

Elena Valdameri. 2022. *Indian Liberalism between Nation and Empire. The Political Life of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*. London: Routledge. 246 pages. Hardcover. £ 120. ISBN 9780367470326.

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As is not always the case with books of history, the title of Valdameri's monograph gives us an appropriate idea of the content. In fact, Gokhale's political liberalism develops between the two poles of nation and empire. Or, more exactly, his ideas of liberty and national liberty cannot be understood without a reference to British rule in India. But before delving into the problem of the relationship between nation and empire in Gokhale's *Weltanschauung*, a short premise is appropriate on the structure of the monograph. It isn't a biography of Gokhale but, rather, an accurate, dense, and keen analysis of his political thought. Accordingly, the volume doesn't follow a chronological path, but is organized around some major themes, focused on the guiding ideas in Gokhale's political thought. So, the four chapters are each a sort of monograph on a specific topic. Liberalism, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, Citizenship are therefore analysed in that order. Notwithstanding the systematic approach, however, the historical context is never neglected, and the analysis of Gokhale's different political attitudes is always accompanied by a sober but accurate reconstruction of the context in which they are placed. The only exception to this rule is the first chapter ('Liberalism') which follows, more definitely, a temporal pattern. This is a perfectly intelligible exception, as liberalism is the backbone of Gokhale's political vision, and, to explain its importance, it is useful to describe the intellectual training of the Indian leader, following its subsequent stages.

The description of the structure of the book leads us, almost naturally, to analyse its content. Here, it is worth remembering that Gokhale (1866-1915) is currently classified as a moderate. This general label, however, must be understood *cum grano salis*. In general terms we must always remember that the early Indian nationalism developed in a constant osmosis with the progressive elements of the British administration. It is a well-known fact that the Indian National Congress was founded, in 1885, by a retired British official. Likewise, Gokhale's political career took place, in large part, in the consultative and representative institutions created by the British in India starting from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In other words, to classify Gokhale as a moderate does not mean that he wasn't a convinced supporter of India's independence. Rather it only means that, in his opinion, independence was a goal that would not be achieved in a short time and had to be pursued without any form of terrorism and wanton violence. To have a term of comparison, it is enough to think that

Mahatma Gandhi himself, who considered Gokhale his political guru, remained a Crown's loyalist until the end of First World War. What is more, moderation, for Gokhale, did not mean a conciliatory attitude toward the British. Gokhale shared the "drain theory," with its hard-hitting criticism to the economic politics of the British in India, and attacked vehemently the colonial government "for the inefficacy of famine relief operations" (: 54). Also, on the means of political action he was not "unconditionally against mass agitation, provided that it was led from the above" (: 156) and appreciated passive resistance.

Gokhale's personal story is typical of the intellectual classes of the colonized countries because he too "through Western education [...] became increasingly acquainted with the language of the 'universal' rights of liberalism" (: 34). In fact, liberal ideals had a critical value towards colonial domination, and offered "an effective ammunition for shooting at the political inconsistency of the British rulers and the perfect language to frame discourses of political and civil rights" (: 56).

The faith in liberal principles also helps to understand the Indian leader's idea of a nation. Gokhale developed a voluntaristic idea of nation, a conception where conscious and wilful factors have a preponderant role. In his opinion, "national self-determination revolved around the subjective will to become members of the national community and contribute to its welfare." A claim, notes Valdameri, only "apparently tautological," because it presupposes "a programme of political education as well as social and economic maturation" (: 81). In this programme a key role was reserved to the educated classes of the Indian society, which had the task of guiding the people.

According to Gokhale, the birth of a new nation "did not mean dividing humankind along exclusionary national lines." Rather, "the emancipation from oppressive social and political structures was the highest duty of a nation" and, at the same time, an endowment "to the progress of Humanity" (: 82). In the conception of the Indian leader, a free India would be "only a *tessera* of a global mosaic of free nations" (: 233). Rather appropriately, Valdameri draws a parallel in this regard with the idea of nation developed by Giuseppe Mazzini, with its similar view of the emancipation of oppressed nationalities.

In Gokhale's national vision, historical and cultural factors had an accessory function. Obviously, India had a cultural background of her own, but this "was a pre-political factor that provided the national project with a sense of destiny and continuity with a shared past" (: 79). The significance of Indian historical identity was in first instance useful to the political struggle, because it questioned the British pretension "that India lacked any common cultural traits" (: 79). At the same time, it was an appropriate response to the "more radical nationalists who saw liberal principles as being shallowly universal and therefore as jeopardising the national particularity" (: 79). Under this angle, we can say

that Gokhale's so called moderatism was strictly connected with his pro-Western attitude. He believed that the Indian nation "could be empowered by adapting and using Western-based knowledge" (: 142). This was a stance that placed him at the antipodes of the extremists, like Tilak, who considered with suspect Western influences, which, in their opinion, could jeopardize what they considered the traditional identity of India. Summing up, we can say that, for the extremists, Indian national identity was "rooted in an idealized past," whereas for the moderate Gokhale it was "something to be built in the future" (: 106).

The more distinctive character of the national vision of Gokhale, nonetheless, was its relationship with British rule. The possibility to give birth to the Indian nation, a nation that was still in the making, had been created by an external agency. In Gokhale's opinion, India had always existed only as a geographical entity, but "had become for the first time a political unity, thanks to administrative unification under the British rule" (: 77). British domination was a decisive turning point in the history of the sub-continent, opening the path to become, in due time, a nation. It would not be fair to understand this last feature of Gokhale's idea of nation as a sign of a cultural dependence on the British occupier. Rather, it was only a realistic acknowledgment of a historical circumstance, which could also turn in favour of the dominated. So much so that the idea of the relevance of the British connection for the future of India would remain, albeit in indirect form, even in a subsequent phase of the independence struggle. A few decades later, the Gandhi-led Indian National Congress, conducting the mass campaigns of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, would nonetheless never neglect to make use of the representative institutes created by the British. An attitude that recognized in the political practice what Gokhale had theorized at his time, namely that the nation in the making was intrinsically connected with the British Empire.

Nevertheless, in Gokhale's opinion, the British influence wasn't something to be received passively; on the contrary, it required an effort of adjustment and improvement on the part of the Indian society. Accordingly, it was necessary to promote not only a transfer of power but, above all, "a radical social transformation against the perceived wrongs and weaknesses of Indian society" (: 193). A transformation that "should be carried out on top-down social policies as well as bottom-up activities of non-state associations" (: 193). With this end in sight, Gokhale created the Servants of India Society. The association was not a mass organism; rather it was a very selective sort of lay monastic order. In Gokhale's opinion, it was necessary above all to ensure rigorous standards to carry out effective action. In short, it was a question of creating an efficient and rigorously structured association that could generate imitators.

The emphasis on self-improvement was intended in first instance for the educated Indians. In this sector of the Indian society, it was necessary to promote the renunciation of “worldly well-being.” Rather, its guiding light ought to become “personal desires for the common good.” In turn, the pursuit of the common good “was presented as an opportunity to demonstrate Indian moral and cultural superiority over the colonial rulers” and, at same time, “the capability – denied by the colonial critique of Indian society – to generate a social ethic that enabled public action” (: 86). Limited to a tiny section of Indian society, over time this effort at self-improvement would reverberate on the whole of Indian society.

The necessity to improve Indian society was a *sine qua non* in deserving self-government. In Gokhale’s own words: “the people of India, having been brought up on Western knowledge, would in course of time demand European institutions in the government of the country” (: 88).

The admiration that Gokhale had for the British constitution – another remarkable element of his political *Weltanschauung* – was not exclusive of the Indian leader but a widespread attitude on the part of many other non-British political leaders of the time. We can find a similar attitude, a few decades earlier, in personalities so different like the Italian Camillo Benso of Cavour and the French François Guizot. The particularity of Gokhale is the fact that, in his case, Anglophilia was a problematic by-product of the colonial relationship. We say problematic because the relationship with the colonial power was twofold. On the one hand India was indebted to the British domination that had inspired and fostered the birth of a national feeling in the sub-continent; on the other, British domination was perceived as an obstacle to the full development of the nation. This ambiguous situation, intellectual and existential, is the ultimate, defining feature of Gopal Krishna Gokhale’s personality. The merit of Elena Valdameri’s book is to have reconstructed it in all its complex and fascinating nuances.

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