William Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*

Claude Markovits

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Claude Markovits

[1] The emergence of the Hindu Right as an important political force in India in the late 1990s and early 2000s has inevitably called forth renewed interrogations about the historical genesis of Hindu nationalism. One of the major questions concerns the ambiguous relationship that has always existed between the ‘mainstream’ so-called ‘secular’ nationalism of the Congress and the specific brand of ‘Hindu’ nationalism linked to the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha.

[2] Regarding that relationship, no scholarly consensus has emerged, and two positions can be said to have shared the field. According to some, like Christophe Jaffrelot (1996), Hindu nationalism has existed as a specific trend since the late 19th century, and crystallized in the interwar period around the two distinct but ideologically close organizations of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. It has thus been distinct from the main trend of Indian nationalism, represented by the Congress, which has tended to espouse a ‘secular’ agenda. Others, such as Peter Van der Veer (1994), see less of a distinction between these two trends, a difference in degree rather than in essence.

[3] In this book, William Gould attempts to take a look at that question from the angle of a study of political languages in late colonial India. Focusing on the United Provinces, the most populous province in India and the one which became the main Congress stronghold after 1920, Gould proposes to renew the subject through the use of theoretical tools that have been little used by historians of Indian nationalism. He defines the object of his inquiry, not as discourse, but as a set of languages used by political operators belonging to the Congress Party. What is striking is how diverse the repertoire of symbols and references used by these operators was. Gould however discerns a pattern, in which references to ‘Hinduness’, although not the Hindutva
dear to the Hindu Mahasabha leader Vir Savarkar, occupy an important place. These references coexist with a discourse of secularism, a contradiction that does not appear to have been perceived as such by the Congress spokesmen.

[4] To explain such surprising blindness on the part of political actors regarding the nature of their speech, Gould has recourse to the notion of ‘heteroglossia’, borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, which seeks to account for the intersection of jargons, dialects and languages in literary texts. Bakhtin’s contribution is to have shown that, through the dialogic relationship between contradictory languages, a meaning quite different from the sheer sum of their parts can result. Gould’s ambition is to combine this ‘dialogical’ approach with the more classical concepts used by Quentin Skinner in his study of political discourse, such as that of ‘intentionality’ and ‘illocutionary force’.

[5] As we shall see, this ambitious theoretical agenda is not always very effectively implemented, but even if Gould’s work does not hold all the promises of its alluring theoretical introduction, it is nevertheless an important and innovative contribution to the study of different kinds of nationalist discourses voiced by nationalist operators in inter-war United Provinces politics. An instance of ‘heteroglossia’ is how the use, by a whole range of Congress operators, of a rhetoric about the catholicity of Hinduism, capable of embracing in its fold all other religions, resulted in an exclusionary posture toward non-Hindus. In other words, a discourse of inclusion became, by a twisted logic that escaped the attention of those who uttered it, a discourse of exclusion.

[6] Once this has been demonstrated, and in fact the demonstration is repeated in slightly varied forms at different moments in the book, there remains the question of the ‘illocutionary force’ of such utterances, in particular in relation to the Muslims who were of course the most significant non-Hindu group in the province. That is where I find Gould less persuasive, not because he fails to muster evidence that Congress discourse offended Muslims and thus inadvertently contributed to giving plausibility to the claim by the Muslim League that the Congress was a ‘Hindu’ party bent on establishing a Hindu ‘Raj’, but because of a methodological problem. Following Bakhtin, Gould analyses discourse in ‘dialogic’ terms, but here the dialogue is actually only internal to the Congress. The Muslim voice, which serves to validate the thesis, remains always in the background and is never enunciated by actual operators. We are told by Gould that Muslims reacted in a certain way to Congress discourses, which tends to support Gould’s contention about the unintended consequences of the ‘heteroglossia’ of those
discourses, but only rarely in the book are we presented with actual Muslim voices. In other words, there is an imbalance in the presentation, which tends to focus much more on the ‘heteroglossia’ than on the illocutionary force of the discourses.

[7] Another problem concerns the nature of language itself. Although Hindi was increasingly the dominant language of politics in the United Provinces, and the one exclusively used at the local level, while at a provincial level a kind of ‘diglossia’ between Hindi and English prevailed, most of the source material used by Gould is either in English or translated from Hindi into English as in the case of banned newspapers, of which extracts were collected by the colonial authorities. It would have been interesting, by engaging into a systematic comparison between Hindi-language material and English-language material, to test the hypothesis whether ‘heteroglossia’ was not in fact linked to ‘diglossia’, that is whether ‘Hindu’ references were not used mainly in Hindi utterances meant for a local audience, while ‘secularist’ pronouncements were reserved for speeches in English destined for a provincial or even national audience. Such strategic use of different languages in relation to different audiences has been shown to have been practiced by Gandhi, whose vernacular addresses often employed a tone much more strident than his English utterances.

[8] Notwithstanding these remarks, which point to certain limitations of the work, there remains a very rich analysis of the various facets of Congress discourses, which is rare in the existing literature.

[9] Chapter 2 presents interesting material about the various connections at the local level between Congress activists and various Hindu agents and institutions, such as sadhhus, temples and fairs. Although these connections were in some way of a pragmatic nature, driven by the need to limit the effects of official repression by appropriating some kind of ‘public space’ that the authorities could not control, because of their own agenda of non-interference with local religion, they nevertheless contributed to the image of the Congress as a party with strong ‘Hindu’ roots.

[10] Chapter 3 is an interesting take on the unintended effects of the ‘untouchable uplift’ campaign linked to Gandhi’s famous 1932 ‘fast unto death’ directed against the granting of separate electorates to untouchables, a demand put forward by the untouchable leader Dr Ambedkar. Muslims reacted in a generally hostile way to the campaign, not only because of their own prejudices against untouchables (which were basically similar to those of the so-called
‘Caste Hindus’), but also because they perceived it as driven by a communal agenda, i.e., the will to strengthen the Hindu community numerically and politically. They saw in it a threat to their own identity, and it increased the attraction of ‘separatist’ politics.

[11] Chapter 4 looks at the complicated but often close relationship at the local level between Congress organizations and the Hindu revivalist organization, the Arya Samaj. There was often an overlap between the two, particularly in the western part of the province, and this of course was grist to the mill of those Muslim propagandists who wanted to depict the Congress as a ‘Hindu’ party.

[12] Chapter 5 is a rather fascinating study of the way ‘radical’ discourses held by left-wing Congressmen were often subtly suffused with references to ‘Hinduism’ which belied the proclaimed secularist position of such political actors. The focus is more particularly on one of the main leaders of the Congress Socialists, Sampurmanand, and it makes really interesting, although slightly disturbing, reading. There is however a danger there of ‘over-determination’, that is of implying that ‘Hinduism’ was such an ingrained reference that no Congress operators, whatever their intentions, could eventually escape its pull. In spite of his precautions, Gould does not always manage to avoid such teleology, especially because of his (probably justified) reluctance to use ‘agency’ as an analytical device. Interestingly, he also shows how ‘radicals’ and ‘communalists’ could converge in the mid-1940s in a common opposition to Gandhian non-violence and in a drive towards the ‘militarization’ of the Hindu community to resist Muslim League ‘separatism’, a move that of course contributed to an increase in communal tension in the province.

[13] Chapter 6 focuses on the period of the Congress provincial ministry of 1937-39, and puts forward a new interpretation of the estrangement between the Congress and the Muslim League, which deserves attention. Conventional wisdom has it that this estrangement was linked to the failure of negotiations between the two parties over the composition of the government, a failure that has been ascribed by many, following Maulana Azad’s posthumous writings, to Nehru’s intransigence vis-à-vis the League. Gould suggests that it has more to do with the outcome of years of Congress manipulation of Hindu symbols that had convinced many Muslims that it was out to reduce them to the status of a helpless minority. This forms the background of a study of the failure of the ‘Muslim mass contact movement’ that reaches conclusions which differ somehow from the ones reached by Mushirul Hasan in his authoritative study of that campaign.
Once again, one can only regret that Gould does not delve deeper into the discourses of the Muslims themselves, which would have given greater force to his interesting assertions.

[14] Chapter 7 is a study of the rise of volunteer militarism in the United Provinces on the eve of Partition, but, although it has some interesting material, it appears as somehow of an afterthought and does not really fit in with the main argument of the book about ‘heteroglossia’.

[15] In conclusion, one can only repeat that the book, despite the above mentioned weaknesses, represents an interesting contribution to the ongoing debate over the complex and ambiguous relationship between the ‘secular’ and ‘Hindu’ versions of Indian nationalism. It remains to be seen, however, whether its methodology can be used more broadly and its conclusions extended to an all-India level.

References
