining large armies. These individuals were occasionally called to the Kakatiya capital at Warangal and performed more ceremonial functions at the royal court. Succeeding the Kakatiyas, the rulers of Vijayanagar also made use of local rulers. The kings of Vijayanagar periodically summoned chiefs to their court—rewarding them with land grants, military commands, and increased ceremonial boons. By the sixteenth century, Indo-Muslim military and court practices comingled with those of earlier times, adding new layers of both real military practice (for instance, the extensive use of cavalry) as well as more ceremonial changes (for instance, changes in dress).[21] Again, regional rulers—centered at Golconda—called upon

local leaders to provide armed forces, land management, and participate in ceremonies.

Links between local and regional power holders are also present beyond the Deccan. To the north, under Mughal authority zamindars (landholders) close to Delhi and Agra served as clients of Mughal patronage. These zamindars provided armed forces and ceremonial bolstering to the Mughal rulers, and were in turn rewarded with increased *zat* (personal rank held by a Mughal officer). However, while the samasthan rajas bolstered Deccan rulers, the zamindars of the Mughals have been blamed in part for the very collapse of the administration itself.[22] Among the princely states of the north, a comparison with Awadh and Lucknow brings to light the "family" of scholarship this work joins—one with a focus that begins to shift its attention away from the capital cities and toward the countryside. The once princely state in 1901 had a total area was 23,966 square miles with a population of 12,833,077.[23] Like Hyderabad, Awadh had an urban capital surrounded by a *mufassal* (countryside) where lesser rajas maintained their own courts. Different from the practices followed in Hyderabad was the relationship between the urban center and countryside periphery. In Awadh, for instance, at the coronation of Ghazi al Din Haydari in 1819, the rajas of the *mufassal* either sent *nazr* (gifts, usually gold) or redoubled their fortifications, but none was "welcome" at the event itself.[24] In fact, the Awadh administration actively discouraged the rajas from attending the court.[25] By the mid-nineteenth century, under weakened leadership at Lucknow, many of these small rajas fought amongst each other, paid into an increasingly corrupt exchequer, and sought to further strengthen their own military powers. Thus, in 1857 where some of the samasthan rajas of Hyderabad joined with the East India Company (and one, Shorapur, did not), the rajas of Awadh largely joined in the revolt.[26]

Relationships in Hyderabad were much different. The samasthan rajas and the Nizams were locked in a symbiotic dance: the samasthans at the head of the dominantly Hindu population provided an important buttress to the Nizam's royal pavilion. And the Nizams, while more powerful, could not afford to affront the samasthan holders; and thus adopted a tone of cordiality largely free of religious or communal bigotry.[27] Both found themselves allied with the British before and after 1857. The Nizam bestowed gifts and titles on the samasthan rajas, and after the events of 1857, so too did the governor general of India, thus largely cementing their loyalty. Moreover, post-1857, the territorial chieftains of Awadh encountered changes in their relationship to the court and the British, while the positions and prerogatives of the samasthan rajas remained largely unchanged in their loyalties and practices.[28]