

The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India

Kavita Saraswathi Datla

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In her study of Urdu language politics in late colonial India, Kavita Saraswathi Datla traces the rise and eventual demise of an alternative Urdu movement that envisioned the language not as a marker of Muslim religious identity, but as a means to articulate a modern secular nationalism with roots in India's Islamic past. By highlighting this largely forgotten moment of secular Urdu nationalism, the author pushes back against two well-established historiographical narratives on Muslims in colonial India: the dominant understanding of the Hindi-Urdu controversy as a process of sharpening communal boundaries and the scholarly emphasis on the epistemological struggles to make Islam and Western science compatible. She complicates both of these existing histories by shifting her geographic lens from northern India to the so-called colonial periphery: the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad. Specifically, Datla's research centers on the establishment and initial decades of intellectual activities at Hyderabad's innovative and Urdu-medium Osmania University.

In the book's opening chapter, Datla argues that Hyderabad's leading Muslim intellectuals and administrators were largely uninterested in epistemological questions about the relationship between Islam and modern Western forms of knowledge. To underscore this disinterest, she examines Wilfred S. Blunt's unsuccessful proposal from the late nineteenth-century that the Hyderabad state build a modern Islamic seminary. Whereas Blunt envisioned an Islamic university as a catalyst for Islamic reform in India, Datla demonstrates that his Muslim interlocutors remained unconvinced about the necessity of any Protestant-style reformation of Islam. Instead of possessing such bold theological agendas, leading Hyderabad educators focused on extending educational access and forging a stronger connection between the values taught at home and the knowledge acquired at school. They located the solution to these twin issues in vernacular education. For them, the use of Urdu instead of Persian, Arabic, or English as the medium of instruction would remove the existing language barriers in Hyderabad's education system and simultaneously ensure a greater continuity between home and school cultures. According to Datla it was this focus on vernacular education, not Islamic reform, that inspired Osmania University's founding in 1918.

The second chapter provides an in-depth examination of the university's Translation Bureau and its projects designed to reform Urdu into a modern scientific language. She explains that the Osmania faculty hoped to regener-

ate Urdu into a “worldly vernacular” that, like English, could perform “quodidian, administrative, literary, scientific, philosophical and academic” functions with ease (p. 58). With this reformed Urdu, Hyderabad intellectuals aimed to communicate modern scientific ideas to the masses and, by eliminating this perceived popular ignorance, also help “fashion a disciplined, self-reliant, and ethical society” (p. 67). These lofty visions required hard work. In order to translate western scholarship into Urdu, Osmania faculty had to coin new words to express modern scientific concepts. This process produced tensions: Should the new words be drawn from classical Islamic languages like Arabic or Persian? Were Sanskrit-derived terms more appropriate? Or, did Hyderabad’s villagers already possess overlooked colloquial vocabularies that could be utilized to communicate many scientific concepts? In the end, Datla notes that the majority of new words came from Arabic; however, she argues, this recourse to Arabic was less the result of Muslim identity politics than a conscious recognition that much western scientific thought had Arabic roots.

Moving from scientific translations to Osmania’s original works of scholarship, chapter 3 advances that “those associated with Osmania University in the 1920s and 1930s were involved not only in the reformation of the Urdu language but also in revising and formulating narratives of their own past, laying claim to both an Islamic and an Indian heritage as part of their attempts to place themselves politically in the present” (p. 83). To understand this process of historical re-imagination, Datla analyzes two Urdu-language histories, Abdul Halim Sharar’s *Tarikh-i Islam (History of Islam)* and Sayyid Hashmi Faridabadi’s *Tarikh-i Hind (History of India)*. While Sharar reframed Islam as a civilizing force in the Arab world akin to Judaism and Christianity, Faridabadi aimed to blend Hindu and Muslim periods of Indian history into the tale of one, admittedly complex, nation. Taken together, the two books insisted upon the Muslims’ centrality to modern civilization and the Indian nation.

Chapter 4 zooms out of Osmania University to examine Hyderabad’s leading Urdu associations and their connections to national-level Indian politics. Datla first investigates activist efforts to relocate the history of Urdu from northern India to the Deccan and, in turn, to emphasize the unique fusion of Hindi and Persian in Hyderabad’s Urdu. She then explores tensions between native Hyderabadis (*mulki*) and northern Indian émigrés (*ghair-mulki*) in the Urdu movement. However, the chapter’s most notable contribution lies in the author’s discussion of the collision between the secular Urdu and Congress Party variants of nationalism. By chronicling Mahatma Gandhi’s mid-1930s relegation of Urdu to solely a Muslim language, Datla argues that Congress policies often minoritized Indian Muslims as inescapably Muslim and, in the

process, marginalized the movement for a secular Urdu nationalism as a whole.

In the book's final chapter, Datla returns to Osmania University in order to explain the dynamics driving the campus-wide student protests of 1938-39. She rejects the two prevailing accounts that cast the controversy as either a Hindu communal uprising against Hyderabad's Muslim elite or as the beginning of Hyderabad's anti-colonial nationalist mobilization. Instead, Datla concludes that the protests were far more complicated because students and state officials alike made simultaneous claims to religious rights and inter-religious pluralism as well as to communal and national identities. The protests also opened the door to demands concerning language. Indeed, the turbulent decade of the 1940s saw students challenge the dominance of Urdu itself at Osmania. In the immediate post-independence era, the university succumbed to these popular pressures to adopt English as the medium of instruction, thereby marking the end of Hyderabad's Urdu movement.

While *The Language of Secular Islam* weaves a multi-faceted story of Hyderabad's often overlooked secular Urdu nationalist movement, Datla leaves some questions unanswered about its relationship to Congress-Muslim League national politics and its subsequent marginalization. She touches briefly but tantalizingly on these intertwined issues in the latter half of the fourth chapter. Condensed into five pages, the relevant section details Abdul Haq's ill-fated confrontation with Gandhi over the future of Urdu. After Gandhi tied Urdu to the Muslim community alone, Abdul Haq withdrew his support from Congress. Datla uses this episode as the hinge of her narrative; for her, this moment represents the minoritization of Urdu and, along with it, the impossibility of the Hyderabad movement's aspirations for a secular Urdu nationalism.

Yet Datla's evidence is confined to only the figure of Abdul Haq. This leaves various questions unanswered: How did other Urdu advocates and Osmania faculty members engage with both Congress and Muslim League visions of nationalism? Despite this process of minoritization, did any secular Urdu nationalists manage to carve out a viable space within Congress? Or, did many find solace in the Muslim League? Although her work is refreshing precisely because it shifts perspectives from national-level politics to Hyderabad's alternative political dynamics, her intriguing concept of minoritization would benefit from both a broader and a more in-depth discussion.

At the heart of her history, Datla defines Hyderabad's Urdu movement as an alternative secular nationalism and not as a project of Islamic religious reform. As a result, she self-consciously bypasses epistemological questions about the compatibility of Islam and modern western modes of knowledge, declaring them largely irrelevant for her Hyderabad intellectual. However,

if epistemological questions regarding Islamic reform were not at stake in Osmania University's establishment, then does Datla's history imply that western science had already triumphed? In many ways, chapter 2 gestures at an established consensus on the value of western science among Hyderabad's elites. If such a consensus did exist, did it extend beyond the small circle of Urdu nationalists or was the epistemological battle over science still raging among other influential Hyderabad intellectual? In turn, chapter 3's discussion of Muslim historiography hints that some Urdu nationalists may have been invested in projects of Islamic reform. For example, Sharar offered a reinterpretation of the righteous caliphs, adding the second Shi'i Imam Hassan to the established Sunni list of four. For these reasons, perhaps "the language of secular Islam" is not quite as distinct from epistemological issues and Islamic reform as Datla asserts.

Overall, *The Language of Secular Islam* spotlights a largely forgotten moment in Urdu's history and Hyderabad's nationalist politics. By tracing the history of secular Urdu nationalism, Datla provides a fascinating glimpse into an alternative imagining of Indian nationalism that, while eventually marginalized, complicates prevailing narratives about Urdu and Indian Muslims in South Asian historiography.

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