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Veer Savarkar: A Nationalist Historian

Laishram Ashok Singh

Ph.D., Centre for Political Studies, JNU, India

* Corresponding Author: **Laishram Ashok Singh**

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Abstract

Veer Savarkar's political actions and writings reflect his uncompromising desire for building India into a strong nation-state. He, of course, cherished this ideal of building India into a nation-state throughout his life. However, the nature of his idea of nation and the ideology of nationalism changed over times. Even while his nationalist philosophy evolves throughout time, one aspect of his nationalist worldview remains constant. Savarkar chose history as an important site for constructing his nationalist ideology. This essay tries to understand the importance of history in his nationalist ideology by close reading some of his key texts. Savarkar emphatically argued that a nation must know its own history, if the nation wanted to have a strong and formidable present and future. However, he sternly cautioned that while knowing its own past was crucial, the nation should not allow the past to determine its present state-of-affairs. Rather, Savarkar believed that the nation must have the capability to use its past for the future advancement of the nation.

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1. Introduction

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) was an ardent believer in the modern ideas of nation, nation-state, nationality, nationalism. He believed that the main reason for Europe's superiority over other nations in the world was solely due to its advancement in the field of nation-building and state-formation. He therefore considered India's destiny depended on its ability to develop into a "nation" backed up by a strong, centralized state. Savarkar is a testimony to the power of the global culture of nationalism and nation-state system as no part of the world is left untouched and unreached by nationalist ardor. Savarkar's political actions and writings reflect his uncompromising desire for building India into a strong nation-state. He, of course, cherished this ideal of building India into a nation-state throughout his life. However, the nature of his idea of nation and the ideology of nationalism changed over times. He began as an exponent of a united Indian nation both for Hindus and Muslims cutting across the religious lines. Later on, he turned into a principal ideologue of Hindu nationalism.

Savarkar began his public career as a revolutionary freedom fighter who pioneered the idea that "national armed revolt" was the only ultimate means to achieve political independence from the British political domination. He started his revolutionary activities at a very young age. In 1899, at the age of 16, he started a secret revolutionary organisation, *Mitra Mela* that subsequently changed its name to *Abhinav Bharat*. He also took part in several other political activities including organizing Shivaji utsav. In England, he founded one more anti-imperialist organization, the *Free India Society*. While he was in London, he searched for bombs and received training for using them during the freedom struggle. By that time, he talked about an inclusive, anti-imperialist Indian nationalism that would allow Hindus, Muslims and others Indian communities who fought in the national war for independence against the British to join the Indian Nation. His masterpiece, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* (used hereafter as *IWI, 1857*), which was first published in 1908 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Sepoy Mutiny, was a vivid reflection of his idea of nation and the nationalism of his revolutionary era. In fact, Savarkar's sole purpose for writing this book was to spread the political message to Hindus and Muslims in India that they should launch a united armed

revolution against the powerful British Empire to attain political independence and to save their country and religion. In *IWI, 1857*, he described the historical event of 1857 as a secret national armed revolt against the oppressive British imperialism in order to establish *Swadharma* and *Swaraj*. He condemned those English Historians (and Indian Historians too) and called them fools and knaves who oversimplified the history of 1857 merely as a “Sepoy Mutiny” caused by ‘the rumour to the greased cartridges’ or due to ‘the annexation of Oudh’. For Savarkar, it was clearly an Indian war of Independence as clearly indicated by his choice of the title of the book itself.

More significant than anything else, he ardently declared that Hindus-Muslims animosity as stupid and unreasonable and forcefully urged that they (Hindus and Muslims) must relegate their animosity as a matter of past. He contended that Hindus and Muslims were children of the same mother were blood bothers. So, he prompted them to jointly fight for India’s independence. The following extract from the book, *IWI, 1857* will make the above points more clear:

...after a struggle of centuries, Hindu sovereignty had defeated the ruler-ship of the Mahomedans and had come to its own all over India. It was no national shame to join hands with Mahomedans then, but it would, on the contrary, be an act of generosity. So, now, antagonism between the Hindus and the Mahomedans might be consigned to the Past. Their present relation was one not of rulers and ruled, foreign and native, but simply that of brothers, with the one difference...of religion alone. For, they were both children of the soil of the Hindusthan... they were all children of the same mother; India therefore being the common mother of these two, they were brothers by blood... their enmity, now so unreasonable and stupid... the Hindus and the Mahomedans should unite and fight shoulder to shoulder for the independence of their country and that, when freedom was gained, the United States of India should be formed under the Indian rulers and princes....¹

From the above quotation, it is clear that Hindus and Muslims, according to Savarkar, could together form a nation. And hence the responsibility of freeing India from the British colonial yoke was not only for the Hindus but Muslims also should share equal responsibility in this national struggle for independence.

He argued that Muslims by fighting alongside the Hindus could be considered as true patriots and loyal Indian nationalists. He not only openly recognized “Hindus and Muslim faiths as the two principal religions of India” but also claimed that independent Hindusthan would be “the united nation of the adherents of Islam as well as Hinduism”. In the book, he sang similar praises for many Muslim leaders and masses viz. Moulvie Ahmad Shah, Azimullah Khan, Vizir Ali Nakkhi Khan and many others along with the Hindus. In the introduction of *IWI, 1857* he also said that even if hatred against the Mohamedans was just and necessary during Shivaji’s times but it would be unjust and foolish to cherish such feeling of mutual hatred by the Hindus and Muslims of his times.

What is important to be noted here is that even though

Savarkar talked about Hindu-Muslim unity he saw Muslims as foreign invaders. It is clearly seen from the text quoted above that Savarkar considered Hindu’s act of joining hands with Muslims in the national war of independence as an “act of generosity” that happened only after “Hindus defeated Muslim ruler-ship”. His notions of Muslims were foreign invaders and Hindus were autochthonous Indians remains unchanged as his understanding of Indian history throughout his life. However, this understanding of Indian history and his earlier record of involvement in the vandalization of a village mosque by way of taking revenge against the Muslims did not stop him from recognizing Muslims as fellow countrymen.

Although Savarkar’s desire for building India into a strong nation-state was present throughout his life, there was a significant change in Savarkar’s idea of the “nation” after he was released from the Andaman Cellular jail in 1922. He, to some extent, rejected his ideology of an anti-imperialist inclusive Indian nationalism as expressed in the *IWI, 1857* and began to expound Hindu nationalism in his later political writings. His book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (which he wrote in Ratnagiri jail and published in 1923) marked the beginning of this ideological shift in Savarkar’s ideology of nationalism. Since then, he deliberately remained silent about his previous theme of Hindu-Muslim unity throughout his life.

There is no satisfactory explanation for Savarkar’s ideological shift towards idea of Hindu nationalism. One plausible explanation, as pointed out by the authors of the book *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, could be the intense communalization of the Indian politics in the mid 1920s due to the Khilafat and Non-Corporation movements and the rapid increase in the number of Hindu-Muslim communal riots in its wake.² Drawing from G. Pandey, Christopher Jaffrelot also argued that Hindu nationalism as an ideology emerged in the mid 1920s within the context of “a threatening level of Muslim organization, preparedness and militancy”.³ Besides the larger political context, Savarkar’s own perceptions of both Muslims and Islam also deserve sufficient attention in understanding his idea of Hindu nation. Some observers point out that Savarkar’s antipathy towards Muslims was the result of cruel and inhumane treatments shown by the Muslim Pathans who worked as the prison guards in the Cellular jail.

Savarkar emphatically argued that a nation must know its own history, if the nation wanted to have a strong and formidable present and future. However, he sternly cautioned that while knowing its own past was crucial, the nation should not allow the past to determine its present state-of-affairs. Rather, Savarkar believed that the nation must have the capability to use its past for the future advancement of the nation. The following paragraph will throw light on Savarkar’s perception of the connection between a nation and its history:

...The nation that has no consciousness of its past has no future. Equally true it is that a nation must develop its capacity not only of claiming a past but also of knowing

¹ V.D. Savarkar, *The Indian war of Independence, 1857*, Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, 2007 (Vol.1), First Edition, p. 72.

² Tapan Basu, et.al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1993, p. 9- 10.

³ Quoted by Christopher Jaffrelot from G.Pandey’s *Who of us are Hindu?* in his book *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics (1925 to 1990s): Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with reference to Central India)*, Hurst & Company, London, 1966, p. 25.

how to use it for the furtherance or its future. The nation ought to be the master and not the slave of its own history...⁴

He lamented that English historians had misrepresented the history of the Hindu nation. As a result, one of constantly recurring themes in all of the historical writings of V.D. Savarkar was the idea that English historians, particularly during British colonialism, deliberately and purposefully wrote many perverted accounts of Indian history. Furthermore, he rightly blamed the British colonial administration for promoting those history books, written by the British writers, as textbooks for everyday instructions to Indian students in Indian educational institutions in those days. Hence, a few generations of Indian students were taught of a perverted idea of India's past, such as: 'India as a nation has always been under some foreign Rule', 'Indian history is an unbroken chain of defeat after defeat of the Hindus', 'History of the Hindus is nothing but the doleful tale of foreign subjugation and national defeats', etc.

In order to counter the false accounts of Indian history propagated by the English historians, Savarkar believed that Hindus themselves had to write their own truthful histories. According to Savarkar, writing history was needed for the Hindus to expose the historical truth objectively and to reclaim their nation honor. It is interesting to note that Savarkar considered writing national history by Hindus themselves as a "national duty". It is undeniably a primary sign of the nationalist consciousness that it will not find its own voice in histories written by foreign rulers and that it will set out to write for itself its own account of its own past.⁵ Savarkar was not unique in this instance. In colonial Bengal, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Bankimchandra had already developed this "nationalist agenda" for asserting a true history for the nation.

Savarkar's objective for writing *The Indian war of Independence, 1857* (hereafter referred to as *IWI, 1857*) was not restricted only to counter the distorted historical accounts produced by the British writers. In the pamphlet, "*O martyrs!*", issued on the 10th of May, 1907, Savarkar not only expressed his deep regard for the Indian Revolutionaries of 1857 but also solemnly pledged to fight for Indian national independence. In another article published in *Talwar*,⁶ Savarkar openly expressed that the objective of writing *IWI, 1857* was to instigate Indian people to start a secret armed revolutionary war against the British colonialism and win national independence. As pointed out by G.M. Joshi in his essay *The Story of this History* (1947), *IWI, 1857* became the source of inspiration and source of guidance for the program of action for many nationally celebrated and deeply regarded future Indian revolutionaries, including Nataji Shubhas Chandra Bose, Shahid Bhagat Singh and many others. Savarkar knew that the history of national heroes who fought for freedom and national independence not only brought a sense of national elevation and national pride but also created a far-reaching "spirit of defiance" in the minds of the readers. Savarkar outlined some principles that a historian should

follow when writing historical accounts. Influenced by Mazzini's idea that every revolution must have a principle, he asserted that historians must try to find out the underlying principles in writing history of any particular past event (especially a revolutionary war) rather than simply describing or narrating the incident. He maintained that comprehending the underlying principle was crucial to appreciate the significance of the revolution in the real light of the history. Only then, one could see the difference between the empire-building wars of Alexander the Great and Italy's fight for liberty under Garibaldi.

According to Savarkar, to trace the fundamental causes of revolution was a historian's responsibility. When tracing the primary underlying reasons of any historical event, historians must be must be cautious and adept in categorizing the causes as direct and indirect, general and particular, accidental and necessary. His argument was that characterizing some accidental factor as the primary cause of the event would never adequately capture the essence of a revolution. Therefore, Savarkar contended that uncovering underlying causes was one of the primary duties of a historian.

Foreword to his book *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi* (used hereafter as *HPP*) is also quite revealing about Savarkar's principles for writing the history of the Hindu Nation. He wrote (in the foreword) that the primary duty of a truthful historian was to depict as faithfully as possible the feelings, motives, emotions and actions of the primary actors of the past event. Moreover, an impartial historian, according to Savarkar, while performing his duty as a historian must neither falsify nor exaggerate the inner motives of the actors of the past just for the sake of avoiding any unwanted consequences of that history in the present times.

Explaining his reason for writing *HPP*, he said he was only exercising his duty as a faithful historian in delineating those periods of Hindu history when the Hindus were waging a cutthroat struggle against the alien Muslim domination for national independence. He reminded both Hindu and Muslim readers of his book that they must not cherish any kind of mutual ill-feelings towards one another after reading this narrative of what he called "Hindu-Muslim epic struggle". He further said that although Hindu-Muslim animosity was justifiable at the times of Shivaji considering the peculiar conditions of those days but at present such feeling of hatred became suicidal. And, he explicitly explained the main objective for reading history as below:

... We ought to read history not with a view to find out the best excuse to perpetuate the old strife and stress and bickering and bloodshed whether in the name of our blessed motherland or of our Lord God that divided men from men and race from race but precisely for the contrary reason of finding out the root causes that contributed to and the best means to the removal of the stress and strife so that man be drawn towards man because he is a man the child of that our common father God and nursed at the breast of this our common mother Earth and wield humanity in a World-Commonwealth...⁷

⁴ Savarkar, V.D., *The Indian War of Independence, SELECTED WORKS OF VEER SAVARKAR, VOL.1*, Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, 2007. P. 13.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, OUP, 1995, p. 77.

⁶ *Talwar* was a periodical of the secret revolutionary organisation the Abhinava Bharat Revolutionary Society. It was published in Paris. Savarkar was also one of the founder members of this organization.

⁷ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi, SELECTED WORKS OF VEER SAVARKAR, VOL.4*, Abhishek

Savarkar endorsed the idea that the dates and places mentioned in all historical texts must be authentic. He stated that historians should properly cite the dates, places and descriptions, by giving proper references from both foreign as well as indigenous sources. Like in any other modern historians, Savarkar adhered to contemporary historiographical norms by using appropriate references and footnotes. The fact that he wrote most of his writings under adverse conditions, such as in prison or under severe censorship of colonial regime, without any proper access to books and library could be one of the reasons for his inconsistency in giving proper references.

2. Conclusion

Savarkar chose history as an important site for constructing his nationalist ideology. Through his historiography he tried on the one hand to establish the timeless existence of the Hindu nation and on the other hand a sanguinary relationship between the Vedic Aryan forefathers and the Hindus of the present times. Narrating histories in the manner of portraying Hindus as the only „true patriots“, he supported his claim that Hindu nationalism was the only genuine and authentic Indian nationalism by his Hindu nationalist historiography. History for Savarkar was important not only for the point of view of claiming a history for the Hindu nation but also to draw moral lessons which were essential in transforming the Hindus and the nation. By writing history of the Hindu nation, he tried with a firm determination to prove that India became subservient to foreign rule only when India adopted total non-violence and other perverse religious virtues without considering its harmful effects on the national existence.

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