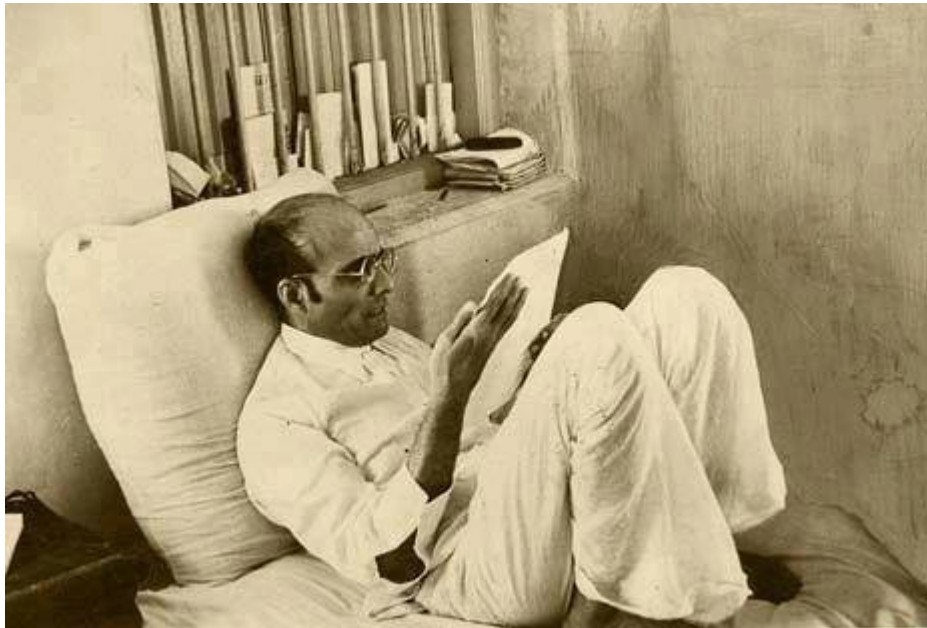


Deconstructing Savarkar: Hindutva as a history

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By Anwesh Satpathy

Though Vinayak Damodar Savarkar has been a figure to reckon with through much of independent India's history, his ideas have mostly been treated as being part of a fringe. A radical change in India's political discourse has occurred with the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s through the Ayodhya movement that led to the demolition of the fifteenth century Babri Mosque and more recently through Narendra Modi's election as India's Prime Minister. It is no longer feasible to ignore Savarkar's ideas. As the father of Hindutva, he represents an idea of India radically different from and in direct contrast with the pluralistic Nehruvian idea that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of independence. In retrospect, Savarkar's conceptualization of Hindutva as a history of violence deserves critical attention.

The phantom of Savarkar

As a figure, Savarkar has always lingered in the shadows in post-independent India. His stature in pre-independent India was unquestionable. After his release from prison and the lifting of restrictions on his movement, he was welcomed by major leaders of the Congress including Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Bose and C Rajagopalachari. Manabendra Nath Roy, revolutionary and the founder of the Communist Party of India, took part in public receptions in celebration. Setting aside disagreements of political ideologies, Roy was quite explicit about the fact that Savarkar exerted a huge influence on him. Savarkar considered the goal of equality of Hindus to be compatible with socialism. Roy dressed up in traditional Bengali style while meeting Savarkar and stated, "I am going to pay my

respects to Veer Savarkar and I thought I should do it in the fittest manner possible. I am sure the old man will be pleased to see me dressed as a full-fledged Indian rather than a Westernised revolutionary.”

Roy was not alone among the left leaning revolutionaries who admired Savarkar. The anarchist M. P. T. Acharya, who stayed in the same student residence as Savarkar while in London, later wrote about his personal charisma even among ideological opponents and considered his book on 1857 to be a seminal contribution to the Indian national movement. The revolutionary socialist Bhagat Singh too considered Savarkar to be an influence, distributing his biography among his followers while quoting from his books in his prison notebooks.

In recent years, this swift in Savarkar’s legacy has been noted by Vinayak Chaturvedi and G.P. Deshpande. The assassination of Gandhi altered the perception of Savarkar for years to come. He was among the 8 who were persecuted for the conspiracy to murder Gandhi. Though he was acquitted by the court, the murderer Nathuram Godse made no secret of the fact that Savarkar was his ideological mentor. According to Godse, the ideology of Savarkar and Gandhi has contributed “more to mould the thought and action of modern India” than any other single factor. The murder of the father of nation was justified as he had “failed in his paternal duty” to prevent partition. Implicit in Godse’s statement to the court is the idea of Savarkar as the rightful father of the nation. The political psychologist Ashish Nandy refers to Savarkar as the “disowned father of the nation”, owing to his marginalization in the aftermath of Gandhi’s assassination.

The problem with categorization

D. Savarkar as a historical figure and intellectual has been inconvenient for both Indian nationalist and global intellectual history. Nationalist history considers Savarkar to be anathema to the very idea of India that figures like Nehru and Gandhi fought for. Thus, he is put in the basket of figures to be condemned and ignored. Placing Savarkar in the larger international historical discourse is also rather difficult. Though Savarkar was certainly inspired by Italian nationalists like Garibaldi and Mazzini, he fused their ideas into the local idiom particular to Indian context. Moreover, Savarkar cannot be reduced to merely being an Indian version of Mazzini. The differences between the two has been noted by Janaki Bakhle. Mazzini was a deeply devout and religious man. Savarkar’s relationship with orthodox Hinduism was unstable at best. According to him, the Hindu tendency to elevate an “animal that eats garbage and indiscriminately passes excreta anywhere and everywhere to the status of a goddess is insulting to both humanity as well as divinity.” Despite his support for women’s education, staunch opposition to caste system and campaigns of inter-dining, temple entry of untouchables, intermarriage and critique of orthodox Hinduism, Savarkar cannot be called a “progressive” in the mould of other Indian nationalists like Bhagat Singh and Ambedkar. For similar reasons, he cannot also be put in the category of traditionalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Instead, he operated in his own teleology while being inspired from both European and non-indigenous sources. He was not a derivative thinker but a part of both global and Indian history.

Mazzini and “history in full”

The Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini inspired Savarkar both as a writer of history and as a revolutionary. Savarkar translated some of Mazzini’s writings in Marathi. His intention was to emphasize that people should follow Mazzini’s example by carrying out “armed revolution in India.” The key argument in Mazzini’s work as identified by Savarkar is the claim that there was no antagonism between politics and religion. While history is traditionally understood as a battle between the enslaved and conqueror, Savarkar conceptualized revolutionary violence as not only necessary but virtuous. Heaven, according to Savarkar, was open only to those who did their God-ordained duty of offering themselves for the cause of motherland. Thus, Italy’s revolution was a “holy war of independence.”

Chaturvedi identifies Savarkar’s use of the word “tattva” in his translation of Mazzini for the English word “principle”. While Savarkar also uses the word “siddhant”, which is a closer translation, he uses “tattva” with greater frequency. For Savarkar, the principles of revolution were defined by the “essence (tattva) of revolution.” According to Mazzini, all revolutions have a fundamental principle. It is this fundamental principle as represented by the motive of the individuals participating in the revolution which helps us distinguish between the wicked and the good. Without this principle, there would be no difference between “Alexander’s empire building war” and “Italy’s fight for liberty under Garibaldi”. Thus, Savarkar’s history of the 1857 war of independence was written as a “history in full” through the tracing of the revolution to its source or the motive. This theme, along with violence, remained constant throughout his later works.

In his book on 1857, Savarkar celebrated the killing of English men, women and children by arguing that it was justifiable vengeance against British cruelty. As he writes, “Revolt, bloodshed and revenge have often been instruments created by nature to root out injustice and introduce an era of justice.” It was not enough to merely engage in revolutionary violence. In fact, Savarkar complained that Indians had not killed the alien Englishmen “savagely enough.”

Hindutva as History

Savarkar’s *Essentials of Hindutva* was written as a reaction to the Khilafat movement. Christophe Jaffrelot has noted that Hindu nationalism from its earliest incarnations in the nineteenth century has always started as a reaction to the “other”. In his mercy petition written before the *Essentials of Hindutva*, Savarkar claims that he’s willing to abide by constitutional methods as the danger that is “threatening the country from the north” is from “fanatic hordes of Asia who had been the curse of India in the past when they came as foes and who are more likely to be so in the future now that they want to come as friends.” This marks a shift in his identification of the “other” as Muslims instead of the British.

“Hindutva,” writes Savarkar, “is not a word but a history.” The meaning of the term cannot be understood through a clear definition. A proper comprehension of Hindutva requires one to read history through an all-encompassing singular lens, i.e., “a history in full.”

Savarkar does provide a definition of a Hindu, i.e., one who looks at India as their fatherland, motherland and holy land. Under this definition, Muslims, Christians and Jews are excluded since their holy lands lie outside India. Nevertheless, we can only grasp Hindutva by looking at Savarkar’s attempt to write Hindu history.

Though Savarkar continues to be celebrated as an anti-imperialist in India, it is interesting that he admired England’s skill and might which allowed her to stretch through oceans and continents to “snatch Indian empire from our struggling hand.” He hopes for the return of the glorious Hindu empire, peculiarly with a reference to Mary with frankincense. His definition of “Hindu” encompassed those who choose to colonize and reside in different countries as the crucial element was recognition of India as “holyland”. He wanted Hindu “colonists” to found a Greater India or a Mahabharata in order to “contribute all that is best in our civilization to the up building of humanity.” This is crucial as Savarkar, unlike contemporary Hindu nationalists, accepted Aryan Invasion Theory. According to him, Aryans “reclaimed the vast, waste but very thinly populated land” and converted it into one where “agricultural flourished, cities rose and kingdom thrived.” It was the “human hand of the Aryans” which changed “the whole face of wild and unkempt nature.” Hindutva reached its geographical limit when the Hindu deity Ramachandra, the prince of Ayodhya, invaded Ceylon and “brought the whole land from the Himalayas to the sea under one sovereign sway.” Through this act, the Aryans and non-Aryans were knitted together as a people to form the nation. For Savarkar, this was the national day and the real birthday of Hindu people.

Savarkar was wary of extra-territorial loyalties of those he deemed as non-Hindus. He argued that Mecca was a sterner reality for Muslims than Delhi. Giving the example of the Jews, he argued that the Jews would sympathize with the Jewish state in the case of war between the Jewish state and their adopted country. He treated this as a fact to be accepted, supporting the creation of a Jewish state.

The “history in full” of the Hindus, which can be considered as Savarkar’s last magnum opus, is his 1963 book *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*. Though Christian, Jews and Parsis were not included in Savarkar’s definition of Hindu, he did not look up to them with the same amount of hostility as he did to the Muslims. Parsis were considered to be akin to Hindus “in terms of race, religion, language and culture.” He considered Jews to be well integrated with the Hindus while viewing Christians as a minority that were “linguistically and culturally aligned with the Hindus.” Muslims, Savarkar argued, divided land into Enemy land (Dar-ul-Harb) and Muslim land (Dar-ul-Islam). Their primary aim in enemy land, i.e., land of the non-Muslim, was to convert its population into Islam and establish Muslim power.

To read Savarkar's book through a historian's lens would be to go against the very purpose of the book. Savarkar explicitly mentions that he is not interested in writing a detailed history. His intention, instead, is to ignore the "extensive but chaotic mass of details" and focus on the essence. In other words, a history in full.

Savarkar's history starts during the Buddhist era. He rejects the Puranas as history due to lack of evidence while recognizing their symbolic importance. The Buddhists are considered to be the enemy of Hindutva. Lamenting Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism and decrees prohibiting the killing, he posits a counterfactual that had Ashoka become a monk instead of retaining political power, India would have avoided a great calamity, namely that of non-violence. He treated Buddhism as not only an internal enemy but as anti-national. Nevertheless, Buddhism was an enemy of the past. This shows the flexibility of enemies that Savarkar's history permitted under changing context.

To identify invaders, Savarkar uses the term "parakka" (different) and "Mleccha" (derogatory, enemy). Only the Muslims are treated constantly as Mleccha as they never assimilated or belonged to Hindustan. Each glorious epoch is cast as a violent conflict between a Hindu Hero and a non-Hindu "invader". His purpose is to celebrate Hindu achievements in direct opposition to the other. Savarkar advocates the use of violence against proponents of non-violence by giving the example of Pushyamitra beheading the Buddhist emperor Brihadrath Maurya. It was permissible, even necessary, to kill non-violence which emasculates human beings with weakness through cruel violence. For Savarkar, this allowed the free development of human virtues. Violence was not just permitted but treated as a righteous moral duty in Savarkar's work. It is no wonder then that one of his close disciples was the murderer of the pacifist Gandhi.

Savarkar identified the period of Muslim invasions as particularly different since it was religious in nature. The Muslims looted Hindu territories, kidnapped Hindu children, raped Hindu women and destroyed Hindu temples. With each new invasion, violence multiplied. When the Hindus inflicted cruelty, it was as a vengeance and justified. Since the goal of Islam and Christian was to "destroy most cruelly the Hindu religion", Savarkar prescribed "super-savage cruelty" against the perceived enemies of Hindustan.

Contradictions in Hindutva

Savarkar was never clear about what the Hindu nation would look like and the policies that the Hindu state would follow. Would it be a theological state? As we've discussed before, Savarkar had no time for theology or traditionalism. He supported universal adult franchise and advocated for the Indian state to be purely Indian without making any distinction on the grounds of race and religion. At the same time, he argued that Hindus and Muslims are two different nations with "centuries of a cultural, religious and national antagonism." He did not want non-Hindu minorities to even have a "ghost of suspicion" as their "legitimate right" to "religion, culture and language" will be expressly guaranteed. The promise to guarantee equal rights to minorities while asserting the existence of two nations is perplexing. In Savarkar's scheme, the nation must be Hindu and its language Hindi. The Muslim nation must exist in a perpetual state of subordination. While the idea

of a homogenous nation state is not novel, the proposal of two opposing nations to exist under one state is unique to Savarkar. The Dalit leader B R Ambedkar points out that Savarkar's scheme of one nation dominating over the other will give Hindus "an empire over the Muslims and thereby satisfy their vanity and their pride in being an imperial race." This is perhaps the clearest articulation of the Hindu nation evident through his chronicles of Hindutva as history.

Conclusion

Savarkar's quest for the history in full for Hindus was a quest for a history of violence. Shruti Kapila's considers Hindutva to be "a theory of violence in search of its own history." Savarkar's history remained incomplete because it was never intended to be a complete history. He knew there were more pages to be filled. He knew the war will continue after his death. Thus, there cannot be unity between Hindus and Muslims because one has to be a slave and the other master. In Savarkar's words: "Even if the Muhammadans stretched out a hand of peace, it would have been an act of condescension and not of friendship, and the Hindus could not have honourably grasped it with fervour and sincerity and confidence which a sense of equality alone breed." For Hindu nationalists, a permanent state of war between the two communities will continue till the other is subjugated.

Bio:

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