



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

LIBERATION OF HYDERABAD (1948): HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, POLITICAL DYNAMICS, AND POST-INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The integration of Hyderabad State into the Indian Union in September 1948 represents one of the most decisive episodes in the consolidation of post-colonial India. Unlike many princely states that acceded peacefully, Hyderabad's ruler sought independence, creating constitutional uncertainty, diplomatic tension, communal unrest, and military confrontation. The Government of India ultimately launched a military intervention, code-named Operation Polo, resulting in Hyderabad's accession. This paper examines the historical background of Hyderabad State, the socio-political contradictions under the Nizam's rule, the role of the Razakars, the Telangana peasant rebellion, diplomatic negotiations, military intervention, and post-liberation administrative and socio-economic challenges. The study argues that the liberation was not merely a military action but a complex state-building process that reshaped federal politics and regional identity in South India.

Keywords: *Hyderabad State, Integration of Princely States, Razakars, Telangana Rebellion, Federalism, Postcolonial India*

1. Introduction

India's independence in 1947 marked the end of British colonial rule but left unresolved the question of integrating over 560 princely states. The leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, supported by V. P. Menon, ensured that most states acceded through negotiation.

Hyderabad, however, presented a unique challenge:

- Geographically located in the heart of India
- Economically prosperous
- Militarily organized
- Ruled by an autocratic monarch

The refusal of Mir Osman Ali Khan to accede created a constitutional and political crisis that culminated in armed intervention.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly perspectives on Hyderabad's integration can be categorized into three broad approaches:

- ❖ National Integration Perspective – Emphasizes necessity of unity (Menon, 1956).
- ❖ Critical-Humanitarian Perspective – Examines violence and civil rights concerns (Noorani, 2013).
- ❖ Regional-Social Perspective – Focuses on Telangana peasant uprising and agrarian transformation (P. Sundarayya, 1972).
- ❖ Recent historiography situates Hyderabad within postcolonial state formation debates, linking it to issues of sovereignty, federalism, and minority politics.

3. Historical Background of Hyderabad State: The historical evolution of Hyderabad State is central to understanding its political trajectory and eventual integration into the Indian Union in 1948. Established in 1724 by Mir Qamar-ud-Din Khan, also known as Asaf Jah I, the state emerged as an autonomous polity within the declining Mughal Empire. Although nominally subordinate to the Mughal emperor, the Nizam exercised de facto sovereignty over the Deccan region, laying the foundation for one of the most powerful princely states in India.

- ❖ **Formation and Consolidation (1724–1798):** Following the weakening of Mughal authority after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, regional governors asserted independence. The Asaf Jahi dynasty consolidated control over vast territories in the Deccan, including present-day Telangana, Marathwada, and parts of Karnataka. Hyderabad became a center of Persianate court culture, administrative refinement, and military organization. During the eighteenth century, Hyderabad navigated constant conflicts with the Marathas and Mysore rulers. The state maintained its autonomy through diplomatic manoeuvring and shifting alliances, particularly during the expansion of British power in India.
- ❖ **Subsidiary Alliance and British Paramountcy (1798–1857):** In 1798, the Nizam entered into a Subsidiary Alliance with the British East India Company under Governor-General Lord Wellesley. This agreement placed Hyderabad under British military protection in exchange for accepting British troops within its territory and ceding control over external affairs. While the Nizam retained internal autonomy, Hyderabad effectively became a princely state under British paramountcy. Throughout the nineteenth century, Hyderabad remained one of the most loyal allies of the British Crown, especially during the Revolt of 1857. In recognition of this loyalty, the British accorded the Nizam the prestigious title of “Faithful Ally of the British Government.”
- ❖ **Administrative and Socio-Economic Structure:** Hyderabad State developed a centralized administrative system headed by the Nizam. The state was divided into districts governed by officials appointed by the ruler. However, much of the land was controlled through the jagirdari system, under which nobles and aristocrats (jagirdars) held large estates and collected revenue from peasants. This feudal agrarian structure created significant socio-economic disparities. Peasants were subjected to high taxation, forced labor (vetti), and arbitrary authority of landlords. Rural discontent would later contribute to the Telangana peasant uprising in the 1940s. The population of Hyderabad was religiously and linguistically diverse. Although the majority of the population was Hindu, the ruling elite was predominantly Muslim. The state included Telugu-, Marathi-, and Kannada-speaking regions, making it culturally heterogeneous but politically centralized.
- ❖ **Modernization under the Later Nizams:** Under rulers such as Mir Osman Ali Khan (r. 1911–1948), Hyderabad witnessed significant modernization. The state established educational institutions, railways, currency systems, and judicial reforms. Institutions like Osmania University were founded to promote higher education, notably using Urdu as the medium of instruction. Hyderabad developed its own currency (Hyderabadi rupee), postal system, and railway network, reflecting semi-sovereign characteristics within the colonial framework. Despite modernization, political participation remained limited, and demands for responsible government grew in the early twentieth century.
- ❖ **Political Awakening and Nationalist Influence:** The early twentieth century saw the rise of political consciousness influenced by the broader Indian nationalist movement led by the Indian National Congress. However, political mobilization in Hyderabad faced restrictions due to authoritarian governance. Organizations such as the Hyderabad State Congress and the Andhra Mahasabha began advocating civil rights, representative government, and social reforms. Simultaneously, communal organizations such as the Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen emerged, defending the sovereignty of the Nizam and the interests of the Muslim elite. These political tensions intensified in the 1940s as British withdrawal from India became imminent.

❖ **Position at the Time of Indian Independence (1947):** When British paramountcy lapsed on 15 August 1947, princely states were given the option to accede to either India or Pakistan. Hyderabad, under Mir Osman Ali Khan, sought to remain independent. Given its geographic location in the heart of the Indian peninsula, such independence posed serious strategic and political challenges to the newly formed Indian Union. Thus, the historical background of Hyderabad State reveals a complex evolution from Mughal provincial governorship to autonomous princely state, from feudal monarchy to partially modernized polity. These historical foundations shaped the political crisis of accession and the eventual integration of Hyderabad into India in September 1948.

4. Hyderabad and the Crisis of Accession (1947–48): The crisis of accession between 1947 and 1948 marked the most decisive phase in the political history of Hyderabad State. With the lapse of British paramountcy on 15 August 1947, princely states were released from their treaty obligations and were advised to accede either to India or Pakistan. The case of Hyderabad was uniquely complex due to its size, demographic composition, strategic location, and the political ambitions of its ruler, Mir Osman Ali Khan.

❖ **Constitutional Uncertainty after Independence:** The Indian Independence Act of 1947 ended British suzerainty over princely states, effectively granting them the option to join either dominion or, theoretically, to remain independent. However, leaders of the new Indian Union, particularly Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and V. P. Menon, strongly believed that political fragmentation would threaten national unity. Hyderabad's geographical position located in the heart of peninsular India and surrounded by Indian territory made its independence strategically unacceptable to the Indian leadership. The Nizam declared his intention to remain independent and sought international recognition. He attempted to negotiate standstill arrangements to maintain existing administrative relations with India while avoiding accession. This position created immediate constitutional uncertainty and heightened diplomatic tensions.

❖ **The Standstill Agreement (1947):** After prolonged negotiations, Hyderabad and the Government of India signed a Standstill Agreement on 29 November 1947. The agreement maintained pre-existing administrative arrangements such as communications, defense coordination, and trade until a final decision on accession was reached. While intended as a temporary measure, it failed to resolve the underlying political conflict. Hyderabad interpreted the agreement as recognition of its quasi-sovereign status, while the Indian government viewed it as an interim arrangement pending accession. The difference in interpretation intensified mistrust between both parties.

❖ **Rise of the Razakar Movement:** During this period, the political climate within Hyderabad became increasingly volatile. The Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen, led by Qasim Razvi, mobilized a paramilitary volunteer force known as the Razakars. The Razakars advocated for the preservation of Hyderabad's independence and the supremacy of the Nizam's authority. Their activities, which included intimidation, communal mobilization, and armed demonstrations, contributed to internal instability. Reports of violence against sections of the population, particularly in rural districts, alarmed the Indian government and strengthened the argument for intervention.

❖ **Telangana Peasant Rebellion:** Simultaneously, large parts of rural Telangana were engulfed in agrarian unrest. The communist-led Telangana peasant struggle challenged the feudal jagirdari system and demanded land redistribution and social justice. The rebellion exposed structural weaknesses within Hyderabad's socio-economic order and undermined the Nizam's authority in the countryside. Thus, Hyderabad faced a dual crisis: external diplomatic pressure from India and internal socio-political upheaval. The weakening of law and order further complicated negotiations.

❖ **Diplomatic and International Efforts:** The Nizam attempted to internationalize the dispute by appealing to the United Nations and seeking legal advice from British constitutional experts. However, these efforts yielded little practical support. The Government of India maintained that Hyderabad's status was an internal matter and resisted any external interference. Meanwhile, economic sanctions and border tensions increased. India imposed restrictions on trade and transport, exerting economic pressure on Hyderabad. Skirmishes along the borders and reports of arms procurement by Hyderabad heightened fears of prolonged instability.

❖ **Decision for Military Action:** By mid-1948, negotiations had reached a deadlock. Indian leaders concluded that prolonged uncertainty would encourage separatist tendencies elsewhere and undermine the authority of the Union government. Sardar Patel, as Home Minister, advocated decisive action to resolve the crisis. On 13 September 1948, the Indian Army launched a military operation code-named Operation Polo. Officially described as a "police action," the campaign lasted five days. Hyderabad's forces were unable to withstand the coordinated advance of Indian troops, and on 17 September 1948, the Nizam ordered a ceasefire and agreed to accession.

- ❖ **Accession and Aftermath:** Following the surrender, Hyderabad formally acceded to the Indian Union. The Nizam was retained as Rajpramukh (constitutional head) for a transitional period, symbolizing a negotiated integration rather than outright annexation. Military governance under Major General J. N. Chaudhuri restored administrative order. However, the aftermath of the operation was not without controversy. Reports of communal violence during and after the military action raised serious humanitarian concerns. Committees of inquiry later examined these events, highlighting the complex and often painful transition from princely sovereignty to democratic governance.

5. The Razakar Movement and Internal Turmoil: The Razakar movement constituted one of the most controversial and destabilizing developments in Hyderabad State during the final years preceding its integration into the Indian Union. Emerging in the context of mounting political uncertainty after 1947, the movement intensified communal tensions, weakened administrative stability, and contributed significantly to the escalation of the crisis that culminated in military intervention.

- ❖ **Origins and Ideological Foundations:** The Razakar organization developed under the leadership of Qasim Razvi, a prominent figure in the Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM). The Majlis, originally founded in the 1920s to safeguard Muslim political interests in Hyderabad State, underwent radicalization during the 1940s. As the question of accession became urgent in 1947, the organization adopted an uncompromising stance in favor of Hyderabad's independence under the Nizam. The Razakars literally meaning "volunteers" were envisioned as a paramilitary force committed to defending the sovereignty of the state. Their ideological orientation combined loyalty to the Nizam with a communal interpretation of political power, asserting the preservation of Muslim political dominance in a state where the majority of the population was Hindu. The movement's rhetoric increasingly invoked themes of religious identity and resistance against perceived external domination by the Indian Union.
- ❖ **Expansion and Militarization:** Following the lapse of British paramountcy in August 1947, the Razakar movement rapidly expanded. Recruitment drives mobilized thousands of volunteers across urban and rural regions. Armed drills, parades, and public demonstrations became common, particularly in Hyderabad city and surrounding districts. Although the Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, did not officially designate the Razakars as a state force, their activities operated with varying degrees of official tolerance. Critics argued that elements within the administration indirectly supported the organization as a counterweight to growing nationalist and communist movements. The blurred line between voluntary militia and state-backed force contributed to the erosion of law and order. Reports from contemporary observers suggest that Razakar units were often poorly trained yet highly motivated. Their actions extended beyond political mobilization to include coercive enforcement of loyalty, suppression of dissent, and intimidation of opposition groups.
- ❖ **Communal Polarization and Violence:** The activities of the Razakars deepened communal polarization within Hyderabad. Tensions between communities intensified, particularly in districts where agrarian unrest and political mobilization were already present. Allegations of forced conversions, looting, and targeted violence circulated widely, though the scale and nature of these incidents remain subjects of historiographical debate. The growing climate of fear undermined administrative credibility and alienated significant segments of the population. Hindu organizations, including local branches of the Indian National Congress, criticized the Nizam's government for failing to restrain the militia. Simultaneously, the communist-led peasant movement in Telangana perceived the Razakars as defenders of feudal privilege. The internal instability provided the Government of India with additional justification for intervention. Leaders such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel cited deteriorating law and order as evidence that Hyderabad's independence posed a threat to regional stability.
- ❖ **Interaction with the Telangana Peasant Struggle:** The Razakar movement intersected significantly with the ongoing Telangana peasant rebellion. In rural districts, particularly in Nalgonda and Warangal, communist-led insurgents challenged the jagirdari system and demanded land redistribution. The Razakars frequently confronted these groups, positioning themselves as defenders of traditional authority. This triangular conflict between the Nizam's administration, the Razakars, and communist guerrillas created a fragmented political landscape. Villages became arenas of contestation, and the rural population bore the brunt of violence from multiple sides. The internal turmoil weakened Hyderabad's capacity to negotiate effectively with the Indian Union and exposed structural fissures within the state.
- ❖ **International and National Repercussions:** News of Razakar activities attracted attention beyond Hyderabad. Indian newspapers portrayed the movement as extremist and destabilizing, shaping public opinion across the country. The Government of India's White Paper on Hyderabad later cited Razakar militancy as a key factor necessitating action. Hyderabad's attempts to present itself internationally as a

stable and sovereign entity were undermined by these reports. Diplomatic appeals to external bodies failed to offset the growing perception that the state was descending into disorder.

- ❖ **Role in the Prelude to Operation Polo:** By mid-1948, the Razakar movement had become inseparable from the broader crisis of accession. Indian intelligence assessments emphasized the militia's expansion and alleged arms procurement. The cumulative effect of internal unrest, communal tensions, and border skirmishes contributed to the decision to initiate Operation Polo in September 1948. The rapid collapse of organized resistance during the military operation suggested that the Razakars lacked the capacity to sustain prolonged conflict against the Indian Army. Nevertheless, their activities had already reshaped the political narrative, framing Hyderabad's integration as a matter of restoring order and protecting civilian populations.

6. Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle (1946–1951): The Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle (1946–1951) was one of the most significant agrarian uprisings in modern Indian history. Originating in the Telugu-speaking districts of Hyderabad State, the movement challenged the entrenched feudal order under the Nizam's rule and became intertwined with the broader political crisis of accession. While initially directed against oppressive landlords and exploitative agrarian practices, the struggle evolved into an armed confrontation involving the Nizam's administration, the Razakars, and eventually the Indian state.

- ❖ **Rise of Organized Peasant Mobilization:** The movement gained momentum under the influence of the Communist Party of India (CPI), which had been expanding its activities in the Deccan region. Local organizations such as the Andhra Mahasabha initially focused on social reform and cultural assertion but gradually adopted a more radical agrarian agenda. By 1946, peasant protests in districts such as Nalgonda, Warangal, and Karimnagar escalated into direct confrontation with landlords. The communists organized village committees, mobilized agricultural laborers, and encouraged resistance against forced grain levies and illegal taxation.
- ❖ **Transition to Armed Resistance:** The turning point came in 1946 when landlord-backed repression intensified. Armed squads (dalams) were formed to defend villages against police and private militias. Guerrilla tactics were employed, including ambushes and raids on landlord estates. In several areas, peasants seized land and redistributed it among the landless. The movement thus transitioned from protest to armed insurgency. Parallel administrative structures were established in some liberated villages, where peasant committees regulated land distribution, resolved disputes, and organized collective farming experiments. These initiatives represented a radical challenge to the feudal and monarchical order of Hyderabad State.
- ❖ **Confrontation with the Razakars:** The rise of the Razakar militia under Qasim Razvi intensified the conflict. Razakar units frequently targeted villages associated with communist mobilization, leading to violent clashes. The rural population found itself caught between landlord-backed forces and revolutionary squads. This triangular struggle—peasants versus feudal elites versus communal militias—created widespread instability in Telangana. The Nizam's administration struggled to contain the insurgency, further weakening Hyderabad's internal cohesion during the crisis of accession.
- ❖ **Impact of Operation Polo and Post-1948 Phase:** When the Government of India launched Operation Polo in September 1948, the political landscape shifted dramatically. While the military action ended the Nizam's sovereignty, it did not immediately end the peasant struggle. Instead, the Indian Army initiated operations against communist guerrillas who continued armed resistance against what they now perceived as a bourgeois-landlord state. Between 1948 and 1951, the struggle entered a new phase characterized by intensified counter-insurgency measures. Thousands of activists were arrested, and many villages were subjected to military surveillance. Ultimately, in 1951, the Communist Party officially withdrew the armed struggle and opted to participate in parliamentary democracy.
- ❖ **Achievements and Limitations:** Despite its suppression, the Telangana movement achieved significant socio-political outcomes. It accelerated debates on land reform and exposed the injustices of the jagirdari system. Subsequent legislative reforms in Hyderabad State and later in Andhra Pradesh addressed tenancy rights and land ceilings, partly influenced by the uprising's demands. However, the movement also faced limitations. Internal divisions within the communist leadership, strategic miscalculations, and severe state repression curtailed its revolutionary aspirations. Moreover, the armed phase resulted in considerable human and material costs.
- ❖ **Historiographical Interpretations:** Historians have interpreted the Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle in diverse ways. Marxist scholars regard it as a landmark anti-feudal and anti-imperialist movement, highlighting its grassroots mobilization and redistributive agenda. Others emphasize its regional dimensions, linking it to linguistic identity and sub-regional political assertion. Recent scholarship situates

the uprising within the broader context of decolonization and postcolonial state formation. It is seen not merely as a class struggle but as part of the transformation from princely autocracy to democratic federalism in India.

Conclusion:

The crisis of accession was not merely a diplomatic disagreement but a multidimensional confrontation involving constitutional principles, regional identity, communal politics, and national security considerations. Hyderabad's attempt to remain independent challenged the emerging framework of Indian federalism. The resolution of the crisis through military intervention demonstrated the determination of the Indian state to ensure territorial integration and political consolidation. Thus, the events of 1947–48 stand as a defining chapter in India's postcolonial state formation, illustrating the tension between princely autonomy and national unity.

The Razakar movement was both a symptom and catalyst of Hyderabad's internal crisis between 1947 and 1948. Rooted in fears of political marginalization and animated by militant rhetoric, it intensified communal divisions and weakened administrative authority. Its activities shaped national perceptions, influenced policy decisions in New Delhi, and contributed directly to the circumstances that led to Hyderabad's integration into the Indian Union.

Understanding the Razakar movement is therefore essential to interpreting the Liberation of Hyderabad not merely as a military episode, but as a complex process shaped by internal turmoil, ideological conflict, and the broader challenges of postcolonial state-building.

The Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle (1946–1951) was a complex and transformative episode in the history of Hyderabad State. Emerging from deep-rooted agrarian exploitation, it evolved into a sustained armed insurgency that intersected with communal militancy and national integration. While ultimately subdued, the movement reshaped agrarian policy, influenced political discourse, and left a lasting imprint on the socio-political consciousness of Telangana.

Understanding this struggle is essential to contextualizing the Liberation of Hyderabad, as it reveals that the integration of 1948 was not solely a diplomatic or military event but also a social revolution unfolding from below.

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