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978-0-521-17220-2 - Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India

William Gould

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1 Introduction

The Indian National Congress was the most prominent and successful movement of anti-colonial nationalism in the twentieth century. It claimed to represent the Indian nation, irrespective of social, occupational, class, religious or caste differences. This position was in contrast to colonial discourses that often saw India's religious differences as irreconcilable. In claiming to transcend religious difference, the Congress represented itself as the only truly 'national' political movement and appeared to espouse secular nationalism. Yet, in the 1930s and 1940s, many of its agents continued to identify with forms of 'Hindu' politics and ideas of the 'Hindu' nation. This book explores how and why this paradox appeared in one of the most politically important provinces of India – the United Provinces or Uttar Pradesh (UP).

Remarkably, some of the most significant forms of communal politics manifested themselves within the Congress movement in UP. This is not to argue that the Congress was exclusively a 'Hindu' party or movement or even that Hindus existed as a homogeneous community. The terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' had fluid descriptive and representational meanings in this period. Precisely for this reason, some individual Congressmen were able to evoke symbolism with a 'Hindu' meaning whilst subscribing to a general stance of secular nationalism. Such politicians sometimes appeared to be deaf to the possible contradictions in their political language. Rather than promoting the secular, they were in fact often party to communal politics.

Historians have usually explained such contradictions by reference to factors outside the control of the Congress as an institution. In these analyses, communalism was a problem created by the colonial state, or generated by the response to that state of other 'communal' parties and agents. The Congress as a 'party' failed to overcome this largely external threat. Most writing on communalism in India has highlighted one or more of three such external factors: the adoption of 'separatist' politics by Muslims from the late nineteenth century, the appearance of institutions of 'Hindu nationalism' such as the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha,

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and, thirdly, the actions of the colonial state in representing the Indian polity on the basis of divided communities.

Explanations of communalism have rarely taken sufficient account of the heterogeneity of the Congress, and how this heterogeneity played upon religious difference. In the late colonial period, the Congress was not a party but a broad-based movement. Even in a single province like UP, it seldom had a single set of coherent and well-defined agendas, or a structure of party discipline, apart from the broadest anti-colonial goal of political freedom. It was defined less by a concrete party manifesto than by the words and actions of those acting in its name. Within it there was room for a range of political voices. The nature of the political languages and ideologies of different Congress agents, then, is central to understanding what the Congress represented politically. This book is concerned with how and why this array of political languages within the UP Congress repeatedly made recourse to religious, particularly self-consciously 'Hindu', subjects and forms of symbolism. It was also of the utmost importance that these political languages and styles acted upon Muslims and Muslim politicians in UP.

The nature of Congress's political languages will be examined in relation to India's most politically dominant province in this period. The United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (Awadh) had the second largest provincial population after Bengal. It occupied about one-sixteenth of India but contained nearly one-seventh of the total population and had a greater population than either the British Isles or France in this period.¹ Most importantly, it was the homeland of a nationally significant Urdu-speaking Muslim elite, instrumental in setting up educational and political institutions which fostered a distinctively Indian Muslim politics. The presence of this significant Muslim minority had its impact on the growth of different types of settlement in the nineteenth century – the predominantly Muslim 'qasbah' and the 'Hindu corporate town'.² This area of India was also 'Aryavarta', the heartland of the Hindi movement from the late nineteenth century, and the location of perhaps the most significant sites of Hindu pilgrimage and melas. From the early twentieth century, Agra and Oudh (Awadh) became the crucible of the Congress movement, displacing the dominance of elites from the presidency capitals. This process was accelerated in the late 1910s and early 1920s when, through the experience of Muslim and Hindu mobilisation in the Khilafat agitations, the UP bazaar towns grew in political significance. This was

¹ A. C. Turner, *Census of India, 1931: United Provinces of Agra and Awadh Part 1 – Report* (Allahabad, 1932), p. 7.

² C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Delhi, 1983), p. 456.

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a province which by the 1930s, as in contemporary India, helped to define national politics. Consequently, by the 1930s at least, the working out of communal relations in UP had a huge impact on other parts of the subcontinent.

Nationalism and religious difference

The key to understanding how and why Congress agents made recourse to 'Hindu' symbolism in this part of the subcontinent is to look at the complex nature of Hindu nationalism and secularism in north India. Hindu nationalist ideologies and political languages that evoked the 'Hindu', like the Congress itself, were linguistically and socially varied. Since Hinduism did not represent an identifiable religious community, the terms 'Hindu nationalism', Hindu, or Hinduism are therefore highly problematic. As historians have recently observed, 'the conventional intellectual identification of "India" with the terms "Hindu" or "Hinduism" is deeply mistaken' since there is no original collective classification as such.³ Nevertheless, a set of discourses about a Hindu political community, however mistaken in its sociological premises, did evolve in the late colonial period, through both colonial agency and Indian debate.⁴ Institutions developed with the project of discussing the idea of the 'Hindu' – described as 'revivalist' because of their selection and rejuvenation of collective traditions. In some cases this revivalism involved a celebration of 'Hindu-ness' or the Hindu community. At other times it was a space for religious or social reform. The way Indians then represented communities and defined constituencies often mirrored the state's distribution of political powers⁵ according to religious, ethnic and caste cleavages.⁶

³ David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia, 1996), p. 6. See also Heinrich von Stietencron, 'Religious Configurations in Pre-Muslim India and the Modern Concept of Hinduism', in Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, eds., *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi, 1995) p. 51. Romilla Thapar, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', *Modern Asian Studies* 23, 2 (May 1989).

⁴ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 144–86.

⁵ See Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872–1905: Some Essays in Interpretation* (Delhi, 1993), pp. 12–19; Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harisandra and Nineteenth Century Banaras* (Delhi, 1997), pp. 1–15.

⁶ T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (Delhi, 1997), pp. 252–3. This is supported by evidence from the census report of 1931: 'the leaders of the various communities eventually realised that as their shares of representation in the legislatures . . . would be determined mainly by the numerical strength of those communities, it would have been suicidal for any community to run the risk of under enumeration'. *Census of India, 1931, Part I. Report*, p. 6.

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For the purposes of this book it is more important that a *sense* of 'Hindu-ness' or 'Hindu politics' was possessed by a range of Congress agents, than that 'Hindu' or 'Hinduism' could be identified as an entity, with fixed physical and theoretical boundaries. Moreover, the Congress did not aim, as an institution, to promote the interests of an imagined Hindu community. But because the Congress itself was by no means a homogeneous institution, individuals acting in its name could and did produce political ideas that evoked religious community. The existence of these languages did not, however, demonstrate that secularism and secular nationalism were intrinsically flawed within the Congress organisation. Conceptions of secularism, like Hinduism and Hindu nationalism, varied in north India and could easily exist as an institutional ideal alongside other ideologies, many of them religious in inspiration and fitted to local circumstances. Curiously, these separate ideologies, even though divergent, could clearly co-exist.

This co-existence has often proved difficult for historians to reconcile. In establishing the limits of Congress secularism in the 1930s and 1940s, some writers have briskly concluded that secularism must be incompatible with Indian culture.⁷ The clearest idea to have emerged about Indian secularism has been the notion of the state maintaining an equal distance from all religions, which nevertheless are equally tolerated and respected. But, as early as the 1960s, disagreements arose about the applicability of western notions of secularism (implying separation of church from state or the idealisation of a non-religious political realm) to India. Some writers argued that secularism was applicable to the subcontinent, with a qualification that state secularism would inevitably be challenged by a largely non-secularised Indian society.⁸ Others considered that an orthodox, western-style secular state was not feasible in India, arguing rather for a 'jurisdictionalist' state which concentrated on guaranteeing freedom of worship and conscience.⁹ As many scholars have pointed out, the idea that secularism should take a different form in India when compared with Europe was inevitable, given the lack of an established church. Interpretations of secularism, like interpretations of Hinduism in India, have consequently been fluid and open.

Later theorisations of secularism by historians and political scientists have often replicated Congress's ambiguity over religious politics in the 1930s rather than simply explained it. Two alternative conceptions of

⁷ Although secularism and ideas about the secular state are discussed by historians looking at the 1930s and 1940s, there are very few references to the word 'secular' or 'secularism' until the 1950s.

⁸ Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, N.J., 1963), pp. 493–501.

⁹ Ved Prakash Luthera, *The Concept of the Secular State and India* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 21–3.

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secularism in India have emerged – the second of which will be discussed further below. It has become increasingly common for historians to theorise the inapplicability of secularism to the Indian context. Secularism, in this view, could only be accommodated to Indian social conditions if adapted beyond recognition. T. N. Madan, for instance, emphasises the rootedness of secularism in the dialectic of Protestant Christianity and the Enlightenment and thereby its incompatibility with India's religious traditions.¹⁰ For Ashish Nandy, Indian religious traditions offer a solution to the problem of secularism itself since they contain within them a notion of a more catholic attitude of respect for all religions.¹¹ And for Partha Chatterjee it is doubtful whether secularism as an ideology will ever combat the problem of majoritarian communalism.¹² However, Amartya Sen has pointed out the implication of this 'anti-modernist' critique, which suggests that, as a Hindu nation, India can never be truly secular.¹³ As will be seen in following chapters, advocates of the anti-modernist critique, even in its post-colonial garb, have held similar assumptions about India's religious traditions to those made by Congressmen in the 1930s and 1940s.

The historian still needs to account for the ambiguities of Congress secularism in the 1930s and 1940s, and why unambiguous forms of secularism were so weak. An approach to this question is to ask how far a single dominant form of secularism actually ever emerged within the Congress. It is difficult to argue that orthodox secularism as set out by Madan and Nandy should necessarily have failed for societal reasons, since it was never seriously tested in India in the 1930s and 1940s. Instead, the notion of secularism as a form of 'tolerance', which related to Indian traditions, was more prevalent. This was a multifaceted idea of the secular, and could be interpreted in ways that allowed differing notions of the space of religion in political life. There were wide variants in interpretations

¹⁰ T. N. Madan, 'Secularism in its Place', *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, 4 (1987), pp. 747–59. For Madan, secularism 'fails to recognise the immense importance of religion in the lives of the peoples of South Asia'.

¹¹ Ashish Nandy, 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', *Alternatives* 13, 2 (1990), pp. 177–94. Nandy emphasises the importance of societal organisation over state formation to argue that secularism, being hegemonic, narrows the domain of significant choice-making.

¹² Partha Chatterjee, 'Secularism and Toleration', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, 28 (1994), pp. 1768–77. Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism', *Modern Asian Studies* 26, 4 (1992), pp. 815–53. Upadhyaya also discusses the problem of secularism in India, pointing out that majoritarian Congress secularism is not in fact true secularism.

¹³ Amartya Sen, 'Secularism and its Discontents', in K. Basu and S. Subrahmanyam, *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity* (Delhi, 1996) pp. 17–18.

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of secularism amongst UP Congressmen. Purushottam Das Tandon and Jawaharlal Nehru conceived of secularism as an entire divorce of state from religion (if not divorce of politics from religion, as in the case of Tandon). However, Tandon still possessed an idea of a nation of 'Hindus' and made reference to Hindu traditions and religion in descriptions of the nation. Even Nehru shared this approach of celebrating India's Hindu culture, although in a very different and lapsed form. As Madan has pointed out, Gandhi's 'secularism' was of a different kind, using religiosity to assert the basic equality of all religions.¹⁴ This does not mean that secularism as an ideology was bound to fail in India, or that it was inapplicable to Indian conditions. Rather, secularism in India might better be described as containing a conglomeration of different ideologies, some of them adapted to political and social circumstances. The existence of variable forms of secularism in the UP Congress is explained by the equally variable engagement of Congressmen with religious symbolism in their political activity.

Alongside the mild Nehruvian celebration of India's Hindu culture, some UP Congressmen held that secularism could be actually contained within Indic traditions. This idea persists amongst spokespersons of the Hindu right: locating secularism within Indian ideas of 'sarva-dharma-sambhava' (all dharmas or religious beliefs being equal to or harmonious with each other); asserting that secularism 'has a long philosophical tradition going back to ancient times'; or highlighting the concept of 'dharma' as proof of India's essential religious toleration and propensity for secularism, is the second major stream of ideas on secularism.¹⁵ These interpretations tend to single out the Muslim community as being ultimately responsible for communal antagonism.¹⁶ They also accept uncritically the overlap between ancient Indian ideas of toleration and secularism or secularisation. This tendency to locate 'secularism' within Indian traditions is

¹⁴ Madan, *Modern Myths*, pp. 235–8.

¹⁵ M. M. Sankhdher, 'Understanding Secularism', in M. M. Sankhdher, ed., *Secularism in India: Dilemmas and Challenges* (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 4–7; L. M. Singhvi, 'Secularism: Indigenous and Alien', in *ibid.*, pp. 35–87. Amartya Sen would relate this tendency in Indian secularism to the 'prior identity critique' – the idea that religious identities are prior to national ones and that, therefore, as India is a Hindu country, secularism must be located within Hinduism. This logically leads into the 'favouritism critique' which suggests that the Indian state has in reality favoured the Muslim community. Sen, 'Secularism and its Discontents', pp. 15–17.

¹⁶ Contributors to the Sankhdher volume cited above include Balraj Madhok, president of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, and H. V. Seshadri, general secretary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Madhok claims that the ideas of 'nationalist Muslims' such as Azad actually damaged 'Hindu secularism'. Sankhdher, *Secularism in India*, pp. 119–21. Seshadri asserts that 'Muslim communalism has now acquired a constitutional dignity by the term "minority rights"': Sankhdher, *Secularism in India*, p. 146.

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particularly pertinent to this book, as it was shared by a range of 'Hindu', institutions as well as by the UP Congress.

This idea of the secular state being contained within Indian tradition was critical to the various nationalist expositions of Hinduism and the Hindu nation in the 1930s. As will be explained below, it was in the interests of Congress agents, when discussing the notion of 'Hindu', to make its meaning and provenance as wide as possible. The attractions of an ancient, essentially 'Hindu', traditional Indian secularism were clear: its flexible conceptual frameworks allowed a whole range of anti-colonial messages to be conveyed. Because the notion of 'Hindu' could be flexible and catholic, a diverse range of political languages, manipulating often very different traditions, were considered by observers to be essentially 'Hindu'. These languages and ideologies were part of a national project, and so Congress agents were party to a process whereby complex and differentiated voices were homogenised into an overriding concept of 'Hindu' tradition.

This is why, despite the diversity of Congress's political languages, this book has chosen to investigate that pertaining to the 'Hindu'. Throughout, these languages have been related to the term 'Hindu nationalism', because it was the *national* project of Congress which encouraged agents to select the homogenising notion of 'Hindu', encompassing, among other things, a concept of the secular state. This Hindu nationalism was, however, of a very different character to that of Savarkar and other Hindu ideologues, despite sharing some important basic premises. This book therefore gives Hindu nationalism a broad meaning for a particular reason but does not suggest that it is necessary to confuse and conflate the UP Congress with the harder exclusivist Hindu nationalism of the Sangh Parivar.

The looser forms of Hindu nationalism, which were more evident in Congress activity, are more problematic to define but more significant. Here there was very little, if any, advocacy of nationhood being the exclusive preserve of Hindus, as appeared in the thinking of Savarkar and RSS ideologues. Yet the activities of Congress spokespersons, through deliberate and public uses of religious symbolism, were accommodated into understandings of 'Hindu' traditions. In explaining this process, the concept of a dialogue through a mixture of political languages, ideologies and contextual meanings is central. Different social groups and sects would respond to these ideologies and languages of politics in variable ways – demonstrating that the UP Congressmen's relationship with Hindu nationalism was multifaceted.

On a practical level, association with public religious rituals enabled UP Congressmen in the locality to mobilise and legitimise themselves

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in a mass movement. Religion rarely figured in discussions about party organisation at the provincial level.¹⁷ But at local levels the nation was presented in propaganda using popular notions of Hinduism and folk culture. To achieve this, Congressmen and women drew illustrations and analogies from the great epics – the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.¹⁸ As Congressmen moved and operated in different towns and districts of UP, rhetoric was often adapted to local religious and folk traditions but fitted within a homogenising framework. Hinduism could be theorised as a universal system, creating political legitimacy by integrating the sensibilities of other faiths and understandings about the nation and the wider world.¹⁹ Congressmen might have maintained a sense of the ‘communal’, but this notion of the ‘Hindu’ was not considered to be a part of that realm.

These methods of theorising Hinduism were of course inherited from the revivalism of the late nineteenth century and older Tilakite and extremist influences.²⁰ Attempts to adapt Indian traditions to western organisation within the broad scope of a ‘rationalised’ Hinduism were also an even older preoccupation of institutions like the Brahmo Samaj.²¹ Like late nineteenth-century revivalists, Congress nationalists in UP repeatedly illustrated the tension between an emulation of western political forms and an assertion of Indic supremacy.²² Yet what was new about UP Congress formulations of the ‘Hindu’ was the holistic way in which key publicists incorporated Hinduism into overall conceptions of the Indian nation. This process cannot be described simply as a strategy. Its content and motive related to a complicated set of political relationships which will be explored throughout this book. Its forms emerged through a dialogic relationship between Congress and its constituencies, individual agents and the wider political sphere.

¹⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh: A Study in Imperfect Mobilization*, (Oxford, 1978) p. 71.

¹⁸ Marriott McKim, ‘Cultural Policy in the New States’, in Clifford Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York, 1963), pp. 31–41.

¹⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (Oxford, 1939), p. 313. A more recent explanation for this use of Hinduism is provided by Dawa Norbu who notes that ‘modern ideology and rational techniques . . . tended to make what had been implicit in tradition more explicit’. Dawa Norbu, *Culture and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* (London, 1992), p. 222.

²⁰ Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions*, pp. 21–7. When Bharatendu Harischandra addressed a meeting of the Arya Deshopakarini Sabha in 1889, he stated that the political welfare of the country should not be separated from matters of religion and that the abandonment of different beliefs by Hindus was urgent. Language, literature, religion and territorial allegiance were all aspects of being Hindu. Even Muslims were described as Hindus.

²¹ Amiya Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal*, pp. 31–46. ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 4–29.

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Just as the UP Congress acted as a forum for diverse political agencies, then, so these forms of Hindu nationalism appeared in different guises. They were reinforced by the curious interplay of politics at different levels of the colonial state. In order to build patronage networks and assert political authority in a district after 1920, access to political influence at the provincial level was also necessary. This process was strengthened as Congress institutions at village, town, district and provincial levels came to reflect the structures of the colonial state and administration. It is well known that what a Congress spokesperson did or said in a town or village could be very different from PCC (Provincial Congress Committee) activity. However, local activity impinged upon the province during elections.²³ Religious or caste politics at local levels, which often took forms reflecting the specific local context, could therefore acquire a provincial significance, albeit in a distorted fashion. Local political activity in turn often militated against the interests of provincial party organisations and tarnished the image of individual leaders. This is broadly illustrated in political transformations between the 1920s and 1930s in UP. It is clear that, for the whole of the 1920s, the Congress maintained direct, sometimes formal, associations with Hindu organisations at local levels. During the early and mid-1920s the Congress was closely allied with local Hindu Sabhas. Both organisations provided the financial and professional backing to sustain organised political activity.²⁴ However, these associations with Hindu communalism persisted in more informal forms into the 1930s despite the official all-India Congress's explicit rejection of 'communal' parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha.

So how did the Hindu idiom persist in the Congress at local levels and impact on the province? This book argues that Congress's close association with forms of secularism that were based on the attractive and adaptable notion of a 'Hindu' civilisation and culture broke down any possible taboo surrounding religious mobilisation in the locality. By the late 1930s this situation made it difficult for the Congress in power to contain and control religious conflicts. Neither could Congress be in a

²³ Likewise, provincial power bases also relied on networks of support in the districts. This makes the dichotomy between local and provincial-level political style even more interesting. Harold A. Gould, 'The Rise of the Congress System in a District Political Culture: The Case of Faizabad District in Eastern Uttar Pradesh', in Paul R. Brass and Francis Robinson, eds., *Indian National Congress and Indian Society, 1885–1985: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Dominance* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 242–309. See also Anil Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal, eds., *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870–1940* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 26.

²⁴ Richard Gordon, 'The Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress, 1915–1926', *Modern Asian Studies* 9, 2 (April 1975), pp. 182–95.

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position to act with a heavy hand after 1937, whilst the Muslim League accused it of being part of a 'Hindu conspiracy'. The importance of political language was perhaps nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the Congress ministry period from 1937 to 1939, when an accumulation of grievances surrounding Congress's political image allowed the party to be condemned for its 'Hindu' bias. This tension, then, between a striving for secularism and the attraction of particular forms of political language, was a part of the UP Congress as 'government' as well as 'agitator'. It was to affect the UP Congress well into the following decade, by which time a rejuvenated, strident identity politics had appeared in the form of the Muslim League.

Ideology, symbolism and language

Because political activity in the locality affected the Congress at the province and the centre, it is important to study political languages in their more localised manifestations: print journalism, the theatre of political processions and meetings and stump oratory, as well as political writings and manifestos. This necessarily contextual study of political language and symbolism is most usefully conceptualised at a broader level as 'ideology' at certain moments, and 'political language' at others. The distinction between these two phenomena is a difficult one. Ideology is arguably contained in all manner of languages, but is dependent upon a certain level of articulation. Hence, a collection of writings on politics are formulated ideologies, whilst the text of a speech, or the symbolism of a festival, within its historical context might be more appropriately accorded a looser description as a kind of political language. There have been sophisticated studies in other contexts of political ideas and action which employ the idea of interacting political languages. Some of the best examples of this look at the operation of *mentalité*, the overlapping of cultural languages and how they relate to national identity.²⁵ These approaches highlight the complementarity of political ideas espoused by individuals and groups, which are most effectively studied as something hybrid, or as a form of dialogue.²⁶ This book will argue that ideology relates closely to this looser definition of political language. This is because ideological transmission is the result of a multilinear

²⁵ See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1984), especially pp. 62–5 and pp. 257–63.

²⁶ This has been discussed by D. A. Washbrook, 'Orient and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire', in Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. V: *Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 596–611.