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SAVARKAR IN TRANSITION: FROM A PROPONENT OF HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY TO A CHAMPION OF HINDUTVA

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Abstract

V.D. Savarkar remains a contested figure in Indian politico historical landscape. Many hail him as a revolutionary and a hero fighting for India's freedom struggle and to organize and reform the Hindu society, whereas others vilify him as a Hindu fanatic and a traitor. The adherents of the latter view argue that Savarkar, overwhelmed by the torturous Kala Pani in the Andamans, reached a clandestine understanding with the Brits to keep the freedom struggle divided along religious lines through his Hindutva advocacy and his actions as part of the Ratnagiri and All India Hindu Mahasabha in exchange for remission of his punishment. However, proponents of this view ignore the fact that as a revolutionary, Savarkar was a votary of Hindu-Muslim unity in fighting the British yoke. His later ideas like Hindutva, sangathan, shudhhi, and so forth, while coinciding with his release from the Andamans, were more a result of prevailing historical circumstances and his personal experiences in the Andamans than of complicity with the British to sabotage the freedom struggle. This paper, therefore, attempts to provide a brief overview of his life and views, and locate factors therein that might have led to the metamorphosis in his ideas from a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity to a champion of Hindutva. Such a study is warranted to debunk the conspiracist understanding of Savarkar's works.

Keywords: Gandhi, Hindutva, Indian National Congress, Khilafat, Savarkar.

INTRODUCTION

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was born to Radhabai and Damodarpant in Bhagur, a small town near Nashik, on 28 May 1883 in a Maharashtrian Chitpawan Brahmin household. He was second among two other brothers and a sister (Ragi, 2011) ^[1]. Young Vinayak was a precocious child, the leader of the pack, a voracious reader, a history buff, a gifted poet, and a skilled orator & debater who had developed a critical understanding of the disastrous consequences of the foreign rule for India through his keen interest in nationalist newspapers (like *Sandhya*, *Kal*, *Kesari*, etc.), and who wasn't shy of expressing his hatred for the same in both written word and in speech (Sampath, 2019) ^[2].

Young Vinayak's deep seated animosity towards the British was also a reflection of his Maharashtrian Chitpawan Brahmin lineage. Chitpawan Brahmins were at the helm of Maratha administration since the time of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's death in 1680. Their preponderance ended with the British conquest of the region in the early 19th century. The fiercely nationalist, intelligent, and brave community now longed for its lost military and political glory. No wonder the staunchest opposition to the British in the region came from this community which included the likes of Ranade, Tilak, Chiplunkar, Agarkar, Gokhale, and later Savarkar. Additionally, the charged political climate of the region, where Phadke had led an armed rebellion (1875-1883) to overthrow the British, the Indian National Congress had held its first session (in Bombay in 1885), the Chapekar Brothers had carried out the assassination of W.C Rand (in 1897), the British Plague Commissioner of Pune, and Tilak who was leading mass mobilizations against the British through his Shivaji and Ganapati festivals was charged with sedition (1897) for his articles allegedly advocating the said assassination, had a lasting impact on young Vinayak who was now idolizing Phadke, Damodar Chapekar, and Tilak as his heroes fighting the British (Sampath, 2019).

The approach of early nationalists of petitioning the British and appealing to their conscience to introduce constitutional reforms in India did not appeal to young Vinayak. This, along with the cumulative effect of his politically conscious mind, social background, political climate in Maharashtra in particular, and in the rest of the country in general



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(read: the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement, 1905), led Vinayak to opt for a violent course of action against the British (Ragi, 2011). Thus, Savarkar took the revolutionary road on a journey from Vinayak to “Veer”.

REVOLUTIONARY-SAVARKAR: A CHAMPION OF HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY

Savarkar’s revolutionary career actually spans between 1902, when he joined Fergusson College in Pune, and 1921 when he came out of the Andaman Jail. Among other things, Savarkar penned numerous revolutionary writings during this period, including the book titled, *The History of the Indian War of Independence*, in 1909, which became a popular text among the revolutionaries, including Bhagat Singh (Ragi, 2011). In the book, Savarkar, vouched for cooperation between the Hindus and the Muslims and advocated joint action against the British. He argues that since the relationship between the Muslims and the Hindus was no longer that of the ruler and the ruled there was no reason for Hindus to be hostile towards them. Savarkar (1909/2020) ^[3] writes:

the antagonism between the Hindus and the Mahomedans might be consigned to the Past. Their present relation was one not of rulers and ruled, foreigner and native, but simply that of brothers with the one difference between them of religion alone. For, they were both children of the soil of Hindusthan. Their names were different, but they were all children of the same Mother; India therefore being the common mother of these two, they were brothers by blood. Nana Sahib, Bahadur Shah of Delhi, Moulvi Ahmad Shah, Khan Bahadur Khan, and other leaders of 1857 felt this relationship to some extent and, so, gathered round the flag of Swadesh leaving aside their enmity, now so unreasonable and stupid. In short, the broad feature of the policy of Nana Sahib and Azimullah were that 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.

His willingness towards cooperating with the Muslims for the national cause is also evident from his 1909 Dussehra speech in London in Gandhiji’s presence in which he described the various communities of India, including the Muslims, as a rainbow that enriched India’s culture. Moreover, Savarkar’s Abhinav Bharat had once invited Sayed Haider Raza as chief guest to its Ganesh festival celebration. Furthermore, a Muslim, Ibrahim Khan, used to teach horse riding to the members of Abhinav Bharat in Nashik (Mahurkar & Pandit, 2021) ^[4].

The aforesaid clearly point out that Savarkar had welcomed Hindu-Muslim unity against the British. What then explains his turn towards Hindutva and his efforts to consolidate, organize, and militarize the Hindus against a perceptible threat from the Muslims? It is the ignorance of the reasons or the context behind this transition that has led Savarkar’s critics and “reflex secularists” to label him as a Hindu fanatic (Varma, 2022) ^[5]. It is therefore imperative to objectively put out the reasons behind the changeover in Savarkar’s ideas so that one can have an unprejudiced understanding of a historical figure as complex as Savarkar.

FROM HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY TO HINDUTVA

Savarkar, ever since his boyhood, had been proud of his Hindu cultural roots and its ancient & rich heritage. At the same time, he was vexed at the pitiable state Hindus found themselves in formerly under the Islamic rulers and later under the British rule. He wanted to restore the lost cultural, political, and military glory of the Hindus and had no moral qualms against using violent means to achieve the same; towards this end, Shivaji and the Bhagwad Gita acted as his military-icon and philosophical inspiration respectively. However, he was well aware of the inherent weaknesses in the Hindu community which remained divided along numerous faultlines – castes, sects (Sikhism, Lingayats, etc.), etc.- and whose life was dominated by dogmas & superstitions. In comparison he found the Muslims to be much better organized and much more aggressive in pursuing their interests – communal (religious freedoms) as well as secular (education, employment, official language, etc). He noticed that even the government administration, in its bid to secure their loyalty, sided with the Muslims. Moreover, Hindus were unfairly blamed for any violence between the two communities arising out of issues like cow protection, religious conversions, cultural processions, and so on (Sampath, 2019).



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Teen-Savarkar was therefore fully apprised of the contradictions between the interests of the Hindu and the Muslim communities. Despite that we have seen how in his revolutionary years he believed that these contradictions were not a barrier to the two communities forging a united front against the British. However, the events in Cellular Jail and thereafter made him cognizant of the hollowness of his mistaken optimism. He realised that the Indian Muslims could never transcend their narrow parochial mindset of putting their community before the nation at large.

For starters, he was exposed to the brutalities of the Muslim jamadars and wardens in the Andamans who, instead of empathising with their Hindu compatriots struggling against the government, drew sadistic pleasure in torturing them. Prisoners were given the option of converting to Islam if they wanted to rid themselves of the manifold atrocities perpetrated on them; many whose broken bodies and battered souls could no longer withstand the pain did give in to this sinister ploy. Moreover, Hindu prisoners were discriminated against with respect to sporting Hindu symbols on their person, reading their religious texts, grant of religious holidays, and so on. The British administration seemed complicit in facilitating this sacred duty of the Muslim petty officials in Andamans of either converting or torturing those they regarded as *kafirs* (Savarkar, 1927/2020) ^[6].

While Savarkar was witnessing the first-hand cruelties being perpetrated upon his Hindu brethren in the Andamans by the Muslim jamadars the “*afat called Khilafat*” (Savarkar, 1927/2020) was brewing in India. It was a pan-Islamist movement by the Indian Muslims and their leadership to protest the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the sanctions placed on its Sultan, the Caliph or the *Khalifa*, the de jure politico-religious leader of Islam. The hard strictures being protested were finally imposed by the Treat of Sevres (1920) following the defeat of the Ottomans at the hands of the Allies in the First World War (1914-18).

Gandhi had fervently supported the Khilafat issue and helped it merge with other nationalist grievances of the time – the Montford reforms, the Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and so forth. By aligning with the pan-Islamists on the former, he sought to galvanize the support of Indian Muslims for the latter and was able to build momentum for the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement for Swaraj which saw unprecedented mass participation from Hindus and Muslims alike.

However, leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai, Annie Beasant, B.C. Pal, and C.R. Das pointed that the fierce transnational loyalty of Indian Muslims, as part of the Khilafat movement, for their co-religionists in a far-off land on an issue of insignificance to India was a matter of concern as it depicted that their priorities lay elsewhere and this would make difficult their emotional and psychological integration with India. What was especially worrisome to them were the calls made by the Khilafatists to their Turk, Afghan, Arab, and Central Asian brethren to invade India and free the Indian Muslims from British tyranny. Moreover, suggestions were made by some pan-Islamists to move the Caliphate to India. Alternately, Maulana Abdul Bari suggested that Indian Muslims move to *Dar-ul-Islam* (or land that allows Islam to be practiced freely) of Afghanistan (Sampath, 2019). The aforesaid suggestions by Khilafatists should be interpreted as euphemisms for the return of Muslim rule over the Indian subcontinent.

Even the ‘secular-Marxist’ historians of independent India found fault with how the Khilafat movement panned out. Chandra (1989) ^[7], for e.g., writes:

The nationalist leadership failed to some extent in raising the religious political consciousness of Muslims to the higher plane of secular political consciousness. The Khilafat leaders, for example, made appeals to religion and made full use of fatwas (opinion or decision on a point of Islamic law given by a religious person of standing) and other religious sanctions. Consequently, they strengthened the hold of orthodoxy and priesthood over the minds of men and women and encouraged the habit of looking at political questions from the religious point of view. By doing so and by emphasizing the notion of Muslim solidarity, they kept an opening for communal ideology and politics to grow at a later stage.



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Savarkar who was still lodged in the Andamans couldn't stay indifferent to these happenings in the mainland. He was apparently perturbed with the conflation of a purely religious issue of little significance to the Indian Muslims—Khilafat—with a purely political one—Swaraj (loosely defined as some sort of autonomy within the British rule). Savarkar (1927/2020) said:

alliance of non-cooperation with the Khilafat agitation was bound to end in disaster, that it was sure to raise in the country a wave of fanaticism and plunge the whole movement into conflagration, with its consequences to the country too terrible to imagine.

The movement did indeed plunge into “conflagration” and “fanaticism” with riots in Malegaon, Malabar, Multan, Lahore, Saharanpur, Amritsar, Allahabad, Calcutta, Delhi, Gulbarga, Kohat, Lucknow, Shahjahanpur, and Nagpur, thanks to Gandhi's encouragement of the Khilafat Agitation and its pan-Islamic vision (Nair, 1922/2000) ^[8]. The most gruesome among these was the carnage of the Hindus of the Malabar by the Moplahs in August 1921. While historians like Mukherjee (1989) ^[9] have projected the unrest as peasant rebellions against the Hindu landlords or attacks on the Hindu collaborators of the British', Savarkar (1924/2013) ^[10] in his work, '*Moplah*', described it as an anti-Hindu genocide and argues that Moplah's were spurred into action by the radical religious calls of the Khilafatists. Sai Deepak (2022) ^[11] seems to agree with Savarkar. He argues that the 1921 episode should be understood against the backdrop of the history of fanaticism by the Moplahs in the region and “must not be reduced to the simplistic Marxist template of a ‘peasant rebellion’, which is nothing but a restatement of the Marxist existential need to find a class war in every situation and to reduce it to one”. He refers to the Malabar and other riots as examples of ‘two-nation theory in action’.

The Congress Working Committee passed a resolution only mildly criticising the Moplahs. This was done to keep up the farce of Hindu-Muslim joint action and to avoid displeasing the Khilafatists (Sampath, 2019). Gandhi did not go to Malabar nor did he organize any relief measures. He did not even condemn the Muslim atrocities unequivocally (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 2021) ^[12]. Criticising the attitude of Gandhi and the Khilafatists on the issue, Ambedkar (1945/2021) ^[13] writes:

Any person could have said that this was too heavy a price for Hindu-Moslem unity. But Mr Gandhi was so much obsessed by the necessity of establishing Hindu-Moslem unity that he was prepared to make light of the doings of the Moplas and the Khilafats who were congratulating them . . . Speaking of the Muslim silence over the Mopla atrocities Mr Gandhi told the Hindus: The Hindus must have the courage and the faith to feel that they can protect their religion in spite of such fanatical eruptions. A verbal disapproval by the Mussalmans of Mopla madness is no test of Mussalman friendship. The Mussalmans must naturally feel the shame and humiliation of the Mopla conduct about forcible conversions and looting, and they must work away so silently and effectively that such a thing might become impossible even among the most fanatical among them.

This response of Gandhi and the Congress was in line with its policy of appeasement towards Muslims. And this wasn't the first or the last time that the Congress had side-lined Hindu interests and sentiments to continue living in their make-believe world of Hindu-Muslim unity. For instance, the Congress, in 1916, had accepted the principle of separate electorates for the Muslims in elections for legislative councils in the Lucknow Pact with the Muslim League in exchange for presentation of joint demands for political reforms to the British. Sai Deepak (2022) argues:

Clearly, the League was better at pushing its primary agenda—namely, protection of Muslim interests—which was in stark contrast to the Congress's ‘secular’ agenda. Therefore, notwithstanding the joint adoption of the reform scheme by the Muslim League with the Congress, the latter had revealed its willingness to accommodate almost every demand of the League to preserve ‘Hindu-Muslim unity’.

Moreover, according to Sampath (2019), Gandhi even condoned and rationalized the acts of Abdul Rashid, the assassin of Hindu saint Swami Shraddhanand Ji who was working for the organization of Hindus. Gandhi's untenable justification was rebuked by not only Savarkar, but also, Ambedkar (1945/2021):



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What is not understandable is the attitude of Mr. Gandhi. Mr. Gandhi has been very punctilious in the manner of condemning any and every act of violence and has forced the Congress, much against its will, to condemn it. But Mr. Gandhi has never protested against such murders. Not only have the Musalmans not condemned these outrages, but even Mr. Gandhi has never called upon the leading Muslims to condemn them. He has kept silent over them. Such an attitude can be explained only on the ground that Mr. Gandhi was anxious to preserve Hindu-Moslem unity and did not mind the murder of a few Hindus, if it could be achieved by sacrificing their lives.

Congress' and Gandhi's appeasement of Muslims was evident to Savarkar. This, coupled with the fact that the Muslims were already better organised and more virulent in fighting for their interests, and the British time and again obliged them (by propping up Sir Syed, partitioning Bengal, making Delhi the capital of the Raj, through their favourable disposition towards the Muslim League, the grant of separate electorate in 1909, etc.), meant that the divided, leaderless Hindus were left to fend for themselves. Savarkar suspected Congress' ability to provide the much-needed leadership to the Hindus. (His suspicions proved prophetic in 1944 when Gandhi used the so called 'Rajaji Formula' or 'C.R. Formula', devised by Congress leader C. Rajagopalachari, that entailed the communal partition of India, or Hindusthan – the land native to the Hindus, as the basis of negotiations with Jinnah). In such a scenario it became imperative for Savarkar to provide direction and leadership to the Hindus so that their lot could withstand, and fight-back against, the injustices perpetrated on them by the British-Muslim combine.

CONCLUSION

Thus, from our discussion until this point the following can be concluded. First, Savarkar, initially, was a votary of Hindu-Muslim unity. Second, Savarkar was aware of the shortcomings, namely the disunity and the dominance of rituals & superstitions, among the Hindus and found Muslims to be better organised and more aggressive in pursuing their interests. Third, the support of the British government to the 'Loyal Mohamedans' was a matter of concern for him. Fourth, his personal experiences in the *Andamans*, namely the torture and persecution of himself and his co-religionists by the Muslim jail officials, convinced him that Indian Muslims prioritised their communal interests over national interests. Fifth, he was critical of the appeasement politics of Gandhi and the Congress and sceptical of their ability to safeguard, let alone champion, Hindu interests. Last, he saw the Khilafat movement and the attitude of the Khilafatists as counterproductive to the interests of the Hindus and the nation as a whole, a fact that became apparent with the Moplah carnage. Thus, it should be fair and logical to say that it was these factors, and not the conspiracist understanding driven by conjecture given by his critics like Shamsul Islam and A.G. Noorani, that resulted in his turn towards Hindutva.

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