

VINAYAK DAMODAR SAVARKAR: HINDU NATIONALIST

The tradition of Hindu nationalism begun by Tilak, Aurobindo, and Lajpat Rai was continued and given a more virulent, anti-Muslim form by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966). Born a Chitpavan Brahman like Ranade, Gokhale, and Tilak, Savarkar was the son of a landowner known for both his Sanskrit scholarship and his Western-style education. Two incidents from his youth presaged his lifelong antipathy to those he considered Hinduism's foes. At the age of ten, hearing of bloody Hindu–Muslim riots in the United Provinces, he led a gang of his schoolmates in a stone-throwing attack on the village mosque. At sixteen, his anger at the hanging of two Maharashtra terrorists made him vow to devote his life to driving the British out of India.

On entering Fergusson College at Poona, Savarkar quickly organized a patriotic society among his fellow students. Through poems, articles, and speeches, he reminded them of India's glorious past and the need to regain her freedom. In 1905 he arranged for a huge bonfire of foreign cloth and persuaded Tilak to speak to the crowd gathered around it. For this he was expelled from his college. With Tilak's help, however, he secured from an Indian patriot in London a scholarship to study there, on the understanding that he would never enter government service.

From 1906 to 1910, in the guise of a student of law, the young Savarkar bearded the British lion in its den. His "New India" group learned the art of bomb-making from a Russian revolutionary in Paris, and planned the assassination of the hated Lord Curzon. One member of the group electrified London when he shot and killed an important official of the India Office and then went proudly to the gallows. Savarkar himself was arrested a few months later, but by this time he had already published his nationalistic interpretation of the 1857–1858 rebellion, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857* (1909).

When the ship carrying him back to India for trial stopped at Marseilles, Savarkar created an international incident by swimming ashore and claiming asylum on French soil. The Hague International Tribunal ultimately judged his recapture by the British authorities irregular but justifiable, but by this time he had already been twice sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1911 Savarkar was transported to the Andaman Islands (India's "Devil's Island" in the tropical Bay of Bengal), where he found his elder brother, a renowned terrorist, already there before him.

Agitation in India secured his release from confinement in 1924, but until 1937 his movements were restricted and he was forbidden to take part in politics. Nehru, Bose, and Roy sent him congratulatory messages on his return to the political arena, and the Hindu Mahasabha (founded in 1915, and revitalized in the early 1920s), the largest Hindu communal party, elected him as their president for seven consecutive years, until failing health forced him to resign.

Intending to unite and strengthen all Hindudom, Savarkar advocated the removal of intercaste barriers, the entry of Untouchables into orthodox temples, and the reconversion of Hindus who had become Muslims or Christians. During World War II he

propagated the slogan “Hinduize all polities and militarize Hindudom,” and urged Hindus to enlist in the armed forces in order to learn the arts of war.

Savarkar and Gandhi had disagreed from the time of their discussions in London in 1909 (discussions that may have helped to provoke the latter to write his famous *Hind Swaraj*, a pamphlet denouncing the evils of modern civilization). Savarkar now made no bones about his conviction that Gandhi’s doctrine of non-violence was “absolutely sinful.”¹⁷ As the fateful hour of independence from British rule drew near, Savarkar and the Mahasabha opposed the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan, but maintained that Bengal and the Punjab should be divided into two provinces even if there was no partition of the whole country. Gandhi’s apparent vacillation on this issue and his post-Partition fasts for the protection of India’s Muslims and for goodwill toward Pakistan infuriated many of Savarkar’s followers. Early in 1948 one of them, to avenge what he felt was Gandhi’s betrayal of the Hindu cause, felled him with three pistol shots.

The assassin, N. V. Godse (see chapter 6), although no longer a member of the Mahasabha, was still known as a devoted lieutenant of Savarkar, who consequently had to stand trial with him. Acquitted because of lack of evidence linking him to the crime itself, but too ill to lead an active life, Savarkar returned under a cloud to his home in Bombay. In the 1950s he made speeches urging military preparedness, and until the last year of his life he issued statements and wrote books and articles.

The theory of Hindu national solidarity and political dominance evolved by Savarkar continued after independence to animate organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, and the Bharatiya Janata Party. Their appeal to patriotic, moral, and religious sentiments has given them considerable influence on the Indian political scene.

THE GLORIES OF THE HINDU NATION

Deprived of writing materials during his days of imprisonment, Savarkar scratched on the whitewashed walls of his cell and then committed to memory the notes for his treatise on Hindutva (“Hindu-ness”). In the final portion of this work, published in 1923, he proudly cited the geographical, racial, cultural, numerical, and religious ways in which the Hindu nation is superior to all other polities.

[I]t will not be out of place to see how far the attributes, which we found to be the essentials of Hindutva, contribute toward [the] strength, cohesion, and progress of our people. Do these essentials constitute a foundation so broad, so deep, so strong, that basing upon it the Hindu people can build a future which can face and repel the attacks of all the adverse winds that blow; or does the Hindu race stand on feet of clay? . . .

Have they not, these Himalayas, been standing there as one whose desires are satisfied—so they seemed to the Vedic bard—so they seem . . . today. You take up buckets and fill your trenches with water and call it [a] moat. Behold,

Varuna himself, with his one hand pushing continents aside, fills the gap by pouring seas on seas with the other! This Indian ocean . . . is our moat.

These are our frontier lines bringing within our reach the advantages of an inland as well as an insular country.

She is the richly endowed daughter of God—this our Motherland. Her rivers are deep and perennial. Her land is yielding to the plow and her fields are loaded with golden harvests. Her necessities of life are few and a genial nature yields them all almost for the asking. Rich in her fauna, rich in her flora, she knows she owes it all to the immediate source of light and heat—the sun. She covets not the icy lands; blessed be they and their frozen latitudes. If heat is at times “enervating” here, cold is at times benumbing there. If cold induces manual labor, heat removes much of its very necessity. . . . She loves to visit her ghats and watch her boats gliding down the Ganges, on her moonlit waters. With the plow, the peacocks, the lotus, the elephant, and the *Gitā*, she is willing to forego, if that must be, whatever advantage the colder latitudes enjoy. She knows she cannot have all her own way. Her gardens are green and shady, her granaries well stocked, her waters crystal, her flowers scented, her fruits juicy, and her herbs healing. Her brush is dipped in the colors of dawn and her flute resonant with the music of [Krishna’s playground] Gokul. Verily Hind is the richly endowed daughter of God. . . .

With the exception of [the] Chinese and perhaps the Americans, no people are gifted with a land that can equal in natural strength and richness the land of *Sindhustān*. A country, a common home, is the first important essential of stable strong nationality; and as of all countries in the world our country can hardly be surpassed by any in its capacity to afford a soil so specially fitted for the growth of a great nation; we Hindus, whose very first article of faith is the love we bear to the common Fatherland, have in that love the strongest talismanic tie that can bind close and keep a nation firm and enthuse and enable it to accomplish things greater than ever.

The second essential of *Hindutva* puts the estimate of our latent powers of national cohesion and greatness yet higher. No country in the world, with the exception of China again, is peopled by a race so homogeneous, yet so ancient and yet so strong both numerically and vitally. The Americans . . . are decidedly left behind. Mohammedans are no race nor are the Christians. They are a religious unit, yet neither a racial nor a national one. But we Hindus, if possible, are all the three put together and live under our ancient and common roof. The numerical strength of our race is an asset that cannot be too highly prized.

And culture? The English and the Americans feel they are kith and kin because they possess a Shakespeare in common. But not only a Kalidas or a Bhas [Vyasa], but Oh Hindus! ye possess a Ramayan and a Mahabharat in common—and the Vedas! . . . The Hindu counts his years not by centuries but by cycles—the Yug [age] and the Kalpa [eon]—and amazed asks: “O Lord of the line of Raghu [Rama], where has the kingdom of Ayodhya gone? O Lord of the line of Yadu [Krishna], where has Mathura gone!!” He does not attempt to rouse the

sense of self-importance so much as the sense of proportion, which is Truth. And that has perhaps made him last longer than Ramses and Nebuchadnezzar. . . . A people that had produced an unending galaxy of heroes and heroworshipers and who are conscious of having fought with and vanquished the forces whose might struck Greece and Rome, the Pharaohs and the Incas, dead, have in their history a guarantee of their future greatness more assuring than any other people on earth yet possess.

But besides culture the tie of common holyland has at times proved stronger than the chains of a Motherland. Look at the Mohamedans. Mecca to them is a sterner reality than Delhi or Agra. Some of them do not make any secret of being bound to sacrifice all India if that be to the glory of Islam or [if it] could save the city of their prophet. Look at the Jews. Neither centuries of prosperity nor sense of gratitude for the shelter they found can make them more attached or even equally attached to the several countries they inhabit. Their love is, and must necessarily be, divided between the land of their birth and the land of their prophets. If the Zionists' dreams are ever realized—if Palestine becomes a Jewish state . . . it will gladden us almost as much as our Jewish friends—they, like the Mohamedans, would naturally set the interests of their holyland above those of their Motherlands in America and Europe. . . . The Crusades again, attest to the wonderful influence that a common holyland exercises over peoples widely separated in race, nationality, and language, to bind and hold them together. The ideal conditions, therefore, under which a nation can attain perfect solidarity and cohesion would, other things being equal, be found in the case of those people who inhabit the land they adore, the land of whose forefathers is also the land of their Gods and Angels, of Seers and Prophets; the scenes of whose history are also the scenes of their mythology.

The Hindus are about the only people who are blessed with these ideal conditions that are at the same time incentive to national solidarity, cohesion, and greatness. . . . Only Arabia and Palestine—if ever the Jews can succeed in founding their state there—can be said to possess this unique advantage. But Arabia is incomparably poorer in the natural, cultural, historical, and numerical essentials of a great people; and even if the dreams of the Zionists are ever realized into a Palestine state still they too must be equally lacking in these.

England, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey proper, Persia, Japan, Afghanistan, [the] Egypt of today (for the old descendants of "Punto" and their Egypt is dead long since)—and other African states, Mexico, Peru, Chilly [Chile] (not to mention states and nations lesser than all these)—though racially more or less homogeneous, are yet less advantageously situated than we are in geographical, cultural, historical, and numerical essentials, besides lacking the unique gift of a sanctified Motherland. Of the remaining nations Russia in Europe, and the United States in America, though geographically equally well-gifted with us, are yet poorer, in almost every other requisite of nationality. China alone of the present comity of nations is almost as richly gifted with the geographical, racial,

cultural . . . essentials as the Hindus are. Only in the possession of a common, a sacred, and a perfect language, the Sanskrit, and a sanctified Motherland, we are so far [as] the essentials that contribute to national solidarity . . . more fortunate.

Thus the actual essentials of *Hindutva* are, as this running sketch reveals, also the ideal essentials of nationality. If we would we can build on this foundation of *Hindutva*, a future greater than what any other people on earth can dream of—greater even than our own past; provided we are able to utilize our opportunities! For let our people remember that great combinations are the order of the day. The leagues of nations, the alliances of powers, Pan-Islamism, Pan-Slavism, Pan-Ethiopism—all little beings are seeking to get themselves incorporated into greater wholes, so as to be better fitted for the struggle for existence and power. . . . Woe to those who have them already as their birthright and know them not; or worse, despise them! The nations of the world are desperately trying to find a place in this or that combination for aggression:—can any one of you, Oh Hindus! whether Jain or Samāji¹⁸ or Sanātani¹⁹ or Sīkh or any other subsection, afford to cut yourselves off or fall out and destroy the ancient, the natural, and the organic combination that already exists?—a combination that is bound not by any scraps of paper nor by the ties of exigencies alone, but by the ties of blood and birth and culture? Strengthen them if you can; pull down the barriers that have survived their utility, of castes and customs, of sects and sections. What of interdining? But [let] intermarriages between provinces and provinces, castes and castes, be encouraged where they do not exist. But where they already exist as between the Sikhs and Sanātanies, Jains and Vaishnavas, Lingayats and Non-Lingayats—suicidal be the hand that tries to cut the nuptial tie. Let the minorities remember they would be cutting the very branch on which they stand. Strengthen every tie that binds you to the main organism, whether of blood or language or common festivals and feasts or culture love you bear to the common Motherland. Let this ancient and noble stream of Hindu blood flow from vein to vein . . . till at last the Hindu people get fused and welded into an indivisible whole, till our race gets consolidated and strong and sharp as steel. . . .

Thirty crores of people, with India for their basis of operation, for their Fatherland and for their Holyland . . . bound together by ties of a common blood and common culture can dictate their terms to the whole world. . . .

Equally certain it is that whenever the Hindus come to hold such a position whence they could dictate terms to the whole world—those terms cannot be very different from the terms which [the] Gītā dictates or the Buddha lays down. A Hindu is most intensely so, when he ceases to be a Hindu; and with a Kabir claims the whole earth for a Benares . . . or with a Tukaram exclaims: “My country? Oh brothers, the limits of the Universe—there the frontiers of my country lie.”

[From V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 4th ed.
(Poona: S. P. Gokhale, 1949), 108–116.]