Among Sayyid Ross Masood’s first impressions of Japan after two days in the country was that the scenery, except for Mount Fuji, was unattractive, the modern architecture copied from Europe was “hideousness itself,” and the way people dressed was “ghastly in the extreme.” He saw men “dressed in silken Kimonos, nevertheless go about with an ordinary English felt hat or bowler on their heads” or “wearing getas (wooden shoes), though dressed in extremely well cut English clothes. But then,” he added, “they can easily ask me why I put on an Indian cap when I am otherwise dressed in European clothes to which, of course, I can give no adequate reply.” The thirty-two-year-old Director of Public Instruction for Hyderabad, India’s most populous “Native State,” had arrived in Japan in early April 1922, the time of cherry blossoms, after “a long voyage in a slow boat,” nearly four weeks in an old Japanese steamer, the Wasaka Maru, from Bombay. Aside from brief excursions on shore at Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, and a fair amount of social interaction with fellow passengers out of “A Night at the Opera”—including a wealthy widow from Pasadena, California—he had spent his time reading up on Japan, particularly two large tomes, published twelve years before, called Fifty Years of New Japan.

Ross Masood was on an official mission: to study the ways in which Japan had managed to develop a European-style educational system based on the Japanese language, to measure the success of the enterprise, and to determine to what extent Hyderabad and perhaps India could learn from Japan. Most particularly, he wanted to shore up the project, recently studied by Kavita Datla and Tariq Rahman, to create in the newly established Osmania University and

---

related efforts an Urdu-medium educational system. Masood himself, though he knew great swaths of Urdu and Persian poetry—as well as French and some Italian—was very much a product of English education, starting with the so-called English House at the Aligarh College and culminating with a BA with honors in history from Oxford. (He got the name Ross after a British friend of his father). When he was seconded to Hyderabad from the Indian Educational Service in 1917, he was skeptical of the value and viability of higher education in Urdu, a project that was just getting under way. It was only after visiting Japan, he later said, that he finally cast off his doubts. But at the outset of his visit to Japan, it appears, he still had to be convinced that it was possible to run a modern educational system without relying on a European language.

More than half a century earlier, in 1869–70, Ross Masood’s grandfather, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, had made a similar journey to England and had famously declared: “Those who are really bent on improving and bettering India must remember that the only way of compassing this is by having the whole of the arts and sciences translated into their own language. I should like to have this written in gigantic letters on the Himalayas for future generations.” The M.A.O. College at Aligarh, founded in 1875, at first included an Oriental department, which was to teach history, geography, science, and mathematics in Urdu. Testifying to the Hunter Education Commission in 1882, Sayyid Ahmad conceded that the experiment was a failure; Urdu, he said, was inherently unable to adapt to the requirements of “exactness of thought” that one could achieve in English.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has observed that Sir Sayyid’s project, as exemplified in the literary criticism of Alṣaf Ḥusayn Ḥāli in 1893—“still the most influential literary theoretical work in Urdu”—set forth the idea that there “were universal norms for literary excellence” and that “universal” meant ‘English’ or ‘European.’ Ross Masood’s education flowed from that determination, but it summoned up conflicts and doubts. Such an education, he said after his visit to Japan, resulted in “people of my type who live in an entirely

---


5 Oral evidence before Father Blatter Commission (committee on university reform), Bombay, October 4, 1924, in the appendix to Masood, Travels in Japan, 186.

