

[Hindu Studies: Warring with Words](#)

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Book Excerpt

## Hindu Studies: Warring with Words

### Misunderstanding of key terms confuses today's reporting and research on Hinduism

By Koenraad Elst

In the introduction to his book, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, Belgian scholar Koenraad Elst argues that Western-based reporters and scholars fail to recognize biased and misleading terminology used by their Indian counterparts. We excerpt here his discussion of particularly problematic terms.

To find out about the thought animating a social, cultural and political movement, one must simply listen and read what its acknowledged spokesmen have to say. The need of the hour is to get acquainted with what Hindu revivalists are really saying and to restore objectivity to the discussion. Objectivity has been under attack on two fronts. One is the "postmodern" form of Marxism (quite powerful in American universities), which denies the very notion of objective knowledge, assumes that knowledge is conditioned by one's social belonging, and insists that "all research in the social sciences has a political agenda." In practice, this means that once an author has been identified as belonging to the wrong interest group, his arguments are ipso facto wrong or vitiated. In a large part of the academic publications, this position is implicit in their way of foregoing any serious evaluation of arguments formulated by Hindu revivalists, as if the identification of the propounder of the argument as a "Hindu fundamentalist" were sufficient to put his arguments beyond the pale of rational discourse. Thus, the Hindu litany of grievances against the inequalities imposed on Hinduism by the Indian state (a major issue) is commonly only mentioned as an object of ridicule, never of proper investigation.

The second problem is that many India-watchers who do believe in the principle of objectivity have nonetheless published books and papers on the present topic which

suffer serious lapses from the normal scholarly standards. The exacting standards of objectivity are obviously a permanent challenge to scholars in any field, but this field, or at least its present-day state of the art, presents some peculiar problems. In some cases, the bias may be in the mind of the India-watcher, but the overriding problem is that even scholars and journalists who do try to be objective frequently rely on Indian sources which have considerable standing but are nonetheless far from objective. There is, apparently, an assumption of cultural solidarity in which Western India watchers regard their Indian colleagues, "our men in India," as representatives of enlightened modernity who stand above the ongoing conflicts between the native barbarians. This, in spite of the conspicuous fact that many Indian academics use very partisan language when addressing the issue of Hindu revivalism.

However, we shall show that the very basics of this research are highly problematic: numerous presumably non-partisan sources are tainted by a partisan involvement which outsiders tend to ignore or misunderstand, and even the terminology which conditions the whole discourse on India's religious conflict is often unclear and sometimes the object of deliberate manipulation. My intention is to avoid these traps and clear away the cobwebs at the only entrance to a real understanding of Hindu revivalism, viz. to let the primary sources speak.

What follows is a brief glossary of the typical terminology encountered in the primary and secondary literature on Hindu revivalism. A number of these terms represent false trails, theories or rhetoric which contribute nothing to our understanding of Hindu revivalism--this in spite of their tremendous popularity as explanation models in circles with little knowledge of the primary material. Others are very ordinary terms whose meaning suddenly becomes problematic when used in the context of "Hindu revivalism."

## Hindu Revivalism

The focus of this study is most aptly termed Hindu revivalism, a broad trend in nineteenth-and twentieth-century India which seeks to revive Hinduism after a benumbing near-millennium of political, ideological and psychological subjection to Islamic and Western hegemony. Hindu revivalism is a many-pronged attempt to ensure the survival of Hinduism by integrating the gains of modernity in Hindu civilization (in that sense, it is of course not a revival of anything ancient in unchanged form), as well as by intellectually and politically fighting off the perceived threats posed by Islam, Christianity and a string of secular ideologies, of which Marxism is the most articulate.

The Hindu revivalist movement perceives itself as the cultural chapter of India's decolonization. It tries to free the Indians from the colonial condition at the mental and cultural level, to complete the process of political and economic decolonization. The need for "reviving" Hinduism springs from the fact that the said hostile ideologies (mostly Islam) have managed to eliminate Hinduism physically in certain geographical parts and social segments of India, and also (mostly the Western ideologies) to neutralize the Hindu spirit among many nominal Hindus.

## Hindu Fundamentalism

It should already be clear that the movement under consideration cannot be called "Hindu fundamentalism." The reason is not that, as Hindu revivalists commonly argue, "a Hindu cannot be a fundamentalist because the concept of fundamentalism is specific to the Biblical-Koranic tradition." The role of "scripture" is, indeed, not exactly the same in Hinduism as in the "religions of the Book," among other reasons, because there is a plurality of Hindu scriptures. Rather, the key point is that that segment of Hindu opinion which we are considering in the present study does not belong to this scripturalist tendency, even though it may embellish its manifestoes with an occasional (and often creatively reinterpreted) Vedic quotation. Most certainly, it is "not fundamentalist in the sense of being scripturalist." Fundamentalist movements invariably oppose the lukewarm and compromising tendencies within their own religion; such is not the case at all in Hindu revivalism, which focuses on confronting non-Hindu doctrines or social forces and uniting all Hindus. Fundamentalism, in the true sense of the word, is not in evidence in the Hindu revivalist movement.

## Communalism

One of the most frequently used terms in India-watching is communalism, a term unknown to most Westerners. Its roots lie in the British colonial policy of taking "communities" as the relevant units in recruitment or in the allotment of seats in representative assemblies. Originally, the term had no pejorative connotation.

Today, communalism is one of those labels allotted exclusively to people who reject it; it is a term of abuse. This distortion of an otherwise well-defined and useful term started in the 1920s, when Congress leaders took to using it for (i.e., against) Hindu organizations, even though the latter opposed communal electorates and recruitment quota which the Congress had endorsed. Even when Congress became a party to the Partition of India on a communal basis (Pakistan for Muslims, India for

non-Muslims), which these Hindu organizations kept on opposing, Congress kept on denouncing the latter as "Hindu communalists."

To justify this shift in meaning, a symmetry was assumed between minority organizations which favored the communal principle and Hindu organizations which opposed it, in the sense that both defended the perceived interests of their own community. The definition of the term was changed. The effective meaning of communalism in post-Partition India is explicated by the Marxist historian Bipan Chandra as "the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests." This definition is generally accepted and used, e.g., by Saral Jhingran: "By communalism is meant the assertion that the secular interests of a group of persons are coextensive with its religious identity."

This definition, is, unfortunately, quite wrong. It does not satisfy the defining criterion of a definition, viz. that its semantic domain be coterminous with the phenomenon it seeks to define. When Bipan Chandra and Saral Jhingran talk about "communalism," they certainly include issues like the agitation against cow-slaughter, the Hindu and Muslim agitations concerning the temple or mosque in Ayodhya, and the Satanic Verses affair. These examples involve not "common economic, political, social and cultural interests," but purely religious concerns--that the birthplace of Rama or the fair name of the Prophet is being violated. Such controversies are not covered by Bipan Chandra's definition of "communalism."

The fact that nowadays the label "communalist" is systematically applied to people who never describe themselves as such, and most of whom go out of their way to deny that they are "communalists," should caution scholars to handle it with utmost care. It may be legitimate to sit down and collect evidence for the thesis that "the Hindu nationalists are communalists," but it is not legitimate, at least not from the viewpoint of scholarly or journalistic duty, to routinely replace their chosen self description with the externally imposed label "communalist."

## Hindu Nationalism

Most Hindu revivalists do accept the term Hindu nationalist. After the Ayodhya-related excitement, with its media exaggerations, died down, the more responsible Western media decided to use this term when discussing the RSS and BJP. It should be kept in mind that in India, nationalism doesn't have the negative connotations which it has in Western intellectual circles. On the contrary, the term

is hallowed by its association with the freedom movement. For the people concerned, it simply means "love of one's country," and in all other respects its meaning can vary. Another term which Hindu nationalists themselves often use, and which is now effectively a synonym of "Hindu nationalism," is Hindutva, "Hindu-ness." It is distinct from "Hinduism," in that it designates the "Hindu nation" rather than "Hindu religion." The "Hindu nation" is conceived as including Indians belonging to semi-Hindu religions like Sikhism and Buddhism (whose sacred sites associated with the founders lie in India), but whether it also includes Indian Muslims and Christians is a point of disagreement within the movement.

## The Hindu Right

In Leftist writings, it is not uncommon to see Hindu revivalism, particularly its political section, described as "the Hindu Right." Though there is nothing pejorative in the term right in itself (on the contrary, for ages this was the "right" side, while the left side was associated with abnormality and evil), ever since the French Revolution it has become associated with the reactionary defenders of social injustice, the moribund forces of the past. In practice, the very word rightist carries an inherent leftist bias. The parties journalistically described as "rightist" (British Tories, German Christian-Democrats, American Republicans, etc.) very rarely call themselves that; only "extreme-rightist" parties do that. Most parties to which the metonymic term rightist is applied identify themselves by means of descriptive terms, like conservative.

The term Hindu Right only applies if an extreme Leftist viewpoint is assumed, as is effectively the case for numerous Indian Hindutva critics: only from that angle is Hindu nationalism consistently found to one's right. To the extent that Hindu revivalism rejects the Marxist reduction of history to economic factors--a refusal which Marxism construes as a camouflage for support to the status-quo in economic power equations--Hindu revivalism is, of course, non-Marxist and, if you want, non-Left.

But the decisive objection against the term Hindu Right is that the people concerned will not accept it. In fact, the BJS explicitly described itself as "centrist," e.g.: "As a centrist party, the Jana Sangh has been subjected to attacks both from the extreme right as well as the extreme left." One workable measure of objectivity and neutrality in news reading and scholarship is whether people and groups are classified with terms in which they recognize themselves. When we apply this simple yardstick of objectivity to the available literature on Hindu revivalism, we find most of it wanting.

## Macaulayism

Macaulayism is named after the British administrator Thomas Babington Macaulay, who in 1835 initiated an education policy designed to create a class of people Indian in skin color but British in every other respect. "Macaulayites" are those Indians who have interiorized the colonial ideology of the "White Man's Burden" (as Rudyard Kipling called it in a famous poem): the Europeans had to come and liberate the natives, "half devil and half child," from their native culture, which consisted only of ignorance, superstition and the concomitant social evils; and after this liberation from themselves, these Indians became a kind of honorary Whites.

Macaulay's policy was implemented and became a resounding success. The pre-Macaulayan vernacular system of education was destroyed--even though British surveys had found it more effective and more democratic than Britain's then-existing education system. A Hindu revivalist diagnosis is given by Ram Swarup: "Above all, there appeared a class of Hindu-hating Hindus who knew all the bad things about Hinduism. Earlier invaders ruled through the sword. The British ruled through Indology. The British took over our education and taught us to look at ourselves through their eyes. They created a class Indian in blood and color, but anti-Hindu in its intellectual and emotional orientation. This is the biggest problem rising India faces--the problem of self-alienated Hindus."

It is this class of Hindu-born "Macaulayites" which has inherited the mantle of the colonial ruling class. Its most conspicuous representative was the first Prime Minister of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru, then sometimes nicknamed "India's last Viceroy," and recently evaluated as "the English gentleman who came to ruin India." Reviewer Joseph Shattan describes Jawaharlal's father, Motilal Nehru, as "in Macaulay's famous phrase, 'Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' .... There being no vacancies at Eton, in 1905 he packed 15-year-old Jawaharlal off to Harrow, determined that the boy grow up a proper English gentleman. He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams; and years later, at Cambridge, Jawaharlal wrote his father asking permission to transfer to Oxford: 'Cambridge is becoming too full of Indians.'"

Hindu commentator S.R. Goel, in *Hindu and Hinduism, Manipulation of Meanings*, observes: "One has to read Nehru's writings and speeches, and evaluate his policies from a Hindu point of view, to realize that, so far as Hindus and Hinduism are concerned, he was a combined embodiment of all the imperialist ideologies--Islam, Christianity, White Man's Burden and communism--that have flooded this country in

the wake of foreign invasions or interventions." This class of mostly Hindu-born Macaulayites has shaped the institutions of post-1947 India, including its de facto state ideology, secularism.

## Secularism

In Europe, its continent of origin, secularism is not an ideology in its own right, it is only a practical arrangement between Church and State, viz. their separation. Secularism means that the State shall not in any way promote any religion, whether by propagating it through official channels, by discriminating in favor of its votaries, or by imposing its commandments through the rule of law. In a broader sense, secularism, as a cultural tendency, means that religion is "kept in its place," if not discarded altogether, in order to let people decide their destinies on the basis of purely human and this-worldly considerations.

In India, the Constitution of 1950 affirms the secular character of the Republic implicitly, but not until 1976 did the Constitution explicitly affirm that India is a "secular" state. Surprisingly, this non-involvement of religion and specifically of Hinduism in the Indian polity is not much of a concern to Hindu revivalists. The reason may simply be that they have more pressing concerns, while some lip-service to Hinduism in the Constitution would not make much difference to the flourishing of Hinduism in civil society anyway. The anger of Hindu revivalists is directed not against "secularism" in its proper meaning but against what it calls "pseudo-secularism"--the alleged practice of favoritism toward non-Hindus under the cover of "secularism."

European secularists wanted man to be emancipated from the mind control exerted by the dogmatic and irrational belief systems of authoritarian religious establishments, a situation which did not obtain in India at all. To be sure, religion in the sense of belief in supernatural interventions was and is widespread in India. Moreover, a religious conception of political authority also prevailed; kings were enthroned with Brahminical rituals. But Hindu states always supported religious pluralism; Hindu tradition never stifled debate, never stood in the way of science, and in its early stage even incorporated and encouraged it.

Hindu India has had no history of book-burning, of executing heretics or confining dissidents to lunatic asylums. The Buddha could preach his heterodox doctrine till his old age without ever being persecuted. As Dutch indologist Sjoerd de Vries writes: "In Indian society, an amazing tolerance vis-a-vis people of unusual opinions

has existed for ages.... Only very few instances are known where conflicts have erupted for the sake of religion. Not until the advent of Islam did India get acquainted with religious persecution."

## PSEUDO-SECULARISM

In their unease about the semantic manipulation of secularism, Hindu revivalists question the very use of this term. Seeing that the policies actually carried out by the secularists are not in conformity with the dictionary meaning of secularism, they allege that India is controlled by "pseudo-secularists." Some of them sum it up in one simplistic sentence: "Secularism means being anti-Hindu." They profess not to reject the principle of secularism, meaning "genuine secularism" or "positive secularism," and accuse the establishment and the other parties of "pseudo-secularism," meaning "discrimination against Hindus justified in the name of secularism."

Ever since Jawaharlal Nehru gave it currency, the term secularism has been very popular in India. Most parties and politicians call themselves secular. Even Muslim activists, whose counterparts in Turkey or Egypt denounce secularism as a demonic betrayal of Islam, call themselves secularists.

This general enthusiasm for secularism in itself should indicate that the meaning of the term has undergone a drastic change in India, and that it is irresponsible to use the term as if it had its established Western meaning (which most India-watchers do). Just as the English word deception has a radically different meaning from its French look-alike *déception* (which means disappointment), the British-English word secularism differs radically in meaning from its Indian-English look-alike secularism. A professional interpreter who translates *déception* as deception is incompetent, and an India-watcher who translates the Indian-English term secularism into standard English as secularism has a similar problem.

The self-described "secularism" of the Indian elite is a special case meriting closer inspection. Secularism in India is certainly not a neutral position, as Western India-watchers tend to assume. In fact, it is one of the warring parties in India's religious conflict. This is a rather consequential insight, for it means that reliance on the presumed neutral Indian sources describing themselves as secularist (a reliance which pervades the entire non-Indian literature on the present topic) is actually a reliance on the version of one of the warring parties, which is the very last thing to do in scholarship.



## Marxism

In allotting political labels to persons, I intend to be more circumspect than the Marxists, who systematically label all Hindu revivalists as RSS men if not Hindu fascists. Of course, I don't pretend to know every author's personal involvement, and allowance should be made for changes in people's commitment. So, the safest criterion is simply to go by the presence or absence of a conspicuous Marxist viewpoint or conceptual framework in an author's writings, then proceed to label that particular argument--rather than the author himself--as "Marxist." In a number of cases, however, the Marxist label is certified by Marxist sources. Thus, Romila Thapar and R. S. Sharma are quoted at some length as representatives of Indian Marxist thought in A Dictionary of Marxist Thought.

To Marx, according to this same dictionary, Hinduism "was the ideology of an oppressive and outworn society, and he shared the distaste of most Europeans for its more lurid features.... he was as sceptical as his Hindu followers were to be of any notion of a Hindu 'golden age' of the past." Marx upheld the colonial view that India was not a country properly speaking, merely a stretch of land with a meek conglomerate of peoples passively waiting for the next conqueror. For him, the question was not whether it was right to colonize India, merely whether colonization by Britain was preferable (and in his view, it was) to colonization by the Turks or the Czar.

Marx's Indian followers have remained true to his view. They reject the very concept of India as a national unit and only accept India's unity and integrity to the extent that they consider it strategically useful--e.g., in 1970-75, when they sincerely believed that they were about to come to power in Delhi. In an interview in Le Monde, Romila Thapar cheerfully predicted that India won't be able to stay together. CPM Politburo member Sitaram Yechury calls India a "multinational country" with "many nationalities."

After the Soviet implosion, many an Indian Marxist, or Left-talking opportunist has switched to free-market liberalism but remained a determined Macaulayite and secularist. Indeed, the intense polarization for and against Hindutva in the early 1990s is partly due to a regrouping of Leftist forces on the cultural front after they found that their fortunes on the socioeconomic front were down, as observed by G. Jain: "Deprived of the old legitimacy which the non-existent but effectively advertised success of the Soviet Union and China conferred on them, leftist intellectuals must now hang on desperately to Nehru. Secularism ... and not

socialism has to be their battle cry." The effect on international opinion is that "the 'secularist' and 'anti-Hindu-communalist' platform assures them the support of not only the Muslims at home and abroad but, interestingly enough, of a lot of people in the West," Jain concludes.

At the academic level, at least, this is very much the situation: Indian Marxists are welcomed in American seminars as privileged commentators on "Hindu communalism." It is ironic and disturbing that a movement which still swears by Lenin--whose October 1917 coup d'etat deposed the first democratic Russian Parliament--and Stalin is hailed in Western universities as the guardian of a civil polity against the encroaching barbarism of Hindu revivalism.

## Majoritarianism

Majoritarianism is the position that a majority has the right to determine the face of a country, whether in symbolic respects or in actual legislation. It is in effect a pejorative term for democracy, especially democracy in its unalloyed "one man, one vote" form, in which a majority can take decisions without bothering about the religious background of the decision's supporters or opponents.

One curb on unalloyed "majoritarian" democracy could consist in veto powers conceded to smaller units (though this means that a minority can impose its will on the majority, which obviously detracts from the "democratic" character of the system). This is what David Ludden refers to in his book *Making India Hindu* with his criticism of BJP majoritarianism: "As a majoritarian movement, Hindu nationalism defines the Indian nation as a whole and seeks to displace and remove alternative, pluralistic definitions." A "pluralistic" definition seems to imply a recognition of subnationalities or other units below the level of the nation.

This critique of majoritarianism intrinsically presupposes a communalist perspective: the nation is not one, is not a single unit which can take political decisions, but it is a composite of communities, one of which may be the majority, but each of which has its own sovereignty. The citizen does not participate in the decision-making process as just a citizen, but as a citizen qualified by his membership of a subnationality. Moreover, in the present debate, it is minorities defined by religion which are accepted as legitimate contenders for the status of a "minority" entitled to "get justice."

In secular countries, there may be subnationalities defined by religion or language (and that only for very limited purposes), but it is unconstitutional and, in fact, unthinkable that a proposal of law in France, the US or any other secular country were to be subjected to the approval or disapproval of groups defined by religious identity. Thus, no matter how sinful the Catholic community may consider the legalization of abortion, there is no question of a modern government giving representatives of the Catholic community a veto right against a democratically enacted law permitting abortion, nor even the right to have a separate minority law applying to Catholics alone. In those countries, a citizen is simply a citizen, and his adherence to a majority or minority religion is strictly ignored. That is real secularism.

That very policy, accepted as a matter of course in Western secular democracies, is precisely what Ludden describes as the majoritarian program of the Hindu nationalists: to treat "the Indian nation as a whole," in particular, to have a Common Civil Code which applies to all citizens regardless of religion--replacing the present "pluralistic" Civil Code, which differs according to religion. By contrast, the "alternative, pluralistic definitions" envisaged by Ludden introduce the notion of separate communities as relatively sovereign building-blocks of the nation. But that is exactly what the British in India used to call the "communal" principle. This example of a controversial term may serve to illustrate how easily outside observers get entangled in the intricacies of India's "communal" problem; how they lose their neutrality even in the stage when terms are defined; and how they may even end up on the side which they imagine they are criticizing, i.e., "communalism."

## Conclusion

I caution the reader that certain commonly held opinions about India and Hindu revivalism are just that--opinions. Views on a large phenomenon like Hindu revivalism naturally stretch across the whole opinion spectrum, but those which dominate the international media and the channels likely to have influenced my readership are almost uniformly hostile, sometimes ferociously hostile. About Hindu revivalism we may say what an earlier researcher has said about the Middle-Eastern Druze religious community, viz. that they "were judged almost entirely in the light of sources written by their adversaries; hence many misconceptions about them persist to this day." This complaint is also heard from the people directly concerned here, the Hindu revivalists themselves.

Dr. Koenraad Elst was born in Leuven, Belgium, on August 7, 1959, into a Flemish (Dutch-speaking Belgian) Catholic family. During a stay at the Benares Hindu

University, he discovered India's communal problem and wrote his first book about the budding Ayodhya conflict. He has frequently returned to India to study various aspects of its ethno-religio-political configuration and interviewed Hindu and other leaders and thinkers. Decolonizing the Hindu Mind is available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)