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History as Revenge and Retaliation

Rereading Savarkar's *The War of Independence of 1857*

Savarkar's account of 1857 has served to legitimise retributive violence in the name of Hindu nationalism. It is based on a conception of how the history of the "Hindu Rashtra" ought to be written, while enunciating a model of politics based on the opposition between "friend" and "foe".

JYOTIRMAYA SHARMA

The first step in any contemporary reading of Savarkar's account of 1857 ought to be the title of the book itself. It is often cited as *The First War of Indian Independence – 1857*. By all accounts, the insertion of the word "first" is a later interpolation. The *Savarkar Samagra*¹ mentions it as *Atthharahasau Sattavan Ka Svatantrata Sangram (The War of Independence of 1857)*. The Marathi title is *Atthharahasau Sattavanche Swatantrya Samar*. Vasanth Krishna Varad Pande, a Savarkar admirer, calls it *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*.² Writing about Savarkar's years in London, Harindra Srivastava³ gives a detailed account of the years leading to the publication of Savarkar's history of 1857, and clearly mentions the title as *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*. In the case of Varad Pande and Srivastava, the word "Indian" has been added to the title. Dhananjaya Keer,⁴ author of a hagiographical biography of Savarkar cites the title on p 67 as *The First Indian War of Independence – 1857*, but mentions it as *The War of Independence of 1857* on page 74. Going by the original title, cited in the Marathi and Hindi versions of the *Savarkar Samagra*, it is safe to assume that the title is *The War of Independence of 1857*.

Another important next step before considering Savarkar's history of 1857 is to read an important essay by Savarkar titled 'Hindu Sangathankarta Swarashtra Ka Itihaas Kis Tarah Likhein Aur Padhein'⁵ ('How Those Working for Hindu Consolidation Ought to Write and Read the History of Their Own Nation'). Savarkar begins by arguing that for the existence of the Hindu Rashtra, the present ought to be made formidable and powerful. In doing so, the knowledge of the past was extremely crucial. The history of the Hindus, however, was one of the emergence of 'Bharatiya sanskriti' through the process of weaving together all diversities, differences and pluralities into the sense of national unity.

But reading Hindu history for Savarkar was also the history of foreign aggression and influences and the way in which these were fought and absorbed into the Hindu cultural and civilisational matrix. The early part of this story was one of the triumph of Hindu civilisation to overwhelm these foreign invasions and influences. The case of the subsequent Muslim invasions was a different one altogether. It is a narrative, argues Savarkar, of struggle against Muslims and the eventual defeat of the Muslim rule at the hands of Chhtrapati Shivaji, who established a Hindu-Padpadshahi or Hindu Empire as a result.

For Savarkar, history was, then, to be written in two different ways. There was to be a history of the Hindu nation and there was to be a history of the encounter of the Hindu nation with Muslims. While he exhorts history writers of the Hindu nation to be objective and truthful, to write honestly about moments in history that were flawed, and do so factually, he goes on to set

a different set of rules for writing the history of the Hindus and their nation. In a national sense, the differences between Aryans and non-Aryans, Brahmin or Shudra, Vaidik or avaidik, Kaayasta or Dravid, Jain or Bauddha, Shaiva or Vaishnava were to Savarkar superfluous. What mattered in the final analysis was that "our collective lives can be described only by one word. That unique word is Hindu".⁶ While history for Savarkar was a mixture of the glories and of embarrassing and uncomfortable moments, it ought not to be divided into Aryan and non-Aryan history. Rather, it ought to be written as the history of the Hindu Rashtra.

Savarkar's methodology for writing Hindu history, therefore, consists of the following trajectory. Hindu historians must not ignore, for instance, the conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism, the instance of Jains resorting to arms in order to defend themselves, the schism between Shaivites and Vaishnavites. Yet, these instances of conflict and differences ought to be read as the history of the "entire Hindu race, united and consolidated as one entity".⁷ Instances in the past of differences and conflicts, suggests Savarkar, ought now to be presented as the common and shared social history of the Hindus.

At the beginning of this essay, Savarkar had argued for a proper study of the past in order to strengthen and consolidate the present. But in delineating the manner in which the history of the unified Hindu nation ought to be written, Savarkar introduces a new element. He says:

Whatever has happened in the past has been written [in Hindu history] factually and objectively. The answers to what ought to be today cannot be given by the past. These answers have to be searched in the present.⁸

Not only did "objective" Hindu history have very little to contribute to the present, but the contemporary Hindu historian of Savarkar's conception also had to follow certain rules regarding his reading of the Hindu past:

The past ought not to be criticised through the bifocals of the present. Whatever unique events happened in a particular period were the result of a different society and a different situation.⁹

Hindu history, concludes Savarkar, was the story of the emergence of a nation called Hindustan, an amalgamation of various regions and sub-nationalities. It was the indivisible Akhand Bharat. Hindu history, therefore, was the history of all nationalities and identities coming together in one single organic unity.

For Savarkar, there was another "laughable example of history writing that hides the nature of truth".¹⁰ Congressmen who followed the "crazed world view and orientation of Gandhiji" wrote this history.¹¹ This history overlooked the cruelties inflicted on Hindus by Muslim rulers like Aurangzeb and Allaudin Khilji, to mention a few. Savarkar finds no mention in this form of history of religious persecution perpetrated by the Muslims;

on the contrary, he finds this history full of praise for Islam, Muslim rule and civilisation. He is irate at the neglect of “the truth that there was a centuries old fight unto death between Hindu and Muslim religions, and Hindu and Muslim nations, and that finally, Hindus destroyed Muslim rule and broke it into pieces.”¹² Only the Hindu nation withstood the assault of the Muslims, asserts Savarkar, and prevented their “poisonous attack”.¹³ The only way Hindus and Muslims can co-exist without the past casting a shadow is by the Muslims acknowledging Hindu strength and supremacy.

Swadharma and Swarajya

When Savarkar’s *The War of Independence of 1857* was published in 1909 (he began writing it in 1907), the “crazed” world view of Gandhi and his followers, as Savarkar had characterised it, had still not been sufficiently formulated. In fact, Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* was published the same year. The two had earlier met in India House in London in 1906. Pandit Parmanand,¹⁴ who knew both Savarkar and Gandhi narrates a story about Gandhi’s meeting with Savarkar at the India House in London. Gandhi had dropped in while Savarkar was frying prawns. Gandhi raised a political issue. Savarkar cut him short and instead invited him to have dinner. Gandhi said he was a vegetarian. To which Savarkar retorted that if Gandhi was unable to eat with him, how was he going to work alongside him. Savarkar, then, went on to say he was looking for people who were ready to eat the Britishers alive, and not baulk at eating fish.

Savarkar’s account of 1857 is replete with instances of “white flesh” being slaughtered. It is a theme that is a constant refrain throughout the text. It is important to note that Savarkar’s politics was one that divided the world between “friend” and “foe”. It was not material who the “foe” was as long as an enemy could be found at all times. In the essay on the way Hindus ought to write the history of their nation, the enemy clearly are the Muslims. But in his narrative on 1857, the enemy were the British. In other words, Savarkar formulated his entire world view in terms of well-entrenched, non-negotiable, binary oppositions. In a rare advaitic vein – for Savarkar had little time for philosophic schools of Hinduism and was suspicious of ‘advaita’ – he talks of the nature of the “Self” as something that was known to itself immutably and without a name or even a form. This abstract notion of the “Self” gets transformed the moment it comes into contact or conflict with a non-self. The “Self”, then, acquires a name and an identity in order to communicate with the non-self. In Savarkar’s scheme of things, the more he engaged in formulating the contours of his ideal of Hindutva and giving it a political colour, the greater was the proliferation of the non-selves. Islam and the Muslims constituted the primary definition of the non-self, but the British and Christianity, Buddha and Buddhism, Gandhi and Ahimsa were at some point or the other added to his rogue’s gallery of non-selves. Often the non-self led to a redefinition of the “Self”. For instance, while Savarkar’s understanding of Muslims and Islam was based on a caricature, he found several elements from within this understanding “irresistible”, and speaks of having “absorbed” a great deal of the non-self in order to recast the “Self”.¹⁵

In a world divided between “friend” and “foe”, between “us” and “them”, there were no rules of morality, no ethical codes, when it came to dealing with the “enemy”. The epigraph of Savarkar’s *The War of Independence of 1857* is instructive. It is a quote from Swami Ramdas, Chhatrapati Shivaji’s guru, which reads: “Die for the sake of Dharma, and while dieing kill all; In killing is your victory, your own rule”.¹⁶ While killing was the chosen instrumentality, the essence that circumscribed Savarkar’s account of 1857 was the establishment of ‘swadharma’

or one’s own religion and ‘swarajya’ or self-rule. Further, Mazzini’s writings and his role in the unification of Italy was the inspiration behind Savarkar’s belief that every revolution ought to have an essence. It has to be pointed out that “dharma” in this instance means religion and does not have the other philosophical connotations that are also associated with the term. There is a tendency among commentators on Savarkar to misread his distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, leading often to the conclusion that Savarkar had little to do with religion.¹⁷

Savarkar argued that there was an inextricable link between swadharma and swarajya. The sages of antiquity believed in this link, and Mazzini too saw an inseparable link between heaven and earth. He further refines the link to argue that “swarajya is worthless without swadharma, and swadharma is powerless without swarajya”.¹⁸ Once the relation between religion and self-rule had been established, the only thing that mattered was killing the British in order to approximate to the essence. The British were the “foe” in this instance. Here too, Savarkar makes no distinction between the British and Christianity. For him, India’s capitulation to the British rule was an act of genuflecting before the kindness of Jesus Christ. Hindus and Muslims were allies in 1857 against a common enemy, the British, a fact that Savarkar constantly emphasises. In the events that led to 1857, Savarkar perceives these as an instance of Hindus and Muslims dancing on the back of Christianity.¹⁹ Invoking the term jihad,²⁰ Savarkar appreciates the way in which maulvis and pandits preached jihad against the British/Christians in 1857. There is jubilation in Savarkar’s account at every instance of a church being felled, a cross being smashed and every Christian being “sliced”.²¹

If the imperative was to establish the supremacy of religion and attain self-rule, the pursuit of this goal sanctioned killing. Swami Ramdas’ exhortation was to kill without entertaining any doubts about the question of means and ends. It was war of a different kind, bereft of the old codes and rules. In his reading of 1857, Savarkar justifies the killing of countless British women and children by taking cue from what he calls the “tactics of Maratha warfare”.²² The ideal was that every sacrifice and act of valour ought to lead to success. Anything short of achieving the desired end was suicide. Therefore, Savarkar writes about the increasing rejoicing and enthusiasm of the rebels when they saw more and more English blood being spilt. In Meerut, this exultation was the result of several women and children being burnt alive after their houses were set on fire.²³ In Delhi, the rebels went like “fearsome demons” to the house of Rev Jennings, killed him, but also his young daughter and another lady guest of theirs.²⁴

On May 16, 1857, several Englishmen were killed. Savarkar goes on to describe the fate of the women and children of those who were killed:

If some woman or child pleaded for mercy, the people shouted: “Revenge for Meerut’s chains, revenge for slavery, revenge for the ammunition shed”. This vengeful sword then decapitated pleading head.²⁵

The rebel soldiers had “taken the terrible vow of tasting English blood, like Bheemsen had done”.²⁶ No allowance was to be given even to those British men and women who had been kind-hearted. An old deputy collector was seen running, and despite some people in Jaunpur arguing that he was a good man, he was killed. Savarkar puts the following dialogue into the mouths of the rebel soldiers: “Nothing of this sort. He is a European and he must die”.²⁷ Take another instance. In Kanpur, colonel Ewart is killed. Here is how Savarkar describes the fate of his wife:

That Colonel’s wife was standing close by. Some people started telling her, “You are a woman and that is why your life has been spared!” But one cruel friend of theirs shouted, “What woman! Isn’t she a white woman? If so, cut her into pieces.”

Before that sentence finished, its terrible import had been made manifest.²⁸

As an aside Savarkar denies that a single English woman was raped despite claims to the contrary. In a sentence that would be the delight of any psychologist, Savarkar maintains that 1857 did not happen because Indians did not “get white women”. It happened to eliminate the inauspicious white feet from “our home”.²⁹

In June, major general Wheeler had entered into an agreement with the leader of the rebels, Nana Saheb, for safe passage of men, women and children down the Ganga in Kanpur. This is how Savarkar describes the fate they met while their boats were moving along the river. He saw this as the celebration of the anniversary of Plassey:

In the meantime, the boats started burning. English men, women and children started leaping in the Ganga. Some started swimming, some drowned, some started burning and all of them, sooner or later, were killed by bullets. Pieces of flesh, decapitated heads, strands of hair, disembodied hands, broken legs, a flood of blood. The Ganga turned red...this is how the anniversary of Plassey was celebrated!³⁰

In Jhansi, Savarkar describes a more gruesome massacre of 75 men, 12 women and 23 children in religious terms by calling it ‘bali’ or holy sacrifice:

Women had little children in their laps and these children were clinging on to their mothers. These women, infants and older children clinging on to their mothers were guilty of being white and were decapitated with a black sword.³¹

With every such massacre of women and children, Savarkar notes that the rebels of 1857 spilt British blood with “great relish”.

More was to come. Here is Savarkar’s unemotional account of what happened in Bibigadh, in Kanpur. The scene is one where the prison guards refuse to massacre the English. Begum Saheb, the chief officer of Bibigarh, which is under the rebel control, sends a message to the butcher’s colony in Kanpur:

In a short while, the butchers entered Bibigarh with naked swords and sharp knives in the evening and emerged out of it late in the night. Between their entering and coming out, a sea of white blood spread all over. As soon as they entered with their swords and knives, they butchered 150 women and children. A pool of blood collected there and body parts floated in it. While going in, the butchers walked on the ground and while coming out they had to journey through blood.³²

And then, this is what happened next morning:

As soon as it was morning, these poor creatures [those who were half-dead or dying] were dragged out and were pushed into a nearby well. Two children got out from under the weight of bodies and started running around the edge of the well. But they were pushed back into the well and fell over the dead.³³

Savarkar comments that the accumulated account between the two races had been squared in this manner. Further, at one point, when the English caught the rebellious soldiers, and before they were hanged, the English asked them why they had killed their women and children. The soldiers replied: “Sir, does anyone leave behind the litter of a snake after killing the snake?”³⁴

The story doesn’t end here. A justification of revenge, retaliation and retribution was carefully built into Savarkar’s retelling of 1857.³⁵ A massacre, he says, is a terrible thing. It happens, however, because humankind has failed to approximate the lofty ideals of natural justice, peace, parity and universal brotherhood. In this day and age, ‘asatya’, untruth rules over satya, truth. We can only wait for an era to dawn when truth will rule every heart. If someone in such an era were to spill blood or even utter the word ‘pratishodh’, revenge, he/she would automatically be considered vile, wretched and lowly. Acts of revenge in a society where ahimsa, non-violence, and justice rule would be considered sinful.

Savarkar regretted that such a divine epoch was far from being realised. Words like revolt, revolution, rebellion and revenge, therefore were legitimate in order to remove injustice and bring about parity and justice. Revolt, bloodshed and revenge were at once the instruments of injustice and of bringing about natural justice. That is why Shivaji’s claws were sacred, that is the reason Brutus’ dagger was sacred and that is why the bloodshed of Italy’s revolution was without blemish. Fear keeps a check on injustice. “For every Hiranyakashyapu”, Savarkar quips, “a Narasimha is essential; every Duhshasana requires a Bheema”.³⁶ Revenge, therefore, was the establishment of natural law and justice. From this axiom, Savarkar derived a principle of nationalism. He claimed that wherever injustice increased and nations went up in flames, wherever nationalist wars were fought, in such places revenge for injustices that the nation suffered were taken by killing the perpetrators of injustice of another nation.

Any reappraisal of 1857, therefore, is also an opportunity to evaluate the terrifying set of propositions introduced by Savarkar into the Indian political vocabulary. Even those who differ from his conception of Hindutva seem to acknowledge his nationalism, patriotism and commitment to the cause of India’s freedom, often overlooking the model of retributive violence and its philosophical justification that informs much of his conception of nationalism and patriotism. Along with a critical view of Savarkar, there is also the need, therefore, to examine the content of such terms as “nationalism” and “patriotism”, used frequently these days to justify inflamed states of emotion and violence in the name of abstractions. [37]

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