

February 10, 2025

Savarkar's Poems, the Sharp Edge of Hindutva

By: Surajkumar Thube

Savarkar's Marathi writings are key to understanding his political thought. His literary work laid the groundwork for his ideas of Hindutva and devastatingly magnified the popularity of his rhetoric.

In 2009, the noted social and cultural critic G.P. Deshpande, in his book *The World of Ideas in Modern Marathi*, explored the growth of social and political thought in modern Marathi through personalities like Jotirao Phule, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, and Vinoba Bhave. Deshpande observed that in the liberal discourse, Savarkar was largely read and understood in English but scarcely in Marathi.

The point was neither symbolic nor illusory. It can be argued that it is well-nigh impossible to understand Savarkar's thought without recourse to his Marathi writings. Even though Savarkar wrote in English and was inspired by the writings of Spencer, Comte, Mill, Darwin, Bentham, and Macaulay, his primary mode of expression was Marathi. His incipient political churning, everyday polemic, and emerging bardic prowess all emerged and were influenced through a wide-ranging corpus of literary genres in Marathi.

|| It is well-nigh impossible to understand Savarkar's thought without recourse to his Marathi writings.

It is therefore astonishing to see how the question of the vernacular was bypassed nonchalantly in the English academia for so long. The Italian writers and revolutionaries Mazzini and Garibaldi – Savarkar's inspirations – wrote and were documented extensively in Italian. Can we imagine European writers, politicians, and litterateurs, amongst others, being studied only in English, at the expense of the vernacular?

This unfortunate trend of overwhelmingly focusing on English archives or on select translations of vernacular works, has continued unabated, into the recent past, especially after a quest to unearth and understand 'right-wing thinkers' in modern India has resurfaced. Barring a few notable exceptions, the overall result, as far as academic output on Savarkar's thought is concerned, has been rather perfunctory and skewed at worse.

Until now. Fifteen years after Deshpande's observation, Savarkar's entire Marathi oeuvre has finally been rigorously consulted and examined in Janaki Bakhle's monumental new book titled *Savarkar: The Making of Hindutva*. Bakhle's focus is Savarkar's Marathi writings and the impact it was supposed to have on his largely upper-caste audience. She scrutinises the multi-faceted 'progressive' image which Savarkar very consciously sought to bequeath to posterity.

Crafting a personality

Savarkar was extremely conscious of his self-image. Hubris was part and parcel of Savarkar's projection of himself as an ace pedagogue, writer, and reformer of Hindu society. He was not a trained historian or a researcher, but was extremely eager for his readers and Hindu society at large to internalise his views and observations in toto.

The blurbs of Bakhle's book describe this multifaceted nature as, "champion of the beleaguered Hindu community, an anti-caste progressive, erudite historian, pioneering advocate for women's dignity, and a patriotic poet." This strategically conceals Bakhle's critical treatment of these adulatory epithets, for she does not use these adjectives to describe the 'truth' of Savarkar. Yet, by engaging with these themes, Bakhle's attempt is to provide a kaleidoscopic view of Savarkar wherein our critical lenses are zoomed out to explore the more intricate aspects of Hindutva's aesthetic expressions instead of regurgitating the more hackneyed tropes of 'Hindutva as a militant political programme'.

|| The colonial government recognised in Savarkar an erudite native writer who could [...] exacerbate the communal rhetoric and sensed an opportunity to make him a useful mouthpiece.

Bakhle begins her account, on a rather counterintuitive yet provocative note, of Savarkar's ascent to political prominence being premised on his shared sense of fear with the British about the rise of global Islam. The British, especially after the revolt of 1857, had started seeing fanaticism, intolerance, sedition, and zealotry as quintessential Muslim characteristics. Similar tropes also fed

into how the British perceived Muslims in the 20th century, with a more global, Khilafatist context.

Bakhle explicitly shows how Savarkar was aware of this global British perception of the Muslims, along with their growing consternation surrounding the incipient forms of swadeshi nationalism. Such propitious circumstances allowed Savarkar to engineer his new political project of Hindutva. In her words, “Savarkar ventriloquized the colonial British fear of Muslims.”

Savarkar was under intense British surveillance right from his school days. Bakhle meticulously documents the police apparatus and intelligence officers tracking Savarkar’s public antics and his relationships with his revolutionary acolytes and colleagues from Bombay to London. This extended character study yielded results: the colonial government recognised in Savarkar an erudite native writer who could, even during his prolonged house arrest, continue to exacerbate the communal rhetoric and sensed an opportunity to make him a useful mouthpiece.

As noted in one of the police files Bakhle consults, Savarkar assured the British that he would be politically useful by cooperating them with warding off the "common danger from the north of Turko-Afghan fanatics." It is perhaps no wonder then, that Savarkar’s articles, editorials, plays and poems that reviled Muslims, Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi, or the leaders of the Khilafat movement, managed to evade proscription. (In contrast, the Bombay government in 1910 had banned ‘Mother India’, a patriotic poem of his written in 1903.)

|| This ‘strategic alignment’ with the colonial government dilutes Savarkar’s much celebratory image of being an ‘anti-colonial revolutionary’.

This intriguing unwritten pact between Savarkar and the colonial officials offers another dimension to the intensely debated question around Savarkar’s clemency appeals. It would not be erroneous to conclude that this ‘strategic alignment’ with the colonial government dilutes Savarkar’s much celebratory image of being an ‘anti-colonial revolutionary’. His recurrent tirades against Gandhi, and the emerging form of mass nationalism that the British were wary of, seamlessly intertwined with his strategic overtures regarding his clemency petitions. For Bakhle, Savarkar’s petitions were a form of political manoeuvring.

The world at home

This global context of the colonial government allows us to understand how Savarkar’s own views on the Muslim community developed around the global issue of the Khilafat movement. For Savarkar, Muslims were a monolithic community. Bakhle argues that Savarkar was not merely sporadically or episodically anti-Muslim, he was deeply and systematically anti-Muslim.

Bakhle explores the development of this thought by providing a synoptic overview the idea of the Khilafat itself. Bakhle notes that even in the Andaman Islands prior to his release, Savarkar spoke of Khilafat as a catastrophe. His Marathi articles and novels dealing with the issue of Khilafat were largely directed towards Hindus to be aware of the purported Muslim antics in Muslim-majority regions like Sindh and what for him were barbaric episodes like the Moplah rebellion of 1921. Bakhle argues that Savarkar’s fear of Muslim sovereignty may not have been about a revival of Muslim suzerainty, but a warning to be vigilant about a surreptitious Muslim takeover.

|| Savarkar was not merely sporadically or episodically anti-Muslim, he was deeply and systematically anti-Muslim.

For Savarkar, Khilafat represented the actual realisation of a prolonged longing for past greatness. Both ordinary and elite Muslims seemed to harbour a profound feeling of membership in the bygone Mughal empire. But they were now a hapless minority in the colonial empire which, as Bakhle notes, had colluded in the abolition of the Khilafat.

Reappropriating this narrative of past greatness from the Muslims was crucial for Savarkar. To realise a golden period of the Hindus, it was necessary to construct Muslims within an idiom of theft: they stole money, they stole Hindu women, and they stole Hindu sovereignty.

The Brahmanical Peshwa rule was Savarkar’s model in his dreams of reviving Hindu sovereignty. Savarkar unequivocally eulogised Peshwa in his 1925 historical work *Hindu-pad-padshahi*. His ‘model regime’ which was essentially supposed to be spearheaded by Marathi Brahmin elites. As is clear, Savarkar’s patriotism was heavily marinated by Brahmin supremacy.

This was not a new affliction. Bakhle quotes the observations of an intelligence officer on Savarkar's trail in 1907: that Savarkar's secret society, the *Mitra Mela*, was zealously driven by "the wiping out, at the cost of life, if necessary, the disgrace resting on Brahmins for ceding their kingdom to others," even as it extolled the virtue of the union of all castes and creeds.

Savarkar's seemingly radical trail of remarks on anti-casteism always ended in a cul-de-sac of Muslim animus. His anti-casteism necessarily had to have an anti-Muslim denouement.

Savarkar indulged in a caste-conscious narration of Muslims perpetrating violence and inflicting torture on Hindus, which started from Brahmins and then moved onto other Hindus. Brahmins were at the top even in the pyramid of jeremiads for Savarkar. These long lists of woes got invoked with a latent sense of alarmism and shock value, almost to vigorously shake and wake up the Hindu community from their deep slumber.

This description of Muslim violence, as Bakhle notes, got amplified by a deft use of Marathi literary devices like alliteration and onomatopoeia. Savarkar also used sarcasm as a tool of insult. By using words like *sadhu* or *dharmaveer* for the Muslim assailant, he insinuate that conversion by rape was a sacred duty for all Muslims. By mocking the sacredness of both the practitioner and the religion, such inflammatory sarcasm sought to redefine and substitute piety by implying violence as being sacred for Islam.

Deflecting the caste question

Savarkar's animus for the Muslim community was also starkly visible in his writings on caste and social reform. Indeed, the present day right-wing rhetoric of ingeniously ignoring caste fault lines by shifting the discourse to inter-religious hatred can be traced to Savarkar's treatment of caste and religion.

For Savarkar, a clarion call for unifying Hindu to oppose Muslims was the only way to leapfrog the vexatious issue of a highly segmented Hindu society. His seemingly radical trail of remarks on anti-casteism always ended in a cul-de-sac of Muslim animus. When he criticised conservative Hindus for clinging on to archaic traditions and the purity-pollution paranoia, his takeaway was that these vices enabled Muslims to convert Hindus. Anti-casteism necessarily had to have an anti-Muslim denouement.

It is no wonder then, as Bakhle notes, that "Savarkar projected himself as a radical caste reformer, but all his writings on caste were also about Muslims." Questions about Muslims were turned into answers about casteism. This strategic obfuscation allowed Savarkar to project caste pride as an enduring system of naivete and stupidity instead of treating it as an enduring system of oppression. It allowed him to observe a strategic silence on the deeper connections of structural oppression of caste based on power, access, and well-being.

Hindutva necessarily becomes a Brahminical project as Savarkar refuses to examine his own Brahmin positionality [...] Dalits played the role of an unreflective footnote to his project, living off Brahmin generosity...

Given this nuance and clarity in Bakhle's overall framework, it is somewhat puzzling to note that she continues to use words like 'radical' and 'caste progressive' while explicating his reformism. Nonetheless, Bakhle categorically argues that by replacing caste (jati) with ethnicity (Hindu), Savarkar's reformism was very much in service of the Brahminical Hindu project. (After all, anti-casteism in service of Hindu sovereignty is Brahminical, because ultimately whose Hinduism are we talking about?)

Savarkar's progressive stand saw him address the issue of untouchability, albeit in the fear induced context of the dwindling numbers of Hindus. Even here, his reformism came with qualifications. For example, Savarkar espoused the opening of public wells and temples for Dalits which would entail them a treatment of "one degree higher than the Mohameddands." Why one degree? And why is there a need to invoke the Muslim community anyway in this context?

In another example, Savarkar extols the virtues of Sanskritised Hindi and proposes it as a lingua franca for the abolition of untouchability. Would the untouchable community approve this variant of Hindi as a marker of equality? It is important in this context to ask 'anti-untouchability to do what?', instead of merely listing out 'anti-untouchability' as an exalted virtue devoid of context. Perhaps to dwell briefly on a recent analogy would be in order. When the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, speaks eloquently on the annihilation of caste, would it be prudent to surmise that he is simply echoing Ambedkar's message?

With Bakhle's careful treatment of Savarkar's writings on caste, we are reminded of how language can be the same, but meanings of the same phrase or a sentence can differ markedly. Hindutva necessarily becomes a Brahminical project as Savarkar refuses to examine

his own Brahmin positionality. His conservative stand also comes out with how he favoured mixed marriages but only between regions, and not caste groups. Furthermore, Dalits played the role of an unreflective footnote to his project, living off Brahmin generosity, and never imagined as agents of change.

|| Savarkar had precious little to say on the alternative ideas of non-Brahmin Hinduism, and more specifically, the development of a non-Brahmin Hindutva.

At the same time, there is still some ambiguity regarding his relationship with non-Brahmin writers. Bakhle mentions that Savarkar did not engage with the non-Brahmin movement, but does not provide a reason. The early 20th century was a period that saw both Brahmin and non-Brahmin communities expand the contours of the term ‘Hindutva’. My own PhD thesis, ‘Towards a Non-Brahmi Hinduism: Caste, Dharma and the Marathi Public Sphere, circa 1890s to 1930s’, looked at emerging forms of non-Brahmin Hinduism after the death of Jotirao Phule, the founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj. My work investigates the dynamism of radical and conservative streaks in the social and political expressions of Satyashodhak writers amidst their contestation of the hegemonic Brahmin writerly discourse.

This idea of retrieving an egalitarian Hinduism for non-Brahmins most certainly also acted as a breeding ground for a variety of non-Brahmin variants of Hindu nationalism. It is surprising to see that Savarkar had precious little to say on the alternative ideas of non-Brahmin Hinduism, and more specifically, the development of a non-Brahmin Hindutva. For instance, there seems to have been no meaningful correspondence between a Kshatriya Prabodhankar Thackeray and a Chitpavan Brahmin Savarkar on their respective versions of Hindutva.

The uses of poetry

Savarkar’s most well known contribution to the political lexicon of modern India is his concept of *punyabhumi* and *pitrubhumi*, outlined in the seminal essay ‘Essentials of Hindutva’ (1922). Yet, the terms themselves were coined by him much earlier, in the 1908 poem *Priyankara Hindustan*.

|| Savarkar saw his historical context as a period of crisis and poetry as the most potent weapon to address it. The poetic historicizing of nation was projected as the injured mother who needed his sons to come to his rescue.

In many ways, his poems were laying the groundwork for his Hindutva terms which became popular through his prose. Savarkar’s acute sense of multiple poetic genres, popular sense of rhythmic patterns and a vast toolbox of grammar and literary tropes also makes him the intellectual father of Hindutva poetry. There is a strong resonance of such poetry in contemporary India which can be discerned by the burgeoning rise of internet Hindutva pop stars, astutely reflected upon by Kunal Purohit in his new book *H-Pop*.

“Savarkar saw himself as a mixture of Mazzini and Bilhana, inflecting classical idiom and history and wished his poetry to be commissive illocutionary act,” Bakhle notes. Poetry was central to Savarkar’s thought as he saw himself, first and foremost, as a poet and an artist by nature.

More reason then, to not rely only on the English corpus and dive into Savarkar’s Marathi poetry, where his idea of caste, social reform, the nation and his emotive outburst of patriotism gain emotional heft through lyrical tones and rhythmic patterns. Bakhle helpfully reproduces copious sections of many poems, juxtaposing the original Sanskritised Marathi version and their English translations.

Savarkar saw his historical context as a period of crisis and poetry as the most potent weapon to address it. Poetry suffused with memory building was identified as a genre defying the linearity of time, and Savarkar used it as his principal medium of rewriting History. As Jeremy Eichler, in his new book *Time’s Echo: Music, Memory and the Second World War*, observes: “For memory by definition also challenges the pastness of the past & the objective distance of history; it also reorders time & flouts the forward march of the years.”

|| For Savarkar, invoking or even remembering history was of no use if it had no resonance in the present.

The poetic historicising of nation was projected as the injured mother who needed her sons to come to her rescue. At the same time, Savarkar’s poetry was modern as most of the content, which includes his eulogies on Chhatrapati Shivaji, extend back only to the 18th

century. Even though he was heavily influenced by English poets like Milton and Byron, Savarkar was extremely cautious to project himself in the lineage of the Shahiri poets reciting ballads and of Kirtans celebrating a deity with music and singing. His rootedness to the everyday characteristics of rural India was important for his poetic version of a sacralised nation-diet.

For Savarkar, invoking or even remembering history was of no use if it had no resonance in the present. His instrumentalist use of history strongly reposed faith in the expressive and emotive power of history. This was unlike other personalities like T.S. Shejwalkar, who Bakhle introduces as a traditional empiricist historian who stayed true to an approach of Rankean facticity. More importantly, through historians like Shejwalkar, Bakhle broaches the more intriguing premise of multiple forms of Hindu nationalism without Hindutva, which shared overlaps and divergent trajectories as compared to Savarkar's Hindutva.

Remembering Savarkar

If Savarkar saw Hindutva as history, and his poetic expressions as the means to imagine a long history of the idea of India, it was necessary for his zeal to construct this memory of a universal Hindu to be memorialised. Bakhle provides a meaningful exploration of the Marathi landscape of different types of what she calls "Savarkar memorialization."

In this hitherto uncharted territory, she begins by exploring his biography, a select sampling of authorised biographies and concludes by a surfeit of hagiographies which she calls "*darshana-dakshina*," meaning 'witness-homage' literature. This genre involves the actual manifestation of the Savarkar's mythology and sacralisation in practice amongst budding and established Marathi writers. This reciprocal relationship is premised on how the author underscored his meeting with Savarkar, is established by process as his devotee and in turn, as Bakhle notes, revalidates the subject's otherworldliness.

Bakhle carefully peels Savarkar's popularity over the years by exploring the cultivation of multiple celebratory afterlives of his myth, especially in Maharashtra. Almost akin to a collective, devotional exercise, numerous amateur historians, senior writers, and nameless and faceless people have preserved and propagated Savarkar's image as an anti-colonial, progressive hero. Savarkar's haughty projection of himself as an ace historian and an unparalleled pedagogue gets complimented by this obsequious nature of preserving the myth of Savarkar.

Surajkumar Thube recently completed a doctorate in history from the University of Oxford.