

The Many Faces of Hyderabad

by Geoffrey Clarfield (July 2013)

Four months ago when the evening crowds of the Dilsukhnagar, a bustling densely populated suburb of the Indian city of Hyderabad, were at their peak, two terrorist bombs exploded, killing 16 and injuring 18 people. Indian authorities suspect the possible hand of homegrown Islamic terrorists and have pursued a number of suspects, but the perpetrators remain at large. The bombs exploded near a movie theater and close by the Sai Babu Hindu temple. Experts believe that the temple was the original target but that in order to avoid police surveillance, the terrorists set off the bombs nearby, as Dilsukhnagar has one of the biggest fruit markets in Asia.

As I drove into the city of Hyderabad I passed by the Dilsukhnagar fruit market and decided to spend whatever spare time I had in the week ahead during a World Bank sponsored conference I was attending, to explore the many faces of this ancient city. This is what I found.

In order to understand Hyderabad you must start at the Golconda fort. It is a fairy tale looking edifice that rises steeply from the plain. To enter you walk through enormous gates and then climb steep stone stairs where you can explore the ancient citadel, its deserted mosque, storage, reception halls and living quarters. It also contains the remains of a Hindu temple for although the former rulers of Hyderabad, the Nizams, were Muslim, like many traditional Indian Muslim princes during the Raj they did not persecute their Hindu subjects. From the top of the fort you see out over the dusty plains. Clearly, it was the commanding military presence of the region until the 20th century.

Despite the fact that the urban sprawl of Hyderabad has grown right up to the walls of the fort, most of the area around it is home to a military base of the Indian army. Originally a Hindu fort, Golconda was conquered by Muslims from the north of India, the Qutbi Shahs, then by the Mughals under Emperor Aurangzeb and finally came to be ruled by the ancestors of the Nizam of Hyderabad, who managed this princely state first under the declining Mughals and then under the rising British East India Company cum British Empire. For centuries the fort contained the enormous financial treasure that these pleasure loving Muslim Indian princes accumulated and, the precious diamonds and gem stones which come from the mines of the region. The famous blue diamond, the Koh i Noor, which is now part of the crown jewels of England, comes from the treasure of the rulers of Hyderabad who before the rise of the oil sheikhs, were among the richest men in the world (Hyderabad has a school as well as a bakery by the

same name.)