

# A Muslim Conspiracy in British India?

Politics and Paranoia in the  
Early Nineteenth-Century Deccan

Chandra Mallampalli



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Nineteenth-Century Deccan*

CHANDRA MALLAMPALLI

*Westmont College*



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## A MUSLIM CONSPIRACY IN BRITISH INDIA?

As the British prepared for war in Afghanistan in 1839, rumors spread of a Muslim conspiracy based in India's Deccan region. Colonial officials were convinced that itinerant preachers of jihad – whom they labeled “Wahhabis” – were collaborating with Russian and Persian armies and inspiring Muslim princes to revolt. Officials detained and interrogated Muslim travelers, conducted weapons inspections at princely forts, surveyed mosques, and ultimately annexed territories of the accused. Using untapped archival materials, Chandra Mallampalli describes how local intrigues, often having little to do with “religion,” manufactured belief in a global conspiracy against British rule. By skillfully narrating stories of the alleged conspirators, he shows how fears of the dreaded Wahhabi sometimes prompted colonial authorities to act on thin evidence, while also inspiring plots by Muslims against princes not of their liking. At stake were not only questions about Muslim loyalty but also the very ideals of a liberal empire.

CHANDRA MALLAMPALLI is Professor of History at Westmont College, USA. He has written extensively on the intersection of religion, law, and society in colonial India. His books include *Race, Religion and Law in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

For refugees, migrants, and displaced peoples

## *Acknowledgments*

I arrived at the topic of this book while conducting research in 2007 at the Tamil Nadu State Archives in Chennai. There I encountered documents describing the East India Company's confrontation with Ghulam Rasul Khan, the last Nawab of Kurnool (r. 1824–39). The Company accused him of amassing weapons in his fort with the intention of launching a rebellion. At the time, I thought this would make an interesting article. Parts of the Kurnool story even worked their way into my last book. Years later, at the Oriental and India Office Collection at the British Library, I found material that situated Kurnool within the investigation of an alleged conspiracy. The investigation was largely centered on the years 1839–40, which mark the early stages of the First Anglo-Afghan War. Subsequent visits to archives at Delhi, Hyderabad, and Chennai helped me learn about the transnational and local contexts that shaped the events described in this book.

This project kept me within the familiar terrain of religion, law, and society in South Asia, but took me more deeply into the study of Indian Islam and Muslim reformism. I grew indebted to the contributions of many scholars, including Mohiuddin Ahmad, Qeyamuddin Ahmad, Richard Eaton, Marc Gaborieau, Nile Green, Peter Hardy, Marcia Hermansen, Ayesha Jalal, Omar Khalidi, Ira Lapidus, Barbara Daly Metcalf, Filippo and Caroline Osella, Harlan Pearson, Claudia Preckel, and Francis Robinson.

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In 2015, I organized a panel on South Asian Wahhabis at the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Annual Conference on South Asia. Sylvia Vatuk and Julie Stephens were co-panelists and Karen Leonard the discussant. Conversations with Sylvia Vatuk over the years have greatly enriched my understanding of Muslim reformers in South India. Conversations with Julie Stephens about Wahhabis and her impressive work on Muslim reformers in North India were highly informative. At various points in the research process, Karen Leonard offered helpful feedback, drawing on her expertise on the history of Hyderabad. I am particularly thankful to Leonard for introducing me to Raghu Chidambi, an independent scholar who is passionately invested in Hyderabad’s history and who generously assisted me with various tasks while in Hyderabad. Chidambi introduced me to Illyas Hashmi Syed and Mir Fazaluddin Ali Khan, two individuals who translated Urdu and Persian materials that were valuable to my research. Hannah Archambault also assisted me with Persian translation. Others who assisted me while in Hyderabad are Sarada and Prem Kumar Chiruvolu (my sister and brother-in-law) and Rajagopal Vakulabharanam of Central University.

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## Introduction

In recent years, political regimes with constitutions as wide ranging as the United States, Great Britain, France, and India have been prosecuting their respective wars on terror. As they contend with extremist violence within their borders, their citizens are staging spirited debates about the proper limits of state power, whether legal, constitutional, or ethical. Questions concerning access to information vs. privacy, the role of special courts to try terror suspects, and the policing of certain classes of people are hotly contested topics. Whereas the terms of these debates vary according to context, a recurring question being raised is whether states are committing their own crimes in their very attempts to prevent or investigate instances of mass violence.

As vast resources continue to be devoted to the war on terror, it is easy to lose sight of a deeper history in which modern empires grappled with similar kinds of choices. It was not uncommon for imperial rulers to set aside their own notions of justice when confronting threats to their sovereignty. Some of the procedures adopted by states to extract information from today's terror suspects resemble methods of detention and interrogation employed by colonial officials in early nineteenth-century India.<sup>1</sup> To effectively thwart rebellion, the colonial state also deployed an elaborate "information order," which enabled them to monitor sections of Indian society that were likely to rebel.<sup>2</sup> Access to the colonial archive, the paper trail of empire, allows us to examine how the British responded to

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Malcolm Lewin, *Is the Practice of Torture in Madras, with the Sanction of the Authorities of Leadenhall Street?* (Westminster: Thomas Brettell, 1856). Lewin's ideas are discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> C.A. Bayly develops the notion of a colonial "information order" in his pathbreaking study of formal and informal networks of communication deployed by the British Raj in India. See C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

subversive elements within their dominions in light of their cherished belief in the rule of law.

In his provocative essay *Fear of Small Numbers*, Arjun Appadurai describes how modern security regimes feel uniquely threatened by itinerant peoples, an insight carrying unique relevance for Muslim migrants. Crossing borders to make contact with their co-religionists, Muslims can evoke the “specter of conspiracy, of the cell, the spy, the traitor, the dissident, or the revolutionary.”<sup>3</sup> A new “cellular” order marked by unmanageable flows of people, information, ideology, and capital across transnational networks, Appadurai contends, now subverts the order of the nation-state.<sup>4</sup> Anxiety and insecurity arising from these developments make Muslim migrants prime targets of suspicion and prejudice.

Such concerns about Muslim itinerancy find compelling precedents in the age of empire. During the early nineteenth century, imperial rulers became more inclined to question the loyalty of Muslims on account of their global connections and convictions. In their efforts to police Muslims, East India Company (hereafter, the Company) officials weighed matters of due process for the accused against the demands of protecting the state against the threat of jihad. In the process, they pushed the limits of liberal imperial values to their capacity. Using untapped records of the colonial archive, this book draws attention to a particular context in early nineteenth-century India when British rulers found themselves uniquely threatened by the mobility, networking capacity, and convictions of Muslims. It was a context that linked the affairs of the Middle East, Central Asia, and India and one that yielded complex plots and unexpected outcomes.

### Distant Threats, Local Schemes

During the 1830s, the Afghan region became a theater of confrontation between rival empires, most notably the Russians and the British. As this Great Game unfolded, Tsarist Russia supported the Persians in their 1837 attack on the Central Asian city of Herat. The advancement of a Persian army into a region so near to British India’s northwest frontier was more than what Lord Auckland, the Governor General of India, could tolerate. It raised the specter of Russian encroachment and turned the

<sup>3</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–31.

Afghan region into one of utmost strategic importance. Determined to secure India's northwest frontier from any advances by its archrival, Auckland initiated a series of interventions in Afghanistan, which culminated in the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–42).<sup>5</sup>

As they committed resources to Afghanistan in the years leading up to this war, the British developed a new sense of vulnerability in India. Rumors of a Muslim uprising began to circulate not only within the ranks of the colonial administration but also among traders, mercenaries, and bazaar workers across well-established paths of commerce and migration. These rumors prompted a massive investigation by officials of the ruling Company. Curiously, the investigation was centered on that region of south, central India known as the Deccan.<sup>6</sup> Why the Deccan and not cities of the north with heavy Muslim populations and in closer proximity to Afghanistan? Eighteen years later, after all, the British would face what was arguably the most momentous challenge to its nineteenth-century Empire. The 1857 Rebellion began as a mutiny among Indian soldiers in the North Indian town of Meerut, but soon spread to Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, and other regions of the north.<sup>7</sup> The investigation of this potential uprising, however, was largely centered on the princely state of Hyderabad and neighboring districts of the south. As such, it gained the cooperation of officials from both British and princely ruled territories.<sup>8</sup>

John Elphinstone, the Governor of Madras, and James Fraser, the British Resident at Hyderabad, alerted local authorities to “suspicious foreigners” disguised as holy men who were spreading disaffection toward the Company, especially among Muslim princes and soldiers. Traveling from places such as Kabul, Baghdad, or Mecca, these “emissaries” (as they also had referred to them) identified each other by wearing copper rings and amulets. The amulets contained cryptic messages, penned either in

<sup>5</sup> A detailed account of events surrounding this war, including the politics centered on the Barakzai ruler Dost Muhammad Khan, the Company-backed Sodozai leader Shah Shuja, and the Sikh leader Ranjit Singh are provided by William Dalrymple in *Return of the King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839–1842* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this book, the “Deccan” encompasses the plateau extending from the Maratha country of Western India to Hyderabad and its vicinity, and hinterland territories extending to the south of the Tungabhadra River toward Mysore.

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent compilation of English language sources, see Richard Sorsky, *The Sepoy Mutiny: 1857, An Annotated Checklist of English Language Books* (Fresno: Linden, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The Company's Raj (rule) in India assumed different forms in different regions of the subcontinent. In addition to those provinces that came under its direct administration, hundreds of princely states remained under the formal authority of Indian princes, whether Hindu rajas or Muslim nawabs. Many of these princes entered into subsidiary alliances with the Company, whereby the Company granted them military protection in exchange for loyalty and the payment of tribute.

Arabic or Persian, which allegedly conveyed their “dark designs” to accomplices.<sup>9</sup> Officials became convinced that these emissaries were knitting together a vast confederacy consisting of princes and their armies working in concert with Russian and Persian forces.

The alarm sounded by Fraser and Elphinstone prompted swift and decisive action. From June to October 1839, police arrested several prominent Muslims in South India for their involvement in a conspiracy to drive the British out of India. Among the accused were Mubariz ud-Daula, the younger brother of the Nizam of Hyderabad<sup>10</sup>; Ghulam Rasul Khan, the Nawab (regional governor) of Kurnool; Sayyid Shah Modin Qadiri, a preacher at a renowned mosque at Vellore; and Shah Abbas Ali Khan, the Jagirdar (holder of a land grant) of Udayagiri. These men represented the key elements – a mastermind (Mubariz ud-Daula), suppliers of troops and weapons, and religious inspiration – of what came to be referred to as the Wahhabi conspiracy (see Map 1).

Strictly speaking, Wahhabis were followers of the Arabian Muslim reformer, Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–92). They called for a return to a purer form of Islam grounded in the Qur’an and the Hadith. They also espoused jihad (struggle or holy war) against religious abuses and innovations and against regimes that impeded the practice of Islam.<sup>11</sup> As numerous scholars have pointed out, the Muslim reformers who were most active in India during the 1830s were not the Arabia-based Wahhabis, but followers of the Indian reformer, Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi (1786–1831), who called themselves the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* (Order of the Prophet Muhammad).<sup>12</sup> Colonial officials and Muslim opponents of the

<sup>9</sup> It was James Fraser who offered this description of the signs used by Wahhabis to recognize each other upon reaching a new place. Fraser learned of these methods from testimonies of several Muslim detainees.

<sup>10</sup> After breaking free from Mughal control in 1724, hereditary rulers of Hyderabad’s founding Asaf Jah dynasty assumed the title of “Nizam.” Under the leadership of its Nizams, Hyderabad would become the richest and most powerful princely state of colonial India. Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India Before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 248–49.

<sup>11</sup> During their early nineteenth-century campaign to seize control of the Hijaz, the Arabian Wahhabis destroyed holy sites and shrines associated with the Prophet and his family. Word of these zealous campaigns shaped a negative impression of Wahhabis among members of the Indian *ulama*. Thereafter they labeled Muslim reformers of India “Wahhabis.”

<sup>12</sup> See especially, Harlan Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth Century India: The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* (New Delhi: Yoda, 2008), Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), Peter Hardy, *Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), and Mohiuddin Ahmad, *Sayyid Ahmad Shahid: His Life and Mission* (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1975). In South Asia and elsewhere, other reform movements calling for a return to the “path of the prophet Muhammad” referred to themselves as the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah*. For instance, Khwaja Muhammad Nasir of Delhi founded in the eighteenth century an organization bearing the same



Map 1: Map of colonial India, which includes key nodes of the alleged conspiracy

movement labeled Sayyid Ahmad's followers (inaccurately and pejoratively) "Wahhabis." By the early 1830s, the *Muhammadi* movement had established a vast network, spanning from Sindh to Tonk, Bhopal, Patna, and Calcutta in the north and eventually extending southward to

name. This movement functioned as a Sufi sect, with Muhammad Nasir maintaining intimate ties with notable *pirs*, authoring important mystical works, and claiming divine inspiration for himself. See Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and His Times* (Canberra: Ma'rifat, 1980), 344–45.



Hyderabad, Nellore, Arcot, and Madras. Company officials were convinced that these reformers had linked the affairs of the Afghan region to those of the Deccan and were orchestrating a massive revolt.

As they investigated what they saw as Wahhabi-inspired threat, authorities detained numerous Muslim travelers. These detainees provided the earliest accounts of the alleged conspiracy: In 1839, Russian and Persian armies would advance through Afghanistan toward British India. As the Company's army was diverted to the northwest frontier to counter this offensive, Prince Mubariz ud-Daula would initiate his revolt. Armies of the princely states of Tonk, Bhopal, Jodhpur, and Satara would attack British military outposts in the North. Mubariz would then lead a huge section of Hyderabad's army on a campaign to seize control of the South. Kurnool's Rasul Khan and Udayagiri's Ali Khan would supply him with arms, soldiers, and grain. Upon victory, the King of Persia would rule India and Mubariz ud-Daula, after deposing his brother the Nizam of Hyderabad, would become the Subedar (local commandant or chief officer) of the Deccan.

The most significant aspect of this scenario is that it *did not* materialize. Upon their arrests all four men profusely professed their innocence of any crime against the state, in some instances swearing on the Qur'an. As persons allegedly committed to jihadist doctrines and often hailed as "freedom fighters," one might expect them to have declared at least some animosity toward the British; but this was not the case. What the investigation left behind is not the record of a violent uprising, but a massive supply of documentation revealing the scope and methods of the government's intelligence-gathering operations. To unearth the designs of the conspirators, authorities detained and interrogated Muslims, conducted weapons inspections, surveyed forts and mosques, and ultimately annexed territories of the accused. As a result of these measures, Company officials believed they had preempted a large-scale and highly coordinated challenge to their rule in India. Were they correct in believing so, or had rumors of a conspiracy merely served to legitimate their use of force against troublesome Muslim regimes of India's Deccan?

This book draws attention to the role of local factors – petty, profane, and centered on individuals and their personal agendas – in manufacturing fears of an expansive conspiracy against British rule. Grievances within various towns of India's Deccan found ways of connecting with flows of people, ideas, and information linking India to Persia, Arabia, and Central Asia. Arising from these connections, I argue, was the transnational imaginary of the Wahhabi conspiracy. Traffic between Hyderabad and a

wider Muslim world created the illusion of a coordinated “Wahhabi” threat; but local factors, not the transnational Muslim operative, became the driving force behind events.

Rooted in this emphasis on the local is a related line of argumentation: The Company’s massive investigation reveals its investment in a social order maintained by means of patronage. Examinations of the alleged conspirators (or their accusers) did not merely address questions of guilt or innocence, but also vetted their family status, rank, title, land grants, pensions, or salaries secured under Company rule. By scrutinizing factors such as these, officials believed they could measure a Muslim’s likelihood either to rebel or remain loyal, the assumption being that anyone enjoying the Company’s patronage would remain loyal. Portrayed as fanatics and jihadists, so-called Wahhabis represented the antithesis of this order. The Company implicated Muslims of various ranks, ethnicities, and vocations in Wahhabi-inspired agitation. Besides linking suspects to Muslim reformist networks, the Wahhabi label often designated those who had *turned* from loyalty to rebellion in defiance of colonialism’s patronage order.

This book sets the big picture scenarios associated with the so-called Wahhabi threat against the local stories of the key conspirators. Instead of using these stories to prove whether the conspiracy was “real” or not (a matter which tends to preoccupy philosophical and political science approaches to conspiracy theories), I focus on the performativity of the very notion of the transnational Wahhabi operative.<sup>13</sup> It was not the Wahhabis per se but the fear of them that steered the events of the 1830s Deccan. Some of the most significant dynamics arising from conspiracy narratives are the performances they enact by means of their dissemination.<sup>14</sup> These occur when a conspiracy narrative makes contact

<sup>13</sup> In connection to the much-publicized “Wahhabi trials” that followed the 1857 Rebellion, Julie Stephens aptly refers to colonial paranoia concerning the “Phantom Wahhabi.” See Julie Stephens, “The Phantom Wahhabi: Liberalism and the Muslim Fanatic in mid-Victorian India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2013), 22–52. I discuss Stephens’ article in greater detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>14</sup> My emphasis on the performative aspects of conspiracy narration (as distinct from a focus on the validity of a conspiracy theory) is informed by other important work on speech-related events that shape communities and the societies in which they thrive. This includes scholarship on rumor, informal talk or gossip, and scandal. On rumor, see Anand Yang, “A Conversation of Rumors: The Language of Popular Mentalities in Late Nineteenth Century Colonial India,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Spring 1987), 485–505; C.A. Bayly’s discussion of rumor as a component of colonialism’s information order in *Empire and Information*, 18–19 and 200–01; Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 4–31. On informal speech, see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s discussion of *adda* in *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 180–213; Debarati Sen, “Speech Genres and Identity: The Place of *Adda* in Bengali Cultural Discourse,” *Journal of Emerging Knowledge on Emerging Markets*, Vol. 3