The Rhetoric of Hindu India

This book examines the late twentieth-century rise of an urban, right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology called metropolitan Hindutva.

This ideology, the book assesses, aspires to be a pan-Indian, urban form that is home to the emerging, digitally enabled, technocratic middle-classes of contemporary India. The success of this new-age Hindutva is based in a politics of language that attaches a kind of cybernetic global English to an ostensibly pan-Indian culture and idiom, now violently being fashioned in exclusively Sanskritic terms. In contrast, the old Hindu nationalism was largely articulated in vernacular idioms, had strong regionalist affiliations, and was primarily associated with upper-caste, agrarian aristocracies and mid-caste, trading families.

Through close analyses of the writings of a range of self-styled public intellectuals from Arun Shourie and Swapan Dasgupta to Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi, this book maps this new avatar of Hindutva. Finally, in analysing the language of the new metropolitan Hindutva, it arrives at an emerging idea of India as part of what Amitav Ghosh has called a contemporary Anglophone empire.

This is the first extended scholarly effort to theorize a politics of language in relation to the dangers of such an imperializing Hindutva.

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The Rhetoric of Hindu India
Language and Urban Nationalism

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For my mother, who taught me to read

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Preface

The Rhetoric of Hindu India narrativizes the late twentieth century rise in India of an urban right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology called Hindutva. It does so in the light of three interrelated changes in the Indian political and cultural situation of this time: first, the opening up of the economy to global finance capital and consumer goods; second, the successful spread in urban and small-town Indian centers of networks of information processing, telecommunications and transnational managerial forms; and third, the rise of India as one of the most important business process outsourcing capitals in the erstwhile third world. In this transformed environment, I argue that Hindutva distinguished itself from an older variant of Hindu nationalism. The old Hindu nationalism was largely articulated in vernacular idioms, had strongly regionalist affiliations and was primarily associated with upper-caste agrarian aristocracies and mid-caste merchant capitalists. In contrast, late-twentieth century Hindutva aspires to be a pan-Indian, urban project and home to the emerging, digitally-enabled, technocratic middle-classes of the nation. The success of this new-age Hindu nationalism, which I call 'metropolitan Hindutva', has been greatly enhanced by its adoption of English in a type of globally cybernetic form to an increasingly Sanskritized national culture. This politics of language is the promised tool for overcoming the nation's many heterogeneities based in class, caste, language and region and for shaping a homogenously Sanskritic-Hindu population that is to be representative of the new India. The citizenry thus formed is however legitimately national only because it is, first and foremost, globally viable as a digitally savvy, upwardly mobile and urban-metropolitan technocracy.

My contention in this book is that it is through its politics of language that Hindutva launched its attack on a history of postcolonial secularism which had been at the foundation of conceptualizations of an independent Indian

nation-state. Arguing that secularism in the Indian Republic was a pseudo form geared toward appeasing minorities and thereby manipulating electoral balances, the ideologues of metropolitan Hindutva proposed to usher in what they claimed to be 'a better secularism' that would be the harbinger of a *second* Indian Republic. In the new India, there would be no place for an older national population that had always formed itself in relation to a political commitment to protect and tolerate difference in all its forms. Instead, as we have seen, all differences – of caste, class, religion and region – were to be dissolved into a new Sanskritized Hindu nation that could be harnessed to a global Anglophone hegemony. At the heart of the matter therefore is the question of difference. And difference, for the ideology of metropolitan Hindutva, is to be managed not just at the level of lifestyles, but more foundationally, at the level of linguistic style. The beginnings of an undifferentiated Indian citizenry are therefore to be found in the syntactical generation of a perpetual present tense that is memoryless and ahistorical and dissolves the differences between contingent pasts, presents and futures. I will show in the course of this book that such a foundational reimagining of time forms the basis of the politics of metropolitan Hindutva, and is transmitted and circulated, in turn, through 'a religion of instantaneity' made possible by the consolidation of telematic networks of information processing, telecommunications and global managerial intelligences. Indeed, the focus on an instantaneously apprehensible present new-age is Hindutva's tool for dissolving the conceptual force of difference, which I theorize as a function of the distances generated by a modern, secular temporality, between strictly separable pasts, presents and futures.

The struggle over the category of difference is what ties my analysis of Hindutva to the metaphorics of postcolonial studies, at the core of which are foundational theories about alterity – between east and west, between civilization and barbarism, between self and other and between center and margin. Since these were consolidated in and through colonial encounters in the modern world, I read metropolitan Hindutva against this background as a template for what I call an 'afterlife of the postcolonial condition'. The afterlife of the Indian postcolonial society, I argue, is characterized by a general civic culture in which the intellectual and political power of the narrative of decolonization has collapsed and nations have come to increasingly write themselves into empire, rather than oppose or counter it. In this context, my book asks the following fundamental questions: how, specifically, do we read the ways in which anti-colonial nationalisms have become intimately one with the forces they had desisted in order to posit their moral, if not political, cases

for autonomy? What are the genres and styles of enunciation through which a postcolonial society engages with the new world order? What is the politics that emerges as these terms of engagement shift and transform themselves and what kind of intellectual structures have to develop in order for such changes to take root?

To enter into these questions, I read the writings of a range of self-styled public intellectuals including journalists, think-tank economists, politicos and fiction writers. Arun Shourie, Jay Dubashi, Francois Gautier, Swapan Dasgupta, Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi are these intellectuals. This is not what one would call a large 'sample-size', but my study is a literary rather than ethnographic one and I keep the numbers down, as it were, so as to be able to pay close attention to illustrative examples from each author's range of works. There are also specific reasons for which I choose to read these particular intellectuals rather than others – Arun Shorie, for instance, is an interesting figure for my inquiry because he represents the very beginnings of a right-wing, urban, Anglophone, elite intellectual formation that forms the core of metropolitan Hindutva. Jay Dubashi, the figure I spend most time on in this book, is also a pioneer in this sense for he is one of the first of the ideologues to theorize metropolitan Hindutva as a political rather than racial or religious concept. In the context of this claim, I do show that the politicization of the category 'Hindu' had already begun in the 1920s with the work of V. D. Savarkar, a man who has often been referred to as the 'father of modern-day Hindutva', but Dubashi's project is different from Savarkar's in several ways. One of those involves the economic template he develops as the basis of the politicization of contemporary Hindutva. The way in which he then deploys this template to demonstrate that political Hinduness is both the originary premise of the free market as well as its final objective, makes Dubashi's work of particular interest to my exploration. This kind of a globally recognizable aspect for Hindutva is transparently comprehensible in a different way in the work of Swapan Dasgupta, who is another important figure in my assessment. Dasgupta speaks to the question of how right-wing Hindu nationalism must seek political success by usurping the place of privilege long been given to a left-liberal intelligentsia in the Anglophone media and he is one of the few ideologues of Hindutva who unambiguously points to the English language as a crucial tool in the remaking of Hinduism for a new age. This is also a significant context for another persona under consideration in this book – the French-born journalist Francois Gautier who provides Hindutva a cosmopolitan aspect in so far as he marries it to the global spread

(via a kind of Orientalist and Orientalizing Indology) of Hindu spirituality in the modern western world.

The place of India, and of Hinduism, in the western world is a matter provocatively taken up by the likes of Amish Tripathi and Chetan Bhagat, the last of the authors I address in this book. These men, I contend, represent the millennial *avatar* of Hindutva, narrating in their works a new Hindu India that is always already cosmopolitan and no longer needs to reach out to the west to prove its global viability. This is why the English-language prose of Bhagat and Tripathi has moved inwards toward what I have, following Suman Gupta, called a non-regionalized local form; the conversations have become internalized and the jokes private, never italicized or translated for an audience of supposed India-watchers. Added to this locally flavoured Anglophone language environment is a cybernetic aspect, complete with the idioms appropriate to social media exchanges and a corresponding exuberant youthfulness well-suited to the emerging arrogance of Hindu India on the global stage. Indeed, it is the likes of Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi who have arguably optimized the discourse of metropolitan Hindutva, not only by affording it a digitally savvy and managerially refined aspect of youth, but also, as I show, in the final analysis, by claiming for it a post-political and post-ideological character. In short, Bhagat and Tripathi function like the new-age managers of Hindutva who promise to give it an important image makeover, shifting the focus from its genocidal politics to its ostensibly apolitical digital competencies and from its attacks against the ideology of secularism to its championing of the seemingly creedless practices of free-market management.

I should remark in closing that the designation 'metropolitan Hindutva' begs a question about what exactly the place of metropolitan cities is in the discourse of the current Hindu nationalism. I do not address this question in any great detail in the course of this book. In fact, it may seem to the reader that Hindutva as it appears in my analysis is grounded not in the already-established major metropoles, but rather in satellite small townships like Gurgaon where outsourcing centers have their homes, or, symbolic sites like Ayodhya which are locked, quite violently, in the battle between temples and mosques. The importance of such locations notwithstanding, metropolitan Hindutva, as I have described it here, is indeed conceptually tied to the idea of a new kind of metropolis, and more specifically, to what has come to be termed 'the 100 smart cities project' of the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Narendra Modi government in New Delhi. Articulated as a grand urban strategy during the 2014 elections, the smart city idea involved building new

real estate enclaves on the outskirts of existing cities to provide serviced land to private companies. These gated cities were to have a centralized surveillance system, a digitally monitored water-supply program, technology-enabled waste collection and other information and communications technology driven amenities. But most importantly, they were to be designated as special investment regions in order to attract global capital and avoid the pesky mandates of India's Land Acquisition Act, which require consent from and compensation for the farmers whose territories these regions were to encroach upon. The proposed smart cities are thus no less than foundational concept-templates for what I have argued is Hindutva's impulse toward cleansing its population such that it becomes an absolutely uniform whole of strictly middle and upper-class, technocratic and always digitally-enabled citizens.

I mention the smart city idea here in the preface to the book, rather than elaborating it more fully in later pages, because I believe that to do otherwise would constitute a book-length study in itself, and indeed, I am not sufficiently trained in the study of cities to sustain such a project. Moreover, my use of the term 'metropolitan' to qualify the category 'Hindutva', while no doubt designed to draw attention to the urban impulse of this ideology, is also tied to the sense of the word in the study of colonial and postcolonial cultures. That is to say, when I refer to Hindutva as a metropolitan project, I draw on the idea of an imperial metropolis that exercises control over distant peripheries, or, to put it differently, I understand Hindutva as an imperial undertaking that hopes to extend into the far-reaches of the world what I have suggested is a Hindu-Anglophone way of being. It is in this sense that the new Hindutva I describe is 'metropolitan'.

The dangerously imperial *avatar* of Hindutva is to be understood, as I have argued, as an event of language that both manipulates the historical relationship between Sanskritized Hindi and imperial English as well as launches a foundational attack on the very concepts of history, memory and secular differences, at the micro level of syntactical manipulations. While there have been discrete instances of scholarly studies in this direction, my book, I believe, is the first sustained effort to theorize metropolitan Hindutva as just such a linguistic environment.