# Book Reviews

## **The Language of Secular Islam - Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India** by Kavita Saraswathi Datla, 2013, New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan

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The possibility of Urdu being a secular language that could unite India's diverse communities may come as a surprise to many because of the mistaken belief that it is a "Muslim language." But an attempt to forge a "common secular future" for Indian citizens through Urdu was indeed made in the 19th century in the princely state of Hyderabad.

Kavita Saraswathi Datla's brilliantly researched *The Language of Secular Islam* takes us through the twists and turns of this amazing venture which led to the establishment (in 1918) of India's first vernacular (Urdu) institution of higher education, Osmania University, to challenge the imposition of English by the British. The desire was, says Datla, to create a systemised and uniform vernacular that would rival English as a language of business, science, and learned conversation and ultimately "democratise the effects of Western education."

To dispel the notion that Urdu is a Muslim language, Datla writes that as far back as the 1830s, Urdu replaced Persian as the official language of administration over a large swathe of British territory, including Bihar, the North-West Provinces, parts of the Central Provinces, Punjab, and the princely states of Kashmir and Hyderabad. This official language policy continued beyond 1900 (when Hindi was added to Urdu in some territories) till Partition. Muslim advocates of Urdu never used it to articulate identitarian claims and saw the language as a product of Hindu-Muslim interaction. Their main concern was securing a secular national culture for India through a language that they believed was a product of Hindu-Muslim interaction.

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As further proof, Datla quotes from Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* to assert that Urdu served as the tool to knit together a diverse set of Mughal functionaries which included both Hindus and Muslims. According to Faruqi, the word Urdu came about from the phrase *zaban-e-urdu-e-mu'alla-e-shajahanabad* (the language of the exalted City/Court of Shajahanabad, that is, Delhi) which soon got shortened to *zaban-e-urdu-e-mu'alla*, then to *zaban-e-urdu* and finally to Urdu. Before that it was called *Hindvi*, Hindi,*Dihlavi*, *Gujri*, *Dakani* and *Rekhta*.

Datla cites an interesting encounter between Gandhi and Maulvi Abdul Haq, who headed the famous literary organisation "Anjuman-e-Tarraqi-e-Urdu", to show why Indian nationalism of the early 20th century needs to be re-evaluated. Abdul Haq was upset with Gandhi for favouring Hindi over Hindustani (in the 1936 Nagpur meeting of the Akhil Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad). Gandhi told him: "Muslims can hold on to Urdu. It is a language of religious value for them. It is written in the script of the Quran. It was propagated by Muslim Kings."

Although Gandhi later expressed regret for these comments, the Maulvi was annoyed that a person of Gandhi's stature should speak of Urdu in such terms. Datla describes this feeling of the famed educator of the Osmania University as "the experience of being minoritised", and makes the important observation that we need to see such political disagreements "not as the result of the competition between communal and secular agendas but as the product of different and competing secular agendas."

**Two projects**

Datla is right. For Osmania University was neither a communal nor theological project despite the fact that it did have a faculty of Theology. According to statistics provided by Datla, by 1935 there were 1,806 students in the Osmania system: 771 in arts, 731 in sciences, 102 in medicine, 97 in law, 47 in engineering, 26 in education and only 32 in theology. In other words, theology was not a popular course a fact that indicates Muslim eagerness to be part of the secular mainstream.

It is Datla's case that such a tendency was encouraged by the Osmania University. She highlights two specific projects that were commissioned by the University which emphasised the highlighting the secular achievements of a Muslim past that would serve India well. They were, *Taarikh-e-Hind* (The History of India) by Sayyid Hashmi Faridabadi and *Taarikh-e-Islam* (The History of Islam) by Abdul Halim Sharar. These two histories, writes Datla, "claim space for Muslims within national and global narratives by asserting the importance of Muslims to the larger themes and imperatives of history and development." "What Sharar and

Faridabadi hoped ultimately to demonstrate was the compatibility of national and Islamic goals."

The book also contains an extensive discussion on student politics in Osmania University, particularly the controversy surrounding the singing of Vande Mataram. She refuses to accept that this imbroglio was part of the freedom struggle in Hyderabad, or proof of anti-Hindu policies of the Nizam. She recounts how when (in November 1938) some students started singing the Vande Mataram in their hostel prayer rooms they were asked not to sing because the song, given its "political and controversial nature", had the potential to hurt the feelings of non-Hindus.

Not surprisingly, this was sought to be exploited by the Hyderabad State Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. This, despite the fact that the striking students did not define their agitation in communal terms.

Datla cites a report from *The Hindu* of June 3, 1939 which quotes the expelled students expressing their allegiance to Hyderabad, their university and their commitment to communal harmony without abandoning the Vande Mataram cause.

Their demand to sing Vande Mataram was rejected by the government on the grounds that a song of comparatively recent origin could not be considered a part of the ancient Hindu religion. In other words, as Datla points out, it was not a blanket opposition to Hinduism but a case of what kind of Hinduism would be permitted on Osmania University campus.

Without a doubt Datla's book is a tremendous historiographical effort toward setting the record straight on the Muslim contribution to India's secular future. Her painstaking research demolishes the narrative that questions the role of Muslims in the freedom movement on the basis of their so called pan-Islamic communitarianism.

(Courtesy: The Hindu)

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