

In the Nizam's Dominions*

Bret Wallach

Working in India, I wrote to a friend back home, is like wrestling a king-size mattress up a spiral staircase: the country keeps sticking, one corner after another. Traveling wasn't the hard part, at least for someone who traveled as a guest of the government. Occasionally I surveyed a deserted railway station in an unfamiliar countryside—the train gone, no other due that day—but a government jeep would always arrive and take me to the rest house or inspection bungalow. Problems arose instead in arranging the travel: this was when a long-distance phone call in India was a form of torture. They arose in getting information, as distinct from being told what people thought you wanted to hear or what you should hear. They arose in the intervals between trips, when what should have been leisure became more exhausting than any amount of bouncing in jeeps between irrigation projects. We had no air conditioning, and the streets were a fine mist of diesel. At home, we couldn't avoid what soon became the nauseating smell of smoke from coal-fired locomotives.

We had rented the spacious upper floor of a private house in Hyderabad. The flat came furnished and equipped with a refrigerator—in India a luxury twice as expensive as one in the United States. There was a two-burner gas hot plate, and there were ceiling fans. But the windows did not seal tight, and there were so many mosquitoes that the high walls sometimes looked as if a pressure cooker had exploded. (We were less than five miles from the laboratory where Ronald Ross at the beginning of the 20th century discovered the link between malaria and the ancestors of those mosquitoes.) Gradually the mosquito population declined, as though the rising heat was too much even for them.

Eventually, a refreshing cold shower, fed directly by the rooftop water tank, was too hot to bear. More and more people were driven to sleeping outdoors or, as with us, on the roof. This was an upper-middle-class neighborhood, and there were walls surrounding each house. Still, a Gurkha watchman patrolled the block at night and reassured his clients by tapping his walking stick as he made his rounds. Women here kept large quantities of gold and precious stones in bedroom cupboards, and everyone knew of people who had been murdered by intruders.

Around midnight, the frequent trains that passed a hundred yards from the house quit for a few hours. They were commuter trains, not freights, and they were pulled by ancient steam engines. At first I loved their sound, but the whistles grew irritating and the drifting clouds of smoke became loathsome. Both returned at first light, along with the pleasanter sound of the local

muezzin. Hyderabad, after all, had been the capital of India's largest princely state, and the prince—the nizam--had been a Shia Muslim. Indeed, the last Nizam of Hyderabad, before being deposed by the newly independent government of India, had inherited the title of Caliph from the recently deposed Ottoman sultan. One of his sons was married to one of the Turkish sultan's daughters.

For two hours or so, the house was comfortably cool. I would go downstairs, boil water for the day, and make coffee--too bitter to drink without sugar. This was the ideal time for work, but government offices would not open until after ten. I usually had little choice but to stay indoors until the sun was high and trucks were rumbling past the front of the house. By the time the offices opened, the flat was so hot and noisy that you had to get out anyway.

Under the Nizams

Many months before arriving in India, I had applied for the fellowship that brought me here to study irrigation. India's University Grants Commission arranged for me to be affiliated with Hyderabad's Osmania University, named for Osman Ali Khan, the nizam who had endowed it as a southern equivalent to the famous Aligarh Muslim University up north.

Osman was the last of Hyderabad's seven nizams. (The term translates from the Persian as "regulator.") The first had broken away from the Delhi-based Moguls and proclaimed the independence of his dominions. The British got a slice of his domain in 1765, when they grabbed the fertile delta of the Krishna River and made it part of what became the Madras Presidency. Unlike some other princes, blinded by pride, the nizams realized that the key to survival was to ally with the British, not resist them. The nizam who stood by the British during the uprising of 1857 was given the title, "Faithful Ally," and a successor gained the title, "His Exalted Highness." Titles mattered much in this world, perhaps especially since real power—paramountcy, in the jargon—rested with the British. Even in 1980, 30-odd years after Nehru's government invaded Hyderabad and put an end to the hollow game, the city's main shopping streets still had a few stores with silver-on-black signs. They advertised British woollens, Goodyear tires, jewelry, dried fruit--all "by appointment to H.E.H." The imported goods were permanently out of stock, but the merchants soldiered on.

The boundaries of the nizam's dominions no longer exist in the reorganized political geography of India, but they had encompassed 83,000 square miles. That's almost as big as Great Britain, and the land revenues from 2,000 villages were assigned to the nizams personally as their *jagirs*. A small circle of Muslim nobles, hardly more than a hundred families, grew fat as *jagirdars* receiving the taxes collected from nearly 7,000 others. Facts like these explain why in

his autobiography Nehru describes Hyderabad as "an almost perfect feudal relic."

More than 90% of the nizam's 13,000,000 subjects were Hindus speaking Telugu, a language foreign to the the Muslim elite. Not that the elite had much need of Telugu: typically, they visited their villages once every five years and left management to overseers. One elderly survivor of the elite told me that even as a man of 40 he had only once been to the villages that supplied his father's income; visiting was considered improper, he said.

With their unearned income, the Hyderabad elite built huge Victorian palaces, ornate yet crude: steel I-beams, for example, were permanently exposed in concrete ceilings. The palaces were filled with European furniture, English tweeds, and London magazines.

Protected as they were by the British, the nizams were still always resentful. Out of loyalty or mere prudence, few Hyderabad nobles dared to fraternize with the state's British residents. The resident himself--the official appointed to represent the Crown in its dealings with the nizam--lived in the immense, porticoed Residency, its steps flanked by lions and its private spaces protected perhaps more functionally by heavy bars and gates. The building was now a girls' school.

Osman Ali Khan had better reason to distrust the British than he knew, because the British would finally betray Hyderabad. A British prime minister had assured India's princes that when the British left India the princely states would revert to the *status quo ante* and regain their independence. A British secretary of state for India had said that the Indian princes were free to join the new India or not. Many princely states were so small, and the terms India proposed for union were so generous that their leaders did not seriously consider independence. But the state of Hyderabad was half the size of France, and its population was greater than Canada's. The city of Hyderabad had long been called the second city in the Muslim world, after Cairo. Something very like state visits were made by Arabia's King Saud and Iran's young shah. Osman Ali Khan held out for independence.

A radical Muslim movement gave the government of India the opportunity it was looking for. For the Indian Army, the conquest of Hyderabad was almost a picnic; the three-day war was coded "Operation Polo." The Dominions became the State of Hyderabad. Its boundaries were recast in 1956, when there was a general political reorganization in South India. Hyderabad lost its Marathi-speaking west to Bombay, regained the Telugu-speaking Krishna delta, and took the name Andhra Pradesh. Its ministers in 1980, however, were still working in the nizam's old secretariat. Its irrigation department was housed in the vast mansion of one of nizam's high nobles.

In the Streets

Once a model of Indian urban planning, Hyderabad has swollen by 1980 to more than 2,000,000, perhaps a fifth of them living in makeshift huts, often no larger than a pup tent. I was disoriented for some weeks, because getting decent maps of the city was amazingly difficult, but I got a ride to Char Minar, the “four towers” associated with Hyderabad the way the Eiffel Tower is with Paris. Char Minar had been built late in the 17th century by Hyderabad’s founder, a king of the pre-nizamic Asif Jah dynasty. It looked like Siamese quadruplets, with four towers joined at the waist by several elevated floors, including a mosque. Above the waist rose the minarets proper. I was less impressed by them than by the terrific congestion of rickshas, pedaled and motorized, that clogged the surrounding streets. They were crowded also with pedestrians--mostly women and mostly hidden in *burkas*. Many were here to buy bangles, for there’s a whole street of bangle merchants catering to them. Whatever banglous flamboyance lay under the *burkhas* remained forever hidden from me.

This was the old city: heavily Muslim and a confusing warren of boarded-up palaces and much simpler homes and businesses. The newer sections of the city were to the north, across the Musi River, but there were not much less chaotic. The city lacked the grand avenues of Calcutta and Bombay, Madras and New Delhi. As a result, Hyderabad’s streets were especially crowded. People filled the plazas outside the cinema palaces. Hindu marriage processions passed by, with musicians teasing western instruments into quarter tones unknown to Mozart. Exposed corpses were carried on litters to burning grounds. Now and then, elephants padded by, so quietly that at a market I turned with an eggplant in hand and gasped to see a dark and silently moving pillar sweep past.

Auto-ricksha drivers, basically with motor scooters converted to tricycles, liked to discuss their tip in advance. After sometimes heated negotiations we would jar our way through Vidyanagar, Nallakunta, Narayanguda, Himayatnagar. That was the mosaic of the city: no street names, no addresses, just chunks of turf--each with a name. We’d pass the chicken market, with baskets of live birds. Here was a grocery store with soft drinks and bins of assorted cookies and crackers. It had canned fruit that was not much good, terrible jam, soap, toothpaste, and eggs. Sugar, rice, and salt were sold in bulk in another place. Here was a pharmacy with a wide assortment of pills for stomach troubles--bacterial or amoebic--and surprises like valium, made in Bombay and sold very inexpensively over the counter. Here was an appliance store, with air coolers stuffed with evaporative straw in a metal shell. The store also sold Calcutta-made radios of a quality that would have been laughably disastrous in the United States. It had air conditioners, too, but they were five times as expensive as those in the United States, and so their quality remained an unknown to us. We bounced past a beer and wine shop. It had only domestic

products, mostly beer--cold and in large bottles. Along with the water from green coconuts, that beer could be a lifesaver.

At Nallakunta we crossed a stream fetid from unsewered settlements along its banks; the stench of the black water carried a mile. Still, boys led herds of dairy buffalo to the water and jumped in to scrub the animals. Somehow, pasteurized milk was delivered each morning in plastic pouches. Did the animals producing it eat proper fodder? Perhaps. But Hyderabad had no garbage collection, no dump. Our household wastes were simply discarded. Scavengers sifted for glass, metal, and paper. The rest of the garbage was eaten by stray chickens, goats, and black pigs. The dairy buffalo likely got a share.

At dawn each morning the cry came from minarets scattered over the city. How did Hindus react, I wondered, to a sign in the Muslim quarter that read: "Prince Beef Shop"? On days hot enough for Arabia, men wearing long wool coats and lambskin caps walked through these streets. Every day an Indian Airlines airbus left for Bombay with luggage labeled for Bahrain and Kuwait. Veiled mothers sat next to husbands puffing cigarettes. What was inside the briefcases the men kept on their laps? The bazaars of Hyderabad were famous for jewelry. Sitting on carpets and drinking milky tea, customers watched as merchants opened envelopes full of pearls fresh from the Gulf.

Relics

Despite this wealth, a sense of ruin hung over the city. Most of the palaces in the city had been leveled or gutted; the nizam's had been taken for taxes and half-converted to hospitals. Floorings had been ripped up, furnishings and mahogany doors sold. Palace grounds that once held the private garden of a wife of the sixth nizam now were barren. A surviving inscription read, "This well was dug and faced by Major James Achilles Kirkpatrick, Hushmat Jung, Vakil of the British Government, the Honorable English Company Bahadur, for quenching the thirst of passengers and watering the fruit garden and deer paddock, 1804 A.D., 1219 A.H." The well itself was not to be found.

Old guidebooks referred to Hyderabad's grandest palace, Falaknuma, or the "mirror of heaven." Photographs taken around 1900 showed viceroys and foreign dignitaries. I went to take a look.

I got off the local commuter train, walked half a mile through a flatland slum, then climbed the wrong side of a granite hill to Falaknuma's high wall. There was, of course, a road to the palace, but it led to a wrought-iron gate taller than any I had ever seen in America. A group of women went through a side gate. They gave me a sharp look before slamming it behind them. With the nerve of the newcomer and the naïve swagger of an American abroad, I climbed the wall and with a bit of scrambling and scratching dropped inside to

look around. I didn't dare to go inside, but even the outside conveyed the extravagance of the old order.

Months later I got a legitimate tour of the palace, which was still the private property of the eighth nizam, who divided his time between England and a sheep station in Australia. I was taken to the dining room. A viceroy's wife who had dined here wrote, "everything was of gold, epergnes, vases, cruets, table cutlery, forks, spoons, even to the covers of the champagne bottles and the crumb scoop." Sixty years later, the gold noticed by Lady Reading was gone. The leather chairs were badly split, and the furnishings in other rooms--carpets, drapes, upholstery--were disintegrating. A pantry held a fine old General Electric refrigerator. (Built without electricity, Falaknuma was updated for a visit by King George and Queen Mary.) The library was magnificently wood-paneled but contained nothing except scores of copies of one work, a leather-bound volume from 1898 called *Glimpses of the Nizam's Dominions*. A classic mugbook, it was still a valuable record of a vanished society.

The pride of the survivors was still enormous. One man had a cupboard with 40 dusty pairs of fine British shoes unworn in decades. Most of his house was now a box factory, but the walls of the few rooms he used were covered with photographs of his family, often with the nizam. A photograph from 1935 showed the man resting his foot on the running board of his new Buick. Another, taken when he was a boy, shows him sitting on his father's lap. His father has a handlebar moustache, tweed hunting jacket, and fine leather boots. The man owned no automobiles now. He scarcely left his house and its tiny garden courtyard.

A cousin who had left India in 1949 and transferred from the nizam's government to UNESCO had now retired to Hyderabad. I gave him a list and he found his father's name in the expropriation order published in 1949. "There, that's him," he said. If he did not remember the 113 villages that provided his father's income, at least he remembered the enormous palace of his childhood, a palace so large that it now housed major parts of several departments of the Andhra Pradesh government. The man was determined to check the ravaging of the city he loved. Groups were being formed, he said, to make Hyderabadis aware of their heritage before it was too late, before everything had been replaced by slovenly modern buildings. His wife was still smarting from a beggar's rebuke a few days earlier. The man reminded her of the times when her father-in-law drove through the streets and directed her husband to toss handfuls of coins into the crowd.

At a garden party on the other side of the city, a distinguished Muslim member of parliament spent an evening excoriating America and pointing out how well the Soviet Union has served India. Socialist passion was in the air, but as he left

the party this man went over to his hostess and said graciously that her hospitality reminded him of the old days.

Lessons

I often went to the office where Andhra Pradesh district gazetteers are compiled. Squirreled away next to a mosque and almost hidden behind a garden courtyard now abandoned to dirt, the office had been a private house. Now a dozen men worked in a few small rooms. In the library, cupboards were jammed with old books gathered from around the state. The collection had many scarce items, and the librarian was happy to provide me with whatever I wanted. Still, the sight of his clerk rummaging through the cupboards in search of my requests, which often fell apart when found, grew depressingly symbolic. At the Osmania University library, things were worse. Bees built barrel-sized hives in convenient niches. Birds nested in the reference room. The library's most valuable items, old reports of the nizams' government, were heaped in a basement corner. How long, I wondered, could a country like this hold together? Was it just me being hypersensitive? I soon learned that Indians themselves saw their country as a sinking ship. How many times did I hear, "Only God can help us."

Foolishly, but with innumerable predecessors, I stormed up to a bank manager and told him his procedures were insane. He smiled warmly and agreed. The chief cashier handed over a brick of 100,000 rupees to a man who strode outside with the bills in his hand like a loaf of bread. Odd, how what is dangerous in one country is safe in another.

The cashier asked me how I found India and smiled when I told him that I liked and hated it. For some reason my few thousand rupees did not come. A guard stood at attention with a veritable elephant gun at his side. Tea was served. The cashier took the time to explain that leprosy, common in Hyderabad, is nothing to worry about: "We are all victims; we all take care of ourselves." I snapped at the bait and retorted, "Does God want parents to cut off their son's hands and feet so the boy can earn money painting with a brush held in his teeth?" The cashier smiled and tried to help me see that there was no need to be upset: this was karma at work. Why, then, was Mrs. Gandhi working to alleviate poverty? The cashier's ready answer: this was *her* karma. Ten, twenty minutes later, the money came. Had the delay been necessary? Had it been the cashier's vehicle for instruction? I was between laughing and pounding the desk. The cashier knew it. It was part of the lesson.

Late one night I arrived at Hyderabad so tired that I forgot a package on the overhead rack of the bus. At dawn I returned to the bus station. The station was big, with perhaps 50 buses waiting at any one time. The dispatcher directed me to the drivers' hostel, a room furnished with nothing except 60 three-tier bunks. The floor was concrete; the windows were barred. Even at

that hour the room was extremely warm. Small groups of drivers were talking. The conductor's bunk was pointed out to me. The package was sitting on his pillow. He returned in a few minutes and recognized me. I thanked him and offered five rupees. He declined twice; the third time he took it. Cynics will say his performance was orchestrated, but I saw his face and still think that he was reluctant to see duty specially rewarded.

Later I looked out the window of a stopped railway coach one morning at dawn. Two women walked along an adjacent track slimy with filth. One of them hunted fragments of coal; the other was after tiny scraps of paper. The crowd of pedestrians and a line of hissing steam locomotives did not wake a figure sleeping on the platform. At length the sleeper was roused. He took out a small square cloth bag with a shoulder strap, smoothed it, took up his shroud, folded it like a flag from a military funeral, and tucked it neatly into the bag. He put the bag over his shoulder, brushed his hair with his hands, and walked off like a commuter from the last train.

Scenes like these stick with you. One goes to India, after all, knowing that the country's poverty is bottomless and that charity is quixotic. One sees the decay and perhaps perceives the fear that is so fundamental to the country's fumbling desperation and outright corruption. What comes as a surprise is the speed with which you adjust to these conditions. What comes as a surprise is the difficulty you have in forgetting the country when you have gone home. What comes as a surprise is that there is so much dignity among people with so little else.

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