THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

February 27, 2023

History in the Service of Hindutva

By: Srinath Raghavan

For Savarkar, history was a critical tool in a war to protect the Hindu nation. A new book examines the relationship between history and politics in Savarkar's thought and braids together the past and the present.

Some years before his passing in 1966, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar wrote an essay titled "How Hindu organisers should read and write their national history." Savarkar explained that he had long intended to write this essay, but political work had taken precedence. Now, in the evening of his life, he wanted to leave an intellectual testament for Hindu political leaders and publicists who would carry on his unfinished work. The essay reprised Savarkar's old ideas and hammered home his central message: Hindus were engaged in a war to protect the Hindu nation. "One of our main tools in this struggle", he emphasised, "is *itihaas* [history]."

At this time, Savarkar was ostracised by the mainstream of Indian politics. The assassination of Mohandas K. Gandhi by a follower of Savarkar and his own indictment in the trial had placed him beyond the pale for most Indians. This was a remarkable downturn in the public standing of a figure, who had once elicited admiration across the political spectrum – despite sharp ideological differences – for his early career as an anti-imperialist revolutionary. Six decades on, there has been an equally extraordinary apotheosis of Savarkar: his ideology of Hindu nationalism is now enthroned in the republic.

Savarkar's reminder of the principal weapon in this struggle continues to resonate among the faithful. Historians are exhorted, from the highest offices in the land, to rewrite history and show how the Hindu nation strived valiantly to protect itself from assaults of assorted Muslim 'invaders'. As Home Minister Amit Shah recently put it, "We will work towards reviving India's glorious history." As if on cue, the Indian Council of Historical Research has announced a multi-volume project in which "everything about India will be rewritten."

> [Chaturvedi] focuses on a crucial aspect of Savarkar's thought: the relationship between history and politics in his conception of Hindu nationalism.

Against this backdrop, the publication of Vinayak Chaturvedi's *Hindutva and Violence* could not be timelier. Savarkar has lately drawn the attention of scholars and biographers. Political theorists and intellectual historians too have started taking his work more seriously. Yet, there has been little sustained interrogation of the conceptual and historical dimensions of his thought and writings. Chaturvedi's account is neither an intellectual biography nor a comprehensive theoretical account of Savarkar's ideas. Rather, he focuses on a crucial aspect of Savarkar's thought: the relationship between history and politics in his conception of Hindu nationalism.

The urgent contemporary salience of this issue apart, Chaturvedi's work is an outstanding contribution to the emerging scholarship on modern Indian thought. The author of an important book on the social and cultural history of the Gujarat peasantry in the colonial era, he brings to this subject the much-needed rigour and scrupulousness of the historian.

The principles of history

No admirer of Savarkar's politics, Chaturvedi refuses to partake of the squeamishness and condescension of many scholars when confronted with his subject. As he forthrightly puts it, "There is often an assumption that reading Savarkar at all is an expression of political sympathy with his ideas […] Needless to say, it is a point I reject. For many who oppose Hindutva, the subject of Savarkar is itself a problem, let alone the assertion that he was an intellectual: the impulse to dismiss his ideas because of hostility to his political allegiances is strong." Chaturvedi's interest in Savarkar stems from an unlit corner of his own life. He was named 'Vinayak' after Savarkar by his childhood physician, Dr D.S. Parchure – a man who was also indicted in Gandhi's murder trial for allegedly supplying the weapon to the assassin Nathuram Godse. While he explicitly turns to this in an arresting Coda, the book subtly braids together the intellectual and the personal, the past and the present.

> A key theme in Savarkar's writings over subsequent decades [was] the idea of a permanent war in India to rid the country of "foreigners".

The book is divided into four chronological parts, each of which considers key texts and concepts in Savarkar's oeuvre at a given time and place. Although Savarkar is best known for his *Essentials of Hindutva* (1923), Chaturvedi goes behind and beyond this book. He begins with Savarkar's writings during his years in London (1906-1910) on the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini and the great rebellion of 1857. Mazzini was, of course, a well-known figure in the liberal and incipient nationalist circles in India. But in translating and interpreting Mazzini's writings for a Marathi readership, Savarkar wanted the people of Maharashtra "to follow the revolutionary path of Mazzini." In particular, he underlined Mazzini's claim that there was no "antagonism between politics and religion." Indeed, "politics is a God-ordained duty". By the same token, "The intervention of politics in religion is necessary. In fact, to do so is a religious duty." This was, according to Savarkar, the central principle animating Mazzini's life and work.

Chaturvedi argues that this quest after motivating principles – *tattva* – is the master-key to unlocking Savarkar's own approach to writing history. In his *The Indian War of Independence of 1857* Savarkar claimed that "to write a full history […] means necessarily the tracing of all events […] back to their sources – the motive." This motive must, in turn, be traced as the "innermost desire" of key actors in history – exemplary figures who formed the revolutionary vanguard of the "people". In May 1908, Savarkar wrote and circulated a short pamphlet titled "Oh Martyrs" to celebrate the 1857 rebellion against British rule. The eponymous martyrs were part of a "pious struggle" and a "grand unity" – one that brought together Hindus and Muslims, upper and lower castes in a revolutionary war that needed to be resumed: "Your blood, oh Martyrs, shall be avenged." Notwithstanding its overwrought style, the pamphlet adumbrated a key theme in Savarkar's writings over subsequent decades: the idea of a permanent war in India to rid the country of "foreigners".

> Savarkar stood in the front-ranks of generations of anticolonial thinkers who regarded historiography as a central terrain in the struggle to expropriate the expropriators.

This theme was further expounded in *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*. Chaturvedi teases out important and overlooked aspects of Savarkar's historical method in writing this text. In reclassifying 1857 as a "war of independence" or "revolutionary war," rather than a "Sepoy mutiny," Savarkar sought discursively to rupture the historiography of the subject dominated by colonialist knowledge. Further, he was a precocious reader of the colonial archive 'against the grain' and espoused the importance of recording oral history of ordinary people pulled into the ruck of the rebellion. In these and in his overall insistence on the importance of history for revolutionary politics, Savarkar stood in the front-ranks of generations of anticolonial thinkers who regarded historiography as a central terrain in the struggle to expropriate the expropriators.

Then again, Savarkar was no enemy of empires per se. In his writings in the 1920s – especially *Hindu Pad Padshahi* (1925) – he held that the Hindu nation was the product of a violent colonization of the land by Hindus and the consequent establishment of a Hindu empire. This glorious imperial epoch had, alas, slipped under the domination of the Islamic and British empires. Then too, the Marathas under Shivaji Bhonsle had built the "most glorious of our Hindu Empires" – one that should inspire Hindus to fight for a new empire. In *Essentials of Hindutva*, he made the case for what Chaturvedi aptly describes as "an idealised and imagined and unified Hindu nation of Hindus, marking a territory that was finally conquered by Hindus, and holy place in the world meant only for Hindus." For Savarkar, violence was constitutive of *Hindutva*. Hence, his belief that Buddhism – and other non-violent creeds – posed an existential danger to the Hindu nation.

Conceptualising Hindutva

The term *Hindutva* was not, of course, of Savarkar's coining. But he was first to offer a conceptual history. In so doing, he repurposed a range of Orientalist scholarship on India. In particular, he rejected the Orientalists' claim that Hinduism was merely the religion of the Hindus as well as their refusal to treat Hindu epics and Puranas as "records of our people". As Chaturvedi cattily observes, "this allowed him to conceptualise Hindutva free from the constraints of Oriental research, and perhaps all research." Savarkar was also fiercely sceptical of the knowledge-power nexus embodied in such colonial practices as the census, underscoring the constructed nature of its categories of caste and tribe – all deeply detrimental to the unity of his cherished Hindu nation.

Indeed, Savarkar was alive to plasticity of some of his own concepts. Thus, he famously wrote that Hindus were united by "the bonds of a common blood." His analysis of blood appeared to dismiss any claim for purity of blood (and race). Indeed, all blood was necessarily tainted, for "Sexual attraction has proved to be more powerful than all the commands of the prophets". Even so, it was important for the Hindu nation to *emotionally feel* that its blood was purer than that of others. He further argued that Buddhists, Jain and Sikhs as well as the low castes, "untouchables," and tribes shared the same blood as the Hindus. What about Hindu converts to

Islam or Christianity? Here Savarkar's invocation of land came handy. The Muslims, in particular, did not consider "Hindusthan" their holy land and hence forfeited their membership of the Hindu nation.

> Ambedkar perceptively noted […] that Savarkar wanted Hindus to establish "an empire over Muslims" in order to create "an imperial race" of Hindus.

Following his return to politics in mid-1930s as president of the Hindu Mahasabha, Savarkar pressed these concepts and claims into wider circulation. In his presidential address of 1937, he stated, "India cannot be assumed today to be a unitarian and homogenous nation, but on the contrary there are two nations in the main: the Hindus and the Moslems, in India." These were, he maintained, "two antagonistic nations living side by side".

Yet, Chaturvedi argues, Savarkar was not exactly anticipating the two-nation theory of Jinnah. Savarkar clarified in subsequent statements that he did not advocate the creation of two states—the demand advanced in the Muslim League's Lahore resolution of 1940. Rather he wanted a single Indian state in which the Hindu nation would "protect" the religion, language and culture of minorities, while robustly thwarting any "aggressive" claims by the latter.

In his address to the Mahasabha in 1938, he said, "we Hindus are a Nation by ourselves. Because religious, racial, cultural and historical affinities bind us intimately into a homogenous nation and added to it we are […] a territorial unity as well." B.R. Ambedkar perceptively noted in *Pakistan or Partition of India* (1940) that Savarkar wanted Hindus to establish "an empire over Muslims" in order to create "an imperial race" of Hindus. (Savarkar, for his part, counted Ambedkar as prominent among "Hindu-haters.") Rammanohar Lohia's verdict was altogether more trenchant:

Those who have shouted loudest of Akhand Bharat [Indivisible India] … did nothing whatever to bring the Muslim close to the Hindu within a single nation. They did almost everything to estrange them from each other […] To espouse the philosophy of estrangement and, at the same time, the concept of undivided India is an act of grievous self-deception, only if we assume that those who do so are honest men […] the coupling of the two concepts of undivided India and Hindu-Muslim estrangement can only reinforce the idea of partition (1960: 7-8).

The consequences of blood and soil

In dealing with these texts as well as other autobiographical writings, Chaturvedi is scrupulously fair-minded. Yet his laser-like focus on Savarkar's writings has at times a distorting effect. Not until the final pages of the book does he acknowledge that Savarkar's writing were part of an emerging historiographic practice to reclaim the past as central to the idea of the modern Indian nation. Apart from such efforts in Bengal and western India, there were others who creatively scrambled Orientalist knowledge for very different ends: think of Phule in the Bombay presidency or Iyothee Thass in Madras and their quest for an emancipatory, anti-caste politics (O'Hanlon 1985, Aloysius 1998, 1999). From this standpoint, Savarkar does not appear as singular a figure as the book may suggest.

> Even as he sought to overthrow colonialist readings, including Mill's dismissal of Hindu civilization, Savarkar remained immured within them.

Nor was Savarkar quite as resistant to the dominant tropes of colonialist historiography. The tripartite division of Indian history into the Hindu, the Islamic and the British ages – central to his reading of Indian history – came straight out of the pages of James Mill. Even as he sought to overthrow colonialist readings, including Mill's dismissal of Hindu civilization, Savarkar remained immured within them.

Some of Chaturvedi's claims about the philosophical import of Savarkar's work are also less than convincing. "Perhaps Savarkar's greatest innovation", he writes, "was to link Hindutva with Being." The rest of his exegesis clearly suggests otherwise:

For him, Hindutva was not the ontological Being; rather in his view Hindutva may best be described as the entity by which Being could be understood [… Hindutva] not only touched Being, it also embraced all that constitutes Being […] But Hindutva is not all that constitutes Being, it is only a part of Being.

At this point, we may well conclude that Savarkar's conceptual framework was rather like a cat's cradle – with a fatal propensity for fudge. Chaturvedi reminds us that there was another contemporaneous thinker grappling with the portentous ideas of *Being and Time*: Martin Heidegger (1927). Yet Heidegger's concepts of historicity and Being are very different in their philosophical import from Savarkar's muddled notions. In such matters, it is invidious to juxtapose minnows and maestros. There may be a broader methodological problem here regarding modern Indian intellectual history. In his study of Blake, E.P. Thompson cautioned against "our tendency to make overly academic assumptions as to his learning and mode of thought" (1993: xiii). This seems salutary advice in studying most modern Indian thinkers too. In Savarkar's case it risks clearing up the whiff of the cordite-scented past that hangs so unmistakeably on his writings.

The real intellectual affinities between Heidegger and Savarkar lay in their shared politics of blood and soil that sank to the sourest depths of bigotry. We have no evidence that they knew of each other, but we do know that Savarkar publicly acclaimed the Nazi annexation of Sudetenland in October 1938. The official Nazi organ, *Völkischer Beobachter*, responded the following month with an admiring profile of Savarkar. The Nazis also translated his book on 1857 into German, apparently to burnish their credentials against the British empire.

The consequences of their shared intellectual filiation were best captured by the great Viennese satirist and writer, Karl Kraus. Describing Heidegger as "the thinker who has made his fabulous blue sky thinking conform to the prevailing brown-shirted trend," Kraus wrote in 1933: "The attachment to a combination of blood and soil, which these unfathomable advocates of violence now eagerly expound, could remind us of another hazard, not philosophical but medical, arising from such a combination: tetanus" (2020: 41–42).

As we ponder the consequences of this for India's body politic, we could do no better than read Vinayak Chaturvedi.

Srinath Raghavan is a historian. The views are personal.

References:

Aloysius, G. (1998) *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among The Tamils under Colonialism*. New Delhi: New Age International.

Aloysius, G. (1999). *Iyotheethasar Sinthanaigal*. 3 volumes. Palayamkottai: Folk Resources and Research Centre, St. Xavier's College.

Kraus, Karl (2020). *The Third Walpurgis Night*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lohia, Rammanohar (1960). *The Guilty Men of India's Partition*. Allahabad: Kitabistan.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind (1985). *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, E.P. (1993). *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. New York: New Press.