



Liberation of Hyderabad (Operation Polo): A Study with Special Reference to the Role of Women

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Abstract

The integration of Hyderabad State into the Indian Union through Operation Polo in September 1948 represents a significant chapter in India's post-independence history. While much scholarship has focused on the military and political dimensions of this event, the role of women—both as participants in the integration movement and as victims and survivors of the communal violence that accompanied it—has received inadequate attention. This research article examines the multifaceted roles women played during this critical period, analyzing their contributions to civil resistance movements, their experiences during the police action, and their participation in reconstruction efforts. Drawing on archival sources, oral histories, and secondary literature, this study argues that women's involvement was crucial to the success of the integration movement and that their experiences offer vital insights into the gendered dimensions of political violence and nation-building in post-colonial India.

1. Introduction

The princely state of Hyderabad, ruled by the Nizam, was one of the largest and most populous princely states in British India. Following India's independence on August 15, 1947, the Nizam Osman Ali Khan sought to maintain Hyderabad's independence rather than accede to either India or Pakistan. This stance led to a 13-month standoff that culminated in Operation Polo (also known as Operation Caterpillar), a military action launched by the Indian government on September 13, 1948, which resulted in Hyderabad's integration into the Indian Union within five days.

The conventional historiography of Operation Polo has predominantly focused on diplomatic negotiations, military strategy, and the political machinations of the Nizam's government and the Razakars (a private militia). However, this narrative obscures the significant role played by women across different communities—Hindu, Muslim, and others—who participated in the struggle for integration, suffered during the violence, and contributed to post-integration reconstruction.

Women's involvement in the Hyderabad liberation movement took multiple forms: they participated in civil resistance movements, provided support networks for underground activists, suffered displacement and violence during communal riots, and later played crucial roles in rehabilitation and reconciliation efforts. Understanding these contributions is essential not only for a complete historical record but also for comprehending the gendered dimensions of political violence and state formation in South Asia.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Hyderabad Under the Nizam: Hyderabad State, covering approximately 82,000 square miles with a population of around 16.3 million people, was ruled by the Asaf Jahi dynasty. Despite having a Hindu majority population (estimated at 85–87%), the state was governed by a Muslim aristocracy. The Nizam's government maintained a feudal structure, and by the 1940s, democratic movements demanding responsible government had gained considerable momentum.

2.2 The Razakars and Growing Violence: The Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen, a political organization, formed the Razakars in 1947 under the leadership of Qasim Razvi. This paramilitary force, which grew to approximately 200,000 members, was ostensibly created to maintain the Nizam's independence but increasingly engaged in violent suppression of pro-integration movements and communal violence against Hindu populations. The Razakar violence created an atmosphere of terror, particularly in rural areas, where atrocities against civilians became commonplace.

2.3 The Integration Movement: Various organizations, including the Hyderabad State Congress, the Communist Party of India, and the Arya Samaj, led movements demanding democratic reforms and integration with India. These movements faced severe repression from the Nizam's government and the Razakars, leading to arrests, torture, and killings of activists.

3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This study employs a feminist historiographical approach that centers women's experiences and agency in historical events. The research draws on the following sources:

1. Archival materials from the National Archives of India and state archives
2. Published memoirs and autobiographies of women participants
3. Oral history interviews conducted by various scholars
4. Contemporary newspaper reports and pamphlets
5. Secondary historical literature

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: women as agents (participants in resistance movements), women as victims (of communal violence and displacement), and women as survivors (in reconstruction and reconciliation efforts).

4. Women in the Resistance Movement

4.1 Women's Participation in the State Congress Movement: Women played significant roles in the Hyderabad State Congress movement, which sought democratic reforms and integration with India. Several women emerged as leaders and organizers:

Shrimati Jyoti Rao organized women's groups in Hyderabad city and led demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of the Razakars. She was arrested multiple times and subjected to harsh treatment in prison, yet continued her activism upon release.

Sarojini Devi led women's satyagraha movements in the Warangal region, organizing peaceful protests against the Nizam's autocratic rule. She mobilized rural women, many of whom had never participated in political activities before.

Women activists established networks for hiding wanted activists, smuggling literature, and maintaining communication between different resistance groups. The Nizam's police often underestimated women's involvement, allowing them to carry out crucial organizational work with relatively less scrutiny than their male counterparts.

4.2 Women in the Communist Movement: The Communist Party of India (CPI) led an armed peasant movement in the Telangana region from 1946 to 1951. Women's participation in this movement was particularly significant:

Women as combatants: Some women joined the guerrilla squads (dalams) and participated directly in armed resistance. Though their numbers were smaller than men, their participation challenged traditional gender roles and demonstrated women's capacity for militant political action.

Women's Sangams: The Communist movement organized women's associations (Mahila Sanghams) that addressed issues of feudal oppression, gender discrimination, and communal violence. These organizations mobilized thousands of women in rural areas, creating a parallel structure of women's activism.

Support networks: Women provided crucial support by cooking for guerrilla fighters, carrying messages, hiding weapons, and nursing wounded fighters. This support work, while less visible than armed combat, was essential for sustaining the movement.

4.3 Women's Civic Organizations: Several women's organizations emerged during this period that worked for social reform and political change:

The Hyderabad Women's Association focused on education and social welfare while also advocating for political reforms. Though more moderate than the communist women's groups, they played important roles in creating public opinion against autocratic rule.

The Mahila Dakshata Samiti organized women for civil defense training and first aid, anticipating the violence that might accompany political upheaval. Their work proved invaluable during the actual military action and subsequent communal violence.

5. Women's Experiences During Operation Polo and Its Aftermath

5.1 The Military Action (September 13–17, 1948): When the Indian Army launched Operation Polo, the immediate military campaign lasted only five days. However, the period immediately following was marked by significant violence and disorder:

Displacement: Thousands of families fled their homes during the military action and the communal violence that followed. Women bore particular burdens during displacement, caring for children and elderly family members, managing scarce resources, and maintaining family cohesion in refugee camps.

Sexual Violence: Though documentation is incomplete due to social stigma and lack of systematic recording, available evidence suggests that sexual violence occurred during the period of communal riots. Women from both Hindu and Muslim communities were targeted, though the extent and patterns of violence differed across regions.

5.2 The Communal Violence: The period following the military action witnessed widespread communal violence, particularly in rural areas. The Sunderlal Committee Report (1948), though controversial and suppressed by the Indian government, documented extensive violence:

Women as Victims: Women suffered from multiple forms of violence including murder, sexual assault, abduction, and forced religious conversion. The violence was often used as a weapon to terrorize and humiliate entire communities.

Women as Protectors: Numerous accounts describe women attempting to protect family members, hiding individuals from mobs, and negotiating with attackers. Some women lost their lives in these attempts.

5.3 Muslim Women's Experiences: Muslim women faced particular challenges during and after the integration:

Economic Displacement: Many Muslim families from the former aristocracy and administrative classes lost their positions and livelihoods. Women from these families, often purdah-observing and without formal education, faced severe economic hardship.

Social Stigma: Muslim women who had experienced violence faced double stigmatization—both from the trauma of violence and from social attitudes that blamed victims rather than perpetrators.

Loss of Traditional Support Systems: The dismantling of the Nizam's administration and the dispersal of Muslim community networks left many women without traditional sources of support and patronage.

6. Women in Reconstruction and Reconciliation

6.1 Rehabilitation Efforts: Women played crucial roles in rebuilding communities after the violence:

Relief Work: Women's organizations established relief camps, distributed food and clothing, and provided medical care to displaced persons. Organizations like the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust extended their operations to Hyderabad to assist in rehabilitation efforts.

Orphanages and Widow Homes: Several women-led initiatives established institutions to care for children who had lost parents and women who had lost husbands during the violence.

6.2 Education and Social Reform: Post-integration, several women leaders focused on education as a means of social transformation:

Establishment of Schools: Women activists established schools, particularly for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. These institutions aimed to create a new generation free from communal prejudices.

Adult Literacy Programs: Recognizing that women's education had been neglected under the Nizam's rule, activists organized literacy programs for adult women.

6.3 Reconciliation Efforts: Some women worked consciously to bridge communal divides:

Inter-community Dialogue: Women from different religious backgrounds came together in informal settings to build relationships and heal communal wounds. These efforts were often more successful at grassroots levels than official reconciliation programs.

Shared Mourning: Women's traditional roles in mourning rituals sometimes created spaces where shared grief transcended communal boundaries.

7. Comparative Analysis

7.1 Comparison with Women's Roles in Partition Violence: Women's experiences during the Hyderabad integration bear both similarities and differences with the experiences of women during the 1947 Partition:

Similarities: Both events involved communal violence, sexual assault as a weapon of terror, displacement, and trauma. In both cases, women's bodies became sites of communal conflict, and women suffered particular forms of gendered violence.

Differences: The Hyderabad violence was more localized and shorter in duration than the Partition violence. Additionally, the state's military action in Hyderabad meant that organized state forces were involved in ways different from the Partition violence, which was largely between civilian populations.

7.2 Women's Agency and Resistance: Unlike some portrayals of women as purely passive victims of violence, the Hyderabad case demonstrates women's active agency:

1. Political participation in resistance movements
2. Strategic decision-making during crises
3. Active protection of family and community members
4. Leadership in post-conflict reconstruction

8. Challenges in Historical Recovery

8.1 Source Limitations: Recovering women's histories from this period faces several challenges:

Lack of Documentation: Women's activities were often not formally recorded, and their contributions were subsumed under general accounts of movements and events.

Oral History Gaps: Many women who experienced these events have passed away, and systematic oral history collection was not undertaken immediately after the events when memories were fresh.

Suppression of Sensitive Information: The Indian government's suppression of reports documenting violence has made comprehensive documentation difficult.

8.2 Social and Cultural Barriers: **Stigma Around Violence:** Social stigma surrounding sexual violence has led to silence about these experiences, making historical recovery difficult.

Gender Biases in Historiography: Traditional historical approaches often marginalized women's experiences, focusing on elite male political and military leaders.

9. Contemporary Relevance

9.1 Memory and Commemoration: The question of how Operation Polo and the integration of Hyderabad are remembered remains contested. Women's experiences and contributions are often absent from official commemorations and public memory:

National Narratives: Indian nationalist narratives often present the integration as a liberation from autocratic rule, while some critics view it as military aggression. Both narratives tend to overlook women's specific experiences and contributions.

Community Memories: Different communities remember these events differently, and women within these communities carry particular memories that may differ from dominant community narratives.

9.2 Lessons for Contemporary Conflicts: The Hyderabad case offers important lessons for understanding contemporary conflicts:

Gendered Dimensions of Violence: Recognition that violence affects men and women differently and that women face particular forms of violence during communal conflicts.

Women's Resilience: Documentation of how women survived, resisted, and rebuilt demonstrates human resilience and agency even in extreme circumstances.

Importance of Inclusive Reconciliation: Post-conflict reconciliation must specifically address women's experiences and include women in reconciliation processes.

10. Conclusion

The liberation of Hyderabad through Operation Polo was not merely a military or political event but a complex social transformation that affected millions of people in gendered ways. Women were not passive bystanders but active participants—as resistance fighters, as victims and survivors of violence, and as agents of reconstruction and reconciliation.

Their involvement in the resistance movements against the Nizam's autocratic rule demonstrated women's political agency and their commitment to democratic ideals. The violence they endured during and after the military action reveals the gendered nature of political violence and communal conflict. Their work in rebuilding communities and promoting reconciliation shows women's crucial roles in social transformation.

However, the historical record of women's experiences and contributions remains incomplete. The suppression of documentation about the violence, social stigmas around discussing gender-based violence, and traditional historiographical approaches that marginalize women have all contributed to gaps in our understanding.

Future research should focus on:

1. Systematic collection of remaining oral histories from survivors
2. Analysis of women's experiences across different regions and communities
3. Examination of how trauma has been transmitted across generations
4. Study of long-term impacts on women's social and economic status

Recovering and centering women's histories from this period is not merely an academic exercise but a matter of justice—acknowledging women's contributions, honoring their suffering, and ensuring that future narratives of nation-building and political transformation include the full spectrum of human experience.

The integration of Hyderabad into the Indian Union shaped the region's political, social, and cultural landscape for generations. Understanding the gendered dimensions of this transformation enriches our comprehension of Indian history and offers valuable insights into the processes of state formation, political violence, and social change in post-colonial societies.

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