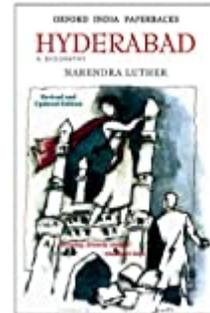




**Narendra Luther.** *Hyderabad: A Biography.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. Illustrations. xi + 433 pp. n.p. (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-809027-4.



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**Published on** H-Urban (August, 2014)

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## Hyderabad across Five Centuries: The Evolution of a City and Its Rulers

The tale Narendra Luther weaves in *Hyderabad: A Biography* is captivating and complex. Tracing the city of Hyderabad from its origins as a small village in the mid-sixteenth century to its modern role as one of India's major economic urban centers, Luther provides a story of a city rich with fascinating characters set within a beautifully and romantically described landscape. The work conveys, with no doubt, a love of the region and a deep relationship with the city itself. Yet, for all the skill that Luther demonstrates as a wordsmith, and despite the sheer joy of reading his work, the question of the depth of value of the book as an academic urban history is less easily answered. Any urban historian, by nature of an interest in cities, would likely enjoy reading the book, but in terms of academic rigor (regarding citations, argument, and analysis, for example), the book is less easy to accept so wholeheartedly. Certainly, it sits within a category of its own. The book vacillates between historical fiction and narrative history and is far more successful in the historical fiction realm than in the historical argument.

The book is organized into four sections. The first section, "The Beginning," covers the first 150 years of the city. The origin of the city is depicted through the love story of the sultan Mohammed Quli and a poor villager, Baghmati. The story is a good example of effective historical fiction (even if at times the dialogue is a bit clumsy), but scholarly analysis is left to a few sentences in the endnote identifying that there is some scholarly debate over the story as fictional or not. While some citations for further investigation are given in the note, it would have been preferable to have this debate engaged in the description of the narrative account of the city's founding. Given Luther's own scholarly work on the debate, it would have benefited this work for him to share his argument and analysis directly.[1] There are times within the first section in which Luther provides more source-based narrative rather than dramatization, such as the chapter "In Praise of Bhagnagar." In this chapter, Luther includes long excerpts of various European visitors to the area, such as Jean Baptist Tavernier and Mons. De Thevenot. Both accounts, as well as a few shorter ex-

cerpts from other chroniclers, are presented at face value as descriptions of the city, and there is no analytic framework applied or argument in the chapter. In this way, the accounts are interesting to read, but much more could have been gained from them than the chapter achieves.

The second section of the book, "A Change of Guard," covers a much longer period, from 1687 to 1911. Indeed, it examines a number of changes in the guard, as the city underwent several power changes and structural shifts over the years. The establishment and later consolidation of British power on the subcontinent provides a backdrop to a detailed chronicle of changes in the power structure of the city. Luther is neither overly sympathetic to the British nor overly critical, but he is adept at pointing out various Hyderabadî leaders' rationale for cooperating with the British. The second section, as compared to the first, has much less dialogue and dramatization, and given the section's larger breadth of time, there is distinctly less rich description. The chapter "If Hyderabad is Lost..." covers the pivotal period of the 1857 uprising. In this chapter, Luther presents an interesting (albeit controversial) argument that "Hyderabad was indeed the bulwark of the British presence in India in 1857. As the Governor of Bombay said to the Resident in his nervous telegram: 'If Hyderabad goes, everything goes.' The Nizam was unquestionably with the British. He did not want to stake anything for anything" (p. 146). Luther does not, unfortunately, provide a great deal of detail or evidence to support this claim and the reader is left wondering about the types of sources that Luther might recommend for more information. His assessment that "the uprising flopped because it lacked competent leadership, unity and organization and because the Nizam and Salar Jung sided with the British" may be a valid analysis (p. 147), but given the copious interpretations of the events of 1857, the chapter would have benefited from an engagement (or acknowledgement) of the scholarly corpus on the matter. This lack of direct engagement with the scholarly arguments regarding various events and eras depicted is pervasive in the work.

The third section, "End of an Order," considers the shortest period chronologically, spanning only thirty-nine years between 1911 and 1950. Luther shifts gears a bit in the first two chapters, "A Unique Collection" and "Masters of Verse," away from a political narrative to an examination of more cultural developments of the period, focusing on art and poetry, respectively. In a thought-provoking representation of the Nationalist period and the consolidation of the independence movements during the interwar years and the 1930s, Luther focuses on

the communal divisions that emerge. While this period is frequently presented in a celebratory light, the era feels much less optimistic by Luther's account; indeed, the chapter covering much of the 1930s is entitled "The Troubled Decades." He depicts the postindependence absorption of the Hyderabad independent state into India with scant detail, which is ironic given the fact that this section covers the shortest period, and he relies on his reader to know a great deal more of the political complexities of the era than may be prudent. Section 3 provides more frequent use of dramatization and dialogue than the second, which creates a degree of emotional depiction, but the parts relying on narrative history provide very little source references and the section feels much less engaged than the earlier sections.

The distance remains in the final section of the work, "Dawn of Democracy," which covers 1950 to the present. Here Luther inserts himself directly into the work, resorting to first person in a number of personal anecdotes. While this is not necessarily problematic, the entire section has a distinct, and careful, political tone that loses the romance and storytelling at which he excels in the first section. There is also a degree of cynicism that comes through, most clearly articulated in the closing line of the last chapter: "The common man will never know what transpires in the murky lanes and dark recesses of politics. He can only watch the spectacles with a mixture of amusement, aversion, and helpless anticipation" (p. 386).

Luther loves and longs for the Hyderabad that he writes passionately about, but that Hyderabad seems to have existed centuries ago. In the epilogue, he writes: "More than 2000 years ago, Heraclitus the Greek philosopher said, 'You cannot bathe in the same river twice'—not even once." Because a river is water and water keeps flowing. It is not the same river when you entered as when you come out of the river. One feels the same about Hyderabad. People who have lived here thirty, twenty, or even ten years feel they are not living in the same city. It is changing, changing fast, too fast and that is taking away some of its old charm.... A city's *raison d'être* is to make life better. Many wonder whether it is doing that" (p. 391). This melancholic end to the work suggests good questions regarding modernity, globalization, and progress that any urban historian should reflect on. As the city has grown and developed, has it made life better? Was the city itself a force or a consequence in the centuries of change that Hyderabad witnessed?

Overall, Luther's work is hard to place in a number of ways, which may well be part of its appeal. It is

not an urban history monograph in the traditional, analytic, or argumentative sense. There is an artistic achievement in the pages though that cannot go unappreciated by those who feel passionate about cities and urban history. Yet there is a longing for more, and for more engagement with the scholarly debates and literature that Luther would be well positioned to inform. Other shortcomings include the large absence of nonelite and non-political figures, as well as analysis of the spatial aspect of the city's development that an urban historian will crave. Thus, the book for urban historians, particularly of South

Asia, is one that will be immensely fascinating and, possibly, equally frustrating. Perhaps the key to such a work is to set aside academic expectations and just enjoy the stunning landscape of a city developing from a small, remote village to an urban powerhouse as Luther describes it.

#### Note

[1]. Luther cites Narendra Luther, "On the Historicity of Bhagmati," *Research Journal of the Salar Jung Museum* 29-30 (1992-93), on page 395.

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**Citation:** Samantha Christiansen. Review of Luther, Narendra, *Hyderabad: A Biography*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.

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