

Counting the bodies: Numbers game or lessons for the future?

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Recently S A Iyer wrote a piece suggesting that the 1948 massacres after the Police Action in Hyderabad State was "the greatest communal slaughter" (presumably after the estimated 10 lakh Hindus and Muslims killed at partition in 1946-47). Iyer cites figures "maybe 50,000-200,000 (Muslim) deaths". His primary source is the Sundarlal Report "on this massacre (which) has been kept an official secret for over 60 years".

He then goes on say "Civil rights activist A. G Noorani has cited Professor Cantwell-Smith who wrote'the only careful report on what happened in this period was made a few months later by investigators, including a Congress Muslim and a sympathetic and admired Hindu (Professor Sundarlal)- commissioned by the Indian government." Iyer ends with: "The Sundarlal report must be made public." And so it should and much of its finding has been available since 2001!

For, in March 2001, A. G Noorani published two pieces together in a leading national magazine. After criticizing Omar Khalidi's version of the Report in his book "Hyderabad After the Fall", Noorani says: "Khalidi was misled. The entire document is in English and the 'fragments' he reproduces should have put him on notice that it is not safe to rely on them. The brief Introductory portion is intrinsically unreliable. The rest is a village-wise and district-wise account."

On the other hand, Noorani writes: "Dr. Charan Sandhilya, Director of Pandit Sundarlal Institute of Asian Studies at Ghaziabad, obtained for this writer a copy of the full text of the Sundarlal Report from the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi". So much for "kept a secret", "suppression" and "not made public". In the companion piece, Noorani published the covering letter conveying the Report to Prime Minister Nehru and State's Minister Sardar Patel.

There it says that the team consisting of Pandit Sundarlal, Kazi Abdul Ghaffar and Maulana Abdulla Misri visited Hyderabad State between 9th November and 21st of December 1948. They: "clarified our position, whenever opportunity presented itself saying that ours was not a Commission of investigation or Inquiry into events preceding or following the police action and that ours was merely a goodwill mission charged with the task of restoring better communal relations."

They toured nine out of the 16 districts of the State, visiting seven district headquarters, 21 towns and 23 important villages. They concluded : "Out of them (16 districts) only three districts remained practically, though not wholly, free of communal trouble which affected the State first during the activities of the Razakars and then during the reprisals that followed the collapse of that organisation. In another four districts the trouble had been more serious but nothing like the havoc that overtook the remaining eight.

Out of these, again, the worst sufferers have been the districts of Osmanabad, Gulbarga, Bidar and Nanded, in which four the number of people killed during and after the police action was not less, if not more, than 18,000. In the other four districts viz. Aurangabad, Bir, Nalgonda and Medak those who lost their lives numbered at least 5,000. We can say at a very conservative estimate that in the whole State at least 27,000 to 40,000 people lost their lives during and after the Police Action."

So there are the Sundarlal Committee figures for Muslim killed "during and after" and nowhere near 200,000. Speaking of the worstaffected districts, the team wrote: It is a significant fact that out of these eight the four wo

rst affected districts (Osmanabad, Gulburga, Bidar and Nanded) had been the main strongholds of Razakars and the people of these four districts had been the worst sufferers at the hands of the Razakars." Most of the districts cited were the ones bordering Bombay Province. They added that: "The perpetrators of these atrocities were not limited to those who had suffered at the hands of Razakars, or to the non-Muslims of Hyderabad state. These latter were aided and abetted by individuals and bands of people, with and without arms, from across the (Bombay) border, who had infiltrated through in the wake of the Indian Army.

"We found definite indications that a number of armed and trained men belonging to a well known Hindu communal organisation from Sholapur and other Indian towns, as also some local and outside Communists, participated in these riots and in some cases actually led the rioters." So Arya Samajists, RSS and Communists all together murdering helpless Muslims?

But the team stated clearly that: "Duty also compels us to add that we had absolutely unimpeachable evidence to the effect that there were instances in which men belonging to the Indian Army and also to the local police took part in looting and even other crimes. During our tour we gathered, at not a few places, that soldiers encouraged, persuaded and, in a few cases, even compelled the Hindu mob to loot Muslim shops and houses. ... Complaints of molestation and abduction of girls, against Sikh soldiers particularly, were by no means rare. Unfortunately there was a certain element in the Army which was not free from communal feelings, probably because some of them could not forget the atrocities committed elsewhere on their own kith and kin. Lest we might be understood to imply a slur on the Indian army, we hasten to record our considered opinion that the Indian Army and its officers in Hyderabad generally maintained a high standard of discipline and sense of duty."

Also that: " This communal trouble followed close upon the heels of the police action and the consequent collapse of the Razakar organisation, which had stood in the Muslim mind as an effective barrier against the establishment of responsible government which was synonymous, to the average Hyderabad Muslim, with Hindu Raj, because it would be based on the will of the Hindu majority. Muslim masses were generally slow to realise that their sufferings were the inevitable repercussions of the atrocities committed on the Hindus only, a few days before, by the Razakars."

And the saving grace was: "We were given by Muslims instances in which Hindus had defended and given protection to their Muslim neighbours, men and women even at the cost of their own lives. In some professions the fellow feeling was particularly marked. For instance, at places Hindu weavers defended Muslim weavers against Hindus and protected them often at a very heavy cost (including loss of life) to themselves. Many Hindus helped in the recovery of abducted Muslim women"

The point of all this is not just to set right public memory distorted by pseudo historians and Pakistani and Jihadist propaganda. It is necessary to remember that even a single person killed because of the sole fact that he/she is of a different religion is reprehensible - even in times of extreme stress. In a time when terrorism and murder is initiated on religious basis, it is necessary to remember the one million dead in Partition massacres of 1946-47 and the 27,000 to 40,000 dead in during and after the Hyderabad Police Action of 1948 and be able to say: "Never Again!"

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