

A Muslim Conspiracy in British India? Politics and Paranoia in the Early Nineteenth-Century Deccan

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Author: Chandra Mallampalli

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Reviewer: Zak Leonard

Questions of conspiracy and collusion loom large in these modern times. Historically, the revelation of obfuscated, ephemeral crimes has often tested the integrity of a state's judicial apparatus. An investigating body may trace elaborate webs of influence and create exacting chronologies of events to test the veracity of witnesses' testimonies. But if such inquiries occur during a period of panic, the demands of state security may trump legal protections for the accused. When the dust settles, it may be revealed that the state exploited the initial conspiracy as a pretext, responding in an extreme manner that would only be permissible in an unspoken 'state of exception'. These abstract concerns acquired a tangible reality in 1838, when East India Company officials stationed in the Deccan region of southern central India uncovered a presumed plot between (mostly) Muslim notables to upend colonial rule. Chandra Mallampalli provides an intricate recreation of these events, analyzing witness statements, the operations of commissions of inquiry, and the occasional 'liberal' backlash to the state's repressive methods. His analysis engages with multiple historiographies, putting scholarship on Indian Wahhabis in conversation with regional political histories of the Deccan. The result is an almost forensic exercise in peeling 'back layers of interpretation that portrayed jihadists as the chief agents of a grand scheme' (p. 18).

As *A Muslim Conspiracy in British India?* is composed of a series of interrelated case studies, I will forgo the traditional chapter-by-chapter overview in favor of a more holistic synopsis. Mallampalli's goals for this book, which utilizes material primarily from the India Office records and the Tamil Nadu State Archives, are ambitious and numerous. By privileging local political contexts, he makes it clear that he is not substantiating notions of a 'Manichean clash between Islam and the West', nor is he positioning the 'conspirators' as agents of a unified, anti-colonial Crescentade (p. 8). The reality of the situation was often more banal. As the outbreak of the First Anglo-Afghan War escalated colonial anxieties, the adversaries of certain prominent Muslims took advantage of the opportunity to settle scores and advance their own position. By labeling particular *maulvis*, landholders, and royal family members as Wahhabis, these informants and inquisitors aimed to distinguish themselves as 'good Muslims' and improve their position within the colonial administrative system. The politics involved in fostering bonds of loyalty termed *namak halal* are central to Mallampalli's narrative (pp. 23, 214). Officials were keen to maintain the allegiance of

Muslim clients and naturally distrusted autonomous figures like Maulvi Modin, whose legal saga is detailed in chapter five. Mallampalli therefore posits that the Wahhabi achieved notoriety not as a result of his religious irrationality per se, but rather due to his subversive estrangement from the colonial patronage order.

Colonial investigators were not necessarily ignorant of these dubious dealings on the local level. The central authorities at Calcutta, for instance, dismissed the testimonies of detained itinerants who told of a grand conspiracy linking Muslims with both the Hindu rulers of the Mahratta states and the Sikhs, the erstwhile enemies of the frontier Wahhabis in the late 1820s. How, then, did this plot come to preoccupy leading officials in the region like Fraser (the Resident at Hyderabad), Stonhouse (the Collector of Nellore), and Elphinstone (the Governor of Madras)? Mallampalli ascribes a latent state of colonial fear to the state's historic inability to circumscribe the movements of Arab travellers, Indo-Afghan mercenaries, and the dispersed 'Wahhabi' followers of Sayyid Ahmed's Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah. Many of the itinerants apprehended in late 1838 and early 1839 had come to India to seek the financial succor of Muslim notables who could settle their debts. If one court was close-fisted, they simply went to another. These circulations brought them within the orbit of Mubariz ud-Daula, the younger brother of the Nizam of Hyderabad and an aspiring Wahhabi leader. Colonel Fraser successfully pressured the nizam to imprison his brother and ten Wahhabi *maulvis* in June 1839. A commission of inquiry, which met from that month until March 1840, ultimately found Mubariz guilty of treasonable actions despite an absence of tangible evidence. Mallampalli situates Mubariz as the conspiracy's gravitational force, as he capitalized on preexistent Wahhabi networks to elevate himself as a spiritual successor to Sayyid Ahmed and stoke discontent among Hyderabad's underpaid soldiery (p. 104). Despite these transregional relationships, the author warns that Mubariz should not be conscripted as a member of an alternative 'Arabacist' imperium calling for 'universal Muslim unity' (pp. 42-3).

Throughout his work, Mallampalli is keen to point out the inconsistency and almost arbitrary nature of colonial criminal procedure. In some cases, authorities were wont to act impulsively, toppling Muslim rulers on dubious pretenses. Ghulam Rasul Khan, the last Nawab of Kurnool, was accused of amassing weapons in his palace and subsequently dethroned. Shortly before his arrest, he maintained that his 'preparation of these military things' and his employment of Rohillas and Pathans was merely a family tradition (p. 132-133). Even after a commission of inquiry failed to prove a direct Wahhabi connection, the state legitimized his ousting on the pragmatic grounds that the raja was a dissipated ruler preoccupied with 'arms, fowl, and women' (p. 141). Similarly, authorities were led to believe that Abbas Ali Khan, the *jagirdar* of Udayagiri, would resort to treason in order to convert his lifetime land grant into a permanent holding. In both cases, the revelation that incriminating documents were forgeries failed to impress alarmist officials who remained convinced of an insidious plot. The trial of Maulvi Modin for preaching jihadist doctrine, however, reveals that the colonial judicial structure could at times accord with certain liberal norms. With the aid of Malcolm Lewin, a vocal critic of the Company's excesses, Modin succeeded in discrediting the prosecution's witnesses and securing his exoneration.

In this saga of spectral forces, Modin's ordeal provides a welcome return to the realm of ideology. Lewin's character, in particular, is sufficiently fleshed-out; we get a clear sense of why he would challenge the prosecution's techniques rather than taking the path of least resistance. Yet I would have welcomed a similar treatment of tenacious conspiracy theorists like Fraser and Elphinstone. Why were they so committed to a narrative that their superiors in Calcutta discountenanced on multiple occasions?(1) If Fraser wanted the Company to temporarily assume the administration of Hyderabad (as it had for Mysore), why would he take pains to ensure that it was the nizam, and not the Company, who actually arrested Mubariz? In 1837, Governor-General Auckland had brokered a treaty with the Nawab of Oudh that allowed for a similar administrative takeover to improve the state's finances, but there was not (to my knowledge) a conspiratorial, religious element at play. If anything, Fraser seems to resemble William Tayler, the disgraced Commissioner of Patna who was dismissed from his post in 1857 after impulsively arresting a number of prominent Wahhabis at his dining room table.(2) Indeed, Fraser similarly flummoxed his superiors in 1849, when he thought it 'proper to renew his proposal for expelling the Rohillas in a body [from Hyderabad], and having them escorted by British troops to Peshawar' (3) on the North-West Frontier. This question of

motivation also concerns Stonhouse and Elphinstone, who generally remain one-dimensional figures in the text.

The nizam himself is given somewhat short shrift in Mallampalli's account. At one point, we are told that he was discomforted by the growing presence of Wahhabis in Hyderabad; one historian estimates their numbers at about 20,000 by 1839 (p. 90). An analysis of this community and its operations may likely be hampered by an absence of surviving vernacular records. Nevertheless, I imagine many readers might appreciate additional context on the Wahhabis' role in Hyderabad society and perhaps a rumination on why the nizam had tolerated their presence to this point.

Finally, the book flitters around the concept of liberal imperialism. The questions it poses are certainly compelling and relevant: how, for instance, does a regime supposedly based on the rule of law litigate against a concealed jihadist threat? Identifying liberalism as 'a central ideology of the British Empire', Mallampalli focuses on its elevation of negative liberty, meaning the defense of 'the rights and freedoms of individuals and constraints on state power' (p. 179).

For Lewin, the prosecution's attempt to buy informants' testimonies in the Modin case was a bridge too far (p. 211). Mallampalli suggests that Lewin's aversion to state-sanctioned torture and his critique of the Madras government's Evangelical prejudice testified to his liberal inclinations. Patrick Smollett, the former collector of Vizagapatam, is also classified as an agent of liberal imperialism for repudiating the seizure of the Udayagiri *jagir* in his 1858 text. Hutton and Malcolm, the members of the Kurnool Commission who revealed Ghulam Rasul Khan to be a victim of local intrigue rather than a conspirator, are also associated with liberal imperialism, though we receive little information on their particular backgrounds (pp. 125, 222).

Yet we may do well to consider just how static and cohesive this ideology of liberal imperialism truly was. Much of Mallampalli's content on Smollett and Lewin is extracted from texts that date to the mid-1850s. At that time, Lewin was a committee member of the India Reform Society, an organization that rabidly denounced Governor-General Dalhousie's annexation of princely states and exerted a key influence in the formation of the Madras Torture Commission.⁽⁴⁾ Smollett, on the other hand, dismissed the Society's advocacy of Indian public works improvements and disparaged the Commission as a futile exercise; out of two thousand submitted complaints, only one sixth were relevant, and those mainly pertained to lower level native corruption. The resultant report could 'be searched through without finding the slightest notice of the evil [of torture], or the suggestion of a remedy for any fiscal abuse whatever'.⁽⁵⁾ In 1859, Smollett was elected as a Conservative MP; he continued to rail against the iniquity of the *ryotwari* land revenue system and lament the decay of the landed gentry. This is to say, if the concept of liberal imperialism is to be invoked, it should perhaps be treated as a fluid ideology that manifested in varying ways.

When it comes to identifying the influence of liberal thought on colonial policy, there is also the matter of jurisdiction. As a civilian based in Vellore, Maulvi Modin was tried before a preliminary Special Court at Chittoor that was accountable to the Sadr Faujdari Adalat. There, he luckily found an avatar in Lewin, who was serving as Special Commissioner and 'Counsel for the accused' (p. 194). Modin himself was allowed to cross-examine Hamid Ali, one of the original informers. But native princes who retained some degree of internal sovereignty were not usually so fortunate. In many cases, the Company legitimized its decision to topple certain rulers accused of wrongdoing as an 'act of state' rather than a judicial matter. One need only consult the voluminous reformist literature on the dethronement of the Raja of Satara for evidence of the state's legal chicanery.⁽⁶⁾ These patterns raise a key question: was the Company inclined to treat its own subjects more liberally (so to speak) while pursuing a less rule-bound approach to inter-state relations?

Mallampalli's turn to 'the local' is a welcome one, as it clearly demonstrates how the label of Wahhabi was a floating signifier that could be weaponized by an array of parties. In cases where the insinuation of Wahhabism was just too conjectural, officials could capitalize on popular discontent (in Kurnool) or longstanding feuds (in the case of Udayagiri). But delving into the mire of these petty animosities occasionally leads to some dense narration that may confound the casual reader. The past grudges that

informed the micro-politics of the Nellore *cutcherry* (pp. 166-71) are especially convoluted. We are introduced to a host of characters; some turn out to be relevant to the immediate events of 1839, some are not. The extensive use of testimonial block quotes throughout the chapter in question does not, in my opinion, enhance readability. The issue of how best to stylistically present a historical conspiracy is indeed a perplexing one. How can the historian capture the byzantine nature of such an affair in a way that won't render his or her own narrative inscrutable?

It is incumbent upon any reviewer to briefly note the occasional editorial issues in the text. In a paragraph and footnote on page 184, Mark Cubbon's surname is spelt various ways. On pages 12 and 185, the explanatory footnote mentioning Seema Alavi's work is repeated nearly verbatim. There is some additional historiographical content absent that I would have expected to see referenced, namely Sana Haroon's fine analysis of Sayyid Ahmed's theology and practices and Mark Condos' recent work on fanaticism as a 'culture-bound syndrome.' (7) It should also be mentioned that portions of the book's content have been published in various forms elsewhere: the concluding chapter five (on the trial of Maulvi Modin) recently appeared in article form in *Modern Asian Studies*, while an amalgamated version of chapters three and four (detailing the Kurnool and Udayagiri dispossessions) will be featured in the *Journal of Asian Studies*. That said, *A Muslim Conspiracy in British India?* is an elucidating and at times gripping account that will certainly hold appeal for students of both British and South Asian history.

Notes

1. Sarojini Regani, *Nizam-British Relations, 1724-1857* (Hyderabad, 1963), p. 256.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John William Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857-1858* (3 vols. London, 1880), iii, pp. 165-168.[Back to \(12\)](#)
3. James Broun-Ramsay, Marquess of Dalhousie to John Hobhouse, 15 June 1849, British Library, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur. F213/24.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Last Counsels of an Unknown Counsellor*, ed. Evans Bell (London, 1877), pp. 17-18.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. P. B. Smollett, *Madras: its Civil Administration; being Rough Notes from Personal Observation, Written in 1855 & 1856* (London, 1858), p. 11.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Sana Haroon, 'Reformism and orthodox practice in early nineteenth-century Muslim North India: Sayyid Ahmed Shaheed reconsidered', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 21 (2011): 177-198; Mark Condos, "'Fanaticism' and the politics of resistance along the North-West Frontier of British India", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 58 (2016): 717-745.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. John Sullivan, *Speech of Mr. John Sullivan, in the Court of Proprietors at the East India House* (London, 1843).[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept this review without any further comment.

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