Urdu’s Progressive Wit: Sulaiman Khatib, Sarvar “Danda” and The Subaltern Satirists Who Spoke Up

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With a new morning, with a new evening with a new Ra’m, with a new R m in the cradle of unity, when our people will be nurtured, through the message of brotherhood,

*In Hyderabad, I incurred a special debt to Mr. im yatu’l-L h and Dr. Mu &f Kam l, two brilliantly witty individuals who shared with me the historical and cultural worlds of Hyderabadi humor. I am deeply grateful to Manu Bhagavan and Valerie Turner for their critiques and suggestions regarding many aspects of this paper.*
when humanity will be molded,  
this world will change—it will surely change  
A colorful morning will dawn  
a colorless night will be gone  
the inhabitant of every country,  
will inherit the life of hope  
when the flag of justice will fly,  
then the world will settle  
this world will change—it will surely change  
Sarvar “ an(” (1990, 100)

zindag n! k apn! ky b l, n  
jaïs j r, -århb k! y r  
g b baïst! bai g b r t! bai  
na. jaïs Kha ìb k! y r

What shall I call my life?  
like a poor fellow’s wife, my friend  
at times she laughs, at times she cries  
like Kha&b’s poem, my friends!

Sulaim n “Kha&b” (2002, 29)

In this paper, I explore the manner in which satire, wit, and humor served resistive and reformist discourses springing from Hyderabad, Deccan. I focus on the poetry of Sarvar an (1925–64) and Sulaim n Kha b (1922–78); how their poetry not only engaged issues of class, caste, gender, and religion, but also how these poets coped with the challenges posed by their North Indian counterparts. In order to fully appreciate the poetry of an and Kha b, and their distinguished contributions as poets and satirists, I will first locate their works within the historical context of the Progressive Writers’ Movement, the ideologies of which were intimately bound up with the sentiments that resonated in the poetry of the Deccani poets.

Historical Context of the Deccani Poets

The year was 1932, the place was Lucknow, the publisher was Sajj d ah r, and the book was Añg r (Embers). The five writers whose prose con-
stituted this book were all under thirty. The literary milieu of the Sub-
continent was filled with words generated by the living pens of All ma
Iqb l, Munshi Premchand, Rabindranath Tagore, Na ru’l-Isl m, and Saro-
jini Naidu. It had been eighteen years since Naidu had written to her
friend Gopal Krishna Gokhale:

Oh, we want a new breed of men before India can be cleansed of her
disease. We want deeper sincerity of motive, a greater courage in speech,
and earnestness in action. We want men who love this country and are full
of yearning to serve and succor their brothers and not to further aid in their
degradation by insincerity and self-seeking. O how I hate shams and
prejudices: how I hate all sectarian narrowness, all provincial limitations of
vision and purpose, all the arrogant sophistries of man-made divisions and
differences: how tired I am to death of the reiterated resolutions that have
become almost meaningless by lip repetition: uncorroborated by the
heart’s conviction and unsustained by practical action …"

(1914)

The highly community-conscious, community-reflexive verses of Iq-
b l were also meant to effect positive changes on the economic front:

\[
\begin{align*}
&u \quad \text{mir\,duny\,ke-ar\,n\,k\,jag\,d} \\
&k \quad \text{kb-e\,umar\,k\,dar-o-d\,r\,bil\,d} \\
&jis\,k\,t\,se\,dabq\,n\,k\,muyassar\,na\,b\,r\,z! \\
&us\,k\,t\,k\,bar\,kb\,sha\,-e\,gandum\,k\,jal\,d \\
&() (Iqb l 1973, 401–2)
\end{align*}
\]

Rise! Wake the poor of my world
shake the doors and walls of the palaces of the
rich
set ablaze every stack of grain
in the field which gives the farmer no
sustenance.

Such pain and sincerity, cast in simple yet majestic eloquence, brought
about a reaction and illuminated the spirit of twenty-something-year-old
idealists Sajj d \, ahir, Rash d Jah n, A) mad Al, and Ma)m du , - afar.
The result was \textit{Añg} \, r —ten short stories, deprived of critical acclaim on
their aesthetic merits by the existing and future canon guardians, but
haughty enough for an Urdu paper to declare: “To buy or quote from this
book is a great sin” (Mahmud 1988, 82). The book was promptly banned
under section 295A of the Indian penal code. When Shabana Mahmud published the postcolonial hardback critical edition of the book, the first page was adorned with the calligraphy of Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim (In the name of Allāh, Most Gracious and Most Merciful). Can great sins begin with the name of Allāh? Such are the aporias we still ponder and those that Añg ēr exploited with disdain. How could anybody who has read these notorious stories not remember Maulānā Dād of the short story “Jannat k Bashrat” (The Glad Tidings of Heaven) who endeavors to gratify the houri of Islamic paradise in a stream-of-consciousness mode while his wife, two decades younger, revolts as a co-wife to the sacred. It is relatively easy to fantasize about sexual intercourse on a prayer mat, even with the scriptures as welcomed voyeurs, but it is much more difficult to give women what they want. Añg ēr boldly lit a fire under issues such as these that had been smoldering for many centuries.

Añg ēr was not only an irreverent and provocative text, it was the first real manifesto of the Taraqq-Pasad Taarak (All India Progressive Writers’ Movement). Two years after inflaming the passions and prejudices of men and women of various stripes, Sajjad Afrār, with the help of Mulk Raj Anand of Untouchable fame, founded the Progressive Writers’ Association.1 The history of Third World literature, especially its resistive manifestation, can simply not be written without a mention of the Progressive Writers’ Movement. The Progressive Movement, in spite of its many shortcomings that glare at us in retrospect, designated the underrepresented, the marginalized, and the silenced as the dialogical equals of men, feudal lords, politicians, religious bigots, and élites in general. It was an affront to patriarchy, feudalism, and religion. Rashid Jahān, through her short story “Dill k Sair,” rent asunder the curtains that veiled women’s alienation in society; Fai bemoaned the Palestinians butchered by American money, Israeli soldiers, and Arab complacency; Sardar Jafar created bridges between his world and the worlds of Paul Robeson and Pablo Neruda; Kaif Ahmar versified an explosive elegy in admiration of Charu Majumdar, the architect of Naxalism; and Imaam, refusing to cast her eyes downward, isolated an inestimable amount of prudishness from the Subcontinental prose through such stories as “Liṭ” (The Quilt).

In spite of its initial forays into the realm of economics, religion, sexuality, and beyond the boundaries of discretion, the Progressive

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1For a thorough and lucid study of this movement, see Coppola (1975).
Movement began to stumble over the very issues that had invigorated it. The reckless youth of the colonial 1930s and 1940s matured into unwitting citizens of India and Pakistan, nation-states scarred by the traumas of Partition, born out of idealism but still sweltering in inequality, poverty, and communal and sectarian tensions. A cadre within the Progressive Movement moved from bold literary experimentation to discrete, at times derivative and contrived modes of discourse. The Progressives pined for justice in the fashion of the ghazal poet-lovers’ masochistic longing for the unattainable beloved, and began to fence their gardens of hope with censorship and expulsion, with idioms of ambiguity that seem so antithetical to the spirit of those who sang in the courts of Neruda, Robeson, and Majumdar. Man’s olfactory sensibilities were no longer appreciated after he wrote “B” (Odor) and “an G sht” (Cold Meat); his friend I mat also wrote on the hair-thin bridge dividing the progressively permissible from the forbidden; Mir j’s sensitively original, at times profoundly opaque poetry was just not allowed to become a part of the canon. N n M m R shid and Qurratu’l- Ain aidar also suffered insofar as they constantly bore the blame of spreading elitist values at the expense of progressive declaratives. Many of the literary works by these authors were singled out for criticism on the grounds that they did not sustain strong enough calls for the demise of capitalism.²

As though alienating Urdu writers coming from the upper echelons of the Urdu literary and aesthetic establishment was not enough, the Progressives heeded little the cries that came from the lower region of the Deccan. Ironically, it was in the 1945 meeting of the All India Urdu Conference held in Hyderabad that Dr. Abdu’l- Al m and Sajjad r, under pressure from the Communist Party of India, embarked on a censorship campaign (Coppola 1975, 256). After 1947, campaigns such as these only became more acute, and through them particular writers were labeled obscene and a curse to progress. It was during this process of interpella- tion that members of the Progressive Writers’ Movement congealed into a group in which not only did particular themes become unacceptable, but variations within the Urdu language (often tied to particular regions) were

²When speaking of Progressive censorship, we must remember that several writers who identified with the Progressive Movement, like Qa) Abdu’l- aff r and asrat M, h n, were opposed to the censorship campaigns that were led by people like Abdu’l-Al m. See A ²-l-m (2002, 84–5).
papered over to make Urdu appear standard and univocal. The effort of North Indians to suppress Deccani Urdu was consequently also an effort to silence a region, a region that claimed it had a legitimate right over Urdu.

This silencing of Deccani Urdu had begun even before the birth of the Progressive Movement. North Indian immigrants to the Deccan, many of whom worked for the Nizam of Hyderabad, coded the Urdu of this region as rustic and provincial. For writers like J. Sh Mal and H. Sh Bilgram, Hyderabad’s Urdu served only as a gloss for humor. As Im-yatu’l-Lah points out, even as they made fun of this language, many North Indian writers could not produce it as it was spoken by the people of the Deccan (2003). It was usually gibberish that they laid as paving stones for their Hyderabadi memoirs, calling it Dakhni. Such approaches to the language and culture rankled with many Deccanis and raised questions about the image and standing of the region—it had become more than simply an issue of language. After all, Hyderabad had particular significance in the context of Urdu. It was a city founded by Urdu’s first ib-n-n poet, Muhammad Quilub Shiah (r. 1580–1611); it was the site of the first vernacular (Urdu-medium) university in South Asia, the Osmania; and it offered financial assistance to many North Indian Urdu writers and reformers.

This paper seeks redress by reflecting upon Urdu’s Deccani voices that used their wit to challenge the hegemonic Progressive Writers’ Movement. I focus on the manner in which Sarvar Khan and Sulaiman Khamb, two Deccani poets, disrupted the Progressive canon by turning the exclusionary semantic etiquette of the literary elite on its head.

ulm Sarvar Khan adopted the pen name “an” (bludgeon) very early on in his writing career. An employee of Hyderabad’s Public Works Department (which, among other things, oversees the maintenance of public roads), an saw firsthand how the oppressed workers willingly braved the elements of hardship and labored daily under the weight of the demands imposed by the nation-state, in addition to the demands of their immediate families. His poetry is heavily laden with the language of the masses, the uneducated, the poor, and the downtrodden. He called his poetry collection _imli ban_ (Tamarind Forest), a title that captures at once the favorite flavoring of Deccani foods, the evergreen idioms of a rich region and the tartness of considerable diversity.

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3For a catalog of Hyderabad’s services to the cause of Urdu, see Ashraf (1990) and Kamal (1990).
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...friend, Sulaiman Khamb blog, was born in modern-day Karnataka and worked for the Water Works Division of that state. Hailing from a family of Muslim preachers, he was a devotee of the Sufi saint of Gulbarga, Hara Khwaja Band Navzads darz; he tied himself not to any one religious community but to the public at large. He identified with the suffering peasant and the subjugated woman, with a language that forged trans-religious and trans-regional alliances: “Till now, the peasant’s causes have been advocated in eloquent and polished language. I have written the peasant’s song in the peasant’s language. Through satire and wit, I have struck a blow at the shortcomings of society” (Khamb blog 2002, 10). He was convinced that from the vantage point of the Deccan, those verses that did not capture the language of its masses had limited potential for promoting reform. He saw his world as Kevk Ban, (The K v Forest), the title of his poetic corpus. The extracts from the scented kv (a species of pandanus odoratissimus) flower are used in food flavorings and perfumes. But to Khamb blog, the world was much more than fragrance and flavor; like the pandanus forest, it was also characterized by pointed thorns and poisonous snakes.

Khamb and Khamb blog brought together in their verses the insights they derived from their respective social contexts, including the ill-fated peasant-led Telangana struggle (see Roosa 2001, 57–94), and the Indian nationalist movement. Their presence at the mushairas (poetry gatherings) in and around Hyderabad elicited an incredible popular response, rendering these gatherings circuits of entertainment for the rich and sites of catharsis for the poor. Mushairas in the Urdu public spheres have served powerful cultural functions, thus Khamb and Khamb blog were pivotal in promoting Dakhni Urdu as a reservoir of inclusionary progress. What tied Khamb and Khamb blog together was their faith in the power of wit and satire.

Both of them realized that satire can have a reformatory function and has been historically constituted by “voices of protest.” The imperatives under which satire and wit operate as political acts can muster a strong rebuttal to conventionality and the status quo. Satire can appeal to reason by splicing the absurd and the tragic to produce an irreverent yet wise potentiality. Through ambiguity, it can constitute a locus of disclosure for the impermissible. From the times of Mr Ja’far Za‘all (d. 1712) and Muhammad Raf‘ Saud (1713–80) to the present, Urdu satirists have demonstrated their sharp acumen when deploying wit in politically strategic ways.

Yet having said this, we cannot forget that Victorian literary aesthetics, and those South Asians drawn to it, viewed wit-employing genres like
satire as something antagonistic to more pure poetry (see Pritchett 1994, 170–2). Satire was perhaps as threatening as it was tasteless. But in spite of such aversions, the likes of Akbar Allah b d (1846–1921) challenged and disturbed colonial constructions ranging from Indian sexuality to the religion of Islam. And after Akbar, the literary initiatives of Dil var Fig r (b. 1889–1958), Sarvar an, and Sulaim n Kha b, among others, radically politicized the issues of class, gender, nation, and religion, chafing against the large-scale practices of the social order of their time.

**Danda and Khatib: Distinct from the Progressive Hegemony**

In this paper I argue that the writings of an and Kha b have five main features that distinguish their voices from the hegemonic Progressive establishment: (1) they constitute a dialectic between the so-called standard North Indian Urdu and Hyderabad (Dakhni) Urdu; (2) they approach issues of femininity with an aesthetic that absorbs into itself a more liberated, folklike, and resistive female voice; (3) they posit a diglossic discourse between Urdu and Telugu, the way in which North Indians had sprinkled their Urdu with Persian; (4) they begin the task of resistance and reform by emphasizing the transformative power of humor; and (5) they reconstitute the domain of progress either by avoiding the Progressive label, or by playfully jibing at it.

**Deccani Manifestations:** an and Kha b accorded importance to the polyvocal, multi-dialectical idiom of progress: they penned poetry not only in “standard” North Indian Urdu but also in its Deccani manifestations. Urdu to these people did not necessarily speak in a North Indian accent.
No to gold, no to silver
no to jewels and pearls
whatever happens, let it happen
be what it may be
hunger strikes, so k yal's songs
lose their sweetening charm
hunger strikes bro, hunger strikes, hunger,
               hunger hunger
it’s New Year, it’s New Talk
it’s a whole new show,
in the world of humans,
now crows will rule
hunger strikes, so k yal’s songs
lose their sweetening charm
hunger strikes bro, hunger strikes, hunger,
               hunger hunger
fat, very fat, the pot-bellied ones
called the seths
silver seals their outward forms,
inner states, wrecks,
               hunger hungry
Sulaim n Kha b expresses the sentiments of a clerk’s widow who is
forced to forgo the few rupees of her husband’s earnings because he in-
conveniently dies on the 28th of the month:
After fighting with me day in and day out
consuming my soul day and night,
Lovely! You fell asleep in a barren land
I, the wretched one,
live like a head cut off from the torso,
Why didn’t I go first?
clutching onto life, in a fist
I sit,
This death, what a death!
A young daughter in the house,
awaits her nuptial day
begging from so many souls
I sent off your corpse
your life in debt, death in debt,
a few flowers I brought for you,
put me more in debt
why couldn’t you do a favor for us,
and be paid before you died

In the poetry of an and Kha\b dates matter in this world, as do the relationship between a man and a woman, a husband and a wife, the lover and the beloved, all prefigured by economics. It is axiomatic for these writers that economics differentiate the sorrowful sentiments of the rich and the poor. The poor cannot mourn in as extreme a deceased-centered manner as their rich counterparts. The ideals of mourning favoring the human loss over the economic one cannot persist in a situation
wherein the last rites for the dead mean an increase in the ceaseless toil for the living.

**Feminist Manifestations:** Unlike mainstream North Indian reformist discourse, wherein men tried to reform their women’s worlds, in and Kha b we see women parlaying with men on different terms. In a song meant to be sung by women accompanied by a ( ) -drum, an explicitly bares the masculine body that can pose sexually but is impotent in the face of persistently invariable poverty. This is the song of a woman who has to run her house (a synecdoche for the world) while her husband (a synecdoche for mankind) is fast asleep. Her contempt for the sleeping man is typified by this song:

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Awake, awake my darling,
The morning is on its way
Pots and pans lie barren
Save for the mice
Solemnly posturing upon them
As if ready for the call to prayer
Children cry,
What’s wrong with you,
Why sleep this time away
Awake, awake my darling
The morning is on its way
May this topsy-turvy rule of law catch fire
May all his deeds and all his doings catch fire
Even the night departs in disgrace
Awake, awake my darling
The morning is on its way
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Instead of rising from the bed, the husband is sexually aroused by his wife’s agitated plea. Her response represents women’s engagement with men when the illusory male superiority and a masculine sense of control thrusts women headlong into a position of being sexual objects:

\[
\text{un } k, \text{ qa } das \text{ lag } \text{ un } k, \text{ g } l! \text{ lag} \\
\text{un } k, \text{ pt } g \text{ lag, un } k, \text{ jb } l! \text{ lag} \\
\text{un } \ddot{n} \text{ p } u s l \ k, \text{ minj } masaln \ k \ bai} \\
\text{u } u \ j! \text{ saty } \ddot{n} \text{ ub } \ddot{n} b \ n \ k \ bai} \\
\text{bam } b ! \text{ ink! samaj } n \ lag \text{ sbaihbiy } \ddot{n} \\
\text{patt } \text{ raon } s \text{ ni } \ddot{n} \text{ ham sakhti } \ddot{n} \\
\text{s } r! \text{ bast! } k! \text{ bast! ma aln } k \ bai} \\
\text{u } u \ j! \text{ satyy } \ddot{n} \text{ ub } \ddot{n} b \ n \ k \ bai} \quad \text{(ibid.)}
\]

May he vomit and shit and catch the plague all that sweet talk then he rubs me the wrong way Awake, awake my darling the morning is on its way. I too have come to terms with all his boasts I’ll squeeze hardships from stones the community verges on agitation Awake, awake my darling the morning is on its way

and Kha b belie the image of women as passive recipients of a male agenda; they do not perpetuate a patriarchy in which the ideal woman listens to her reformer-poet instead of actively engaging him. The gender struggle is very much inscribed within a gendered language, a gendered narrational point of view, and a (feminine) personal and local history. Such an approach is a far cry from Kaif A ‘s “Aurat,” a poem that was brandished as the exemplary blueprint for reforming women’s worlds. Of crucial importance to Kaif A ‘s discussion of gender is the ill-founded idea that men must take the lead in developing the lives and worlds of women.

\[
\text{t, ke } b - j \ n \text{ kbil } n \ \ddot{n} \text{ s babal } t! \text{ bai} \\
\text{tap! s } \ddot{n}s \ \ddot{n} k! \text{ ar rat s } \text{ pig alj } t! \text{ bai}
\]
You who are amused by lifeless toys
and melt in the heat of burning breath
You who slip at every step
and turn into mercury, you fit into every goblet
and you'll have to fit in life’s iron mold
Rise my darling, you’ll have to walk with me.

...and Khab neither surrender women’s causes to man’s goodwill nor do they submit to a manly language—rather they proudly make full use of women’s folk traditions of the Deccan. Moreover, they playfully draw from the styles and idioms of the saint of Gulbarga, Khvaja Band Navz G’s dar z, and Golconda’s ruler, Muhammad Quub Sh h. The female voice, usually mediated by the man’s pen, permeates much of premodern Deccani poetry, just as it does r kbt and bhakti poetry (see Jafari 1983, 542; Petievich 2001). Although tonal proximity exists between an and his Deccani forerunners, according to one of the foremost Progressive Urdu critics from Hyderabad, Rj Bahdur Gaur, the aforementioned poem of an is much more than an example of intertextuality between an and his Deccani forerunners. It is a poem that echoes the memorable sermon of the Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter Zainab in the court of the Umayyad ruler Yazd. This is not just the song of a disgruntled wife; it is the rallying hymn of “Zainab’s daughter,” inciting Yazd’s subjects to rebel against injustices (an 1990, 12). an’s woman has dovetailed her concerns not with those that became female subjects of other Progressive writers but with those of Fima’s daughter. Zainab is remembered every year as fighting the battle of Karbala in the Umayyad courts and palaces of Kufah and Damascus. Her sermons, for many devotees, are wake-up calls not just for the men of Yazd’s time but for all the oppressors who would be born in subsequent centuries. Like many of their reformist and Progressive counterparts elsewhere, an and Khab are interested in producing an immanent critique of society by reading society’s struggles on a religious scale.

In a touching geet meant to be sung with a (lk, Khab exposes the
tension between Islamic ideals and the realities of Muslim lives. It is a *geet* that confronts the relationship of dowry to women's subjugation. Khażb heightens his anti-dowry discourse by conceiving this issue through a complex dialectic of power in which women are not simply victimized by men but also suffer at the hands of their sisters, neighbors, and mothers-in-law. In this poem, within a week of her wedding, a newlywed bride hears her mother-in-law’s friend express her views on the gender divide:

Girls are banana peels,
Guys are crazy, they slip on them.

(Khażb 2002, 96)

The mother-in-law then produces a list of all the amenities that she had asked for but not received from her daughter-in-law:

I asked G. r. P sh [the bride’s father] for a car
I asked for a mere twenty-five thousand rupees
If only he could receive the blessings of my heart
If only he could have given his girl a house
such a girl as this one—we’ll let go of her
such a relationship—we’ll end it
what’s the big deal with marriage?
not just one, we can have four
like shoes for our feet, we can buy a thousand
more

An aged man who had been on a pilgrimage to Mecca provides the rejoinder to these women:
Dear aunt, diamonds are fated to be in dust,
how could they get away from dust,
little did the blooming flowers know,
they’d be fated to live with thorns
Even if a rose branch has a thousand thorns,
it is still tied to the rose
[In a heavy voice]
What did the Prophet give his daughter?
You must have some links with Bat/1 [F &ma, the
Prophet's daughter]
a millstone and a water bag, she got
her only tie was with the word accept
she was in the Prophet's house
she was the Prophet's daughter
she was married to *Al 's principles
a mantle was the Father's gift
Like a flower, she cherished it
in these footsteps we must walk
for eternity we are linked to the Messenger

Kha b adapts the traditions of the Prophet to argue that the prevailing practices of dowry and daughter-in-law abuse underscore the dis-
crepancy between the ideologically-rich but poverty-stricken world of F. ina and the world of her unfaithful devotees. These poets imply confidence in religious ideals in spite of losing hope in those who claim to follow particular religions.

**Urdu and Telugu:** The language in which these poets launch into a tirade against the economic and social degeneracy of India also carries in it idioms of Telugu, a language spoken by the majority of the population that lives in and around Hyderabad. Perso-Arabic expressions or interpolations have limited utility in the poetic enterprise of these writers, who constantly traverse the aesthetic criteria that privilege Persian-sounding words over Hindi-sounding words or, for that matter, Telugu-sounding words. As the postcolonial state wound further into despair, an wondered in Telugu, “Is this our country, Is this our country?”

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id n m d sham
sad m r g ňv ňp - urbat k m sam
na f q ňs fur at na dam mai bai dam
y ňd t! b! gat na! ňv ňun k, bai r sham
id n m d sham id n m d sham
ba p p bai y ňp baĩnš baĩn s
sad ršt bai y ňk r n rul n
upi la k marra inŋ a venka sham
id n m d sham id n m d sham
j ňj ňn p aiks n j ňmarn p aiks ň
j ňjanvar s badtar baĩn b r ins ň
j ňmih b! mushkił bai be! k d d m
id n m d sham id n m d sham
jab ňd dīl ṃpas m ňmih tarasta ň
ar - ň, ňkarta i an barasta ň
j ňadmiiy ňk b s ňm ňraht baĩn dayyam
id n m d sham id n m d sham
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( an( 1990, 77)

Ever-hovering over my village,
the cloud of poverty
no respite from starving, no break from fear
here not even a decent dhoti, there they have silk
Is this our country? Is this our country?
To laugh and make laugh is a grave sin here,
to cry and raise cries is the old tale here,
Gharo Venkatesham fight and die without reason
Is this our country? Is this our country?
Where life is taxed, where death is taxed
where human fare is worse than jungle lair
where even shackles don’t come cheap
Is this our country? Is this our country?
Where two hearts long to meet
the slightest muttering from them and bludgeons
rain
where demons live in manly form
Is this our country? Is this our country?

Through the voice-over Telugu refrain, a dialogic element is added to
the poet’s complaint: It is not just one linguistic entity that wonders about
the postcolonial direction that the state has taken, but two languages
speak in unison. Within this macaronic poem, two religious communities
are also subsumed within the signifiers G a (a common Muslim name
in Deccani villages) and Venkat shan (a Hindu name), and the plight of
the communities these men represent is not much different.

an and Kha b also complicate their indictments against the post-
colonial state by raising issues of religious and caste hierarchies. A vis-
ceral dimension to the politics of caste is given by an ‘s “Blood Bank.”
In this poem, a farmer’s wife receives a blood transfusion. The farmer
grows concerned about the source of this new blood in his wife’s body:
whether it is noble or ignoble, male or female. When he finds out that it is
from an untouchable man, he feels that his wife’s body now houses this
other man and that she will always be attached to this man. The doctor
responsible for the transfusion responds:

m n s n bai bars n s n bai
ye j b al m n kb, n rakk bai
b l kis k ye kb, n bai py r
k’ ma bab bai d arm bai kb, n k
k’ ush! zab n b t bai
k’ ush maq m b t bai
kab n kb, n k b / n m b t bai
kb, n-e Hind, ke kb, n-e Muslim bai
kb, ng r ke kb, n k l bai
kb, n Bhabman bai y harijan bai
I have thought about this—thought this for many years
this blood which is stored in bottles
tell me dear, whose blood is it?
Is there a religion or faith of blood?
Does it have language?
Does it have status?
Is blood named anywhere?
Is it Hindu or Muslim
Is it white or black
Is it Brahmân or Harijan
Is it lowborn or highborn
This blood stored in a bottle
Tell me dear, whose blood is it?

Through the discourse of the oneness of blood, Kha\textsuperscript{b} proceeds to connect categories as diffuse as gender, economics, religion, language and caste. All these other categories are subsidiary to blood, for it is blood that binds them all. It is blood through which appeals to reason must be made.

\textbf{The Power of Humor}: The fourth tendency in the writings of an and Kha\textsuperscript{b} focuses on introducing lightheartedness and humor when speaking about the most serious topics. In spite of all the sufferings that afflict the dispossessed ones, they try to convey that the spirits of those less fortunate are buoyed by a sense of humor that gives them a broader perspective on life.
vais g a y b ! l g b t baiñ
aur ga y b ! d, r b t bai
j b ! kim u , r b t bai
ku na ku t fat, r b t bai
jis k b ja kbar b b t bai
vo b ! a ar, r b t bai
tum b ! d k na ! z a ! bai
ye t b-e ay t jais! bai
tan badan m ñ kash'd bai!
p/n v 1 k! !d b t bai
v ñ pe urd, zab ñ b ! ? t !
aur shik yat t ! t bm-e dam s
sar a b y bai m, t ko tum n
maiñ t mar j , ñ! is! -am s
ye to p sb b ke! taraaq! bai
ye na p, ke urd, kais! bai
ye na p, ke ky gir n! bai
ye na p, ke ky mas il baiñ
ro ! ro ! k l g mart baiñ
ye na p, ke ky dal il baiñ
y ñ t b shan bai aur m la bai

Pisscola
(For those who drink their own urine)

There are bros
and those as close as bros
like coca cola’s bro piss cola
it cures ulcers
it’s fresh, so pure

( cited., 153–4)
some people happen to be worthless
it even cures [their] arthritis.
Now, whoever is leader
has something or other up his sleeve
his brain is rotten,
even though he might certainly be good.
Why don’t you give it a try?
it’s a good thing
it’s like the water of life
it comforts the soul
it causes joy in its consumer.
In a protest, Urdu language interjects:
O Sons of Adam!
You put piss on the pedestal of your head
I shall die in this sorrow
this is urine’s progress
who cares how Urdu fares
who cares what wages are and
who cares about issues
for a morsel’s sake, people die
who cares what are the proofs
we have sermons and fairs,
and plenty of praise for piss!
Sir Piss retorted:
why the hell do you piss me off?
You don’t even fall upon people’s ears
And I? I go down their throat
this is the age of Progress Urdu
this is a tale of something else Urdu!

One of the most pressing issues of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in the Hyderabad region was the status accorded to Urdu. Urdu, which did not get its own state in post-independence linguistically subdivided India, was rapidly disappearing from schools and colleges. It had become tied to the Muslim community, and by extension to Pakistan, and groups like Jana Sangh were actively trying to root it out from various regions of India, including Hyderabad—a region that had housed the first Urdu-medium university on the Subcontinent. As though the struggle to delink Urdu from Muslims was not difficult enough, an, Kha b, and their comrades were offered the additional challenge of proving their credibil-
ity as voices of authentic Urdu. So Urdu, for these Deccani poets, becomes subjugated at two levels: one at the local level, where issues of community were tied to the legitimacy of a language; and the other at the national level, where Urdu was being defined narrowly and presented as a monolith of the North Indian variant. It was during this contest over Urdu that Indians were told that Prime Minister Morarji Desai imbibed his own urine and advocated urine therapy. In the poem above, Sulaiman Khambata taunts both the political establishment signified by the urine-consuming prime minister and the much talked about notion of progress in Urdu circles.

**A New Domain for Progress:** The fifth feature of an and Khambata's writing is the way in which they implicitly offset the hegemonic notion of progress by invoking the terms progressive or progress in an irreverent manner. Since progress to these people came to mean exclusion and elitism, they were happier with the designation aw m, or that which belongs to the people or the masses. They realize that the cause of Urdu as well as that of real progress was impeded by the very term progressive. Progressivism was trafficking in exclusion, censorship, and most of all rigid definitions:

\[
\text{taraqq\text{'}p taraqq\text{'}k k duny}\\
saz apn ki k p rab\text{'}bhai
\]

(\text{\textit{an} 1990, 35})

Achieving progress after progress, this world
Now reaps what it has sown

Although the denotation of progress had its redeeming value, what disturbed an and Khambata were the obfuscations marring the discourse of progress—obfuscations flowing from the pens of North Indian progressives, politicians, and scientists. For example, after the successful Apollo 12 landing on the moon, the astronauts went on a world show-and-tell tour that marketed itself as an exhibition of human progress. The United Nations had that very year reported that hunger was on a rise all over the world. Out of the juxtaposition of these two events, Khambata gets a good deal of satirical mileage. Here is his tribute to the Apollo 12 astronauts:

\[
l\text{\textit{mub rak b}}\text{\textit{nd k r b}}!\\
apn!\text{\textit{manzil k}}\text{\textit{ hai}}\text{\textit{n}}
\]
Bravo, congrats, you who reached the moon
you who returned triumphantly
would that you had brought back bread
for the starving people of the world, instead
what did you bring back?
Mud!

After all] The son of Adam is made of mud
fated to earn only mud

and Khab also used parody to snap at their progressive brethren. They did not even spare Makhdum Mu’ud-Din, the only canonical Progressive from Hyderabad, and a personal friend of both an and Khab. Makhdum is most known for his poem, “k aṁb l k Man v Tal” (Under a Jasmine Arbor):

ik aṁb l l man v tal
maikad s ar d, r us m par
d badan
py r k! g m ŋ jal ga
py r arf-e vaf
py r unk khud
py r unk! it
d badan
s m ŋ b ṭ ndn! m ŋ náb t buw
j s d t rza-r, t za-dam p, lpi l pabar
an! an! subuk-rau aman k! bav
arf-e m tam b,!
k l l l la ŋ s lipa garm rukhs r par
k pal ke liy ruk ga!
ham n d k ŋ n
din m ŋ aur r t m ŋ
n, r-o-. ulm t m ŋ
masjid ŋ k min r ŋ n dek un ŋ
mandir ŋ k kiv ŋ n dek un ŋ
A bit away from the tavern, at that turn
two bodies
in the fire of love, burned up
Love, their word of fidelity
Love, their god
Love, their funeral pyre
two bodies
drenched in dew, bathed in moonlight
like two new-sprung, youthful flowers at noon
The cool, swift garden breeze
mourned forthwith
at once embracing her dark tresses
for a moment, halted on her warm cheeks
We saw them
in the day, at night
in light, in the dark
the mosque minarets saw them
the temple doors saw them
the tavern apertures saw them
from beginning to end, for all eternity
Tell me, O remedy-provider:
Is there a prescription for love's alchemy
Is there a cure, a remedy for love?
Under a jasmine arbor
a bit away from the tavern, at that turn
two bodies
O remedy provider!
This poem celebrates the audacity of two lovers, oblivious of the larger world around them, locked in an exhibitionist embrace in broad daylight and under cover of night, unconcerned with what the mosques and the temples think of them. It is a love that calls for witnesses not remedy providers or consolers (ragar). But who can afford such love, asks Khab in a line-by-line parody titled “B ; rg” (Helplessness). Khab’s parody not only follows the structure of Makhdum’s poem but is also indentured to Makhdum’s language. The setting of Khab’s poem, however, is not under a jasmine arbor but rather in a queue of hungry people at the foot of a grain silo:

maikad se ar d, r
us m par
k - all k!, ṇ i duk ṇ k’ tal
and b , k k a t
ba ! d r s
il il t h u ! ! l s! d , p m ṇ
bad na !b’ k t , k b , r , p m ṇ
sab badan jal ga
b , k k! g m ṇ
-al a un k k bud
-al a un k! du
-al a mushkil-kusb
-al a arf-e ʿīa
sab badan jal ga
b , k k! g m ṇ
p ir sun d st !
īk la ʿfa b,
īk tam ʿb b,
īk shag, ʿa k ul
k m ‘k ʿl y, men b a b,
af men b , k ṇ ʿk! p ir s i ʿfa b,
masjid ṇ k m in r ṇ n d k us
mandir ṇ k kiv ṇ n d k us
maikad ṇ k’ dar ṇ n d k us
ham n d k us
din men aur r t men
n, r-o-. ulm t men
sab badan jal ga
b , k k! g m ṇ
A bit away from the tavern, at that turn, at the foot of a high silo, filled with grain a few starving ones stood for a long time in scorching sunlight, appearing like a devouring vulture they stood—as though spat out by misfortune all bodies burned up in the fire of hunger Grain, their god Grain, their prayer Grain, their helper Grain, the litany meant for their pyre all bodies burned up in the fire of hunger then, Listen friends! Something funny happened, a spectacle—one that opened a can of worms a mother delivered her child in the queue an addition to the hungry queue the mosque minarets saw this the temple doors saw this the tavern apertures saw this We saw this during days and during nights in light and in darkness all bodies burned up in the fire of hunger This man who can glide through space
in whose fist the sun and the moon are locked
deprived of a fistful of rice
O remedy-provider! In your medicine bag
is there some remedy for starvation?
if grain becomes a bit cheaper this year
we too, my friends, will go about singing:
under a jasmine arbor,
two bodies consumed by the fire of love

Kha' b's poem is not only a rejoinder to Makhdum's celebration but it labors under the weight of the insidious lure generated by the traditional ghazal universe. Kha' b morphs the two carefree bodies of Makhdum's poem into several hungry people. The hungry must first fulfill their basic dietary needs before they have the strength to stand up to the world around them. Their god is not love; it is grain. The society and its institutions which bear witness to them in the form of mosques and temples, are not amused spectators; they are pathetic ineffectual voyeurs consumed in the poetry of love. Such love can be celebrated by those well-fed but these self-centered well-fed ones are the raison d'etre of the hungry queue. Each moment that Makhdum's lovers seize for themselves the exploitative gaze, another deprived soul comes into being. Kha' b assigns an out-of-balance economy of value to Makhdum's carefree unions: the poor cannot afford to love like the rich and economics inhere in all relationships. For Makhdum, love is a welcome restorative. But this is not how it works for Kha' b. The only way to appreciate the union of the two thirsty lovers is by averting one's eyes from the day-to-day toil of the poor. Kha' b's queue is economically very distant from Makhdum's lovers and Kha' b's verses push the Progressive romanticism of the likes of Makhdum and Fai. into the periphery of existence.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrate that the history of Urdu Progressivism, and by extension that of the Subcontinent's leftist writings, should not be read as homogenized in any way. The Progressive ideology, especially that which served the dictates of the Communist Party of India, in spite of constituting a resistive discourse to the colonial and postcolonial states, was inflected by the exclusionary considerations that it was resisting at one level. Sarvaran and Sulaiman Kha' b, through witty rusticity, not only
reclaimed progressive space for those who had been excluded from it, but their words also fracture the orthodoxy that is more determined to create categories than it is to act out its own script. Through their poetry, they began to carve out a distinctively Dakhni sphere in the 1960s and the 1970s—a sphere that was much more inclusionary than the one created under the hegemony of the Progressive Writers’ Movement. The verses of Sarvar an and Sulaim n Kha b can be of fundamental importance in redirecting our attention to issues of representation and categories and to the region-based snobbery that still haunts Urdu, as well as in providing focus for issues of poverty, war, and injustice that resonate in our world more than ever. The stakes of their words were not only literary, but also political.

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