

BOOK REVIEW

Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva

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Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) was one of the most contentious political thinkers of the twentieth century. Apart from being an anticolonial nationalist leader in India's struggle for independence from the British rule, Savarkar was an ideologue, poet, and an intellectual, who was known widely for his venomous and blatantly anti-minority writings. His writings played an important role in exploiting India's tensions in pursuit of the majority rule. Divided into six chapters, the present book by Janaki Bakhle attempts to shed light on the lesser known facets of this historical figure. Through a thorough examination of the full range of Savarkar's voluminous writings in his native language of Marathi, including political tracts, historical works, poems, essays, and speeches, Bakhle tries to reveal the complexities of Savarkar's personality as well as the various positions he took as a champion of the beleaguered Hindu community, an erudite if polemical historian, an advocate for women's rights and dignity, and an anti-caste activist. The critical examination of his works by the author shows that the concept of Hindutva is as much about the aesthetic experiences that have been attached to the idea of India itself as it is about the militant political program which targets minority communities in pursuit of socio-political power in postcolonial India.

The initial chapter, "An Anticolonial Revolutionary: Savarkar and the Colonial Police," looks at the contemporary political conditions which led to Savarkar's ascendancy in Indian politics. In her discussion on this theme she takes into account the political conditions which were prevailing prior to Savarkar's birth. In this regard she pays special attention to the Revolt of 1857. The Revolt according to the author laid the ground for anti-Muslim rhetoric on the part of the colonial state. It was perceived by the British as an international Islamic conspiracy against them. And it had the potential to attract not just the Muslims, but also Hindu nationalists. Savarkar who was identified by the colonial state as revolutionary "terrorist," was, as the chapter notes, surveilled from an early age. The colonial state had deep knowledge about his various *avatars*. It was also familiar with his anti-Muslim sentiments. While the British viewed Savarkar as politically dangerous, violent, and seditious, they had no issues with releasing him early from its Andaman's penal colony. It is also not surprising that he was never re-arrested despite the fact that he violated the terms of his release on multiple occasions. This, according to the chapter, was done with ulterior motives on the part of the British Indian government. That is, he was used by the British to attack Gandhiji, as well as the Khilafat Movement and the Muslims. In this sense, as Bakhle notes poignantly, Savarkar "ventriloquized the colonial British fear of Muslims and did so eloquently, passionately, and constantly, focusing over and over again on Muslims and Gandhi" (p. 17).

Chapter 2, "A Fearful Demagogue: Savarkar and the Muslim Question," specifically deals with the "Muslim question." While discussing this theme the author takes into account the anti-minority writings of Savarkar. Countering the argument that Savarkar had no issues with Muslims, but had problems only with certain "types" of Muslims, Bakhle posits that for this figure there was no "good"

or “bad.” For him all Muslims were “bad”. He viewed Muslims as a homogenous group who were racially and intellectually inferior to the majority section and were prone to unpatriotic feelings. While discussing this theme she takes into account the attitude that Savarkar had toward a movement like the Khilafat. Savarkar, as the chapter notes was aghast at the idea of Muslim loyalty to an international political movement based outside India. He was also surprised at the support that Gandhiji gave to the movement. For him what the Mahatma was doing was anti-national. Interestingly, as is shown in the present section, Savarkar’s obsession with Khilafat outlasted the movement itself. As a matter of fact, he perceived the Khilafat as a classic example of Muslim internationalism which was in conflict with Indian nationalism. Moreover, the author notes that for Savarkar all Muslims were coward. This is notwithstanding the fact that they were capable of launching an international movement! Hindus, on the other hand, Savarkar argued in his works, were a brave community who were capable of taking violent actions whenever necessary. And in order to draw attention of the readers, Savarkar, as Bakhle notes, “cherry-picked gruesome events that usually took place outside Maharashtra” (p. 18).

Savarkar’s views on caste are discussed at length in the succeeding chapter, “A Social Reformer: Savarkar and Caste.” The political leader, the chapter notes, had strong views about caste. Significantly, while, as his writings reveal, he was quite reactionary and xenophobic about Muslims, he presented a rather progressive and aggressive reformist agenda. Based on the criticism of the caste system, supporters of Savarkar, the chapter notes, have often argued that he was equally critical of Hindus and Muslims. This kind of argument, according to the author is completely inappropriate, to say the least. While his views on caste were radical, they were almost entirely aimed at orthodox Hindu community and were voiced from within it. To highlight the absurdity of the caste system, Savarkar, the section notes, based almost all his arguments on the sacred texts of the Hindus, including the Vedas, Puranas, and the epics. It may also be noted that Savarkar’s caste reform was Brahmanical in nature, since it was located in his own upper caste community. In her discussions on this theme an important point that Bakhle makes is that Savarkar’s challenge to caste system and untouchability was primarily with the sole objective of rebuilding a lost Hindu sovereignty. At the same time he wanted to prevent the Muslims from “capitalizing on disaffected lower-caste Hindus or Dalits” (p. 19).

In the final three chapters, “A Nation’s Bard: Savarkar the Poet,” “A Nationalist Historian: Savarkar and the Past,” and “A Legend in His Own Time: Savarkar and His Hagiography,” Janaki Bakhle analyzes the intellectual legacy of the political leader. In these chapters, besides discussing the historiography of these themes, Bakhle closely analyzes his poems, historical writings, and essays as well as plays. In “A Nation’s Bard” the author examines Savarkar’s poems in detail. The examination is done in two parts. While in the first part the author surveys a small representative sample of his poetry, both published and unpublished, which are well-known in Maharashtra but obscure elsewhere; in the second portion Savarkar’s recasting of one of the most popular Marathi ballads, *Sāhira Tulshidas’s Povādā* is examined. The author demonstrates the manner in which Savarkar re-molded this *Povādā* and made it into a national myth and used it in his Hindu nation building project.

That Savarkar was also a historian is brought out well in “A Nationalist Historian.” He used multiple genres for his historical narratives. Juxtaposing him with academic historian Tryambak Shankar Shejwalkar (1895–1963) the author highlights the fact that Savarkar was a popular historian. His writings, the chapter argues, are not rooted in disciplinary rigor and do not carefully analyze the primary source material. In fact he “hijacked the writing of history as memory work” (p. 20). The section closely scrutinizes four major works of Savarkar, namely, *The Indian War of Independence 1857* (1909), *Essentials of Hindutva* (1922), *Hindu-Pad-Padshahi* (1925), and *Six Glorious Epochs* (1965–66). Through a lengthy discussion on these historical writings of Savarkar, Bakhle demonstrates how the political leader “positioned himself as a model historian for others to follow” (p. 20). “A Nationalist Historian” also deliberates at length on the academic conditions which were prevalent in Maharashtra which allowed Savarkar to emerge as a popular historian.

“A Legend in His Own Time” highlights the manner in which Savarkar himself and others have visualized and used the story of his life. Based on an examination of three types of literature, viz.,

memoirs of Savarkar, biographies on Savarkar, and the witness-homage literature (*darśana-dakṣiṇā*), the author has discussed at length the ways in which Savarkar has been kept alive in the popular memory of Maharashtra. The section also sheds light on the myths surrounding Savarkar which are popular in Maharashtra. Myths and hagiographic literature, discussed at length in the chapter, have kept alive the legend of Savarkar as a brilliant, brave, erudite revolutionary leader of the Hindu nation. And this, to be sure, is true of, not just Maharashtra, but also elsewhere. While discussing the memoirs a pertinent point that the author makes is that the biographers of Savarkar have rarely questioned Savarkar's views about himself. They have taken his views at face value and considered whatever Savarkar claimed as evidence of truth.

Written in a language bereft of jargons, Janaki Bakhle's *Savarkar* is an important academic intervention. The strength of the present volume lies in its close scrutiny of Savarkar's voluminous writings in Marathi. The author provides her readers with an in-depth and well-structured account of Savarkar's hatred for minorities, anti-caste campaigns, and rationalism. Through a thorough study of his writings Bakhle is able to demonstrate effectively why Savarkar is such a revered figure in Maharashtra, even among those who do not subscribe to his worldview. There are however certain factual errors which could have been avoided by the author. To cite an example, the book claims that Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev met Savarkar in the latter's home in Ratnagiri. This is not completely accurate. There is absolutely no historical evidence to suggest that any meeting took place between the three political figures. These are minor flaws, though in no way do they reduce the academic importance of the present work. This book indeed establishes that an exclusionary logic is imbedded in the ideology of Hindu nationalism. Bakhle's volume will be of interest not only to specialists, but also those who are keen to understand the checkered history of Indian nationalism.