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Babu Totaram (1847-1902) and the Hindi Movement in Colonial Aligarh

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ABSTRACT

The late nineteenth century brought major shifts to the linguistic and political landscape of North India, with the Hindi-Urdu controversy emerging as a central arena of cultural and political contestation. Existing scholarship has largely focused on prominent figures such as Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, leaving the contribution of regional actors comparatively underexplored. This paper examines Babu Totaram (1847–1902), a Kayastha lawyer and writer from Aligarh whose role in advancing Hindi and Nagri in the courts and kutcheries of the North-Western Provinces remains significantly underappreciated. Drawing upon primary and secondary sources, the study situates Totaram within the wider transformations of language, community and political identity in colonial North India. It argues that his strategic mobilization of the Kayastha community, institutional initiatives through the Bharatvarshiya National Association and collaboration with Malaviya were instrumental in strengthening the organized campaign for Hindi. Particular attention is given to the relationship between caste interests, professional networks, linguistic aspirations and emerging communal identities. The study further argues that the landmark government order of 18 April 1900, which granted official recognition to Hindi in the Devanagari script alongside Urdu, should not be understood solely through the activities of nationally recognized leaders. Recovering Totaram's contribution demonstrates how regional actors and community-based organizations shaped language politics and contributed to institutional change in colonial North India.

INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth century, historians of modern India paid relatively less attention to the cultural, intellectual, and political life of North India during the late nineteenth century, possibly because they considered the region secondary to Bengal and Bombay in shaping the intellectual and political currents of the era (Brass, 2008; Casolari, 2002). As demonstrated by researchers such as Paul Brass (2008) and Marzia Casolari (2002), the causes of several events of the Indian politics of the twentieth century are to be sought not in the cities of Calcutta and Bombay of the nineteenth century but rather in Banaras, Allahabad, and Aligarh. Banaras, the well-known center of Hindu conservatism, turned into the center of the Hindu religious revival led by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, while the Muslim communal politics began taking shape with the establishment of the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh in 1877 with the support of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan according to C.A. Bayly (1975; 2008). In this complex interplay of language and religious identity, one individual emerges both as an emblem and as an anomaly: Babu Totaram, an Aligarhi Kayastha lawyer and writer. He was a Kayastha – a community which, like the Kashmiri Brahmins, had a distinct advantage in Urdu due to its mastery of the language for many decades due to support for Urdu. Yet it was Totaram who spearheaded the movement for Hindi in Aligarh (Heimsath, 1964). This seeming contradiction is indicative of the complex caste-class-community politics of the controversy which gets lost in communal discourse (Robinson, 1974; Robb, 2021). Christopher King (1992), Tariq Rahman (2000), Brass (1974, 2008), and Sandria Freitag (1980), provides substantial material to reconstruct language politics. Yet, as the records of the Bharatvarshiya National Association and the Malviya Pustakaliya (then Lyall Library) indicate, Totaram remains one of the forgotten heroes of Aligarh. This paper seeks to address this historiographical gap by systematically recovering Totaram's contributions and situating them within the broader political and cultural transformations of late nineteenth-century North India.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative historical and analytical approach to examine the role of Babu Totaram (1847–1902) in the Hindi movement and the wider Hindi–Urdu controversy in colonial North India. It relies on both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct Totaram's political, social and institutional activities in Aligarh and the North-Western Provinces. Primary sources include colonial government records, administrative proceedings, contemporary newspapers, organisational records, reports and other archival materials relating to the Hindi–Nagri movement and the government order of 18 April 1900. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles and historiographical studies on language politics, communal identities, caste mobilization and colonial North India. The study uses historical source criticism to assess the authorship, context, purpose and potential colonial, communal and nationalist biases of the available evidence. Particular attention is given to Totaram's mobilization of the Kayastha community, the Bharatvarshiya National Association, his association with Madan Mohan Malaviya and the campaign for the recognition of Hindi in Devanagari. A contextual and interpretive analysis is used to examine how language, caste, professional interests, community identity and political mobilization interacted. The study also compares Totaram's activities with broader developments in Aligarh, Banaras and Allahabad to situate his contribution within the wider transformation of language politics in late nineteenth-century North India.

The Historical Context: North India in the Late Nineteenth Century

The Emergence of Communitarian Identities

The period from the 1870s to the early 1900s witnessed what historian Sandria Freitag (1980) has described as "a new process of forming group identities" and "a wide range of experimental explorations of the definition of the community" (Freitag, 1980, p. 597). This process was characterized by the expansion of educational institutions and the establishment of strong socio-religious-political movements based on reform and the revival of religion, especially unanimously accepted ones in Hindi-speaking North India (Hasan, 1997; Freitag, 1980). According to historian Richard Gordon (1975), such organizations as the Arya Samaj, etc. actively promoted Hindi and Nagri and even founded gaurakshini sabhas (societies for protecting cows) (Gordon, 1975). These organizations, as Charu Gupta (2000) has demonstrated, were attempting "to outlaw all spheres of Hindu-Muslim interaction," promoting a



homogenized Hindu identity through a set of common cultural and religious paradigms (Gupta, 2000, p. 132). According to Gupta (2000), by 1890, a large gathering of Hindus in Aligarh was held asking people to refrain from buying anything from Muslim retailers or engaging their services (File No. 54B/1891 cf. Gupta, 2000, p. 132). Similarly, in Banaras, as Marzia Casolari (2002) has shown, towards the latter half of the 19th century the "development of a conscious Hindu political identity" was manifesting itself in the emerging Indian polity, and in Banaras this process was more "fractured and conflict ridden" due to the long history of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in the region (Casolari, 2002, p. 1413). In Allahabad, as Robinson (1974) has highlighted, as many as three cow-protection organisations were set up to fan out lecturers through east UP and west Bihar in order to establish an extensive rural organisation (Robinson, 1974, p. 78).

The Urdu-speaking elite, what scholar David Lelyveld (1978) termed the "kutcherry milieu" in his study of Aligarh's First Generation of Muslim solidarity, constituting both Hindu and Muslim, felt the pressure of this sharply defined communitarian identity (Lelyveld, 1978). As Robinson (1974) documents, the coming of railways, the growth in trade activities, the emergence of a new commercial class, and subversive colonial policies like reforms in bureaucracy, census, and educational policy placed this elite under tremendous pressure (Robinson, 1974). As Francis Robinson (1974) has further argued, the more the matter became one of community, the more the points of convergence and the links that connected Hindu and Muslim members of the Urdu-speaking elite weakened (Robinson, 1974, p. 75). Robinson (1974) further argues that their inability to devise a method to resist this pressure further complicated the matter, a situation exploited by the Arya Samaj, which, as a "vigorously proselytizing movement," found that it could capitalize on the Hindi-Urdu controversy to expand its mass base (Robinson, 1974, p. 75). Aligarh, which falls in western UP, was no exception to this phenomenon (Nevill, 1909). By the turn of the century, there was a huge upsurge in the support base of the Arya Samaj in the town, with its main support coming from the Banias (trading Hindu communities), who were at the forefront of the language controversy and at "loggerheads" with the Urdu-speaking elite Nevill (1909).

Aligarh: A Crucible of Linguistic Nationalism

Aligarh's significance in this linguistic contestation cannot be overstated. The town was home to the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh Muslim University), established in 1877, which nurtured many Muslim leaders and directed much of the earliest Muslim political activity (Hasan, 1997). Yet simultaneously, Aligarh became the site of a robust Hindi movement, spearheaded by Totaram and his associates. Founded in 1878 by a group of public-spirited citizens for the purpose of spreading education and the Hindi (Nagri) language, "Bharatvarshiya National Association" is regarded as one of the oldest educational societies in Aligarh (Nevill 1909). Raja Laxman Singh, the Deputy Collector was the chairman of its Hindi sub-committee called "Bhasha Sambhardhani Sabha", which included notable figures such as Babu Tota Ram Verma, Rai Laxmi Narain, Munshi Nawal Kishore Bhargava, and others as its members (King 1994). The association has made recognized efforts to promote women's education in this town of the province (Syed 1887; Abbas 2017).

The library founded by this Association, which would later be renamed the Malviya Pustakaliya, stands as a monument to this linguistic nationalism (King, 1994). The main purpose of this was to make people aware of the Hindu-Urdu controversy. The foundation stone of this library was laid down in 1884 by G. Edward, who was at that time the District Magistrate of Aligarh (Abbas, 2017). At first, this library was named after Sir Alfred Lyall, who was the Lieutenant Governor of the province and was associated with the Association. The total expenditure for making the library went up to Rs. 8 lakhs and its completion took place in the year 1904. Munshi Nawal Kishore Bhargava and his son Prag Narain Bhargava contributed a third of the money while also donating a number of publications free of cost. The library now has around 70,000 books in different languages like Hindi, Urdu, English and Sanskrit, with the majority of books in Hindi. This institution would later be renamed after Madan Mohan Malaviya in 1947 to commemorate his efforts for the promotion of Hindi/Nagri.

Babu Totaram: Life, Career, and Intellectual Formation

Early Life and Education

Babu Totaram was born in 1847 in NaglaMansingh, Aligarh, to Gyanchand, a scholar of Hindi. After completing his B.A., he worked as a headmaster in Fatehgarh, Banaras, and Dehradun (Jagran, 2020). It was during his time in Banaras that he acquired proficiency in Gujarati, Marathi, and Bengali, besides pursuing an LLB degree. Totaram's exposure to Banaras, which was in proximity to Bengal both ideologically and through railway connections, was formative in his intellectual development (Das, 1991). As historian Christopher King (1992) has documented, the Kayasthas were basically in favour of Urdu, and the "spillover" might have been from Bengal, where the language movement had taken a distinct form (King, 1992; Das, 1991). The proximity to Bengali intellectual currents, including the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and others, likely influenced Totaram's linguistic nationalism.

In 1875, the courts and kutcheries of the North-Western Provinces operated exclusively in Urdu, making it difficult for Hindi-speaking people to understand legal proceedings (Jagran, 2019; Jagran, 2020). Babu Totaram, then working in Banaras, found this situation untenable. He left his job and returned to Aligarh to practice law and more importantly started working for the promotion of Nagri in the courts (Jagran, 2019). As documented in the biographical sketch of Totaram published in Hindi literary journals, on his very first day in the kutcherry, Totaram advocated for Hindi, arguing for the right of Hindi-speakers to understand court proceedings in their own language. The Munshis and Babus all expressed discomfort in working in Hindi, citing British government orders. But Totaram persisted, and from this moment began the systematic campaign for Hindi recognition (Jagran, 2019).

The Literary and Journalistic Contributions

Totaram was a prolific writer and journalist. Babu Totaram was a vital cog in this matter. He used to write for Harishchandra Chandreka, which was started by Bhartendu in 1873. He also translated an English play and titled it 'Ketokritant Natak'. Through Bhartendu's patronage, an organisation named 'Hindi Uddharini Pratinidhi Madhya Sabha' (Hindi Welfare Representative Central Organisation) was established at Prayag in 1844, exclusively to make Hindi the official court language (Shukla 1932). In Aligarh, Totaram opened a press and began publishing the weekly newspaper "Bharatbandhu" (Friend of India). Through his newspaper, he wrote on topics like temperance, women's education and social evils. The language of the newspaper was simple and easy to understand, according to descriptions of his writing from contemporaries (Shukla, 1932). Totaram was associated with the literary and journalistic movement led by Bharatendu Harishchandra, often referred to as the "father of modern Hindi" (Shukla 1932). When Harishchandra stood up for the benefit of Hindi in every way, Totaram was among those who supported him. So, Totaram is considered to be a part of the Bharatendu Yug (Bharatendu Era) of Hindi literature, which witnessed the transition of Hindi from a vernacular language to a modern literary language (King, 1992).

The Political Mobilization: Institutions and Strategies

Totaram was among the founders of the Bharatvarshiya National Association in 1878 with the goal of promoting the Hindi language. This association would become the central organization of the Hindi movement within Aligarh (Syed, 1887, Abbas, 2017). It's for the promotion of the Hindi/Nagari that the Hindi sub-committee Bhasha Sambhardhani Sabha was formed (Abbas, 2017). The Hindi sub-committee of the Association, known as the Bhasha Sambhardhani Sabha, was headed by Raja Laxman Singh, the Deputy Collector of Aligarh (Nevill, 1909). Totaram would also invite Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya to Aligarh during his campaign. As documented in the pamphlet of the library, Malaviya, who would become one of the most influential figures in the Hindi movement and Indian nationalism, was a close associate of Totaram (Brief Account of the Bharatvarshiya National Association (1878) and the Malaviya Pustakaliya, Aligarh. 1964 (BABNA)). It was at Totaram's invitation that Malaviya agreed to come to Aligarh and instilled enthusiasm among the members of the Association (BABNA).

The collaboration between Totaram and Malaviya was crucial for the success of the Hindi movement. Malaviya brought to the campaign his intellectual prestige, political connections, and organizational skills (King, 1992). As historian Christopher King (1992) notes, Malaviya would later become instrumental in influencing Lieutenant Governor Anthony MacDonnell to issue the order permitting the use of "the Nagari character" in the courts of the North-Western Provinces (King,

1992). The most spectacular achievement of the Totaram-Malaviya collaboration was the signature campaign of some 60,000 people started from Aligarh, which was subsequently submitted to Governor Anthony MacDonnell (2020; King, 1992). This campaign represented the first systematic, organized struggle for Hindi in the country. The signature campaign was not just about getting signatures. It required detailed planning in Hindi-speaking areas. Totaram and Malaviya meticulously undertook efforts to rally people throughout the Hindi Belt to produce a surge in demand for their language (Dar, 2018). The petition being presented to the Governor was a stroke of genius in political mobilization that showed how popular the cause for Hindi had become (King, 1992).

The Government Order of 1900 and it's Aftermath

The MacDonnell Order

The efforts of Totaram, Malaviya, and the broader Hindi movement bore fruit on 18 April 1900, when the British government agreed to promote Hindi language alongside Urdu (King, 1992, 1994). The government order, issued by Lieutenant Governor Anthony MacDonnell, granted the following provisions as documented in the records of the Bharatvarshiya National Association and corroborated by historian Christopher King's (1992) account of the Hindi-Urdu controversy:

- 1) All persons could submit applications and petitions in either Nagri or Persian characters as per their choice (King, 1992; MacDonnell, 1900).
- 2) All summons, notices, and other official communications issued in the country's language by the courts or chief officials would be issued in both Persian and Nagri characters (MacDonnell, 1900)
- 3) No person, except European officers, would be appointed to any court in future unless they could read and write both Nagri and Persian characters fluently (King, 1992; MacDonnell, 1900).

This order represented a symbolic equal status to both Hindi and Urdu and was received with jubilation by Hindus while being opposed by Muslims, as historian Francis Robinson (1974) documents (Robinson, 1974; Hardy 1972). Mohsin-ul-Mulk, the Secretary of the MAO College, organized a movement against the MacDonnell order, putting it as an act designed "to harm the followers of Islam through an unjust action" (Robinson, 1974, p. 83; Rai, 2000).

The Muslim Opposition

The Muslim reaction to the MacDonnell Order was swift and organized (Robinson, 1974). According to Robinson's (1974) account, Mohsin-ul-Mulk, who had become a popular leader of the Muslims, presided over a meeting at Lucknow on 18 August 1900 to protest the order. In the same account, Mohsin-ul-Mulk emphasized the point that the agitation against the enforcement of Nagri resolution should not be understood as revolt against the Government but as a manifestation of people's legitimate opinion against an injurious government action within the bounds of constitution (Robinson, 1974). Perhaps the reason for this statement Mulk had received a thrashing at the hand of MacDonnell.

In any case, prior to this encounter, a body of lawyers, primarily Muslims, set up an Urdu Defence Association at Allahabad in March 1898 to publicly complain regarding MacDonnell's reception of the pro-Nagari delegation. Likewise, the Muhammadan Educational Conference passed a resolution in 1899 opposing official recognition of the Nagari script. Following the resolution, several top Muslim personalities of Aligarh including the Principal of the College, Theodore Morison and, Mohsin-ul-Mulk organized and participated in a protest meeting, which was held in less than a month after the resolution had been passed. Encouraged by the immense response to the meeting, Mohsin-ul-Mulk decided to hold another meeting in the city of Lucknow after three months. Many Muslim students and traders from across the country participated in the meeting. Several Hindus under the leadership of Pandit Kedarnath of Banaras, and Christians also participated in the meeting. The success of the campaign can be gauged from the fact that Mohsin-ul-Mulk was welcomed at the train station by a 'contingent of sixty Muslim volunteers' wearing 'red badges with the word Urdu stitched on their chests'. (King, 1994).

Anthony MacDonnell did not remain indifferent to all the signs of opposition. Kunwar Ali Khan, a Muslim landlord from Awadh, was asked to leave his position in the Urdu Defense Association. At a speech in Banaras, MacDonnell condemned the opposition to his resolution calling it "irrational"

and “malicious” (King, 1994). However, the harshest steps were taken by him against Aligarh which he visited in November 1900. He exerted great Pressure on Mohsin-ul-Mulk leading him to choose between the adviser position of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh or the presidency of the Urdu Defense Association because he was informed that if he did not agree, the government would cancel the financing of the college (Bhatnagar, 1969; Minault & Lelyveld, 1974). Mohsin-ul-Mulk preferred to take up the post of secretary in the college instead of being the president of the Association. After MacDonnell departed from the United Provinces, in 1903 Mohsin established the Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i Urdu as a part of the Muhammadan Educational Conference (Hardy, 1972).

Although the MacDonnell Order does symbolize equality, it in fact established the greater divergence of Hindi from Urdu (King, 1992; Brass, 2008). Indeed, we observe that Hindi gradually began to rely on Sanskrit more heavily and to purify itself from more and more Persian words. Conversely, Urdu preserved its Persian vocabulary (King, 1992). This only reaffirmed the ethnic identities which emerged under the movement, and the new stage in the development of the Hindi movement took place in the new century, as Hindi was declared the national language of India (King, 1992; Rai, 2000). As King (1992, 1994) notes, Hindi in Nagari is now recognized by Bihar, Central Province, and United Province, and it began its fight for the national status (King, 1992). The first thoughts about Hindi as an all-India link language belonged to Bengali intellectuals, such as Bankim Chandra and Bhudev Mukherji (King, 1992; Rai, 2000).

Situating Totaram: A Reassessment

The Kayastha Paradox

The most intriguing aspect of Totaram's career is the apparent paradox of a Kayastha, a caste proficient in Urdu and therefore having a clear advantage from long-term support of Urdu, leading the movement for Hindi in Aligarh (Heimsath, 1964). As historian Charles Heimsath (1964) argues, even the Kayastha conference, particularly of western UP, later succumbed to the pressure of growing intensification of the Hindi Movement and therefore decided to pass a resolution in 1889 in favour of the Nagri script (Heimsath, 1964). This indicates that Totaram was part of a broader shift within the Kayastha community, a shift that reflected changing economic and political realities. Recent research by Megan Eaton Robb (2021) has helped in understanding this shift. According to Robb (2021), in the western part of UP at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, Hindu businesspeople were more likely to hire Kayastha and Brahmin clerks, which meant that Muslim zamindars were less influential in this and hence had an inferior role than their counterparts in the east (Robb, 2021, p. 3). In contrast, in the eastern UP region, Kayasthas and Brahmins lived from the Muslim zamindars and had mutual interests that were not based on the community but rather economic affiliation (Robb, 2021, p. 3). This comparison introduced by Robb (2021) contains another important point because it shows that it did not have to happen that Muslims create communalism or become separatists in the western UP as a result of some specific circumstances like land tenure patterns, poverty of Muslims, prices in the end of the 19th century, and political race considerations (Robb, 2021, p. 3).

Totaram's Place in Historical Memory

It is amazing the way Babu Totaram moves along the line of mainstream history. While persons like Madan Mohan Malaviya have attained fame in the island of India, the name of Totaram is merely known in the local. He is often praised as one of the best scholars the town of Aligarh has produced, while his significant contribution towards the promotion of the Hindi language is often obscured by Malaviya's huge fame (Dar, 2018). The above fact reveals the continuing presence of "metropolitan bias" in historical writing, where history is influenced by major cities and changes taking place there (Bayly, 2008; Brass, 2008). However, historians like Bayly (1975, 2008), Paul Brass (2008) and Marzia Casolari (2002) demonstrate that the origins of Indian ideologies in the 20th century were in smaller provincial towns like Benaras, Allahabad and Aligarh. The life of Totaram serves as bright evidence supporting the idea that local figures and organizations influenced the Indian politics on the national level all over India.



CONCLUSION

The life of Babu Totaram has shed light on the complex connection between language, caste identity, and community in Northern India in the late 1800s. As a Kayastha lawyer in Aligarh, Totaram not only mobilized the Kayastha community and established important civil institutions but also collaborated with leading social reformers such as Malaviya whilst making a significant contribution to the introduction of the Devanagari Hindi script in government offices and courts in different regions. The importance of Totaram's input goes well beyond the success of the MacDonnell Order of 1900. He set up the Bharatvarshiya National Association, launched the Malviya Pustakaliya, and established a network of Hindi activists thus laying foundations of the Hindi movement which gained strength and power in the 20th century. Totaram's use of the resources of the Kayastha caste, his involvement in writing and newspapers and his relationship with Malaviya are evidence of how local elites might bring about changes on the national scene of politics. Nevertheless, Totaram is still unknown to the public, overlooked by historians focusing their attention on metropolitan political landmarks. This paper intends to restore the place of Charles Totaram in the history of Indian linguistic nationalism demonstrating how a local

Ethical Consideration

The study uses historical primary and secondary sources and does not involve living human participants. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. Sources were critically examined with attention to their historical context and potential biases. All interpretations and arguments are the author's original work. ChatGPT was used only for grammatical correction and language refinement.

Data Availability Statement

The study uses cited historical records, newspapers, archival materials, books and scholarly articles. No confidential or personally identifiable data were collected. All sources are cited in the paper and reference list and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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