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"Religion, Community, and Social Order in the Social History of Telangana (1800–1950)"

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Abstract:
In this paper the study will focus on the overlapping processes of religion, community formation and social order in Telangana between 1800 and 1950, which was bookended by the consolidation of the Nizam rule under Asaf Jahi dynasty and political incorporation of the State of Hyderabad into the Indian Union. Basing the argument on census data, administration reports and other secondary scholarly research, the work suggests that religious identity in the Telangana world was not a fixed and merely divisive entity and was dynamically formed by the order of Nizam rule, colonial modernity, caste relationships and the local movements of reform. The chiefly Hindu peasant population in the region of Telangana was under the rule of a Muslim sovereign, so a peculiar social structure was formed where religion, caste, land tenure, and political power were intertwined. With the advent of new reform groups like the Arya Samaj (formed in 1892 in Hyderabad) and the Andhra Mahasabha (1921), new planes of religious and social awareness were formed disturbing established hierarchies. The article also examines the tensions of 1940s community as mediated during the Razakar crisis and the Telangana peasant rebellion (194651) and shows that the boundaries of religion became solid under the pressure of politics but were not completely finalized. The paper has concluded that the social history of Telangana provides an example of how religion as both ideology and community bond and contestation site in a pre-modern polity becoming modernity should be understood.

Keywords: Telangana, Hyderabad State, Nizam, religion, social order, caste, Hindu-Muslim relations, Arya Samaj, Andhra Mahasabha, communalism, peasant uprising, colonial modernity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The region of Telangana, constituting the Telugu-speaking districts of the erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad, occupied a singular position in the social history of the Indian subcontinent. Ruled by the Asaf Jahi dynasty of Nizams from 1724 to 1948, and formally incorporated into independent India following Operation Polo in September 1948, Telangana was the site of a social formation unlike either the directly administered territories of British India or the other major princely states. Here, a Muslim sovereign presided over an overwhelmingly Hindu agrarian population, administering through a court culture inflected by Persian and later Urdu idiom, while the masses conducted their religious, ritual, and community life through Telugu-language traditions rooted in Shaivite, Vaishnavite, and Shakta devotionalism, alongside substantial Dalit and Adivasi spiritual traditions.

The historiography of social life in Telangana has long been dominated by two poles: the nationalist narrative of "liberation" from feudal, Muslim rule, and the counter-narrative stressing the cosmopolitan culture of the Hyderabadi court. This paper proposes a more granular social history that resists both

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simplifications. It argues that religion in Telangana between 1800 and 1950 must be understood not as a fixed, primordial identity, but as a dynamic social force continually produced and reproduced through the institutions of governance, agrarian relations, reform movements, and popular practice. The paper is structured around five thematic concerns: the demographic and institutional landscape of religion under Nizam rule; the structure of caste and its entanglement with religious community; the role of reform movements in reshaping religious consciousness; the trajectories of Hindu-Muslim social relations; and the politicisation of religious identity in the crisis decade of the 1940s.

2. Demographic and Institutional Landscape of Religion Under Nizam Rule

Hyderabad State was, at the time of the 1941 Census, home to a total population of approximately 16.34 million people, of whom Hindus constituted approximately 81–84 percent, Muslims approximately 12–13 percent, and Christians and others the remaining 4–6 percent (Husain, 1947; Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Within the Telangana districts specifically, the Hindu proportion was even higher, as the Muslim population was disproportionately concentrated in Hyderabad city and surrounding areas. Despite this demographic imbalance, Islam was the official state religion, and the institutions of state — the court, the bureaucracy, the judiciary — were organised along lines that privileged Muslim elites.

Table 1: Religious Composition of Hyderabad State (Selected Census Years)

Year	Total Population	Hindus (%)	Muslims (%)	Christians & Others (%)
1881	~9,800,000	~80	~12	~8
1901	~11,100,000	~81	~12	~7
1911	~13,374,000	~81	~12	~7
1941	~16,340,000	~81–84	~12–13	~4–6

Sources: Census of India, 1901, Vol. XXII-A (Hyderabad); Census of India, 1911, Vol. XIX (Hyderabad State); Husain, M. (1947). Census of India 1941, Vol. XXI: H.E.H. The Nizam's Dominions. Government of Hyderabad.

The administrative structure of Hyderabad State reflected these demographic asymmetries in an inverted form. According to Beverley (2015), the Muslims of Hyderabad successfully became an upper caste in the social hierarchy, taking control of the top of life in power and rituals in disproportionate numbers to their population. Muslims controlled the 1,100 feudal lords (the nobility or umara) who jointly controlled about 30 percent of the state land (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). In 1893, the Executive Council that was formed was mostly composed of Muslim elites, and the lower ranks of state service were also dominated by Muslims and by the North Indian Hindu Kayasthas recruited specifically by the Nizam to work as clerics (Beverley, 2015).

Such an institutional structure influenced the outlines of religious life significantly. The Nizam's patronage of mosques, shrines, and Islamic learning created a visible Islamic cultural presence in the urban landscape of Hyderabad, while the Telugu-speaking Hindu majority of the Telangana countryside lived largely outside the direct reach of this patronage. Village-level religious life was organised through temples, festivals, jatras (pilgrimages), and the hereditary office of the priest (*pujari*), which were embedded in local caste hierarchies rather than in any centralised religious administration.

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3. Caste, Community, and the Social Architecture of Religion

Any description of religion in Telangana must not overlook the constitutive role of caste. The varna-jati system in the Telugu-speaking Deccan organised not merely occupational identity but the entire fabric of ritual, commensality, residence, and access to sacred spaces. In the Telangana districts, the dominant landowning castes — the Velamas, Reddys, and Kammas — occupied a socially privileged position that was expressed partly in terms of ritual precedence in village temples and festival processions. The Brahmin castes, though numerically small, retained control over priestly functions in major temples and over the textual traditions of Sanskrit learning.

The Dalit communities — principally Madigas (leather workers) and Malas (weavers) — were not only excluded from many temples but were denied access to wells, pathways, and public spaces in ways that linked caste subordination directly to the spatial organisation of religious life. As Omvedt (1994) argues in her broader survey of Dalit movements in India, such exclusions were not peripheral to Hinduism as practised but were structural features of the caste-temple-village complex. The Telangana region was no exception. Reports from the early twentieth century document systematic exclusion of Madigas and Malas from major temple festivals, a form of social violence that the Andhra Mahasabha would later mobilise against (Sherman, 2007).

Table 2: Major Caste Groups in Telangana and Their Ritual Social Position (c. 1900)

Caste Group	Primary Occupation	Ritual Status	Approximate Share of Population
Brahmin	Priesthood, administration	Twice-born, ritual supremacy	~3–4%
Velama/Reddy/Kamma	Landowning, agriculture	Dominant caste	~15–18%
Kummari/Kamsali (artisan castes)	Craft production	Middle-rank	~8–10%
Mala	Weaving	Scheduled Caste	~10–12%
Madiga	Leather work	Scheduled Caste	~8–10%
Tribal/Adivasi (Gonds, Koyas, etc.)	Forest cultivation	Outside caste order	~6–8%

Sources: Venkatesu, E. (2003). Social Deprivation and Social Mobilization. University of Hyderabad Repository; Census of India, 1901, Vol. XXII-A (Hyderabad).

The relationship between Muslim governance and caste Hinduism was characterised by a functional pragmatism on both sides. The Nizam's government did not, in general, seek to disrupt the caste order of rural Telangana, as that order served to maintain agrarian productivity and social control. Hindu temples, festivals, and customary law continued largely undisturbed, and the *desmukh* (revenue headman) and *desai* systems that articulated village-level authority were populated by upper-caste Hindus. The result was a dual social order: Islamic governance at the level of the state, and a caste Hindu social order at the level of village and agrarian life (Pavier, 1981).

4. Reform Movements and the Reconstruction of Religious Community

The twentieth century and the early 20 th century saw a sequence of reform movements which reinvented the conditions of the religious identity and community in Telangana radically. These movements were

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conditioned by experiencing colonial modernity even in a formally non-British country and contradictory nature of the existing social order.

Arya Samaj, which was founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, opened its chapter in Hyderabad in 1892, first in the area of Residency in the city (Arya Samaj, 2024). The reformist program of the Samaj, namely, acting against the idolatry, caste system, child marriage, devadasi system, etc. was met by the responsive response of the educated Hindus in Hyderabad who started to experience the cultural subjugation of Hindu identity within the Muslim court of the Nizam. The Arya Samaj also pursued the *shuddhi* (purification/reconversion) programme, which had significant implications for the religious demography and for Hindu-Muslim relations. The Nizam ultimately conceded to Arya Samaj demands for social and religious equality for Hindus, a measure of the organisation's growing influence (Arya Samaj, n.d.).

The Andhra Jana Sangham, founded in November 1921 and later renamed the Andhra Mahasabha, took a broader social-reform agenda that was less overtly religious but deeply shaped by questions of Hindu community consciousness. Its activities included campaigns for the abolition of the devadasi system, the removal of purdah, the uplift of Dalits, and the protection of peasant rights (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). The Mahasabha established a Telugu-speaking civil society under the leadership of people like Madapati Hanumantha Rao and Burgula Ramakrishna Rao that implicitly coded the religious and the regional identity as one.

Table 3: Major Reform and Community Organisations in Hyderabad–Telangana (1875–1950)

Organisation	**Founded**	**Primary Agenda**	**Religious Orientation**
Arya Samaj (Hyderabad)	1892	Hindu reform, anti-caste, shuddhi	Hindu reformist
Andhra Jana Sangham / Andhra Mahasabha	1921	Social reform, peasant rights, Telugu identity	Secular/Hindu
Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM)	1927	Muslim political representation	Islamic
Hyderabad State Congress	1938	Responsible government, Indian nationalism	Secular nationalist
Communist Party units (Telangana)	1940s	Peasant uprising, land reform	Secular/Left

Sources: Sherman, T. C. (2007). The integration of the princely state of Hyderabad. Indian Economic and Social History Review, 44(4), 489–516; Wikipedia contributors (2025). Hyderabad State.

The founding of the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) in 1927 marked a decisive counter-movement in the politicisation of religious identity. The MIM sought to organise the Muslim minority as a distinct political community with rights that needed protection from the prospect of Hindu majority rule. By the 1940s, under the leadership of Qasim Razvi, the organisation's paramilitary wing, the Razakars, would openly espouse the idea of an independent, Muslim-governed Hyderabad — a development that transformed communal relations irrevocably (Pavier, 1981).

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5. Hindu-Muslim Social Relations: Coexistence, Tension, and the Limits of Pluralism

A recurring debate in the historiography of Hyderabad concerns the nature of Hindu-Muslim social relations. Were they characterised by a genuine syncretic pluralism — the famous *ganga-jamuni tehzeeb* — or by a more ambivalent coexistence in which communal tensions were suppressed rather than dissolved?

The evidence suggests a picture more complex than either the nostalgic or the polemical account. At the level of elite urban culture in Hyderabad city, there was genuine cross-communal interaction: Hindu and Muslim nobility shared the cultural forms of Urdu poetry, Perso-Arabic courtly etiquette, and Deccani cuisine. Hindu merchants and administrators participated in the court economy, and inter-religious festivals such as Diwali and Muharram were observed with some degree of cross-communal participation (Leonard, 2007). At the same time, as Beverley's (2015) detailed study of the political sociology of Hyderabad demonstrates, elite Muslims and Hindus, while sharing political views on certain questions, increasingly diverged in communal identification as the 1940s approached.

In the rural Telangana districts, the picture was different again. Here, the primary social identities were not Hindu and Muslim in any abstract sense but jati (caste community), village, and linguistic group. The Muslim presence in rural Telangana was thin: the peasantry, the artisan communities, and the Dalit labourers were overwhelmingly Hindu by registration, even if their religious practice blended brahminical, popular, and local traditions. The "Muslim" that the average Telangana peasant encountered was more likely to be the Nizam's revenue official, the landlord (*desmukh*), or the money-lender than a neighbour of equivalent social standing.

Table 4: Language Distribution in Hyderabad State (1941 Census)

Language	Number of Speakers	Percentage of Population
Telugu	7,529,229	~48.2%
Marathi	3,947,089	~26.4%
Kannada	1,724,180	~12.3%
Urdu	2,187,005	~10.3%
Others	~500,000	~2.8%

Source: Husain, M. (1947). Census of India 1941, Vol. XXI: H.E.H. The Nizam's Dominions (Hyderabad State). Government of Hyderabad; Wikipedia contributors (2025). Hyderabad State.

The language data is instructive for understanding the social geography of religion. Urdu, the official language and the language of Muslim courtly and professional life, was the mother tongue of a little over 10 percent of the population, largely concentrated in urban centres. Telugu speakers — the base of Telangana's agrarian society — had little access to the centres of religious and cultural authority associated with the state's Muslim establishment. This linguistic bifurcation reinforced a social distance that was expressed partly in religious terms.

6. The 1940s Crisis: Politicisation of Religion and the Collapse of Social Order

The decade of the 1940s was a watershed in the social history of religion in Telangana. Three overlapping crises — the Telangana peasant uprising (1946–1951), the Razakar movement, and the Indian independence and partition context — combined to harden religious identities and accelerate the breakdown of the accommodations that had characterised Nizam-era social order.

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The Telangana peasant uprising, which began on 4 July 1946 following the killing of a local peasant leader in Kadavendi village, Warangal, was primarily a class struggle: the mobilisation of Telugu-speaking peasants against the feudal exactions of landlords and the Nizam state (Wikipedia contributors, 2025b). Led by the Communist Party of India, the uprising deliberately eschewed religious framing, and its leadership included both Hindus and, in some instances, Muslim reformists. However, the social composition of the landlord class — which included a significant proportion of Muslim nobles — meant that agrarian resentment was inflected with a religious dimension, even where the leadership sought to suppress it (Pavier, 1981).

The Razakar movement, by contrast, was explicitly organised around the defence of Muslim political supremacy. At its peak in 1947–1948, the Razakars numbered an estimated 150,000–200,000 armed volunteers who terrorised both Hindu civilians and those Muslims who favoured integration with India (Pavier, 1981). The violence committed by the Razakars against the Hindu population of Telangana in this period — and the retaliatory violence against Muslims following the Indian military operation in September 1948 — constituted the most severe communal breakdown in Telangana's modern history. The Sunderlal Committee Report (1948), though suppressed for decades, documented widespread killings in the aftermath of Operation Polo in which Muslim communities bore the heaviest casualties.

Table 5: Key Events in the Politicisation of Religion in Telangana (1920s–1950)

Year	Event	Significance for Religious Social Order
1921	Formation of Andhra Jana Sangham	Mobilisation of Telugu Hindu social consciousness
1927	Founding of MIM	Formal political organisation of the Muslim community
1929	Nizam's gagging order on public meetings	Suppression of reform agitation
1938	Formation of Hyderabad State Congress	Secular nationalist challenge to Nizam's authority
1946	Beginning of Telangana peasant uprising	Class struggle with communal undertones
1947–48	Razakar atrocities	Sharpest communal violence in Telangana history
Sept. 1948	Operation Polo; Indian annexation of Hyderabad	End of Muslim state authority; anti-Muslim reprisals
1950	Nizam's accession formalised	Transition to secular Indian constitutional order

Sources: Pavier, B. (1981). The Telangana Movement, 1944–51. Vikas Publishing; Sherman, T. C. (2007). Indian Economic and Social History Review, 44(4), 489–516.

The significance of this period for the longer social history of religion in Telangana cannot be overstated. The events of 1946–1950 created memories of communal violence that shaped inter-community relations for decades. They also coincided with the transition from a social order in which religion was embedded in caste, governance, and land to one in which religion was increasingly a matter of formal political identity in the secular democratic framework of independent India.

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7. Discussion

The social history of religion in Telangana between 1800 and 1950 resists simple characterisation. It was not a history of unbroken communal harmony, as the syncretic narrative of *ganga-jamuni tehzeeb* sometimes implies, nor was it a history of inevitable civilisational conflict between Hindu and Muslim, as the Hindu nationalist narrative would have it. It was instead a history of structural inequality mediated by religious difference, of reform movements that sought to reshape community on new terms, and of political crises that mobilised religion in the service of competing visions of social order.

Several analytical observations emerge from the foregoing account. First, the relationship between religion and caste in Telangana was constitutively entangled. The Hinduism practised by the majority was not a single, unified system but a heterogeneous complex of practices differentiated by caste, region, and class. This fragmentation both enabled and constrained the formation of a unified Hindu community consciousness: it created the material of reform mobilisation, but also the internal divisions that such mobilisation had to overcome.

Second, the Muslim governance of Hyderabad State created a distinctive context for Hindu religious life in which the sense of cultural subordination — of seeing one's religious and linguistic traditions excluded from state patronage — became a source of social consciousness and eventually of political mobilisation. The Arya Samaj and the Andhra Mahasabha were, in part, responses to this structural condition.

Third, the peasant uprising of 1946–1951 reveals the limits of purely communal analysis. The revolt was overwhelmingly driven by agrarian grievance — the exactions of the *dora* (landlord) system, forced labour, and debt bondage — and its Communist leadership explicitly sought to build solidarity across religious lines. That the uprising acquired communal dimensions was less a reflection of primordial Hindu-Muslim hostility than of the social structure in which class and religion happened to overlap.

Fourth and finally, the transition of 1947–1950 — from Nizam's Hyderabad to the Indian Union — represents not merely a political but a social watershed. The dismantling of a Muslim-governed state did not end the social significance of religion in Telangana; it transformed it, incorporating religious community into the new frameworks of democratic competitive politics, affirmative action, and constitutional secularism.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that religion in Telangana between 1800 and 1950 was a dynamic social force, shaped by the structures of Nizam governance, agrarian caste hierarchies, reform movements, and the political convulsions of the 1940s. The dominant demographic reality — a Hindu peasant majority under a Muslim sovereign state — generated distinctive forms of social accommodation, resentment, reform, and conflict that defy reduction to either harmonious pluralism or primordial communalism.

The period from 1800 to 1950 saw the gradual transition of religious identity from an embedded feature of village and caste life to an increasingly politicised category of collective self-assertion and state contestation. This transition was driven by reform organisations that sought to reconstruct Hindu and Muslim communities on modern lines, by nationalist and communist movements that sought to subordinate religious difference to class or civic solidarity, and by the ultimate failure of the Nizam state to manage the contradictions of a Muslim polity in a Hindu-majority society.

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Understanding this history has significance beyond the boundaries of Telangana. It illuminates broader questions about the relationship between religion, governance, and social order in the late colonial and early postcolonial South Asian context — questions about how religious communities are made and unmade, how they intersect with structures of class and caste, and how political ruptures reshape the social meaning of faith. The social history of religion in Telangana is, in this sense, both a regional history and a mirror of subcontontinental transformations.

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