

[A tribute to Kavita Datla, 1975-2017, by Dr. Karuna Mantena](#)

Discussion published by Sumit Guha on Tuesday, August 1, 2017

Dr Karuna Mantena of Yale University has composed the following tribute to Dr Kavita Datla.

Kavita Datla (b. April 23, 1975) passed away on July 22, 2017 in her home in Northampton MA, surrounded by family. She had been bravely battling a rare and aggressive cancer since the fall of 2014.

Datla was a distinguished scholar of modern South Asian history, who reveled in bringing to life the layered histories of Hyderabad and recovering the lost political imaginaries and aspirations it enabled. Generous beyond measure, nothing gave her more pleasure than engaging with ideas, projects, and perspectives of her many friends and colleagues. To those at Mount Holyoke, Datla will be remembered as a beloved colleague, passionate teacher and mentor, and dedicated citizen of the college. In 2016, she received the Mount Holyoke College Faculty Teaching Award for her “transformative work with students.” Citing her “enrapturing” lectures and “fantastic” class discussions, students adored Datla for being “brilliant and demanding in the best possible way.”

Datla received her Bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Michigan in 1997 and then chose to pursue her master’s at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. Under the supervision of Professor Majid Siddiqi, she wrote her thesis on the education of the Nizam under imperial rule, cementing her lifelong interest in the princely state of Hyderabad, its educational projects, and entanglements with imperial and national politics. In 2006, she completed her PhD at the University of California-Berkeley where she worked closely with Professors Tom and Barbara Metcalf. Soon after she began her teaching career in the department of history at Mount Holyoke, where she was promoted to Associate Professor in 2013. At Mount Holyoke, Datla was also a member of the Asian Studies and Critical Social Thought programs as well as the Department of International Relations.

In the monograph that developed from her dissertation work, *The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India* (University of Hawaii Press; Orient Blackswan 2013), Datla offered a bold revision of usual understandings of the communalization of language politics in South Asia. Through a careful study of the founding of India’s first vernacular university, Osmania University, and its massive translation projects to revive and modernize Urdu, Datla showed how Muslim intellectuals worked not merely to promote Urdu as a language of and for Muslims but to forge a national vernacular fit for modern purposes. She was keen to recast the political disagreements around the status of Urdu as a clash of competing secular agendas within the context of Indian nationalism. By demonstrating that Urdu could be mobilized for a national project, her work also broke open a long-standing canard in modern histories of South Asia that assume a naturalness to the script-language-religion triad. The work stands as an affirmation of India’s diversity and creativity as embodied in the heterogeneity of Urdu and the full presence of Muslims in India’s history. The debates among the creators of Osmania University and the translators of textbooks offered a vision of India’s past and future that was both grounded and open to a wider world.

The Language of Secular Islam was also a story of how alternative political and social imaginaries, in this case, a cosmopolitan and secular vision of Urdu, was “minoritized” and violently thwarted by the

identitarian imperatives of the nation-state. The recovery of lost political possibilities was also at the core of Datla's most recent research projects. In her ambitious new book, *Sovereign Claims: Hyderabad and the British Imperial Order*, Datla revisits three key moments – the origins of British imperial expansion, the restoration of empire in the wake of 1857, and the emergence of independent India in 1947 – to probe and complicate the history of the consolidation of empire and nation in South Asia. Indirect rule in Hyderabad becomes an exemplary site from which to interrogate the working and making of sovereignty—imperial and national. Datla reveals the ways in which sovereignty was not simply usurped but was continuously subject to and the subject of complex divisions and apportioning; it entailed flexible modes of sharing and parceling authority that generated new technologies of rule that sustained modern empire and laid the foundations of international order.

The book ends with a riveting account of the unlikely attempts of Hyderabad to secure autonomy on the eve of independence, from constitutional experiments in federation, approaching the UN to protect sovereign treaty rights, to the myriad attempts by Hyderabadi Muslims, Dalits, and peasants to obviate the dangers of minoritisation and caste dominance posed by centralization. Datla urges us to consider decolonization as a moment of imperial re-alignment that enabled but also dispossessed other political formations and possible futures. The engagement with alternative futures was also the subject of a collaborative project between Datla and Rama Mantena, which focuses on local and transnational forms of governance. They had begun to analyze the rich debates in Urdu, English, and Telugu that turned on questions of federalism, representative democracy, and even a re-imagined monarchy that were taking place among a swathe of the population much larger than that usually invoked in political and intellectual histories of the period.

Above all, Datla pursued her life and research with unwavering integrity and ethical purpose, always attuned to the historian's role in fostering public debate and in introducing us to radically different ways of seeing our pasts and futures. Despite the burden of her harsh illness, Datla doggedly kept up her rich life of intellectual and personal engagement until her final days. Her untimely passing is a tremendous loss to the field, to her loved ones, and to colleagues and friends near and far.

I would like to thank Manan Ahmed, Ruchi Chaturvedi, David Lleyveld, Jinee Lokaneeta, Barbara Metcalf, Rama Mantena, and Bhavani Raman for their help in putting this remembrance together.