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India

# Modi's Philosopher

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### **The far-right ideology of Hindutva has gained frightening currency under Indian leader Narendra Modi. But in order to combat it, we first have to understand Vinayak Damodar Savarkar – the man who originated the violent ideology.**

In December 2018, the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, took a trip to the colonial-era Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands. [1] The prison was a notorious institution under British rule and housed hundreds of anti-colonial activists. Modi, a member of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was there to pay tribute to one former prisoner in particular: Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.

Savarkar is a divisive figure in contemporary Indian politics. A founding thinker of the ideology of Hindutva, he is the intellectual forebear of the hardline nationalism that today animates the ruling BJP. At the same time, his promotion of violence and his virulent anti-Muslim views placed him at odds with much of the political establishment of post-independence India.

With the BJP's rising political fortunes, many of Savarkar's once marginal ideas have drifted from the periphery of right-wing politics into the mainstream.

To better understand the man whose thought has come to have such a hold on contemporary Indian politics, I met with Vinayak Chaturvedi, associate professor of history at the University of California Irvine. A scholar of South Asia, Chaturvedi's first book explored the tension between peasant politics and Indian nationalism on the questions of land and labor in Gujarat. [2] But it is his forthcoming book, an intellectual history of Savarkar, that I was most interested in discussing.

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#### **JR: What inspired you to take up the figure of Savarkar?**

VC: The political reason for thinking about the project occurred to me when I was finishing my first book, which was centered on central Gujarat. This was the locality in which, in 2002, massive riots took place, which were described as "anti-Muslim pogroms." Approximately 150,000 Muslims were displaced, an estimated 1–2,000 Muslims were killed, there were allegations of state involvement in the violence, and so on.

These events got a number of academics and activists thinking about what the implications were for the rest of India. One of the things that was constantly being discussed was the "rise of Hindutva" as a phenomenon. Historically, the area of Gujarat had been understood as a place of Gandhi's greatest support, but now it was perceived as going from a nonviolent, Gandhian space to a violent, Hindutva space.

Based on my first book, that formulation just seemed problematic. One of the things that I was underscoring in that book was that Gandhi was actually aware of the everyday forms of violence against certain low-caste groups by landed, privileged communities in Gujarat. So, for me, that was the beginning of thinking that there must be a different explanation for what was happening in Gujarat. It didn't simply go from a nonviolent land to a violent land of Hindutva. And as I kept thinking about Hindutva more and more, I was constantly drawn back to Savarkar.

In addition, an entire historiography was being formed at this time that was looking at economic factors, cultural factors, educational factors, attempting to offer an explanation for why Hindutva was taking off in Gujarat in a way that seemed inexplicable. And for me the one thing that wasn't being discussed were Savarkar's ideas.

### **JR: What accounts for this failure to engage with Savarkar?**

VC: In many ways, both the Left and the Right treat him as a non-human subject. The Left wants to simply denounce him and see him as the political enemy, but not actually engage with his ideas. To talk about him or read him is somehow an indication that he is a human, that he is worthy of some kind of engagement. And when it comes to his supporters, it seems they are only interested in hagiographies, in elevating him to the status of an almost deity-like figure, but without actually reading what he is saying.

The more I started looking at his writings, what became apparent to me is that Savarkar had a much better understanding of cultural hegemony than the Left did. It is no longer possible to simply ignore him, or to say that he was not an interesting figure or was only a "derivative thinker." Ignoring Savarkar has not helped us to combat the kind of ideas that now perpetuate Hindutva in India, or globally, today.

### **JR: In what ways did violence — both that of colonialism and the resistance to it — shape Savarkar's political career?**

VC: Violence is at the center of all of Savarkar's writings and, by extension, all his political work.

He argues that Hindus, dating back to antiquity or earlier, had a code of conduct for the uses of violence. When Hindus were confronted with an enemy that did not adhere to the code, they resorted to unethical modes of violence in seeking vengeance, or what he calls "super-savage cruelty."

It is in this framing that Savarkar also writes about the need for assassinations and guerrilla warfare. Throughout his writings, there is a sense that Hindus were victimized by foreign invaders, and that Hindus were simply responding to unethical enemies. This is still the justification used by many supporters of Hindutva today.

However, in his seminal work, *Essentials of Hindutva*, there is a tension, as he points out, that, in fact, it was the original Hindus who were the first perpetrators of violence in the colonization of India. This is a point that is often not considered.

### **JR: And how did this theory of violence translate in his political career?**

VC: In thinking about Savarkar as a public figure, I argue that his public life is bookended by political assassinations. You have a figure like Madan Lal Dhingra, who assassinates a British official in London in 1909. Savarkar is his defender. To Nathuram Godse, who assassinates Gandhi in 1948 and who sees himself as a follower of Savarkar's. [[3](#)]

By all accounts, Dhingra saw himself as one of Savarkar's disciples. While it is unclear whether Savarkar had been privy to the assassination or its planning, he provides a public defense of Dhingra, before Dhingra is executed by the state.

Savarkar was also implicated in transporting handguns to India, one of which was used to assassinate an official in western India. So, in 1910, he is arrested in London for sedition and a number of other charges, including the weapons charge.

### **JR: What happens to Savarkar after he is arrested?**

VC: The British government decided to try Savarkar in India, rather than in Britain. But before he gets to India, he escapes from the ship when it docks in Marseilles and requests political asylum. However, the French police did not understand his request and handed him back to the British officials.

This apparent misunderstanding led to an international dispute, with the French government filing a case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague for the British to return Savarkar to their custody.

What is significant is that news of Savarkar spread globally. Newspapers from all over the world were covering the case, and Savarkar acquired a reputation as an anti-imperialist extraordinaire.

So when Savarkar ends up in the Cellular Jail in the Andamans, he has a certain kind of authenticity. His book, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*, is widely known. [4] He had also published a book on [Giuseppe] Mazzini that probably has some resonance as well. [5] He has some kind of credibility among revolutionary figures.

But the interesting thing, of course, is that he is also at this point becoming an anti-Muslim, already making certain kinds of arguments against both Muslims and Christians, already arguing for a certain kind of "Hindu" framework.

**JR: Obviously this period is a momentous one for world politics – the formation of the Comintern, the emergence of fascist parties in Europe, the growth of mass anti-colonial movements across Asia, etc. Given the censorship and surveillance of life in the Cellular Jail, how aware was Savarkar of his place in this global political moment?**

VC: The Andaman Islands is a place where you had a lot of political prisoners who were coming in at different periods. So their own interactions, and the fact that they also had access to books, meant that Savarkar was aware of what was going on during WWI, the Russian Revolution, etc.

In fact, I would argue that most of his later books actually begin and have an engagement with global politics and global history overall. So, for instance, he has a celebratory essay about the German annexation of the Sudetenland. But he is also a big advocate of Zionism and the founding of Israel, at the same time. He sees these as consistent arguments about the creation of ethnic homelands.

**JR: You note that when Savarkar is released as a political prisoner in 1937, he becomes the president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization. What did Savarkar's politics look like at this time?**

VC: On the one hand, he is concerned about the rise of Islam, and pan-Islam especially, in this period. But at the same time, he is very interested in creating pan-Asian solidarity.

There are these very interesting telegrams that Savarkar writes to Chiang Kai-shek, who comes to India in 1942 to meet with Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders in the Indian establishment. What is interesting is that in this correspondence, Savarkar argues that the time has come for a resurrection of a "neo-Hindu and Buddhist alliance" as a way to counter the rise of Islam globally, but also to figure out, in the period of decolonization, a way forward so that Asia doesn't get colonized again. He is interested in thinking about anti-imperialism overall.

But I argue that he is not an anti-imperialist. He's anti-British. He's anti-foreigner. He believes that "foreigners" should leave India and leave other places in which they have an imperial enterprise. But he himself is longing for the lost Hindu empire. So, for him, it's not simply about the creation of a Hindu nation, but thinking about how to resurrect a

Hindu empire in the future.

In *Essentials of Hindutva*, one of the things he argues is that Hindu nationalists need to colonize the globe, that we need a plurality of Hindu nations in the future. I'm not sure most people actually get to that point in the book!

**JR: Earlier you mentioned Nathuram Godse, the assassin of Gandhi. Obviously, Savarkar's name has been closely associated with that assassination, and he was reviled for many years after Gandhi's death. In your opinion, how complicit was Savarkar in this crime?**

VC: Godse saw himself as a disciple of Savarkar's. Although at court he is very clear that Savarkar had no direct influence on him, didn't instruct him to do anything, one of the requests that he has in prison is to read Savarkar's speeches on Hindutva in order to write his rationale for killing Gandhi.

The idea of the assassination, of guerrilla warfare or using deception or various other tactics against an enemy who is unethical, are all justifiable forms of violence. Savarkar actually has a whole discussion about the uses of cruelty and the necessity for cruelty. But for him, interestingly enough, the most "cruel" thing one can do is actually to promote nonviolence.

Savarkar sees Buddhism as being responsible for the demise of the Hindu empire. He cites the example of King Ashoka, in the third century BCE, who is a warrior who ascribes to practices of statecraft that include colonization and taking over huge amounts of territory through violence. Once he completes his conquests, however, he declares himself a Buddhist and commits to nonviolence.

What Savarkar argues is that this is the moment in which Buddhist monks start going out into the world and saying that India has these great riches, intellectually and materially, but they also inform the world that India no longer has a theory of statecraft or warfare.

**JR: So, Savarkar believes that nonviolence, of the kind promoted by Gandhi, has been detrimental to the Hindu cause?**

VC: He is very clear that the idea of the Hindu nation came into being through colonization and violence. And if we push his argument even further, it is that the Hindu *becomes* a Hindu in the act of violence. An individual who understands himself or herself as a Hindu is an individual who understands the links between being a Hindu and using violence.

For Savarkar, if you are an advocate of nonviolence, you should be the recipient of super-savage violence.

**JR: To better understand the appeal of Hindutva in India today, I'd like to dig deeper into the formation of Savarkar's thought. What were his chief intellectual influences?**

VC: Giuseppe Mazzini is a figure who influences him in multiple ways: in thinking about politics, the relationship between politics and religion, which is very appealing for Savarkar, the whole concept of "duty" – the duty of man is also very important.

And I argue that the relationship of duty that he picks up from Mazzini fits in very conveniently with the arguments from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which informed Savarkar as well; regarding issues of the duty of participating in certain

kinds of battles, the idea of having a principled battle, the ethics of certain kinds of violence.

**JR: Let me ask about the most significant term in Savarkar's political lexicon: "Hindutva." What does this mean for Savarkar?**

VC: "Hindutva" is a complicated term for him, and he begins the book *Essentials of Hindutva* by arguing that "Hindutva" is a term that cannot be defined. But in the following sentence, he argues that it is connected to Being. He is very interested in linking the concept of Hindutva to a certain kind of ontological framing.

But his definition of Hindutva is that it is a "history." It is not a "word" but "a history in full." Hindutva becomes this kind of middle entity that allows us a glimpse of Being in itself.

What is interesting to me is that the other person that is writing about the ways in which we understand being through history is Heidegger.

Now, Savarkar is not a philosopher at the level of Heidegger. He doesn't write a big work, unlike Heidegger, on this specific question. Instead, Savarkar writes a lot on the concept of history, and he is interested in writing about individuals, such as various kings, princes, and warriors, dating back to antiquity, who "invoke Hindutva" in their actions.

It is as if these historical actors that he is studying possess a certain kind of essence or principle of Hindutva. So, if we look at their actions "and these are usually actions of violence, of warfare" then this gets us closer to understanding what Hindutva really is.

It becomes a kind of ontological argument: the Hindu is violent. Therefore, we don't need to justify our forms of violence, because we are violent, in that sense.

**JR: One of the things that is perhaps most interesting in your work on Savarkar is his early reception among the Left, both in Europe and within India. Could you say a little bit about how Savarkar was understood by figures on the Left during the height of his political activism?**

VC: This is a complex question. He is sympathetically interpreted as an anti-imperialist by a number of figures early in his career "from the Glaswegian anarchist Guy Aldred to the French socialist Jean Longuet, who, by the way, was Karl Marx's grandson. [6] Longuet not only wrote a newspaper article in support of Savarkar, but he also published a twenty-four-page pamphlet in his defense against the British.

But there are two figures that illustrate the Indian left's early engagement with Savarkar.

One is Bhagat Singh, who was a revolutionary figure who was arrested and then executed in 1931. [7] To become a member of Singh's organization, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, he required individuals to read three books: one was *The ABC of Communism*, another was a book on the IRA, and the third book was *The Life of Barrister Savarkar*. [8] So, in a sense, Savarkar's life story was being elevated by the Left already in the 1920s.

The other figure at the time is M. N. Roy. [9] Roy had an illustrious life as a revolutionary, was one of the founders of the Mexican Communist Party, debated Lenin, and so on. When he finds out that Savarkar is going to be released as a political prisoner in 1937 and that there is going to be a reception committee and a parade that goes around the

state of today's Maharashtra to celebrate Savarkar's release, Roy asks if he can introduce him.

So there are these descriptions of Roy bowing, touching Savarkar's feet, describing Savarkar as a childhood hero that he had read about and had long admired.

**JR: How do you explain figures like Singh and Roy expressing such admiration for Savarkar, even as the latter's ideas were already well entrenched in a Hindu chauvinism?**

VC: Savarkar's reception, at least earlier on, functions in what Chris Bayly has called a "fluid intellectual economy," in which people were reading each other, engaging each other. The kind of singularity of the ways in which Savarkar is interpreted today, by all indications, were much more diverse.

I think the most significant response, more recently, to Savarkar's ideas is from the Marxist G. P. Deshpande. Before he died, Deshpande wrote a fantastic essay in which he argues that the time has come for the Left to have a "Savarkar moment," to really engage with his ideas as a way to counter the political movement of Hindutva that is taking place today.

This is a parallel argument to the one Perry Anderson has been making in *A Zone of Engagement* and in the "Renewals" piece in the 2000 edition of the *New Left Review*. [\[10\]](#) Here he argues that the Left has to come to terms with both their intellectual decline but also the rise of the Right.

So I think in a sense both Deshpande and Anderson, in different ways, are really demanding that the Left rethink some of their ideas, but also not marginalize the ideas of the Right. Certainly not to accept them! As Deshpande says, the point is not to accept these ideas; the point is to counter them. Ignoring them won't help us down the road in trying to build a different society.

**JR: How can a better understanding of the intellectual origins of the BJP, and in particular a more nuanced engagement with Savarkar's thought, help us to explain the rise of Hindutva today?**

VC: One of the things that Savarkar writes about in *Essentials of Hindutva* is the idea of purity of blood. This is something that Hindus have argued about for a long time, especially high-caste Hindus; there is a whole history of thinking about purity and pollution when thinking about caste.

Savarkar says that Hindus need to move beyond this. His argument is that all human blood is polluted, that there is no purity in human blood.

At one level, you can think of this as Savarkar's desire to try to reclaim all Hindus under one category, which is what he is trying to do. And in the act of doing that, he is saying that the tribal, the untouchable, the brahman "we are all Hindus under one banner. But there is also a deep critique of colonial governmentality here, especially the practices of the colonial census and its classificatory schemes.

The one activity that Savarkar is actually allowed to do in the 1930s when he is under house arrest is to work with untouchable communities. He campaigns for temple entry for untouchables, and he campaigns for inter-dining, where all Hindus should sit down and eat together. And he gets into a lot of trouble from elite Hindus and very conservative Hindus on those grounds.

If we fast-forward and think about what the BJP and other organizations attached to the BJP have been doing, whether the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) or others, it is really trying to bring in untouchables and others as Hindus into the fold. And perhaps doing that fairly successfully. What we've begun to see in recent elections is the shift of the Dalit and tribal vote dramatically to candidates attached to the BJP.

And I would argue that we need to come to terms with the fact that maybe Hindutva is going to be defined from below, that it is no longer only an upper-caste, elite movement. The leadership of the BJP, whether you think of Ram Nath Kovind, the president of India, or the prime minister, Narendra Modi, or Uma Bharti, or Sadhvi Rithambara "all come from marginal caste groups.

Here I disagree with colleagues and friends who argue that this is a form of "false consciousness." To suggest that a figure like Modi cannot be held accountable due to his caste background is unacceptable.

So, in a sense, this is part of an agenda of trying to bring in communities that have felt alienated both from nationalism, who were written out of the story of anti-colonial nationalism, and from globalization and the contemporary liberalization of the economy.

The BJP and its supporters have spent a long period of time thinking about how to create a mass movement in these communities. I don't think it is a recent phenomenon. It has taken a long period of time, several decades. This is what I mean when I say the supporters of Hindutva have long understood cultural hegemony. And I don't think it can simply be shut off, either. In fact, Savarkar was talking about the power of "rhizomal nationalism" well before Benedict Anderson wrote *Imagined Communities*. And, in the process, what you are seeing is the revival of Savarkar as well.

**JR: So, in a sense, Savarkar threatens to replace Gandhi as the father of the nation?**

VC: I think that the worry for lots of people is that perhaps Savarkar is the ghost father of the nation! Perhaps India today isn't the one that Gandhi envisioned, but is moving closer to the one envisioned by Savarkar. In many ways, Savarkar's ideas can no longer be ignored.

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] [https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long\\_reads/cellular-jail-india-integral-country-fight-freedom-independence-british-colony-andaman-and-nicobar-a7883691.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/cellular-jail-india-integral-country-fight-freedom-independence-british-colony-andaman-and-nicobar-a7883691.html).

[2] <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520250789/peasant-pasts>.

[3] <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/gandhi-assassinated>.

[4] [https://archive.org/details/ldpd\\_6260651\\_000/page/n8](https://archive.org/details/ldpd_6260651_000/page/n8).



[5] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giuseppe-Mazzini>.

[6] <https://spartacus-educational.com/SPaldredG.htm> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/longuet-jean/index.htm>.

[7] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bhagat-Singh>.

[8] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/index.htm> [savarkar.org/en/pdfs/life\\_of\\_barrister\\_savarkar\\_by\\_chitragupta.pdf](http://savarkar.org/en/pdfs/life_of_barrister_savarkar_by_chitragupta.pdf).

[9] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/roy/index.htm>.

[10] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/574-a-zone-of-engagement>.